



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 9 | JUNE - 2019



RELATIVE DEPRIVATION- SEARCHING INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF AVARNA CASTES IN COLONIAL KERALA

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ABSTRACT:

The social customs and practices of early modern Kerala were infested with caste dissensions because of the historical materialism of Brahmins for centuries. The disciplinary power as Foucault, affected all aspects of the life of the avarnas and subjected to the possibility of surveillance at all times. So naturally the avarnas were inherently fragmented, disorganized, diffused and uncoordinated under the humiliating protocols set by the theological feudal society (Gopal Guru 2009, 210).



KEYWORDS: social customs and practices , modern Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

By the nineteenth century, the socially politically and economically depressed castes of Kerala became the forefront of social struggles which paved the way for the social awakening and social transformations in Kerala. Here this paper analysis how far the experiences and the social situations of avarnas in colonial Kerala created the state of relative deprivation among them and how far it helped to their struggles.

The advent of Christian missionaries in the first decade of the 19th century caused disturbances in the 'peaceful and stagnant' society in Travancore. William Tobias Ringletaub, a

Persian missionary received extensive help from the Dewan John Manroe in founding new churches and converting the natives. Help provided by the activities of the Christian missionaries contributed to a large extent in ushering social changes in Kerala. Missionaries spread their humanitarian work in the early decades of the 19th century in several districts in South Travancore. Such interventions resulted in the embracing of Christian religion by a large chunk of Channar community. The women of Channar sect abandoned their obsolete way of dressing and following the instructions of the missionaries started wearing modern clothes. They violated the customary social order by wearing the upper garments by women

and preaching the new gospel in public among the upper caste people (Samuel Nellimukal 2003, 50). The Channars who were hitherto performing *Oozhiyam* job for their masters and were keeping away from the courtyards of the residences of the landlords now entered the courtyards fearlessly and preached the Biblical scriptures parrot like without understanding the seriousness of what they were pronouncing. The slavish and passive Channars now became conscious of their rights and were not ready to tolerate any longer the humiliation heaped on them. Fearlessness was infused into their veins by Christianity (Samuel Nellimukal 2003, 50). This open defiance of existing social norms propelled intolerance on the part of the

savarnas and led to yearlong agitations.

The socio-cultural regeneration in the nineteenth century Kerala was occasioned by the colonial presence, but not created by it. It is proved by the differences of opinion existing among scholars regarding the introduction and the implementation of breast clothes among the weaker sections of society. Some modern historians say that it was mere tactics adopted by the colonial masters. According to Max Weber the Christian missionaries who worked in Kerala were inspired and informed by the ideals of a protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Weber 1930, 87). The various markers of modernity and its ethics were introduced in Kerala during this period. But there were some errors in the case of their attitudes towards the lower castes in Kerala. Actually the major reason for the Channar revolt was the cunning activities of supplying upper garments to the converts by the missionaries. Even though the majority of the rest of the population had to struggle for many more decades to get that right realized (Neettu 1034 M.E), it is to be noted that Channar agitation which transformed into a problem of caste or class influenced the marginalized people in a notable manner (Abhimanyu 1990, 133). Even after getting the right to wear upper garments in the case of Channar women, the law never affected those who were at the very bottom of the society. But this incident highly influenced the outlook of the downtrodden and naturally a sense of freedom worked out in their minds. They wanted to bring changes in their own life and it also led to the development of self-consciousness among them.

In order to usher in social changes and developments, several social movements were launched by early social reformers in Kerala who were awakened to a sense of self-consciousness from their relatively deprived conditions. Under the spell of the awakened consciousness, they brought about several changes in the feudal hierarchical society.

CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

As mentioned before, during the nineteenth century traditional Brahminic order in Kerala underwent a historical transformation as a result of colonial interventions. The LMS introduced western education which in due course replaced the native system and acted as a tool to bring about social change. The various protestant missionary enterprises and the British administration established schools for the people. This led to the opening of a new dimension of knowledge and power and it has sometimes been referred to as a discourse on colonial modernity versus native education. Thus Christianity and western education formed the superstructure of the prevailing order of caste system of the country. It openly challenged the caste ideologies and structure of the existing society. It acted as a double edged sword by providing employment opportunities in the various organs of the ever expanding British Empire and by making the native conscious of their backwardness in the social and economic sphere (Karthikeyan Nair 2012, 187).

