

Dissent and Modernity in Travancore, 1888-1938

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Abstract

Social, religious and political dissent with traditional customs, practices and mentalities brought about modernity in Travancore. The dissent found expression in various movements –revivalist and reformative, religious, social and political for the redressal of grievances which the majority of the Travancoreans had long been suffering from. These protest movements were spearheaded by progressive social and religious reformers belonging to different castes and communities. The orthodox elite mentality had been conditioned to accept reform and change, resulting in the modernization of Travancore society. Modernity and social progress achieved in the past were largely due to reasonable dissent and valid discourse. Therefore tolerating and accommodating dissent is essential for a healthy and harmonious society.

Keyword: Dissent, Modernity, Hegemony, Travancore, Civic Rights, Abstention

1. Introduction

Dissent or disagreement with traditional customs and practices, mode of worship, political or religious ideology, etc. brings about changes which interrupt the usual course of society and usher in modernity, most often decried by the hegemonic groups that benefit from the existing system. The social and religious agents who want to stick on to the obsolete system, traditionally practiced with divine sanctions, respond to the challenges of dissenters in a violent manner with the help of administrative machinery always at their service. The charisma of the dissenters helped them to attract a large following which nullify the orthodox reactionary attitude to change and modernity.

Modernity, as we understand today, evolved under certain conditions created by colonial regime whose presence gave boldness to the forces of renaissance to articulate itself in the form of corrective steps aimed at the restructuring of social and religious ethos held dear by the conservative guardians of Hinduism. The questioning of dominant social and religious ideology especially by the hitherto 'silenced' deprived and backward sections was a

courageous act which set the engine of modernity in motion. The dissenting voices were at first left unheard, but finally had its better fruits as we have of today.

According to Hegelian philosophy, historical process is a dialectical process. Every idea or institution produces its opposites. History is the result of the interplay of thesis, antithesis and the consequent synthesis. The dissent to the existing idea (thesis) may be taken as the antithesis. Whenever the dissent is accepted, accommodated and tolerated, there can be any synthesis, any progress in society.

Dominant or hegemonic groups who want to maintain power and status can never tolerate dissent or disagreement which they think as counterpoise to their pet ideology. They use all their machinery, say monarchical or feudal, to check the rising tide of dissent. That is why revolutions or monarchical coup become a regular feature of the historical drama.

Dissent is a strong corrective force of society. It may take different forms- political or religious or social. Political dissent occurs when the existing political authority is questioned for its authoritarian measures or for sticking on to

traditional state policy founded upon iniquitous principles. Religious dissent occurs when reformers dissatisfied with superstitious and obsolete religious practices call for a purification of faith and return to an earlier and simplified form of religion. Social dissent is for a drastic social change-a reform of social practices and customs that are harmful or cancerous to the social organism. When a group of social leaders came forward to question social and religious evils and superstitious practices and demanded a through restructuring of society on the basis of liberal, humanitarian and democratic principles, modernity came to be realised.

2. Dissent and Transformation

The princely state of Travancore underwent a thorough social and religious transformation during the period from 1888 to 1938. The social leaders could articulate their dissent through press, platform, organisation and social and political action. They were to present before the authorities an organised dissent in the form of memorials, petitions, organised agitations, and exemplary social and religious actions. The authorities had to relent and mend their traditional policies in favour of an acceptable consent of the majority towards progress and modernity.

The colonial regime attempted a kind of modernity that was superficial. The British introduced an educational system that replaced the *gurukula* system; a judicial structure that established the Rule of Law and Equity before law; a bureaucratic state structure that did away with the feudal aristocracy; and the modern means of transport and communication that reduced spacial distance. Under pressure from the missionaries and social reformers, the British Government passed certain social legislations abolishing Sati, female infanticide, child marriage and polygamy; permitting widow remarriage and encouraging the education of females. This modernity, though meant for facilitating colonial administration and exploitation, did not go deep in to the social organism nor they were appreciated by the people of India. They produced rather a negative impact on British rule.

The British might have continued with their modernity endeavours, had it not been revealed to them that their social intervention

was one of the potent causes of the 'Hindu – Muslim Conspiracy' against the British in 1857. So, after the revolt of 1857, the British withdrew from all social reform measures. It was left to the educated among the Indians to advocate for social transformation. However, they did not suppress such endeavours, and their presence emboldened the social reforms to undertake creative social and religious action.

