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# DR.PALPU (1863-1950) AND THE LIBERATION OF OPPRESSED CLASSES IN KERALA

History

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## ABSTRACT

Dr.Palpu was a social reformer of Kerala. He was born on 2nd November 1863 at Nedungottu Veedu, Pettah in Trivandrum. Though he was from an affluent family of an untouchable Ezhava community, Palpu could not get the deserving job opportunity and recognition from the state due to the disgusting caste equations which left a deep impact on his mind and infuriated him. Initially, Dr. Palpu charted his own course by organizing signature and petition campaigns to enlighten the authorities and the general public about the deplorable condition of the oppressed classes in the state. These efforts did not bring change to the desired level. It was the advice given by Swami Vivekananda to associate with some spiritual person in his effort to fight for the rights of the Ezhavas. Therefore he sought the help of cultural luminaries such as Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan to reach the wider audience. With their help, he organized the agricultural and industrial exhibition to convey the importance of socio-economic development of the society. He passed away on 25th January, 1950.

## KEYWORDS

Travancore Ezhava Sabha- Malayali Memorial- Ezhava memorial- SNDP Yogam

### Introduction

The caste ridden Kerala society began to experience radical changes in the socio- economic, educational and political field right from the last quarter of the 19th century itself. It facilitated the intellectual milieu for social change and reforms in Kerala society[1]. With colonial rule and the influence of English education and missionary activities, many traditional Kerala customs and practices were questioned and new waves of thinking about identity were emerging[2]. This change was also bolstered by the renaissance movement, socio-religious reforms and the rise of nationalism.

The Hindu reform movements were led mostly by the outstanding leaders of the non-Brahmin communities. The educated people among the so-called low castes jumped themselves with great courage into the work of social reform. Among the depressed classes, the Ezhavas were the most agitated. They struggled hard to break the shackles that bound it to tradition and emerged with the sunshine of social freedom[3]. Social mobilization among these classes was achieved through the internal stimulus provided by the great leader, Dr. P. Palpu.

Dr. Padmanabhan Palpu is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Kerala Social and Cultural Renaissance. He was a doctor by profession and a social reformer by action. As a professional bacteriologist, he was trained to fight against the germs, but was forced to struggle against the social evils of untouchability[4]. After having fought so long against the social evils, Dr. Palpu received enough experience in social struggles to pen his thoughts for the benefits of his community members. This enabled him to convey his impressions about the mentalities of the authorities of administration and the religious order to his fellow community members. In the face of the stiff opposition from the members of the upper caste, Palpu stood his ground with conviction and led his brothers and sisters as the apostle of liberty and unfailing champion for their cause[5]. He was responsible for the establishment of SNDP Yogam to coordinate the social movement. He is also considered as the 'Political father' of Ezhavas, the largest Dalit community in the state of Kerala[6].

### Early Life

Dr.Palpu is one of the immortals of the Kerala Renaissance movement that started in the pre-Independence days. Towards this end, he waged a long, heroic and self-less battle, with his sharp mind and mighty pen. Dr Palpu's fight was mainly against the dominant and priestly sections of the society which looked down upon and discriminated against what they called 'lower castes'[7]. In the face of all their organized, government-sponsored opposition and ill-treatment, he stood apart as an apostle of liberty and unfailing champion of the oppressed classes. Dr. Palpu was a contemporary and follower of Sree Narayana Guru[8]. He was a prominent Indian writer, physician, and philanthropist during the Indian Independence Movement.

Dr Palpu was born on 2nd November 1863 at Nedugottu Veedu in Petta, Trivandrum, a part of Indian princely state of Travancore, present-day Kerala, in a wealthy Ezhava family. His Parents were Thachakkudy Padmanabhan and Matha Perumal. His first Guru was Pettayil Ramanpillai Assan[9]. He was initiated into the world of letters at a very tender age. Palpu had his formal education from a reputed school in Pettah. Later, he attended a degree course in Maharaja's college in Trivandrum and successfully completed it. He was the first Medical Graduate from Ezhava Community in Travancore. During his time, the members of his community were traditionally involved in toddy and Ayurvedic medicine businesses[10].