Even in the matter of the Government of Travancore, in the 1860s Dewan Madhava Rao established a successful system of educational institutions and began to insist on the need for academic qualifications for admission to certain jobs in the *sirkar* service. It was an impressive initiation taken by Madhava Rao for the modernization of the country. Moreover he established number of schools in different parts of the country. Later the Government itself started schools where western education was introduced. As Robin Jeffrey pointed out the development of Government schools broke the missionary monopoly and any chance of high castes being forced to attend mission schools in large numbers (Jeffrey 1976, 82). But both the missionary and the Governmental educational efforts co-operated for the development of the region. The missionaries opened schools for the slaves but these brought the missions into increasing conflict with slave owners and *sirkar* officials. Rev. Henry Baker wrote, "The owners of the slaves are much opposed to having them taught" (Rev. Henry Baker 1933, 57).

Though the missionaries took charge of the education of the lower castes and Christians, they still educated a large number of high castes. But Travancore State largely concentrated on the education of high caste Hindus only. The state at least took cognizance of the situation, and the missionaries were certainly well satisfied with it. Modern education acted as a venue for entry into the public sphere that was dominated by the educated upper castes. Even after passing the act there was no change in the

matter of education for the depressed. In 1904 the Government took a radical step and declared that the Government is fully alive to their responsibility in the matter of primary education and their aim will be to see that no child in the State between the age of five and ten, whatever his caste and status in life is allowed to grow up without the benefit of education (Travancore Government Gazette 1904, 349). And as a first step towards the realization of this ideal, the Government resolved to bear the entire cost of primary education of the backward classes. Theoretically most of the schools in the State were thrown open to the depressed, but in practice they were excluded.

Even though education was a powerful resource, it was denied to the outcastes of Kerala because the upper caste did not permit them to pursue education. They feared that the supply of manual labour for the paddy fields and landed properties would become short if the untouchables were encouraged in the field of education. Rev. Mateer documents the reasons why the upper castes did not wish to see the Pulayas educated; and in doing so, he enumerates how access to Government education would empower them: their utter helplessness arising out of ignorance would be removed, they would no longer be at the mercy of the high caste employers, officials or writers of legal documents, they would be emboldened to claim their rights to which they were entitled by law, they would use their literacy to judge if they were being imposed upon and finally they would be capable of representing their grievances to the proper quarters (Mateer 1891, 349). But even liberals and progressive minds of the time were suspicious of the efforts of Dalits towards acquiring modern education (Sanal Mohan 2005, 18). As the untouchables were devoid of education they were not eligible for appointment to the government service (BhaskaranUnni P, 1988, 45). Even when they were educated with the help of the Christian missionaries, they were rarely appointed in government services (BhaskaranUnni 1988, 46).

At the same time the upper castes and intermediary caste groups experienced these benefits. Thus the establishment of educational institutions and spread of education never affected the downtrodden of the country and they were strictly restricted by the caste law of the society and they never enjoyed the fruits of such reforms. The struggle for education of the unprivileged was a long drawn out battle from the last decades of the nineteenth century onwards. Ayyankali's struggles for educating the untouchable castes proved to be a turning point. He realized that he and his people were being deprived of such basic rights. Those situations created discontent and discomfort in the mind of Ayyankali and the differences made him conscious of the disparity between the *savarna* and *avarna*. He realized that education was necessary to emancipate the *avarna* from the tyranny of social and economic backwardness. This rational thought created a crisis in his views which led him to believe that the hierarchical caste organization was the real cause of social discrimination. Finally he came to the conclusion that attainment of the right to education could bring social changes in the life of the unprivileged. So the developments in the education system in Travancore during the colonial time prompted Ayyankali to launch a social protest towards securing the right to education and employment for the deprived castes.

The Agrarian Situation

The missionaries worked here and provided new resources and encouraged a new assertiveness. Under colonial domination changes came in the method of production when colonial capital launched hundreds of acres of plantations, generating a great demand for labour. The lower castes constituted the major portion of labour force employed in these plantations (Sanal Mohan 2005, 55). When the course of production began to change it obviously led to the formation of new relations of production and it also led to the establishment of free wage labour. It resulted in the emergence of new social elite groups who formed the middle class. In Travancore, the upper castes continued to ally with traditional political powers serving the bureaucracy, Syrian Christians and Ezhavas came to prominence as entrepreneurial classes (Michael Tharakan 1998, 291). It was from these groups that native capitalist planters emerged. New men and new groups gained control over the land through buying up land or becoming zamindaris (Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 9). As a result of commercialization they maintained the traditional system of subordinating the exploited classes within the village. Participation in the modern market economy was limited to rural landlords and merchants;

tenants from middle peasant castes simply turned over a share of their produce while the so called untouchable field labourers continued to toil as before. Their traditional servitude became mediated through a relationship of debt bondage. These people were considered as before, as traditional servants of particular families of landlords and peasant cultivators.

