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Reading *Sahasrapoornima*(1977): A Glimpse of Thiyya Reformation under Colonialism

Dr. UV Shakkeela

Sahasrapoornima is a work written by C.K.Revathi Amma. It contains the memoirs of Revathi Amma who was active in the public life of Malabar in the first half of the 20th century. The reformation of the numerically dominant caste called Thiyyas to which Revathi Amma belonged was in full swing during the period. Her autobiography is a mirror which reflects the society under transformation. The present study examines how well the autobiography reflects the transformation of the Thiyyas under colonialism. Historical literature gives ample evidence to the tremendous changes brought into the caste by colonialism. The change was gradual and the autobiography could sketch the transformation of the caste through the real life story of the family members.

Keywords: Reformation, colonialism, transformation, matriliney, patriarchy, autobiography

Sahasrapoornima is the autobiographical work of C.K.Revathi Amma(1892-1980) a prominent woman social reformer active in the public life of the first half of the twentieth century Malabar. The book written in Malayalam is a veritable source of information about the social transformation taking place among the Thiyyas in her lifetime. However, the reminiscence was rarely used as a source of information. It could have been a rare sourcebook, dipped in and blended with real life situation of her personal life, for constructing a picture of the society of Malabar in general and facilitating to

understand the state of social transformation among the Thiyyas in particular. Notable references about this autobiography are given in two works. In A.V.Anilkumar's work in Malayalam *Indulekhyade anujattimar*(2007) the author has given a two page description of the autobiography of C.K.Revathi Amma.¹ Vasanthi.V examined the activities of C.K.Revathi Amma in her work *Women in Public Life in Malabar (1900-1957)*(2013)²

Moorcoth Kunhappa, the son of prominent social reformer Moorcoth Kumaran who was also well-known literati in the first half of the 20th century, wrote the preface to the work. He left his observations thus- the work can be counted as the portrait of the social and cultural life of the first half of the 20th century.³ In a felicitation note left by Sukumar Azhikode for the work in 2005, he endorsed the observation of Kunhappa. He opined that *Sahsrapoornima* renders a fairly credible picture of the life of the Thiyyas in North Malabar especially about their public and private lives; and customs and familial ties prevailed at the time.⁴ Being a keen observer and a part of the social transformation of the first half of the 20th century Malabar, Revathi Amma's life experiences, in and out, forms an authentic note of the time. Autobiographies in spite of their personal predilections thus form a source of information and a historical literature.

The autobiography has two narrators. The first part gives a picture of the family of Revathi Amma's forefathers and the second part forms the lifetime of Revathi Amma. The first part of the story of the family is narrated by Thala, the maternal grandmother of Revathi Amma and the second part by Revathi Amma herself. The autobiography gives the life of five generations of the family of Revathi Amma.⁵ Interestingly, the story of the family unfolds through female line. It indicates the matrilineal family and inheritance system prevalent among the Thiyyas in North Malabar. The increased physical presence of European men on the Malabar Coast since the 16th century for trading purposes had led to establishing European liaison with native women. This liaison along with matrilineal system strengthened women in the families and they were taken good care by the menfolk in the family. Revathi Amma's family is a typical case in point. She stated

that her maternal uncle Kunhappa took good care of her mother, Damayanti and her siblings when she lost her husband at the tender age of 28. Revathi Amma left her observations thus: our uncle showered his love and affection immensely and fulfilled our needs with great interest. Maternal uncles are not supposed to love, pamper and give gifts to their own children. Priorities were given to the needs of nephews and nieces than to their own children. My uncle extended all his love to my mother in her grief and stood by her. This unconditional love and support my uncle extended to my mother is due to the prevalence of matrilineal system.⁶ When compared to certain other castes of Malabar, women are given importance in the Thiyya community-in their inheritance, marriage systems, customs and manners, system of worship etc⁷. Matrilineal system was prominent among the Thiyyas living on the Coast especially on the Coastal towns of North Malabar.

The history of the family as narrated by Thala traced to Madri whose marriage with Daraseth, a rich merchant belonged to Gujarath based Seth family turned the fortune of the family to their favour. Daraseth who was the grandfather of Thala used to frequent Thalasserry for trading purposes and ran prosperous business connecting Bombay and Thalasserry. *His yachts and boats unloaded goods on Thalasserry coast and caused its development. In one of his business trips to Thalasserry, he happened to meet my grandmother whose beauty and charm attracted him. He married her.*⁸

Thala, the grandmother, through her flashback description could leave the spirit of the age intact and it reflects the state of life led by the Thiyyas since the second half of the 18th century. The time frame work of the family story narrated by Thala corresponds well with the gradual transformation that Thiyyas undergone under the European trading activities on the Coastal Malabar. The growth in the material prosperity of Thiyyas under the influence of European companies started visible in the second half of the 18th century. C.K.Revathi Amma's maternal great, great grandmother, Madri roughly belonged to this period. The material prosperity that the Thiyyas acquired and achieved in the modern period was undoubtedly due to