### Struggle for Education in the State

Dr Palpu remains ever an example of the persecution that the backward communities suffered in Kerala in those days. Though he came fourth in the examination conducted in 1884 by the Government for selecting students for the study of medicine, Palpu was denied the opportunity just because of his caste. But he had no difficulty in getting admission to the Madras Medical College for the L.M.S. course[11]. After successfully completing the graduate course in Medicine, Dr Palpu went abroad to do a Medical training in the specialty of Bacteriology. For this purpose, he enrolled and studied at a Medical University in Cambridge, London[12]. On returning to India, again his caste came in his way to enroll as a professional doctor. Because of this, Palpu could not seek employment with the Travancore Health Service and he had to migrate to Mysore to get an employment opportunity. This struggle to get professional training and employment in the state left him deeply affected and infuriated[13]. He started his meritorious service under Mysore Government at the starting salary of Rs.100/- when the Government of his own State would not give employment to any one from the backward classes even at the lowest level at the meager salary of Rs.5[14].

Dr.Palpu maintained close contacts with several national leaders like Swami Vivekananda and Sarojini Naidu. Naidu praised Dr. Palpu as a great revolutionary when someone tried to brand him as a communalist[15]. When Vivekananda visited Mysore, the doctor had the rare opportunity of pulling him in a rickshaw through the streets of the city. It was during this contact that the Swami advised him to "Spiritualize and Industrialize the Masses."[16] The Mysore Government sent him to Europe to get training in lymph production when he was the in charge of the Vaccine Institute. Dr. Palpu showed the rare courage of treating patients when plague struck Bangalore killing about thousands of people. Another example of his humanism was in his disobedience as the Jail Superintendent to execute two prisoners whom he considered innocent when he went through their case. During his tenure as the Jail Superintendent, he made many innovations for the production of useful things out of discarded and useless things[17].

### Early Struggle Seeking Equality

A London trained physician, Dr Palpu later abandoned his profession to effect social and spiritual reforms within his community and society. His case is often cited as an example of the persecution that the backward communities suffered in Kerala in those days.The bitter experience Dr. Palpu had in getting proper education and training made him aware of the kind of discrimination his fellow caste

members were facing for a long period of time, perhaps from time immemorial[18]. Therefore he started to help his fellow beings to come up in life. After a while, Dr. Palpu understood that the members of his community could come up in life only through proper education and healthy and decent living. Hence he decided to spread the awareness about the socio-economic development amongst the members of his community. For this purpose, Palpu started to cooperate with the leaders of other communities[19]. As a result, a Malayali Memorial pact was signed to generate awareness amongst the members of signatory communities. He used the numbers enumerated by the Travancore census of the year 1891 to highlight the inequalities prevalent in the state.

**Awakening of Mass through Petition Campaigns**

Malayali Memorial and Ezhava Memorial were two landmarks in the struggle of the backward classes for gaining their legitimate rights from the Government that was representative of the mad social customs that prevailed in the state at that time. 'Malayali Memorial' was submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore in 1891 marked the beginning of the united social effort in the state to press the demands of the backward classes. This mass petition in which Dr. Palpu was the third signatory complained about the 'Diwans' who came from outside the state and appropriated a greater part of the jobs for their own people[20]. The memorandum spoke about the pitiable condition of Ezhavas of the State who were denied even the lowest Government jobs though their counterparts could occupy even higher jobs in the Malabar State due to the absence of any discrimination there. The Government in its reply dated 21st April 1891 stated that since the Ezhavas were generally uneducated, it was better for them to pursue their present occupations like cultivation, coir making, and toddy tapping than trying to get education[21].