Actually the products of slave labour entered the market and became part of an expanding commodity chain that ultimately facilitated the colonial trade and accumulation. But at the same time, the slave castes were not allowed free access to the market which prevented their active participation in the evolving market under colonial conditions (Sanal Mohan 2005, 42). The market was generally considered to be offering modern experiences to the subordinated people by providing them access to new commodities. The level of consumption of the slave caste communities in Kerala was extremely low compared with that of the upper castes. Exclusive dependence on agriculture wage labour was the reason why the level of consumption of the slave castes remained low. As a result, the former untouchable slaves could not become decisive actors in the market as buyers (Sanal Mohan 2005, 42). Here we can observe two things, first is that they had no freedom on land at all and the slave castes continued their dependence even during the time of colonial period. And the second one is that even if economic condition burgeoned and the social and economic life of the people changed, there was no progress in the life of the depressed classes of the society. They couldn't get access even to markets. It is clearly visible that though there were many changes, the deprived castes were not even allowed entering the public road and market in 1890s (Abhimanyu 1990, 36).

In short in the nineteenth century agricultural production was reorganized in Kerala to serve colonial interests, but the relations of production had not changed much. Most of the lands used to be controlled by the upper castes. The slave caste labourers, who were slaves till the mid nineteenth century, carried out the actual cultivation. As a result of this the untouchable slaves continued to exist in the same structural position for a very long time even after the abolition of slavery in 1855 in the Travancore region of Kerala. The Land Legislation Act of 1867 and a few subsequent enactments granted legal sanction for the social and economic progress of these people. But in reality they were still oppressed by the higher castes (Saradamoni 1981, 1-2). Caste prejudices hindered their progress, since the caste system had become dominant in the social formations of Kerala. From the above it is clear that the impact of these measures did not fall evenly on all sections of society, especially among the downtrodden. The changes in land relations or the security of tenure for tenants did not affect them for they had practically no land (Saradamoni 1977, 110-146). Omvedt observes that British law also helped to strengthen the system (Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 9).

The fact was that there were no substantial changes in the life of oppressed classes. It could be argued that the potential of liberation from the traditional bondage and duties through conversions into Christianity could not have been unappealing to the lower castes. Though the missionary discourse on the oppressed body might also be biased, it ultimately created certain situations for making the same significant. Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt observe that generally the British imperialism established contract with the rural landlords and feudal classes and maintained and strengthened their position.

Progress in the Field of Medicine

The development in the field of medicine also influenced the consciousness of the *avarνας* especially Ayyankali and other social reformers. Medicine played a major role in the missionary work in Travancore. It was the informal partnership between the missionaries and the state and both considered that western medicine constituted 'charity' work and they made efforts to introduce western medicine. Missionaries provided medical facilities and one of the most important purposes of their medical services was to establish contact with the high castes in Travancore and to seek to convert them.

However it is true that the lower sections of the society were not treated in an equal way. The higher and lower classes were accommodated in separate wards (Abhimanyu 1990, 68). In addition, the Pulayas were not admitted to the General Hospital or other Government hospitals until the early twentieth century. In 1905 the Pulayas in Trivandrum submitted a petition to the government and as a

result a disused kitchen was converted into a ward for their use (Kabri and Krishnan 2013, 16). They had great difficulties in receiving treatment. They were not allowed to approach a Government hospital and forced to keep a distance from the dispensary until the doctor, having attended to all other patients and about to leave. The lower castes were thus discriminated against in the case of their medical treatment. Medicines were thrown out by the doctors to the *avarnas* and they were forced to take this medicine (Jeffrey 1979, 116). But there is a different version that the state was more generous towards the lower castes in the area of medicine than in the sphere of education. When the medicinal field developed day by day, the original picture of the depressed became worse and they were not at all considered either by the State or the missionaries. These inhuman practices and negative attitudes continued even in the time of Ayyankali and it affected the mind of Ayyankali and it fueled his consciousness and desire to get the privileges which other people enjoyed. His struggles against the inhuman practices bear witness to this ignited consciousness.

