

Caste, Colonialism and Thiyya Bureaucracy

Dr UV Shakkeela

The untouchable caste under colonialism identified caste as the main impediment to progress and their existing miserable life. Western education and entry to British administration as officials made them all the more conscious of the relationship between caste and their wretched life. Western education made them eligible to become government officials and other diverse job opportunities as well. Colonialism introduced them to modern western ideas with which they organized themselves to fight against caste. Colonialism gave economic freedom and through it social status too; but caste was the determining factor in the social status among the natives. They understood that colonialism was not on a 'civilizing mission' in India. The paper analyses the interrelationship among caste, colonialism and Thiyya bureaucracy in transforming an untouchable caste.

Key words: Caste, bureaucracy, colonialism, transformation, education.

Thiyyas constitute a numerically prominent caste in Malabar region of Kerala. They belonged to the humpty number of untouchable castes in Kerala and, for that reason, deprived of the rights and privileges enjoyed by the castes above them. As they were placed in the middle rung of the caste hierarchy, they also had some privileges compared to the castes below them. An enterprising caste engaged in all kinds of works, they made use of the colonial condition to their

favour and soon, emerged as a prosperous community. The paper explores the emergence of Thiyya bureaucracy in the nineteenth century by making use of colonialism and the subsequent rupture in the traditional caste hierarchy.

The bureaucrats from Thiyya community started emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century. They also constituted the early intellectuals from the community; and involved in the reform drive sprouting in the caste consequential to the introduction of British rule in Malabar. The path to bureaucracy was a virtual resistance to caste structure and colonialism facilitated them to make their way to bureaucracy by giving not so hard blows to the traditional caste structure.

Transition of power from the native rulers to the British required a new administrative power structure in Malabar. The situation demanded new skills and norms for the bureaucrats to the administrative structure introduced by the British in Malabar. At the same time, the British too wanted officials from the natives who are adept in multiple languages. In addition to native languages, the British wanted natives who are capable to deal Hindustani, the official language with which the British made official correspondence across India in early nineteenth century. In fact the British were in need of cheap human resource to run the government, and the Thiyyas were in dire need of jobs other than jobs offered by the jenmies. This reciprocity seemed beneficial to both the British and the Thiyyas ; and to a great extent, made possible colonialism to progress in Malabar. Churai Kananran, the first prominent bureaucrats from the Thiyya community was proficient in Tamil and Hindustani in addition to have command on Sanskrit and Malayalam.¹

His exposure to the Company administration was due to his father's service to Company as jailor in Tellicherry. In addition to that, Thiyyas were associated with Company in their capacity as porters, cooks and whatever menial jobs offered to them. Even before the emergence of bureaucrats, the Thiyyas utilized the opportunities opened with the transfer of power from native to make money. As they do not have particular job assigned in the caste hierarchy, they

involved in all kinds of works available to them for their livelihood. Therefore, in the early days of Company rule, Moorkoth Ramunni, the father of renowned social reformer and literati Moorkoth Kumaran became rich through working as an abkari contractor. Karai Bappu and Karayai Kutti were successful traders under the British. The father-in-law of Dr.Ayyathan Gopalan was a successful planter and a business man. The bureaucrats who emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century were, thus can be seen, belonged to the families who earned wealth under the early days of Company rule.² C.A.Innes who was a british civil servant worked in Malabar as settlement officer observed the groth of Thiyyas into a prosperous community. He writes thus: by the end of the eiteenth century many thiyyas on the coast seem to have attained a considerable position as merchants, landowners etc., and they further improved their position by the services which they rendered to the company. ..thiyyas as a whole are a most progressive community, especially in north Malabar where they form one of the most progressive classes in india. A large number of them have risen to the higher posts in the government service, and many are vakils.³

The Thiyya bureaucrats were visible in the second half of the nineteenth century Malabar and; historians in common agree a general spurt in the life of that period. P.Bhaskaranunni opined that the antique nature of Kerala has waned with the passing of the first half of nineteenth century.⁴ One could find a number of Thiyyas working as government servants in various capacities as clerks, magistrates, physicians, teachers, village level officers, railway employees etc. It became a fashion almost among the young generation to have a degree in law. Both Mitavadi C.Krishnan and Potheri Kunhambu earned degree in law later in their life. C.Krishnan was a business man and Potheri Kunhambu was working as a postmaster before they joined legal studies. They were all quite active in the field of social reform particularly interested in changing the decadent state of the caste to which they belonged. Potheri Kunhambu who wrote the novel Saraswativijayam(1898) was called ‘pulayan kunhambu’ for the life he dedicated for uplifting the Pulaya caste, the

caste which formed the bottom line of the caste hierarchy. Moorkoth kumaran one of the prominent intellectuals of Malabar in the second half the twentieth century validate kunhamu's service to society thus: kunhambu was a selfless social reformer worked for the uplifting his community and it was his habit to express his opinions freely unmindful of its consequences. He worked among the pulayas for long thirty years and started a school for them.⁵ C.Krishnan became well known as 'Mitavadi Krishnan' for his lifelong devotion in conducting the daily 'mitavadi'. Such was the service that the newspaper mitavadi done to uplifting the Thiyyas that the daily, during his life was hailed as the Bible of Thiyyas.

