

PALIYAM SATYAGRAHA: A STRUGGLE FOR PUBLIC DOMAIN

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Abstract—*Twentieth Century was a turning point in the history of Kerala. The impact of new ideologies and the willingness of people to internalize those ideologies have created an atmosphere that is ready to accommodate new struggle and social values. This atmosphere has worked for converting and restructuring Kerala in all its domains. Although we became politically independent in 1947, social independence which liberates people from the clutches of traditional value and social systems was yet to be attained. Therefore the struggle for the emancipation had to be continued even after the attainment of independence. The Satyagrahas of Vaikom and Guruvayur and its popular content, acted as catalysts for further movements. The Temple Entry Proclamation pronounced in the princely State of Travancore in 1936 opening all the State owned temples for the members of Hindu Religion, is a direct result of these struggles. But the people of Kochi and Malabar had to wait further for the temples to be opened before them. In the circumstances, the people of Cochin and Malabar had to continue their struggles even after Independence. The importance of Paliyam Satyagraha is to be viewed in the above background. The Paliyam road near the Paliyam Kovilakam belonging to the Family of erstwhile Chief Minister of State of Cochin remained closed before the lower castes even after India became independent. The people of the region were therefore, forced to organize themselves to conduct a mass struggle in Gandhian way for the right to travel through Paliyam road.*

The present study entitled "Paliyam Satyagraha: A Struggle for Public Domain" seeks to analyze the historical importance of Paliyam Satyagraha. Even though there are numerous works that highlight the importance of Vaikom and Guruvayur Satyagrahas, the Paliyam Satyagraha has not been given its due importance. No serious attempt has been made to analyze Paliyam Satyagraha in an academic sense. This is a humble attempt to fill up the gap.

INTRODUCTION

Paliyam Satyagraha—1947–48 is a memorable event in the history of the struggles for social equality in Kerala. Kerala Society was based on the rigid practice of caste system and social hierarchy. The Brahminical domination was strongly felt in the society and the majority of the landlords were Brahmins. The other upper castes were the Kshatriyas and the Nairs who also enjoyed special privileges and immunities. The avarnas and depressed classes such as Ezhavas, Arayas, Pulayas, Parayas etc. were subjected to several social disabilities.¹ They were denied social privileges and immunities like wearing gold ornaments and using certain types of clothes. The women or Lower caste were not allowed to wear blouses. Burdens of taxes always fell upon the lower caste.²

The Backward communities among the Hindus were also subjected to several other social handicaps. They were denied admission to temples, Schools and public services.³ The evils of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability were practiced. The Members of the lower caste had to keep themselves at the prescribed distances from those of the upper castes. Many of the Public Highways were inaccessible to the members of the lower castes including the Ezhavas. The government jobs were not given to the lower castes up to the beginning of the 20th

¹ K.N. Ganesh, *Keralathinte Innalekal*, Thiruvanthapuram, 1997, p.78

² A. Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala and Freedom Struggle*, Kottayam, 1997, p.56.

³ M.R., Raghava Varrier, Rajan Gurukkal, *Kerala Charithram*, Shukapuram, 1991, p.90.

century. The Peaceful atmosphere provided by the British rulers in the New Learning prepared the people to struggle against the caste rigidity and caste restrictions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To make a deep study of Paliyam satyagraha in India's freedom struggle.
2. To understand the Importance of social freedom. Which is more important than political.
3. Find out the Social inequalities of Kerala.

HYPOTHESIS

Paliyam Satyagraha—1947–48 is a memorable event in the history of the struggles for social equality in Kerala. It is the continuation of the Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagraha. Paliyam agitation was for opening the road in front of Paliyam Kovilakam for the Avarna Communities. In this respect it was different from Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagraha. Most of the historians did not give any importance in Paliyam struggle and did not consider it as a part of freedom struggle. Freedom is not political freedom above. Social freedom is more important than political. In short the Paliyam Satyagraha was a significant event in the history of social freedom in Kerala .

