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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PROGRESS OF THE EZHAVAS

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Abstract

The Ezhavas were the largest community in the princely state of Travancore. But they were ostracised in the society due to caste discrimination and aristocracy. They were denied amenable rights in the society and were forced to be downtrodden. Untouchability and unapproachability were followed to a great extent as death penalties were even given in the name of defilement. But at the dawn of nineteenth century, the Christian missionaries set foot in Travancore and began their selfless services thereby providing education to the untouchables. Thus the communities which were forced to remain illiterates got educated and questioned their position in the society. Soon there was an awakening through which several social reformers transformed the society towards progress. The most important among them was Sree Narayana Guru. Several other leaders also strived hard for the progress of the community and finally succeeded in it.

Introduction

The Ezhava Community people are inhabited in south Travancore. They had the practice of Joint Family System. The Ezhavas were fully involved in the cultivation of coconut and paddy fields. These properties belong to the Nayers and the Brahmins. The Ezhavas were also engaged in toddy tapping and coir producing. They belong to the Hindu spiritual concept. The Ezhavas practiced native medicine. They were not having the practice of receiving food from Communities which were below their social rank.

The Christian Missionaries who visited Travancore during the early part of the 19th century began to convert the Ezhavas into Christianity. Mass conversion of the Ezhavas to Christianity was introduced in Cochin and Travancore areas. The Christian converts were respected in the society. The ladies who were converted to Christianity were allowed to use gold ornaments. Those Ezhava women who were converted to Christianity were given the right of inheritance.

However, the Ezhavas were illiterates and ignorant people. They did not have any opportunity

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and remained as untouchables. There were very few educational institutions owned by the Government. In these Government schools, Ezhava students were not admitted even if they got a chance to be admitted in schools, they were not permitted to get employments. Even the children of wealthy Ezhavas were denied admission in those schools.

But the Ezhavas who were rejected in the Government schools were given admissions in the Christian schools started by Missionaries. They sought their help to obtain education. Thus the Ezhava Community got educated. Though they got educated, they were not given Government jobs. Even the most eligible Ezhava candidates were not given suitable Government jobs. In 1891, there was not a single Ezhava candidate who had a Government job obtaining more than rupees five as monthly salary. Ezhavas were forced to become converts of Islam and Christianity to receive Government jobs in their own native place.

Ezhava Memorial

The Malayali Memorial was a complete failure to the Ezhava Community. The Travancore Government called the Ezhava Community as 'Confirmed Social Inferiors'. So the Ezhavas of Malabar drafted a petition similar to the petition of Malayali Memorial. This Memorial submitted by the Ezhavas was known as Ezhava Memorial.

Dr. Palpu decided to fight against the inequality done to the Ezhava Community. He submitted a petition to the Dewan of Travancore, S. Shankarasubba Iyer. In this petition, he demanded education and employments to the Ezhavas. The Dewan assured him that Ezhavas would be considered in all Governmental Departments except the Revenue Department. Even after that, the Ezhavas were not given employments, replying that there were no vacant positions. In the first stage towards the progress, the Ezhavas began to oppose the High Caste group, the Nayers through the submission of the Ezhava Memorial. Dr. Palpu, the Ezhava leader began to oppose the Government. So he started an Association known as 'Ezhava Mahajana Sabha'. The Ezhava Mahajana Sabha began to organize the signatures of the Ezhavas. Thirteen

thousand Ezhavas signed the Memorial and the Memorial known as Ezhava Memorial was presented to the Maharaja. By the submission of the Ezhava Memorial, they insisted that admissions and appointments in Travancore should be given only to the Ezhavas. This Ezhava petition was submitted to the Maharaja in 1896. Dr. Palpu also released this petition to Madras Newspapers.