Travancore presented a sorry state of affairs in the 9th century. It was the most caste-ridden part of India [1]. Social relations were determined on the basis of the upper- lower caste dichotomy. Spacial distance to be observed between castes was clearly defined; purity and pollution were strictly adhered to; the lower castes were not entitled to admission to schools, temples and Sarkar service [2]. Within each and every community, curious social customs, primitive as they were, were observed with rigour and rigidity, as though they were unwritten principles handed down from generation to generation by oral transmission and practice from heaven. Any change in the custom, it was afraid, would bring havoc to the entire society. The traditional political authorities in Travancore who were the protectors of customs and conventions were unable to effect any change in the social and religious structure and simply obeyed the religious injunctions.

The establishment of the colonial authority and its hegemony over the Indian states in the 19th century was a significant factor that contributed to the construction of modernity in social, religious and political level. The presence of an imperial power was a political deterrent to the feudal and religious agents from overacting on their subjects who had by then subjected to British law and legal system. The missionaries' critique of the social and religious systems and their advocacy of the rights of the low castes further emboldened the non- *savarnas* to be critical of the *savarna* attitude.

The Nadar community in south Travancore was the first to express their social dissent against the dress codes prescribed for the non-*savarna* communities in Travancore. The right of the converts to Christianity to dress in a decent manner was advocated by the missionaries in South Travancore. Covering the torso was prohibited to the women of Nadars, *Ezhavas* and other low castes. When the Nadars

imitated the dress style of the upper caste, that resulted in the upper cloth disturbance in South Travancore during the period from 1822-1859 [3]. This agitation popularly called the shanar revolt ended with the proclamation of 1859 which permitted the shanar women of all creeds to cover their bosom in any manner but not like that of the high castes [4]. In 1865 the Travancore government issued a proclamation permitting the women of *Ezhavas* and other socially backward classes to wear upper garments [5].

Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928), dissented with the religion and society of his days by establishing centres of worship for the backward classes. This was against the dominant notion that only the Brahmins had the right to consecrate temples. In 1888 Guru installed the Siva idol at Aruvippuram, thus questioning in a silent manner the right of the Brahmins to consecrate temples [6].

The Aruvippuram model was repeated elsewhere in Kerala. Guru consecrated more than 64 temples in and outside Kerala [7]. He abolished the worship of evil spirits and removed such images from temples. He brought about changes in the mode of worship also. Animal sacrifices and fermented drinks were replaced by flowers and fruits [8]. He stopped the sacrifice of goats and cocks conducted in the temples of the *Ezhavas*. He envisaged a simple temple establishment provided with schools, gardens and industrial centres as integral part of it [9]. It was not to imitate the Brahmanical model, but to create a system of worship easily accessible to the common man.

Sree Narayana Guru expressed the strongest social dissent when he asked the members of the *Ezhava* community to do away with many social practices like *Thalikettu Kalyanam*, *Tirandukuli*, *Pulakuli*, Polyandry and polygamy [10]. He proposed a simple inexpensive wedding ceremony. He asked the backward communities to abstain from consumption of liquor. In a message he said: "Liquor is poison. Don't make it, serve it or drink it"[11].

Dr.P.Palpu, with the blessings of Sree Narayana Guru founded the S.N.D.P Yogam which was a platform for the *Ezhavas* to express their views, organize and work for the social,

educational and economic advancement of the community [12]. Guru's social and religious dissent and modernity endeavours had its impact not only among the *Ezhavas* but acted as a strong incentive for other communities to modernise on similar lines. Ayyankali founded the *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Yogam* in 1907; Mannathu Padmanabhan founded the Nair Society in 1914; V.T. Bhattathiripad founded the *Yogakshema Sabha* in 1908; Vakkom Abdul Khadar Moulavi founded the *Islam Dharma Paripalana Sangham*; Kandan Kumaran and K.P. Karuppan worked for the Harijans. All these progressive social reformers contributed to the social and religious transformation of their respective communities.

Ayyankali (1863-1941) strongly dissented with caste rules governing social relations. He organised the famous *Kallumala* agitation by which he asked the *Pulaya* Community to give up the stone chains they wore as a symbol of slavery and subordination [13]. He challenged the restrictions imposed by the upper castes upon the *Pulayas* to travel through public roads in South Travancore. He also agitated for getting admission for the Harijans in Government schools. He organised the first agricultural strike in Travancore and declared that they would not work for the landlords until their children were given admission to the schools, freedom to travel in public roads and an increase and fixation of their wages [13]. As member of the Travancore Legislative Assembly, he was able to express his dissent more forcibly than ever before.