Establishment of the Printing Press and the Arousal of Avarna Awareness

The establishment of the Government printing press was another notable force for the awakening of consciousness among the depressed of the country. The first press in Travancore was the Nagercoil Mission Press of the LMS established in 1820 by Charles Mead, an LMS missionary. The CMS also started a press at Kottayam in 1822 (NagamAiya 1940, 65). Meanwhile the Government press started functioning in 1836. The Government printing press was established and developed with the help of the missionaries (NagamAiya 1940, 494). The printing press and the colonial legal system contributed to changes that eventually or naturally transformed and challenged the traditional social structure substantially (Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 19). The establishment of printing press and easy availability of books paved the way for the removal of traditional barriers. The introduction of printing brought many sided changes in the life and thought of the people. As Travancore was guided by colonial interest, the introduction of printing brought about signs of cracks on its caste-communal fortress. These institutional interventions and new discourses generated new subjectivities that were part of colonial modernity.

The people who later acted as social reformers understood that they were not addressed even by the press or any other agency. Owing to illiteracy they were exempted from these privileges (Chentharassery 2005, 11). These situations also led them to become conscious of making an alternative system to deal with their grievances which they faced in the society. As far as they concerned press and knowledge are connected with each other and both can bring light in the life of the oppressed. It can also stand against the injustice of the country (Jose 2013, 116). He understood that a minority of individuals enjoyed privileges and access to wealth, education and other social status but at the same time the outcastes' reach to power structure remained a dream. This realization was a major reason for the awakening of the marginalized under Ayyankali.

Working System of Law and Justice

The British law formally or officially discarded caste as a tool for judgment in general- criminal, civil and commercial law of the region (Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 15). They formally gave the lowest castes equal access to the law but the fact was that the religious and ritual restrictions were enforced by the courts (Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 15). Defilement of religious restrictions was treated as criminal offence and so punished. The court refused to take action against upper castes who acted on their own to discipline, terrorize and punish (Abhimanyu 1990, 38). In fact formally untouchables were considered to have equal access to such public facilities as schools, wells, and roads; but practically they had no right on the same. The British were not ready to take action against the conservative caste elders. Thus the position of non-interference taken by the British officials and the law amounted in practice to upholding caste hierarchy (Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 16). These situations also led to formulate such movements under the avarna leaders.

Changes in Economic Sphere

The economic effects of colonial rule were much more complex. Though they opened up new centers of employment and education to people, the general effect was to maintain the feudal ladder (Bharat Patankar 1999, 19). This determined which groups could have access to certain jobs or which would be willing to take the most arduous employment (Bharat Patankar 1999, 19). As a result, there was stratification among the working class along caste lines. The untouchables provided the most exploited and lowest paid plantation labour. The old feudal order left its stamp on the emerging capitalist relations of production. In industry as well as agriculture untouchables came to occupy the lowest, most degraded and most low paid positions among the working class. In the realm of ideology, British rule confronted Indians with the new ideas of science, equality, and freedom. But on the other hand, they were forced to admit the need to justify colonial rule over the colonized peoples.

Even though some good work was done, criticism also existed regarding the intention of the Christian missionaries and their activities. According to the critics, the objective of the Protestant missionaries in Travancore was preaching the gospel and at the same time being the promoters of educational and social reforms. They coordinated both evangelism and social work and invested their energies for the uplift of the downtrodden community. But according to Bharat Patankar and Gail Omvedt, "Even though they brought changes in the country it also helped to provide the ideology of domination" (Bharat Patankar 1999, 20).

Colonial concepts to a certain extent helped to create social changes the foundations of which were laid by the interference of missionaries bringing about structural changes (Sanal Mohan 2005, 23). It was a period of questioning or rejection of tradition. A tradition of social and political mobilization began to merge in Kerala when the *avarana* began to challenge the old order. The changing thoughts of the people helped to weaken the traditional caste laws (Sanal Mohan 2005, 23). The increasing loss of the stability of the old system resulted in ruining the existing caste structure. Christian missionaries promoted western education and this helped to bring about social mobility in society to a certain extent.