As Dr.Palpu was irritated by this humiliating reply from the authorities, he frequently visited the state to organize the backward people to protest against the callousness of the rulers. He realized that organized protest was the only way to put an end to the inhuman discretion that the Government practiced against the majority of its own people. He soon formed the 'Greater Ezhava Association'[22] and more than 300 hundred people attended its first meeting held at Trivandrum. The meeting decided to submit a mass petition to the Government signed by 10,000 Ezhavas demanding the abolition of the discrimination against them[23]. Dr. Palpu himself took the initiative to get the signatures, and on 3rd September 1896 the petition, the historically famous 'Ezhava Memorial', signed by 13176 people was submitted to the Government. In the memorandum Dr. Palpu enumerated as an example the humiliations that the members of his own family had to suffer from Government[24].

The Government's reply to the Ezhava memorial was too equally frustrating and reactionary in tone and content. Disappointed by the attitude of the Government of Travancore, another memorial was submitted before Lord Curzon, the Viceroy when he visited Travancore[25]. This is known as Ezhava Memorial of 1900.This also was not considered favorably. Thus the Ezhava memorials failed to produce any tangible result.

His next move was to bring to the attention of the British Parliament the injustices done by the Travancore Government to the Ezhavas and the difficulties that they experienced in the social life in the state[26]. Dr. Palpu sent Barrister G.P.Pillai with a letter secured from Sister Niveditha, the disciple of Vivekananda, to England to get some Member of the British Parliament to represent the case of the Ezhavas. Dr. Palpu shared the major part of the expenditure[27]. In addition to this, when he went to England for higher studies, he got Dadabhai Naoroji[28] who was a member of the British Parliament to raise a question regarding the condition of Ezhavas in the Parliament. With his help a memorandum was submitted to the State Secretary for India. All these measures taken by the doctor began to have results at home when the British Government began to enquire about the condition of the Ezhavas in the State.

**Evolution of SNDP Yogam**

The authorities of local government turned deaf ears and blind eyes to the plight of the oppressed people even after they petitioned about the situation to them. This infuriated Dr. Palpu further. Therefore he decided to seek the help of Indian National Congress and the British authorities. This move had little effect on the overall situation of the oppressed class. After having learned about the mentalities of the people around, Dr. Palpu decided to start an organization to bring together all the affected parties on one platform to showcase their strengths[29]. It was the advice given by Swami Vivekananda to associate with some spiritual person in his effort to fight for the rights of the Ezhavas that drew him to Sri Narayana Guru. The Swami asked Dr. Palpu to "Spiritualize and Industrialize the Masses". Swami told him that the garb of spirituality was essential for any organization to be successful in India[30]. For this purpose; he sought the blessings and help of Sree Narayana Guru who had begun working on the same theme much before him. As a result of the convergence of thought processes of two great personalities, SNDP Yogam was born in 1903. Dr. Palpu became its founding Vice President and the great Malayalam Poet Kumaran Asan became its founding Secretary[31]. SNDP later became the beacon for many social reformation movements in Kerala. Although an Ezhava himself, Dr.Palpu reached out to other backward communities and worked for their welfare as well.

Dr.P.Palpu envisaged a bold vision of a society, where all people lived as brothers and sisters without caste differences. He himself was a victim of caste discrimination as he was denied the chance to enter the service of the home State. He was the real brain behind the formation of the SNDP Yogam. His role in the social revolution of Kerala is invaluable and unparallel.In the triumphant march of the Ezhava and other depressed classes, the role of Dr. P. Palpu stands out unprecedented and without any comparison[32].

**Working Under the Aegis of SNDP Yogam**

When Dr. Palpu was working alone for the cause of equal human rights for the oppressed class, he had to take the independent decision that at times backfired. Under the aegis of SNDP Yogam, he could rely on the help of others like Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan. These personalities had a huge following in the state. Therefore with the help of their support, Palpu tried to reach different communities of the state, enlightening them about the need to work in unison for the common good[33]. He further told his followers to pursue their interest in agriculture and industry to become independent financially. To further tell about the virtues of this belief, he organized an exhibition on agricultural and industrial development in different places in the state. Due to this innovative medium, the people of the state started to think on these lines and amassed the required resources to start new ventures[34]. This move heralded a new era of development in the society in which even the oppressed class members participated.

