

CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF HINDI, HYDERABAD CENTRE
NATIONAL SEMINAR ON RENAISSANCE AND INDIAN LANGUAGES
MARCH 16 - 18

RENAISSANCE IN KERALA SOCIAL AND LITERARY IMPACT

P GOVINDA PILLAI

AKG CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND STUDIES
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM 34

Though the term Renaissance is popular in common parlance, its roots, nature and impact have deeper and denser dimensions that lend to different, even contradictory, interpretations. Owing to fundamental changes taking place in historical perspective, the connotation has undergone drastic metamorphosis that the term has become almost a misnomer. Literally Renaissance means 're-birth'. When the great cultural changes which marked the divide between the European Middle ages and what later came to be identified as the Modern Age were being grasped by historians in 19th century, the general perception was that these changes were being brought out by a revival of classical Greek and Roman art and values. But by the 20th Century this partial and distorted version gave to the following conception, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary:

1. The great revival of art and letters, under the influence of classical models, which began in Italy in the 14th century and continued during

the 15th and 16th: also the period during which this movement was in progress.

The word Renaissance indeed is now generally used to denote a whole complex movement of which that revival of classical antiquity was but one element or symptom...

2. Any revival or period of marked improvement and new life in art and literature etc.

The first part of this definition represents the earlier perception and the latter part the present one. Many modern scholars are veering round to this view as exemplified by Will Durant's multi volume *Story of Civilization*:

The present work aims to give rounded picture of all faces of human life in Italy of the Renaissance- from the birth of Petrarch in 1304 to the death of the Titian in 1576. The term 'Renaissance' will in this book refer only to Italy. The word does not properly apply to such native maturations, rather than exotic rebirths, as took place in France, Spain, England and the Lowlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and even in Italy the designation lays undue stress on that revival of classic letters which was of less importance to Italy than the ripening of its economy and culture into their own characteristic forms. (Volume 5, Preface)

In spite of Durant's attempt to free himself from some of the restrictive urges of the past, he is not bold enough to make a clean break. According to this new perception what is described as Renaissance is not 're-birth' but 'new birth'? Therefore it seems to me that Indian language equivalents for Renaissance like

“Navodhan” or “Navajagaran” etc are more apt than their English original. Here it is evident that even Will Durant’s broader perception is not yet adequate. For example Frederich Engels gives us a more satisfactory and comprehensive evaluation of Renaissance. Engels, who though was writing in the last quarter of the 19th century, this break is complete and clear. He writes:

It was the greatest progressive revolution that mankind had so far experienced, a time which called for giants and produced giants – giants in power of thought, passion and character, in universality and learning, The men who founded the modern rule of bourgeoisie had anything but bourgeois limitations. On the contrary, the adventurous character of the time inspired them to a greater or lesser degree. There was hardly any man of importance then living who had not travelled extensively, who did not speak four or five languages, who did not shine in a number of fields. Leonardo da Vinci was not only a great painter but also a great mathematician, mechanic, and engineer, to whom the most diverse branches of physics are indebted for important discoveries. Albrecht Durer was painter, engraver, sculptor, and architect, and in addition invented a system of fortification embodying many of the ideas that much later were again taken up by Montalembert and the modern German science of fortification. Machiavelli was statesman, historian, poet, and at the same time the first notable military author of modern times. Luther not only cleaned the Augean stable of the Church but also that of the German language; he created modern German prose and composed the text and melody of that triumphal hymn imbued with confidence in victory which became the Marseillaise of the sixteenth century. The heroes of that time were not yet in thrall to the division of labour, the restricting effects of which, with its production of one-sidedness, we so often notice in their successors. But what is especially characteristic of them is that they

almost all live and pursue their activities in the midst of the contemporary movements, in the practical struggle; they take sides and join in the fight, one by speaking and writing, another with the sword, many with both. Hence the fullness and force of character that makes them complete men. Men of the study are the exception - either person of second or third rank or cautious philistines who do not want to burn their fingers. (Dialectics of Nature, page 21 -22)