A great political movement against the traditional policy of Travancore government was organised from 1891 to 1938. The educational elite of Travancore was disillusioned at the traditional policy of Travancore Government which filled the state administration with officials recruited from Tamilnadu. The Malayali Memorial, submitted to the Maharaja in 1891, which strongly dissented with the traditional state policy of the Travancore Government. The Memorialists asked the Government to give due representation to the natives of the state in the administrative service and stop recruitment from outside the state [14]. The *Ezhava* memorials of 1895 and 1896 voiced the same sentiment with particular emphasis on the claims of the *Ezhavas*, the largest Hindu community in Kerala [15]. But the Travancore government was reluctant to

change the traditional policy governed by customs and conventions. Several movements and organised agitations had to be carried on for opening Government schools and Government service to the backward communities.

The Civic Rights Agitation (1919-1922) and the Abstention Movement of the 1930's reflected the organized dissent of the people of Travancore against an obsolete state policy. The Christian, *Ezhava* and Muslim communities were deprived of employment to the Revenue Department on caste and communal grounds. Revenue Department was attached to the *Devaswom* Department, and both these departments were the monopoly of caste Hindus. The non-*savarnas* and non-Hindus were, therefore, excluded from the Revenue Department. The deprived communities, the Christian, *Ezhava* and Muslim demanded the separation of the Revenue Department from the *Devaswom* Department so that they could not be excluded on grounds of sanctity. Their agitation bore fruit on 12 April 1922 when the Maharaja issued a proclamation separating the Revenue Department from the *Devaswom* Department [16]. In 1932 the Christian, *Ezhava* and Muslim communities once again united and started the *Nivarthana* Agitation for getting representation to the legislatures and public services in proportion to their population [16]. Their joint activities had the desired effect. In 1935, the Travancore government passed orders regarding recruitment to the public service. The principle of communal rotation in the recruitment to the civil service was accepted [17].

Modernization of religious worship was a matter that attracted attention of all progressive social leaders. The orthodox Hindus never agreed with the question of temple entry to the non-*savarnas*. It is in this background that the famous Vaikom and Guruvayur *Sathyagrahas* were organised to throw open the approach roads of these temples to the *avarnas* or low caste people. The temple entry in Travancore was a serious question as it involved conflicting views and interests to be discussed. There was a growing sense of disagreement and tension among the *Ezhavas*. As their question of temple entry was delayed, they were planning to convert to other religions, most probably to Buddhism [18]. The threat of conversion was cleverly used by *Ezhava* leaders like C.V. Kunjiraman to take a decision in their favour. A large number of *savarna* leaders like

Mannathu Padmanabhan, K.P Kesava Menon, K.Kelappan had a genuine desire of reforming Hinduism and the evil practice of untouchability. They whole heartedly supported the entry of the *avarnas* into temples [19]. Finally, after much deliberation, the Maharaja Sri Chitra Tirunal Balarama Varma issued the Temple Entry Proclamation on 12 November 1936. It opened all state controlled temples to all Hindus irrespective of birth, caste or community.

3. Conclusion

Modernity is a continuing process. What we consider as modern today may be termed as out of date tomorrow. Many discourses relating to religion and society need to be changed - Customs relating to caste, marriage, death and temple festivals, and customs traditionally observed in temples and accepted by the present generation need to be questioned and revisited.

It must be born in mind that it is dissent to the existing social and religious evils and not blind submission to it that produced far-reaching social changes that modernised society. But, at present, dissent is not tolerated at all. The dissenters are being suppressed or annihilated by the so-called fundamentalists with a fanatic mind set up. The tendency to build a monolithic society instead of a pluralistic society is least desirable.

What is wanted for a healthy, harmonious and balanced growth of society is valid dissent expressed through fruitful discourses. The points of consent must be arrived at, and the hard rule that "I am right" and "you are wrong" must be adjusted to give respect and room for other view points. Only through such tolerant accommodation of valid dissent with a view to arrive at a synthesis of greater validity and utility, we are able to usher in a progressive modern society.

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