His concern for the depressed was not limited to the people of the caste to which he belonged. The sight of many poor people in Mysore who spent nights in public places without any shelter to protect themselves from the severe cold moved his heart to spend some money out of his first salary for getting blankets for these helpless people. While in Mysore, Dr. Palpu helped the Valigar community there to form an association to fight for their birthrights[35].

Branches of SNDP Yogam were started all over Kerala.Yogam earnestly worked for the upliftment of the backward classes. Palpu followed the advice of Sree Narayana Guru that the only way to escape from the social evils and led the community to progress was education. The social evils including animal sacrifices, pooja, pulakuli, liquor drinking etc practiced by the Ezhava communities were questioned by him. He tried to make awareness among the people about the necessity of education. For this purpose he advised the community to start schools, library and reading rooms wherever necessary[36]. Its target was to lead the community to progress through education. The SNDP Yogam was the first communal organization which made a conscious attempt for establishing communal equality in Kerala.

The earliest attempt of SNDP Yogam was to establish temples for the low castes. By discarding Brahmanical hegemony to consecrate idols of their own, efforts were made in Kerala for worship of all Gods by people, including the lower castes[37]. Under Palpu's patronage, and energetic organizing abilities, Yogam became a powerful mass movement. His aim in organizing the Yogam was by and large social and political to fight against the ruling authority for the continuous denial of civic and human rights. In the first annual gathering of the Yogam itself, Dr. Palpu reminded the audience about the need for united action[38].

The second anniversary of the Yogam was convened at Kollam town in 1905 and the master mind behind conducting the anniversary was Dr. Palpu himself. The exhibition conducted; as part of the anniversary

was immensely successful. Thousands of ladies and gentlemen from the Ezhava community took part in it. In this session, Palpu declared that the Yogam had over 600 permanent members. The Yogam voiced the grievances through resolutions, petitions and by heated discussions in conferences and in the columns of newspapers, monthlies and weeklies[39]. Vivekodayam became the mouth piece of the SNDP Yogam. The title was a tribute to Swami Vivekananda[40], who was the leading light of modern India's destiny. The work of the Yogam created awareness among the lower sections. The spear head of the agitations was Palpu himself and worked out in best of his ability for the redressal of the grievances of his community[40].

### Impact of the Struggle

The efforts by this great visionary and social reformer bore fruits towards the fag end of his political and social career. As a result of this, the doors of the government schools and religious institutions opened up and the access to the existing employment opportunities was granted to the members of oppressed castes. New job opportunities in the private sector were made available through the opening of new agricultural and industrial ventures in the state. Even the lower caste members got selected to the State Legislative Assembly to represent the people of their castes to speed up their economic development[41].

### As Writer

Dr. Palpu wrote many articles in English newspapers highlighting the degrading customs in Kerala that made the condition of the Ezhavas miserable. He wrote an article titled 'Thiruvithamkotte Theeyan'in Madras Mail daily. He published the book, Treatment of Thiyas in Travancore, a compilation of the memorandums that were submitted to the Travancore Government. This book, and its translation that he published in Malayalam, became records for the future generations to know about the horrible social situation that existed at that time[42].

### Malabar economic Union

Dr. P. Palpu was much concerned about the economic plight of the poor masses and advocated that only through industrial development they were able to improve their economic conditions. It resulted in the establishment of the Malabar economic Union by him after his retirement from Mysore service[43].

### Conclusion

The country lost a great revolutionary leader when he breathed his last on 25th January 1950, the day before India became a republic. He was the revolutionaries' revolutionary in the sense that he changed people like Kumaran Asan, T.K.Madhavan, and Sahodharan Ayyappan into great social leaders who also fought for the betterment of the backward classes in the State[44]. As a social reformer, Dr. Palpu was a firm believer in the principle of Dharma. This symbolized such factor as absolute truth, self-less love and benevolent service. The work of Dr. Palpu helped to rouse the Hindus from their age-long slumber and to give the Hindu religious reform movement in Kerala a social bias and a practical turn. Dr. Palpu was a relentless fighter for the cause of the Ezhavas and other backward communities in Kerala.

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