This broad view of Renaissance is applicable to the Indian experience also as it is valid for Europe. But it would be wrong to conceive Indian Renaissance as a one-to-one repetition of the European phenomenon – with only the chronological gap of three or four centuries. There are two decisive factors, which differentiate the Indian Renaissance from the European. The first factor is that India was under colonial yoke during the Renaissance period. The second factor is the unique Indian social structure marked by the obnoxious caste hierarchy. Though the west had its own specific feudal and pre capitalist forms of hierarchical and inegalitarian and exploitative structures to over come, all of them were in no way comparable to the caste and untouchability system in India. Indian Renaissance, in thought and practice had the indelible stamp of these two factors. Some of the diversities of the Indian Renaissance streams are directly accounted by the specific characteristics of Indian social and historical reality.

In Europe the Renaissance was directed against the pontifical pretensions of infallibility along with temporal and spiritual dominance of the church. Therefore it was directed at the prevailing societal and political power structure. But in India the fight for the abolition of casteist hierarchy and women subjection was more

strident and even violent occasionally. There was occasional violence in Europe but it was perpetrated by the church in the form of inquisition and burning at stake and imprisonment and not in the form of civil strikes experienced in India.

II

The early historians of Renaissance in India were misled by the propagandists of colonialism with their argument that modernization and Renaissance in India were the beneficent result of colonial conquest, dominance and administration. It was even claimed as the “White man’s burden” to civilize the backward, if not barbarian, people of Asia and Africa. Even radicals like Jawaharlal Nehru and intensely revivalist nationalists like R.C. Mazumdar fell victims to this tendentious propaganda. It has almost become axioms for textbook writers. Isolated sentences and passages from Karl Marx’s writings too are culled out in support of this view.

Though even now this concept circulates in the form of axiomatic received wisdom, more and more historians are entering the field to challenge this colonialist shibboleth. Among them K.N. Panikkar is the foremost. He says:

The emergence of modern ideas and the development of social protest and religious dissent in the nineteenth century have been generally viewed as a consequence of the introduction of European ideas and institutions in India. To the British colonial and administrator – historians, this impact – response framework was useful in projecting the civilizing role of British rule and the manifold blessing bestowed upon the people of India by the dissemination of western knowledge. The formula was very simple: familiarity with European history, institutions and language and the concomitant influence of the

European ideas of liberty, rationalism and humanism acted as the 'open sesame' which made Indians critical of their own institutions and consequently led them to embark upon a career of reform. Many assumptions of this approach, notwithstanding its inherent ideological justification of British rule can be found in the writings of Indian historians. Some have viewed the emergence of socio-religious movements as a contribution of the missionaries to Indian cultural life, while others have ascribed the development of modern ideas exclusively to the influence of western education. Without belittling the importance of western influence, it should be pointed out that such analyses not only ignore the complexities of the social and intellectual developments during the nineteenth century, but also overlook the elements of protest and dissent in the Indian intellectual tradition and the potentialities of social development in the eighteenth century before British intervention. Above all, they totally ignore the material conditions within which these developments occurred. (Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and social consciousness in colonial India, 1995, page 3-4)

Then Panikkar goes on to demolish another piece of “received knowledge” about the modern history of India which takes for granted that the 18th Century of modern Indian history was a period of darkness and decline, with no remarkable political or cultural developments worth investigating. Its logic is simple. In 1707 Aurangzeb the last of the great Mughal Emperors died and the empire was slipping down to disintegration. Though Robert Clive by means of bribery and deceit managed to oust Nawab Siraj - ul - Daula and gain a foothold after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, British suzerainty over a viably respectable area was still many decades away. So in the absence of a powerful monarch or emperor ruling

India from Delhi or thereabouts, how could one speak about a culturally vibrant country that is India. This state or empire – centered view of cultural advance in a large multinational country like India is inane to say the least. This theoretically unsound concept does not tally with the experience of India in general and her national units in particular. Panikkar gives a number of factors to prove that the 18th Century, which immediately preceded the juggernaut of colonial march was not devoid of reform movements and intellectual advances. He says:

Without going into details, the importance of the changes that occurred in the pre-colonial period may be underlined by referring to religious conditions in the eighteenth century and changes in the structure and organization of caste. Undoubtedly, Hinduism was beset with idolatry, polytheism and superstition. But these religious beliefs and practices were being challenged by a large number of heterodox sects which emerged in almost all parts of India- the Satnami, Appapanthi and Shivanarayan sects in Uttar Pradesh, the Karthabhajas and Balramis in Bengal, the Chandradasis in Rajasthan and the Virabrahmas in Andhra Pradesh, all of whom denounced polytheism, idolatry and caste distinctions, The Karthabhajas met in congregations twice a year in which caste distinction were renounced: they ate together as equals and addressed one another as brother and sister. Like the later nineteenth – century reformers, Charan Das invoked Vedic authority for anti-idolatry and anti-casteism. He claimed that his attempt was to propagate Vedic truth in simple Hindi for the benefit of the common man. He was opposed to all rituals including the use of tulsi leaves for worship. These sects, again like the nineteenth-century reformers, placed a high premium on personal morality. Numerically, they were certainly not insignificant: most of them had a following of twenty to

thirty thousand. They were indeed different in methods of organization and functioning from the religious movements of the nineteenth century, but to dismiss them on that account as personal revolts without much social significance is to miss their real import. They have to be assessed and understood primarily as an expression of a developing trend of protest and dissent in the religious life of the people, characterized at the time by superstition and the tyranny of priests. Their failure or success apart – and this depended upon various factors including the subsequent socio-economic developments – they ‘testify to the reform movements manifesting in society even independently of foreign influence’

This line of enquiry is also relevant to other aspects of eighteenth century society. A closer look at the changes in the structure and organization of caste and the major trends in literary and artistic expression would be particularly rewarding. The present state of our knowledge of the eighteenth century, a no-man’s-land ignored both by medieval and modern historians, does not permit detailed analysis of these issues. But there is enough evidence to indicate the broad trends. For instance, it is possible to show that substantial changes were occurring within the institution of caste: fragmentation, occupational mobility and Sanskritization, for instance. In the realm of intellectual activity, the eighteenth century, like all other periods of Indian history, was not devoid of individual brilliance. Artistic and literary activities displayed a very high level of creativity, especially in literature and painting. The move towards popular literature, both in form and content, rejecting ‘the painted, the powdered and the obsequious’ – a trend, which had started in Malayalam and Bengali literatures as early as the Sixteenth Century – gained emphasis during this period. What happened to these tendencies after the British conquest of India is another story. It may not be rewarding to speculate upon the course of their possible development if colonial intervention had not taken place.

Yet a proper appreciation of these tendencies would enrich our understanding of the intellectual scenario of the Nineteenth Century. It would also help us to look for alternative explanations to the rather simplistic impact-response formula. (Ibid pp 4-7)

III

Most of the movements and reformers mentioned above had come from the Hindu community though their struggles were against its inegalitarian structure and oppressive customs. Just as we correctly designate Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) as the Father of Bengal Renaissance, Sree Narayana Guru (1855-1928) is justly celebrated as the Father of Kerala Renaissance. As there was a time gap of many decades between the lives of these two great men, there was an equally wide time gap between Bengal renaissance and Kerala renaissance. This also shows that while the Bengal Renaissance began to achieve its tempo in the first quarter of the Nineteenth Century, Kerala's movement took its steps in the last quarter of the century. Though it is a hazardous game to fix any particular date or year for such massive and all embracing movements like renaissance, with limitations the year 1814 when Ram Mohan decided to settle in Kolkotta and began to write his books and pamphlets is considered to be the starting date of Bengal renaissance. Likewise the year 1888, when after a long period of education, wide range travel and meditation Sree Narayana Guru installed a Shiva Idol at a place called Aruvipuram in southern Kerala is designated as the founding date of Kerala's Renaissance.

