

## RENAISSANCE IN KERALA AND ITS CONTEMPERORY RELEVANCE

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.

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 belongs 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 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 there 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 peoples 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 was a brilliant series 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 Pripalana 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 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 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.

During the last 2 decades which witnessed the rise of Sangh Parivar and a variety of communal and casteist influences in the politics of India including Kerala a study of the original springs and ideals of the renaissance movement has become very relevant. The Democratic Youth Federation of India and Progressive Association of Arts and Letters in Kerala have recently taken up this mission of going back to the springs of renaissance and propagation of its ideals as an antidote to the new wave of casteism, communalism and obscurantism.

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