Developments in Public Works Departments

The prosperous conditions of the State provided larger allotments for public works and salaries also provided for the labourers. Roads, bridges, canals were constructed in different parts in Travancore. It was in 1860, MadhavaRao, then Dewan of Travancore demanded SreeMulamThirunal for the construction of roads in the Travancore region (Jeffrey 1979, 82-83). Initially he did not respond positively to the demand of MadhavaRaobut later, he started to construct roads and around 10000 people from lower castes were working as laborers in P W D. Construction of roads bought a power pact impact on the life of the people of Travancore (Jeffrey 1979, 82-83). Actually people who belonged to the *savarna* category were the beneficiaries because they continued to enjoy their rights and privileges even as before.

The outcastes even though they got new employment opportunities in the public works department, their members were excluded from access to roads and they never enjoyed equal rights. Actually they were not even bothered about the entry into the public sphere. This difference between the *avarana* and *savarna* made the situation more complex. The progressive steps in construction of roads, canals and bridges ultimately led to the development of agriculture. The people who worked in P W D works got money in return. So they naturally became competent and economically better off to buy products from markets. But the reality was that they had no opportunity to enter in to the market and public places due to the caste laws of the society. This situation actually fueled the consciousness of Ayyankali. He understood that public roads were needed for them to become part of the socialization process of the country. The later incidents of 'VilluvandiYathra' and 'Chalia Street Rebellion' of Ayyankali should be analyzed in this context as the outburst of his submerged consciousness.

Political Movements

Political movements in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar contributed a lot to the development of consciousness among the downtrodden of Kerala especially in Travancore. Considering the importance of these political movements lies in the fact that all sections of Travancore society, except the outcastes, were engaged in making petitions and agitations for the betterment of their life while the so called outcastes were deprived of even human rights (Chentharassery 2005, 15). Even though drastic changes occurred in the name of colonialism and native developments, the conditions of the untouchables in pre-colonial and colonial Kerala did not differ from each other. Colonialism brought about changes in the country but it could not get rid of the continuing effects of the age old slavery that had discriminated against the untouchables (Bharat Patnakar and Gail Omvedt 1999, 21). In fact colonial policies and institutions did not provide adequate relief to the downtrodden sections of Kerala. The untouchables remained unprivileged and they were continually exploited by colonial masters and caste Hindus alike. The new experiences could not eradicate the existing effects of the age old casteism that had devalued the untouchables. Though substantial changes took place in the thoughts and life of the outcastes still they continued to follow the existing social system and obeyed restrictions by upper castes in the matter of social observances. The continuation of bad experiences of the slave castes showed their dreadful conditions of existence. At the same time there was general consensus growing among the administrative elites that the liberated slaves would only attain civilization if they could acquire land and other resources (Saradmoni 1980, 102-106).

In short the low caste people were deprived of socio-cultural, economic, political and educational opportunities, power, money, status, social freedom etc. Eventually they became discontented and compared their positions to others and realized that they had less of what they believed themselves to be entitled than those around them. In this context we can use the 'Relative Deprivation' concept of sociologist Samuel Stouffer as the central variable force. In sociology, relative deprivation theory is a view of social change and movements, according to which people take action for social change in order to acquire something like opportunities, status or wealth that others possess and which they believe they too should have (Stouffer 1949, 210). The theory encourages the exploration of an individual's feelings of deprivation that may result from comparing his or her situation with that of a referent person or group as well as the behavioral effects of deprivation feelings. It is to be noted that people became conscious about their status and positions from the thought of deprivation. Thus their feelings of deprivation over power, money, status, may lead individuals and groups to create social consciousness. Here such people become rebels when their desires become legitimate expectations and those desires are blocked by society. It would lead them to the inevitability of the movement for access of social satisfactions.

In the context of the theory of 'relative deprivation' it can be clearly seen that the reformers in general understood that the status of the downtrodden were pathetic than any other community in the society. When the people were suffering from socio- political, educational disabilities, others were unconditionally enjoying all the privileges and thus was convinced about relative deprivation of his fellow men of the downtrodden brethren infused a spirit of rebellion in the minds of reformers and it prompted them to fight for the well being of the socially, economically and politically weaker people (Chentharassery 2005, 16). They became more conscious and fought for social justice and social equality and infused consciousness in the minds of the downtrodden and began to think about their community development and attainment of social status and advancement.

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