the changes in the prevailing social, economic and political systems of Malabar brought in by the European presence. C.A.Innes left a note of their prosperity in the 18th century thus-by the end of the 18th century many tiyans 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 and the tiyans as a whole are a most progressive community, especially in north Malabar where they form one of the most progressive classes in India.⁹ Thala's husband was a rich thiyya merchant called Karayi Babu whose brother karayi kutti was also a successful merchant; though their father karayi Krishnan Gurukkal was a popular ayurveda physician in Thalassery. Thiyyas since the 18th century were making use of the opportunities opened to them by European trade. The British ascendancy of Malabar in the last decade of 18th century led the Thiyyas to come closer to the British. It helped them to seek employment in British Company and later they were inducted into the administration of the British government in Malabar. British men's liaison with Thiyya women also had benefited them economically. Revathi Amma's maternal uncle Kunhappa was an agent in the British military barracks at Kannur. C.A.Innes's observation summarizes the above mentioned changes unequivocally. He wrote thus-a large number of them have risen to the higher posts in the government service, and many are vakils. Not a few families in north Malabar have in their veins a considerable admixture of European blood, as it used not be considered that their women lost caste by living with Europeans; and there is no doubt that they have been benefited in physique, personal appearance, morale and material prosperity by this (infusion of Aryan blood), in the same way as the Nairs have been benefited by the relations between their womankind and the Nambudiris.¹⁰

Lives of Revathi Amma and her mother, Damayanthi fall in the 20th century. The period is significant in the context of the impact of the gradual and steady growth sustained by the Thiyyas in the 18th and 19th centuries. A vibrant group of intellectuals, literati, politicians, professionals and educated women belonged to the Thiyya caste was the result of this steady growth. This development, though miraculously fast, was confined to the educated well-to-do families residing in the

coastal port towns. Revathi Amma belonged to such a well to-do Thiyya family. The intellectuals mostly constituted of such families and, for that matter the reforms in the 20th century find their place in the autobiography as her experiences. She was quite active in the public life of Malabar like her mother Damayanti.

Revathi Amma stood for the eradication of caste discrimination. In her view the caste Hindus looked the deprived castes scornfully and detested them like epidemic.¹¹ The wholehearted welcome extended to Sri Narayana Guru by the intellectuals of Malabar for initiating and directing the Thiyyas of Malabar in the field of social transformation was a matter of immense significance. Revathi Amma opined that a reawakening was visible among the Thiyyas with the arrival of Guru in Malabar because Guru's presence broadened the vista of social reformation of the Thiyyas. Social transformation was extended to Thiyyas residing in the rural areas too.

As a family oriented woman, she behaved typical of a dignified lady of the time. She gave primary importance to family and for that reason; she described the domestic life in detail in her memoirs. The changes in the family are vividly described. Transition from joint families to nuclear family is taking place in the 20th century under the influence of the British. When her husband Commisar was transferred from Mahe to Yanam, she accompanied him. This was unprecedented in the society. She shared the experience thus: I learnt what freedom is when I started living with my husband.¹² Thus transition from joint family to nuclear family among the thiyya intellectuals took place as a professional necessity. It took place without much conflicts compared to the split up of joint families among the other prominent communities such as nairs and nambutiris.

She attributed the eradication of superstitious practices among the thiyyas to srinarayana guru. *Talikettu kalyanam* is the custom of marrying off a girl to an elderly male member of the family immediately after the attainment of puberty of the girl. This was done symbolically but it caused squandering of money and many wealthy families turned poor. In the case of her marriage, auspicious time was chosen according to the time available to her bridegroom's official

responsibility. He was the police commissioner of French Mahe at the time of his marriage; due to his official responsibility, he failed to appear for marriage at the auspicious time fixed. None created any fuss over the auspicious time. And what is found interesting was that relatives who have come to attend the marriage also admitted the importance of professional responsibility on keeping the auspicious time for marriage. A change was visible particularly in identifying and choosing the rational over irrational customs.

Revathi Amma describes in detail her services for gender equality. She organized Stree Samajam, an organization for women and offered training programmes to economically backward women. Her perception on women's emancipation is evident from her own life. She was trying to excel in various roles both in private and in public under the permission of her husband. This submission to patriarchy was common among women followers and leaders alike at the time. But the kind of women's emancipation C.K.Revathi Amma proposed and practiced did not fit prodigious scientist like E.K.Janaki Ammal, a contemporary of Revathi Amma. The reformation package was not fit for all people and all situations. Life of Revathi Amma reflects the limitation of modernity at the level of application and practice. Autobiography is a mirror that stands against generalizations.

Endnotes:

- 1 A.V.Anil Kumar.indulekhayude anujattimar. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi, 2007.p.p 35-38
- 2 Vasanthi.v. women in public life in Malabar(1900-1957). Kozhikode: lipi, 2013
- 3 Moorkoth Kunhappa in the preface to Sahasrapoornima.p.18
- 4 Sukumar Azhikode in the felicitation note to sahsrapoornima.p.09
- 5 Madri-Kasturbai-Thala-Damyanti-Revathi Amma. Five generations of female family line.
- 6 C.K.Revathi Amma. Sahasrapoornima(Mal.) Autobiography. Kottayam, 1977.p.21
- 7 Vasanthi.v. women in public life in Malabar(1900-1957). Kozhikode: lipi, 2013.p.164.
- 8 C.K.Revathi Amma.p.28
- 9 C.A.Innes.malabar(gazetteer) vol.1&2, ed. By f.b.evans(1908) thirivananthapuram,1997. P.126
- 10 C.A.Innes.P.126
- 11 C.K.Revathi Amma.p.67
- 12 C.k.revathi ammap.109-110

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