Review of Literature

There are no serious studies waged on Paliyam Satyagraha. Some references were made by Pro. A Sreedhara Menon, in his *Kerala Chairthram*⁴ and A Survey of Kerala History⁵. An attempt was made by Payyappilly Balan to trace the causes and course of the struggle in his Paliyam Samarakatha⁶. A general version of the working pattern of the caste system in Kerala, is given by P.K. Balakrishnan in his *Jathivyvasthanthiyum Keralacharithravum*⁷.

Methodology

The study used both primary and secondary sources. This study relies mostly on the memories collected through interviews. Secondary sources included books, journals, articles and reports from newspapers, weekly's, magazines etc. The method of approach is both descriptive and analytical

Challenges Against Traditional Social Norms

The struggle against untouchability and unapproachability was an important aspect of the socio-religious reform movements of Kerala. The Kerala society was awakened from its age-long slumber by the activities of various social reformers and the society started showing the symptoms of change. The social and religious reform movements that had emerged in Kerala Society during the 19th century were revolutionary in their idealistic plane, but they were peaceful and non-violent in the practical plane. The complexity of the caste system of Kerala had made the lower caste people untouchables and unapproachables. The domination of the British though had kept

⁴ A. Sreedharamenon, *Keralacharithram*, Madras, 2001.

⁵ A. Sreedharamenon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Madras, 2000.

⁶ Payyappilly Balan, *Paliyam samarakatha*, Thiruvanthapuram, 1998.

⁷ P K Balakrish nan, *Jathivyvasasthanthiyum Keralacharithravum*, Thiruvanthapuram, 1999.

away the caste from the administration. The social status of a person was still determined according to the caste hierarchy. It was against this background that the social reform movement began in 19th century. The upper castes did not permit the avarnas to walk through some of the public roads especially those surrounding the temples and kovilakams (Palaces) a privilege enjoyed even by the Christians and Muslims. If any untouchables showed the courage to walk through the Public roads which were prohibited to them beyond the proscription undoubtedly they were tortured.⁸ The caste system operated itself in such an irrational and oppressive manner that Swami Vivekanda who visited Kerala in 1892, called it the 'Mad house of India'.⁹

Vaikom Satyagraha

The Vaikom Struggle of 1924 was conducted for the permission to all irrespective of their castes to travel by the surrounding roads of the famous Vaikom temple. It became a great struggle in the course of time and received much national attention. It could open a new chapter in the history of the social and religious history of Kerala. The twenty month long Satyagraha provided a new enthusiasm for the low caste people and prepared them for further struggles. After these roads near to the temples at Suchindram Ambalapuzha, Tiruvarp etc. were open to all caste. Finally the government issued a proclamation in 1923 which opened all the temple roads in Travancore to the people irrespective of their caste.

Guruvayur Satyagraha

The Guruvayur Satyagraha of 1931-32 was yet another important land mark in the history of the social reform movement in Kerala which necessitated the Temple Entry proclamation of 1936. The Kerala State Conference of the Indian National Congress met at Vadakara in 1931 demanded temple entry for all castes and communities among the Hindus. The Guruvayur Satyagrahies was started on 1st November. The police had raised barricades to prevent the Satyagraha from entering the temple. The Guruvayur Satyagraha gained national importance with its beginning itself. The leader of the movement K. Kelappan started fast unto death at Guruvayur temple from 21st September onwards. He broke his fast on 2nd October 1932.

The Temple Entry Proclamation

The Temple Entry Proclamation of November 1936 of Chithira Tirunal Balaramavarma the Maharaja of Travancore must be seen in this background. The Maharaja was forced to issue the proclamation allowing all Hindus to enter into the temples by the earlier mass movements. The struggle for equality continued since the proclamation of 1936 by the Raja of Travancore allowed temple entry to all Hindus irrespective of their castes in all the temples in Travancore.

The Temple Entry Proclamation brought about some changes in Travancore. But it did not completely abolish the social evils from the Kerala Society. The social evils like untouchability, unapproachability etc. continued to be practiced in Kerala especially in Kochin and Malabar area. The practice of oppression and discrimination against the lower caste Hindus continued. Many caste Hindus continued to observe the evil practice of untouchability. It was in this background that the Paliyam Satyagraha

⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947*, New Delhi, 1983, p.90.