The submission of the Ezhava Memorial heralded the dawn of progress in the life of the Ezhava Community. Thus the downtrodden community stood upright for their denied rights by the submission of Ezhava Memorial. It was the time when the Indian National Congress put up strong agitation against the British Imperialism. The submission of the two Memorials also created a troubled situation in Travancore. The submission of the two Memorials was not considered by Sree Mulam Thirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore. So in 1919 a Congress Committee under the leadership of A.P.Pillai and V.Achutha Menon was constituted to fight against the British and against the Maharaja of Travancore. At this time, the Dewan of Travancore increased the fees to be paid by the students. When the fees rate was increased, a student's agitation was organized. In 1922, all the students including the Ezhavas participated in this agitation. Despite reducing the fees rate, the Dewan very harshly controlled the students' agitation. Many students were arrested. Indiscriminate lathi charge was performed on the students.

Role of Palpu towards the progress of the Ezhavas

P.Palpu the prominent leader of the Ezhavas was born on 2nd November 1863. He joined H.H (His Highness) The Maharaja's College, Trivandrum. While he was studying at the College, he applied for medical admission. He passed the entrance examination. But because of his Community, he was denied admission in Medical College at Trivandrum. However, the determination of Palpu made him to join the Madras Medical College and he became a Doctor. But when he tried to join in Kerala, his appointment was denied by the Travancore Public Service Commission. Highly depressed over the role of the Travancore Government he returned to Madras and in

1890, he joined the Government service in Madras State.

Because of Caste discrimination, highly qualified persons of the Ezhava Community were denied admissions and appointments in Travancore. He sought the support of the Barrister G.P. Pillai and another leader Shankara Menon. They prepared the Memorial known as Ezhava and Malayali Memorial and presented it to the Government on 11th January 1891. These Memorials were not responded by the Government of Travancore. So Palpu proceeded to Trivandrum and met the Dewan. The Dewan promised that all help would be given to the backward classes. The submission of the Memorials demanding admission and appointments to the Ezhava Community in the Travancore Government was given wide publicity in the daily newspaper of Travancore. But the Government kept quiet.

Hence Dr. Palpu proceeded to take further steps, he sent barrister G.P. Pillai to England to present the matter before the British Parliament. Barrister G.P. Pillai met the British Parliamentarians and the problem of the Ezhava Community was taken up by the British Parliament. The matter of the Ezhava Community was discussed in the British Parliament by Herbert Roberts on 17 July 1897. But the British Parliament decided not to involve themselves in the internal Caste system of Travancore. Thus, the second attempt of Dr. Palpu did not bear fruit. Then he reported the matter to Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India. In 1900, when Lord Curzon visited Travancore Dr. Palpu submitted him a petition entitled as "The Treatment of Thiyaas in Travancore". Lord Curzon suggested the Government of Travancore to follow a conciliatory policy with the Ezhavas.

Having failed in all his activities, Dr. Palpu met saint Vivekananda and requested him to admit him as one of his disciples. Vivekananda gave him the answer saying that, in Kerala, at Aruvipuram there lives a great Guru and you become a disciple of that Guru, Narayana Swamy. On the advice of Swamy Vivekananda, Palpu sought the guidance of Swamy Narayana Guru.

Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru was born on 25th August 1854 at a small village in Chempazhanthi. This village is located at a distance of ten kilometres north of Trivandrum. In his village, he studied Malayalam and Sanskrit. Due to financial problems, he discontinued his studies. But he was much interested in reading and specialized in General Knowledge. Guru patronized Lord Shiva worship. He was against family life and chose ascetic life. He came to Kanyakumari and stayed in "Maruthuval Malai" and spent six years in meditation and attained Enlightenment. After Enlightenment, he proceeded to Travancore and erected a small temple in Aruvipuram having the image of Lord Shiva in it. But the Brahmins opposed it and informed that the low caste people like the Ezhavas should not worship the high caste God, Lord Shiva. He replied that he consecrated an 'Ezhava Shiva' and not a 'Brahmin Shiva'. This installation ceremony in Aruvipuram was the beginning of a silent yet powerful socio-religious revolution. He founded his Ashram in Sivagiri. He fought against the domination of Brahmins.