It has been pointed earlier that there is a time gap of a few decades between Bengal renaissance and Kerala. But the difference

between the two are not confined to chronology, while Bengal renaissance and also renaissance in certain other cultural areas of India were led by the newly educated upper class intellectuals. Kerala presents a different picture. Though modern middle class intellectuals educated in English and modern styles were involved in many capacities. The most outstanding leaders were all educated in the traditional style without the assistance without the benefit of English. Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal, Araattupuzha Velayudha Panikker, Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi swamikal, Ayyankali were all educated only in Malayalam Tamil and Sanskrit. These facts also disprove the claims of the colonizers that renaissance was result of the western dominance and influence. In Kerala specially the renaissance was from below and not from the top.

Ram Mohan and the Brahmo Samaj he founded was strongly against idol worship. Why as apparently conventional action like the installation, the idol of a traditional god like Shiva is considered so innovative if not revolutionary? Narayana Guru belonged to an untouchable caste (Ezhava, OBC). In those days not only entering caste-Hindu temples, even walking along roads outside the temple premises were forbidden for untouchables and unapproachable dalits. Though the caste system and pernicious untouchability was prevailing for ages all over India and Swami Vivekananda was aware of this practices, he was shocked to find that in Kerala it was much worse than in the rest of India. In a fit of righteous anger he called Kerala “a lunatic asylum”. The untouchable castes were denied not only entry into temples, public places and roads but also education and government jobs.

In conformity with these barbarian practices it was considered a sacrilege for an untouchable like Narayana Guru to have that presumption to establish a temple and install the idol of a Hindu god and gather worshippers around.

Naturally there was a hue and cry against Guru's action, from the conservative Savarna (higher caste) sections and it took a long time for it to die down. In the meanwhile Guru established a series of such temples and in some places he installed mirrors instead of idols so that men and women can worship their own images and enhance their self respect. In other places he installed instead of idols and mirrors 'Plaques' with slogans like the following: "One Caste, One Religion and One God for human Kind", "Don't ask about caste, don't speak about caste and don't think about caste". In his first temple at Aruvippuram he displayed the slogan in Malayalam verse: "This is an ideal spot where caste distinction and religious differences do not exist, and all people live like brothers and sisters". All these and the controversies around them set in motion a wide ranging people's movement against the hierarchical caste system and for the modernisation of the feudal conservative society.

Narayana Guru organised a body of his followers and disciples for the administration of the Aruvippuram temple. In 1903 this body was expanded and registered under Company Law under the name Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). This body was the first all Kerala organisation to take up political, social and educational issues. Though the body and its rules allowed all people irrespective of caste and religion to be its members, in practice it

was confined to Ezhavas, the most numerous of the other backward classes in Kerala. Nairs, Kshatriyas and Namboothiri Brahmins were considered higher in the hierarchy and various Dalit and SC&ST sections at the bottom and Ezhavas in the middle rung.

The movement threw up a number of talented and powerful personalities like Dr. P Palpu, “Mahakavi” Kumaran Asan who is considered the pioneer of Modern Poetry in Malayalam, Sahodharan Ayyappan, a great rationalist, journalist and political leader, C V Kunjiraman, a man of letters and journalist. Kumaran Asan was the founding secretary of SNDP who continued in that post in its eighteen formative years. Asan’s poetry created a new style and taste in Malayalam and wrote a brilliant series of poems for social reform and renaissance. SNDP led the movement for temple entry and civil rights and even brought around it all the depressed classes and minority like Christians and Muslims. This movement was built around an alliance called Samyuktha Rashtriya Sabha (coalition political Assembly) and by 1930’s it could win its main demands like representation for minorities and depressed classes in government services and legislature. A public service commission was established for the first time in Travancore which comprise the southern half of present day Kerala and if Travancore became in 1936 the first state to allow temple entry for all Hindus irrespective of caste the credit goes to SNDP and its founder Sree Narayana Guru. The historic Satyagraha Movements for temple entry at Vaikom in 1924, Suchindram temple in 1926 and Guruvayoor in 1931 and civil rights satyagraha in Kalpathy owe their original inspiration to the Guru’s ideas and the movements he initiated.