⁹ A. Sreedharamenon, *Kerala and Freedom Struggle*, Kottayam, 1997, p-56.

started at Chennamangalam in 1947 (Dec 4) to secure the right to travel through the Paliyam road. Like other caste Hindus, the members of the Paliyam Family also considered Avarnas (low caste Hindus) as untouchables. So they did not allow the Avarnas to walk through the road in front of their Kovilakam.¹⁰

PALIYAM SATHYAGRAHA

The origins of the Paliyam family are not very clear. One view is that the Paliyam Family is descended from the Villarvattom Royal Family in Chendamangalam. The family traces its lineage to Kunjikaavu and Kochukutty—two sisters from the town of Elankunnapuzha who were married into Villarvattom. All members of the Paliyam family fall into one of two lineages.¹¹ The other view is that the Paliyam family is linked to the Cochin Royal Family or Perumpadappu Swarupam. It is thought that when the last Perumal departed the Chera kingdom of Mahodayapuram split with one segment leaving for Vanneri near Chowghat. It is thought that the powerful feudal Cheiftan, Paliath Achan also left with this segment. Until recently a Paliyam Parambu was found there. Quite possibly Paliath Achan, moved with Perumpadappu Swarupam to Thiruvnchikulam due to the Zamorin's invasion. The flood of 1341 brought the Perumpadappu Swarupam to Kochi, and Paliath Achan may have moved with them as well.

Paliath Achan

The Paliath Achan was hereditary Prime Minister to the Rajah of Kochi from 1632 to 1809 and second only to the Rajah in power and wealth in the central Cochin area during that period. He was also a considerable land owner, one of the largest in the state. Historical records show that the Paliath Achen became major players in Kerala history with the arrival of the Portuguese. In recognition of the Paliath Achan's services, the Kochi Rajah granted him Vypin Island.

Kovilakam and Approach Roads

Most of the residents of the Chennamangalam were the tenants of the Paliyam family and belonged to the lower caste Hindus, who were subjected to untouchability and similar social handicaps. In spite of the attainment of independence for India, Paliyam authorities did not allow the lower caste people or Avarnas to walk through the Paliyam road close to the Paliyam Kovilakam. At the same time they allowed the non Hindus that is Jews, Christians and Muslims, to travel through the same road except on some rare occasions. They considered avarnas or lower caste people like Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas etc. as untouchables and the sight of the Avarnas as Pollution. The Paliyam Satyagraha was officially inaugurated by C. Kesavan on December 4, 1947. Though participants of satyagraha entered the banned road, they were not arrested. But on the second day a harsh treatment was seen on the part of Paliyam authorities and the people. About ten people were arrested on the second day. Majority of the Christian Community also supported the Paliyam Satyagraha. Women played an important role in Paliyam satyagraha. Under the leadership of Yogakshema Sabha, the Namboodiri women namely, P. Priyadatta, E.S. Saraswati, I.C. Priyadatta, Arya Pallam, Rema Thampuratti and Indhira Thampuratti played an important role in this satyagraha. A.K. Gopalan played a very important role in this struggle. On the march 1948, a mass march was organized by A.K. Gopalan but the police brutally lathi

¹⁰A. Sreedharamenon, Kerala Chairthram, Madras, 1991,p.324.

¹¹www.localhistoryofpaliyam.com

charged the people. After the mass March towards Paliyam , the karmasamiti decided to stop the Satyagraha on 9th March 1948. The satyagrahies had to wait for more than a month to achieve their objective. Their await come to an end in april 1948 with the Temple Entry Proclamation by Kochi Raja. This temple entry proclamation of the Kochi Raja promoted Paliyam authorities to open the Paliyam road to the public.

CONCLUSION

Paliyam Satyagraha-1947–48 is a memorable event in the history of the struggles for social equality in Kerala. It is the continuation of the Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagrha. In spite of the attainment of political independence in 1947, social inequality continued in several parts of India, especially in Kerala. The significance of Paliyam satyagraha is that it was the first organized struggle against social discriminations in post independent Kerala. Paliyam agitation was for opening the road in front of Paliyam Kovilakam for the Avarna Communities. In this respect it was different from Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagrha. In short the Paliyam Satyagraha was a significant event in the history of social freedom in Kerala.

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