The schools run by the Basel Evangelical Mission in Malabar played a significant role in producing the Burecrats among Thiyyas. They started working in Malabar in 1834. Though conversion was their man aim, they established many schools and small scale factories for the natives. This opportunity was very well utilized by the Thiyyas for their material benefits. Thiyyas in large numbers in north Malabar joined the mission schools. These schools not only introduced modern western education but also instilled the ideas like equality, fraternity and liberty among the deprived castes. For the new education was the gateway to government positions and other commercial avenues of wealth. Also, caste differences were ignored in the schools as far as possible, and lower castes saw a way of changing their circumstances through education- opined Adrian C. Mayor.⁶ It gave them hopes on which the Thiyyas set off constructing a new identity since the second half of the nineteenth century. The casteless attitude of the Basel Mission was revealed to the Thiyyas from the very beginning of their mission work in North Malabar. Rev.Hebic, a Basel missionary who arrived in Kannur for mission work opened an English school in a place called Burnnassery in 1841. He appointed Ambu Gurunathan, a much respected Thiyya teacher in the area, as the teacher in the school for teaching Malayalam. In the opinion of Frederic Sunil Kumar, with the appointment of Ambu Gurunathan as teacher in the Mission School, English education started spreading among the Thiyyas in and around Kannur fast.⁷ One cannot say that appointment

of a Thiyya teacher was one of the tactics applied by the missionaries for facilitating mission work among the Thiyya community. Basel Mission not only admitted students, they did not hesitate in inducting them as teachers in the mission schools. Mooliyil Krishnan was appointed as the Headmaster of a Mission school soon after his completion of matriculation in 1868.⁸ Nambutiri jenmies scornfully ignored these schools as ‘factories of inquilab’⁹ and opposed the establishment of such schools.

The entry of Thiyyas to the British Indian service elevated their position. They were treated as the symbol of state power. People looked at them as ‘thamburans’ especially those Thiyyas who were appointed as village level officers called ‘adhikaris’. Churai Kanaran(1812-1876), was one of the earliest prominent bureaucrats from among the Thiyyas. He reached the position of first class Deputy Collector from Malabar. Many Thiyyas bore offices of prominent position in the British service. This was a great leap forward to Thiyyas in the caste ridden society. Caste had decided their economic, social and political status under the native Rajas. British discarded caste as the criterion of appointing natives in government service. The Thiyyas made use of colonialism as an opportunity to come out of the caste ridden society. It did give economic prosperity and to a great extent rose their social status too. The attitude, standard of life and values of bureaucrats changed once they are placed in the administration. It increased their mobility and influenced the family set up too. Mooliyil Krishnan took his wife along with him after marriage to Chennai where he worked as Tutor in the Presidency College. The intelligentsia preferred nuclear families than the traditional joint families. The bureaucratic families gave great care in giving education to their children as they know well that education was their sole means to economic and social status.

The bureaucrats turned to be the early social reformers among the Thiyyas. They even attempted reform in the religious life of their fellow beings. Churayi Kanaran attempted to build a Shiva temple for the worship of Thiyya caste. Though it did not materialize, they were aware of the impediments and chalked out solutions too. Indeed, the

efforts in the nineteenth century made the society lively with debates on caste and the untouchables castes bureaucrats turned intellectuals made it a topic of discussion. Whatever changes occurred to them as a result of the opportunities offered under colonialism was largely confined to the intellectuals in the port cities. The large mass of Thiyya population in the interior of Malabar was out of touch with the changes that took place in the coastal cities. They were embedded in illiteracy and a number of socio-religious practices like kettukalyanam, thirandukalayanam, pulikudi etc. Caste system was practiced with such stringency that their life was not better than an animal. They continued as the slave labourers of the upper caste jenmies and their economic status was pathetic. This necessitated reform among the Thiyyas and the intellectuals were keen on those practices which hinder the economic prosperity and social degradation among them. In addition to it, the Thiyya bureaucrats realized the fact that colonial rulers are not interested to meddle and remove the hurdles that deny equality in society. They do not want to invite the wrath of the public by interfering in the social affairs of the natives unless they obstruct the smooth running of administration. They realized that there is no point in waiting the British interference to change the society through removal of caste anomalies. Naturally Thiyya intellectuals invited Sree Narayana Guru to Malabar for initiating social reform among them in 1904. Thus the leadership of the social reformation passed to religious leader and there emerged a new kind of interrelationship among caste, colonialism and bureaucracy.

Endnotes

- 1 K.R.Achutan. C.Krishnan. A biography. Vylopilly Samskriti bavan. Thiruvananthapuram. 2021. p.6
- 2 Some Aspects of the Tiyyas' 'Caste' Movement with Special Referenceto British Malabar' by Toshie Awaya in Caste System, Untouchability, and the Depressed. ed.by H.Kotani,Manohar, 1997. P.142.
- 3 Malabar gazetteer.vol.1&2 by C.A.Innes.ed. by f.b.evans. (1908); Thiruvanthapuram, 1997.p.126
- 4 P.Bhaskaranunni.Pathonpatham Nootandile Keralam. Trissur, Kerala Sahitya Akademi.1988.p995
- 5 Moorkoth Kumaran.Gadhyamanjeri.vol.1 Kottayam: vidhartimitram, 1967.p.131.
- 6 Adrian C. Mayer. Land and Society in Malabar. Bombay:oup, 1952. P.34-35.
- 7 Frederick Sunil Kumar. Mathethara vidyabhyasavum basel missionum. Article in Malabar Paithrakvum prathapavum. Ed. P.B.Salim Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi, 2011.p.439
- 8 P.K.M.Nair.Mooliyil Krishnan. Biography. Calicut, 1932.p.24
- 9 Dr.M.S.Nair. Vagbhandaguruvum samoohikanavodhatnavum

Dr UV Shakkeela

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Govt. Arts and Science College

Calicut, Kerala

India

Pin: 673018

Ph: +91 9846457469

Email: uvshakkeela@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-7714-8175