Dr. Palpu had a son by the name Natarajan. He was working as a teacher in the school which was founded by Sri Narayana Guru. Narayana Guru sent Natarajan to Paris for his higher education in philosophy. Likewise, Narayana Guru started schools and trust associations throughout Travancore. He was specialized in Tamil, Malayalam, and Sanskrit languages. For the benefit of the Low Caste people, he started an Association known as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam in 1903. Improving the social status of the Ezhavas through educational, economical and industrial developments along with religious revolutions was considered as the scope of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. Within a short period, SNDP Yogam became the common institution of Ezhavas. The Ezhava Community people were the first to be awakened by the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru.

He slowly prepared the people of the Ezhava Community towards the high-level realization of advanced revolutionary ideas. In 1922, at Murukkumpuzha near Trivandram, he erected a temple where instead of the image of God he exposed a bright

light, a bright light showing the truth, duty, kindness and love. Later, he consecrated a mirror in order to show that God lives in one's heart. This is known as Kannadi Pratishta. He was the one to propagate "One Caste, One Religion and One God for man". Narayana Guru's contributions were entirely different from that of reformers of modern India as he had a peculiar approach towards society.

The SNDPY founded by Narayana Guru did meritorious services against the Caste system in Travancore. The first General Secretary of the SNDPY was Kumaran Asan. Kumaran Asan was the highly dedicated disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. All his revolutionary and spiritual poems against Caste system were highly developed because of his close associations with Sree Narayana Guru. Sree Narayana Guru founded two Ashrams, one at Varkala, and another at Alluwa. These Ashrams spread high ideals and universal fraternity among the people of Travancore and the institutions which were attached to the Ashrams were responsible for the growth of education among the Ezhavas. Thus, the Ezhavas proceeded to their prosperity because of the steps taken by Dr. Palpu, Kumaran Asan and Natarajan. The guiding principle for all these people was the great saint of Travancore, Sree Narayana Guru.

A complete transition towards the progress of Ezhavas was brought in by these leaders due to the indomitable steps taken by the Sree Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana Yogam. Many Ezhavas became poets, doctors, teachers, professors, Businessman, and press reporters within a short span of time. For the progress of the Ezhava Community, the Ezhavas are highly thankful to the service rendered by Dr. Palpu.

Economic and Social Progress

In the Northern part of Travancore, especially in the Malabar area, trade developed. Merchants from different parts of the world came to Malabar to get spices. So the Malabar harbours were fully packed with foreign ships. Taking advantage of this, trade involvement and organization known as Malabar Economic Union was started. Initiatives for establishing the Malabar Economic Union was taken

up mainly by Dr. Palpu. This commercial organization had an idea, "Progress through Industries". SNDPY took the full charge of the Malabar Economic Union. This Malabar Economic Union aimed to bring back the old traditional trade and to give monetary benefits to the low caste people especially the Ezhavas. A share of the profit should also be handed over to the Ezhavas. This system highly enhanced the financial position of the Ezhava Community. In these trade activities, thousands of people could be employed. The economic background of the Ezhavas highly increased because the Ezhava male members were appointed along the Malabar coastal regions.

Likewise, there was a social transformation also among the Ezhava Community. Because of the reform movements, the society of Kerala especially the Ezhava Community people began to live as brethren setting aside Caste restrictions. The economic and social condition of the Ezhava Community began to develop through industrial development and the development of employment opportunities. Caste system with all its problems was highly limited. The people especially the Ezhavas were permitted to worship any God, and all the Low Caste people were permitted to enter into the temples and communal representation was also given in the State Legislature of Travancore. Ezhavas began to fight against the injustices done to them.