Further even the national movements for freedom and responsible Government represented by the Travancore State Congress was also a qualitative transformation of the Samyuktha Rashtriya Sabha built by the initiative of SNDP.

From all these it would be serious misconception if anyone thinks that the Sree Narayana Movement was confined to the Ezhava community alone or other depressed castes. The outstanding contemporary and dalit leader Ayyankali was inspired by the Guru and his organisation for the upliftment of the Dalits was named almost on the lines of SNDP named Sadhu Jana Privalana Yogam. The highest caste namely the Namboothiries organised their reform body called “Yoga Kshema Sabha” in 1908 taking their cue from SNDP. Though it was the highest caste their internal life was torn by oppression of women and all types of superstitions and outdated customs. Nairs were another numerous Savarna Caste which also suffered from antiquated customs. Joint family system in which the younger generation was not given equal opportunities, the loose marriage tradition and the very unusual system of contracting male spouses from the Brahmins etc led to moral and social degeneration among Nairs. Chattampi Swamikal, a contemporary and a close associate of Sree Narayana Guru who belongs to the Nair community initiated many reforms in their outdated customs and joint family system. Taking their cue from Narayana Guru and SNDP yogam, Nairs organised their own reform movement with a body called Nair Service Society (NSS). The Araya Samajam of the Hindu fishermen community threw up reformers like Panidit Karuppan and Velukutty Arayan and they too tried to modernise

their social practices and customs. Among the Muslims Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi like his all Indian counterpart Sir Sayed Ahammed Khan began a movement for introducing modern education among Muslims and established a number of modern schools. Till then Muslims were given only Arabic and Koran classes in their madrassas. Women education was till this movement a taboo if not a sacrilege among Muslims of Kerala. Likewise there were outstanding reformers among Christians like Palakkunnattu Abraham Malpan, Poyikayil Youhannan alias Kumara Gurudevan who fought for equal rights of dalit Christians, were discriminated not only by caste Hindus but also by upper caste Christians. Finally Poyikayil Youhannan went to the extent of revolting against Christian church and forming his own Church.

Besides such social movement for equality against untouchability and other discriminations among the oppressed sections of people and social reform among even the upper castes another movement which embraced large sections of people and gave ballast to the reform movement was the rationalist movement which questioned the very basis of religion and traditional thought and practices. Sahodharan Ayyappan, Kuttipuzha Krishna Pillai, M C Joseph, Rama Varma Thampan and a host of others raised a storm in the citadels of conventional thought and customs. It is remarkable that Sree Narayana Guru gave implicit blessings even to his rationalist disciples. Brahamananda Siva Yogi who was the third in the trio which included Sree Narayana Guru and Chattambi Swami propagated a rational religion without resort to need for a god head.

By 1920's these different movements were merging the general stream of National Movement for freedom and by 1930's Socialist and Communist ideas and class organisations of workers and peasants began to alter the entire landscape of Kerala's society and politics. It was in the year 1937 the first unit of the Communist Party of India comprising of P Krishna Pillai, E M S Namboothiripad, N C Sekhar and K Damodaran was formed, which in about next 20 years grew by leaps and bounds and in 1957 led to the formation of the first communist led ministry in India. Many of the leaders of both National and communist movement had their early schooling in public life in the mainstream of Sree Narayana and associated movements.

These social and political upheavals and advance were reflected in the ideological and literary transformations in Malayalam. We have already referred to the rationalist movement. The break from the traditional classical and neo- classical literary styles in Malayalam was initiated by Mahakavi Kumaran Asan, who as was seen the founder secretary of SNDP. Novelist like O Chandu Menon an interpede journalist like Kandathil Varghese Mappila, Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai, C V Kunjiraman and Kesari Balakrishna Pillai not only helped to expand the public sphere of modern discourse but retrieved the Malayalam literature from the monopolist grip of the poetic form. Here also the inspiration derived from the anti casteist reform movement and renaissance is very evident.