Ezhavas were not allowed to cover the upper part of their bodies. All the Ezhava women irrespective of age had no right to cover their bosoms. After the arrival of Christian Missionaries, they induced them to wear upper clothes and distributed Jackets to them. Eventually, the high castes started to rebel against them by covering their bosoms. This act of Ezhavas irritated the Nayars. During a festive ceremony, the Ezhava women who dressed like Nayar women were attacked by the Nayar Community people. Their upper clothes were torn and thrown out. Simultaneously, the Ezhava students were attacked. This led to a widespread Nayar-Ezhava Agitation. Because of this chaos, Nayars and Brahmin students boycotted the educational institutions. So, the Government was forced to start separate schools for Nayars and Brahmins. Thus, the Ezhava Community broke the

shackles of the society one by one which bounded them. They started to revolt with unity. Through this social awareness, Brahmin domination in society was reduced.

Role of T.K. Madhavan towards the Progress of the Ezhavas

The Ezhava Community had an extraordinary revival under the leadership of T.K. Madhavan, one of the disciples of Sree Narayana Guru. T.K. Madhavan was born in Mavelikara on 2nd September 1885. Even while, he was very young he developed a taste to do good to the society. He noticed the suffering of the low Caste people and developed a firm decision to improve the condition of the low Caste Communities. He developed a close association with Sree Narayana Guru and took efforts for the formation of the Ezhava Association. Under his guidance in Karthigaipalli and Mavelikara, Ezhava Associations were formed in 1902. He was highly attracted by the speeches of Francis Bacon, Swamy Vivekananda and Gopala Krishna Gokhale. He took an active part in fighting against the prohibition of untouchability. He was much interested in organizing the Temple Entry Movement and participated in the Vaikom Sathyagraha.

He was a powerful speaker. In 1918 at Kottayam, a public meeting was organized in connection with civil equality. He submitted a joint representation of the Ezhavas, Muslims and Christians to the Government, demanding equal rights to the low caste people. Because of his steps, the Department of Revenue and Temples were separated. Low Caste people were appointed by the Government in the Revenue Department. He started a Journal "Deshabhimani" in 1915. His advanced ideas were published through this magazine. Through this, he demanded that Ezhava Community should be represented in the Sree Mulam Assembly in Travancore.

Madhavan fought for the freedom of the Ezhavas to use public roads. In 1918 because of the pressure extended by him, the Government appointed him as a member of Sree Mulam Assembly. In 1921, when

Mahatma Gandhi visited Thirunelveli of Madras Presidency. There Madhavan met him. The meeting of him with Mahatma Gandhi highly increased the prestige of the Ezhava Community. At that time the Ezhavas involved important occupations, one was weaving and other was toddy tapping from palm trees.

Madhavan advocated that toddy tapping of the Ezhava Community should be stopped and suggested that weaving should be developed. Gandhiji also advocated that the Community should produce "Swadesi" clothes. The standard of the Ezhava Community was highly raised when they began to weave Swadesi clothes. It was because of the progressive steps taken by Madhavan, the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee which met at Eranakulam in 1924, constituted a Community for the removal of untouchability, T.K. Madhavan took an active part of this. He called upon the Ezhavas to join the Congress to remove untouchability. The Committee held a public meeting at Quilon and propagated that equal rights should be given to the Ezhava Community people. Thus, because of the earnest steps taken by Madhavan, the Government came forward to grant equal rights to Ezhavas and other low Communities. The Temple Entry was accepted in 1937 by the Proclamation the Government of Travancore.

Conclusion

The Ezhavas remained as a backward caste for several centuries. The Christian missionaries were responsible for this progress as their social activities created a stir in the society resulting in the availability of education and rational thinking. Education gave rise to several social reformers who tried their best to reform the society. They began to question their living and started to fight for it. Narayana Guru is responsible for the social and religious progress of the Ezhavas as well as the backward castes. Dr. Palpu and several other leaders strived for political rights and successfully obtained it resulting in the overall progress of the community.

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