



SOCIAL MOBILITY AND MODERNIZATION IN KERALA: A STUDY OF SWAMI AGAMANANDA

History

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ABSTRACT

Swami Agamananda was one of the leaders who interpreted and used the elite religious concepts for social reformation in Kerala. He used the religious concepts to re-construct an egalitarian society during the epoch of renaissance in Kerala. His social activities were based on the concept of dharma which is widely interpreted by both ancient and modern scholars. He was born on 27th August 1896 in Chavara, Kollam. His real name was Krishnan Nambiathiri. He was an active worker of the Kerala branch of Sri Ramakrishna Mission. He assumed ascetic life in 1928 and was later known in the name Agamananda. In 1936, he established Sree Ramakrishna Advaita Ashramam in Kalady and later founded Sri Sankara College. He Established Sanatana Dharma Vidyarthi Sangam and Brahmanandodayam. The magazines started by him was Amruthavani and Prabuddha Keralam.

KEYWORDS

Social Reformer-Chavara-Sanatana Dharma Vidyarthi Sangam – Brahmanandodayam- Amruthavani - Prabuddha Keralam

INTRODUCTION

20th century witnessed some of the remarkable changes on the social scene of Kerala which was one of the most caste-ridden states of India. However, this did not happen all of a sudden, by means of a bloody revolution, but gradually by means of new laws under the impact of many cultural factors. Since the advent of Brahmins in Kerala in the 8th century AD, the society was hierarchically re-structured on the principles of caste¹. The high castes enjoyed privileges and immunities: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Nairs owned most of the land and oppressed the tenants who were mostly Ezhavas, Pulayars and Muslim Mappilas. Western education provided in missionary schools created a new sense of equality and an awareness of the injustice of caste discrimination not only among members of the lower castes but also among members of the upper class². Even some Brahmins like Swami Agamananda of the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashram of Kalady were champions of the civil rights of lower castes.

Early Life And Education

Swami Agamananda³ was born on 27th August 1896 at Putumana illam, Chavara in Kollam district of Kerala. The original name of him was Krishnan Nambiathiri. Like his father, Krishnan Nambiathiri had practiced priestly duties in temples during his boyhood days. Koyipilli illam Krishnan Nambiathiri⁴ was the first teacher of him. His father was not able to give formal education to his son due to his financial problems and the lack of schools near his home⁵. Vattasseri Narayjinan Nambiathiri⁶ decided to take Krishnan Nambiathiri to his home and arranged facilities for his primary education. Krishnan Nambiathiri was admitted at Kottamkulangara School in Chavara⁷. Two years after his joining, the school authorities provided English education for all students in the school. His uncle did not like it. He transferred him to the discipleship of Vechur N. Rama Varier⁸. Under the guidance of him, Krishnan Nambiathiri mastered Siddharupa and Srikrnavilasa through the traditional style of education⁹. After some months, Rama Varier was transferred to another hospital and Evur N. Veluppillai¹⁰ took charge as the government physician. He continued the Sanskrit study of Krishnan Nambiathiri by teaching him Kavyas and other works in Sanskrit. At that time, an English Middle School was opened for the first time at Chavara. Veluppillai convinced Narayanan Nambiathiri the necessity of English education. On the advice of him, he decided to provide English education to his nephew and Krishnan Nambiathiri was admitted to the English Middle School at Chavara¹¹. His secondary education had to face many problems. In 1904, his father died. He had been suffering from physical frailty during this time. His mother also died in 1911 and his education was stopped due to the funeral rites for a year. At that time he spent his time for astrological studies under the instruction of Chavara Krishnan Asan¹². During these years, he was attracted by the ideas of Brahmananda Sivayogi¹³ and met some of the disciples of him and read all the important works of him. The criticism of Sivayogi on idol worship and superstitions was the central reformative idea which irresistibly attracted him. The traditional concepts of him on the matter of religious observances such as pujas and japas and the priest craft were stirred partially during this time¹⁴. In 1912, he joined Mavelikkara high school to continue his education. There, accidentally he had the

chance to read the book, 'My Master'¹⁵. The book deeply influenced him and rejected the thoughts of Sivayogi and found more time to read the works of Vivekananda and the interpretations on the views of Sri Ramakrishna. He decided to continue his worship and other traditional beliefs according to the Vedic tradition¹⁶. He was also very eager to study the texts of Sri Sankaracharya which gave him a new-version contrary to the traditional way of thinking. Then he began to oppose the ideas of Sivayogi and his Anantamata¹⁷.

With the reading of the works of Sri Sankaracharya and Vivekananda, interest towards asceticism was strengthened in the heart of Krishnan Nambiathiri. He took keen interest in religious activities during his high school, at Mavelikkara in 1914-15¹⁸. He organized a student council known as Sanatana Vidyarthi Sangh and arranged religious speeches and Gita classes under this organization¹⁹. In 1913, he met Nirmalananda Swami²⁰. After this meeting, he got a clear guidance in his life. In 1914, he again met him and discussed spiritual matters. Knowing the relation of him with Nirmalananda and his ascetic tendencies, his uncle Narayanan Nambiathiri decided to look for a bride for him. He agreed with the decision of his uncle, after strong pressure. Thus, he married Lakshmidevi Urakath Illam, Mailapur in 1916. It is said that the spiritualistic tendency and celibacy of him were not changed by the marriage²¹. In 1916, one month after his marriage, Krishnan Nambiathiri joined Maharajas College, Trivandrum. There, he got more time for spiritual thinking and readings. During this time he organized the 'Vedanta Sangh' to preach philosophy and religious thoughts among his colleagues. Due to stomach diseases and other physical problems, he returned to his home in 1920 and wrote many articles such as Vigharadhana-nisedhakhandana, Punarjanma etc. Moreover he founded an organization of the Brahmanas named 'Madhya Tiruvitamkur Malayala Brahmana Samajam'²². **He went to Madras and Re-joined for BA honours in Sanskrit at Presidency College in 1921. There, he had a large number of friends namely Avinasa Lingam Chettiar and Chidbhavananda. They regularly assembled at Sri Ramakrishna Asrama, Mailapur, during the leisure time²³.**

In 1924, after completion of his study, he returned to Kerala and went to Sri Ramakrishna Asrama, Trivandrum, for practicing asceticism. But his uncle tried to discourage and directed him to look after family matters and to reclaim his alienated wealth. He returned to his home and tried to fulfill the instructions of his uncle. Unfortunately his uncle died in 1924 and some months later, he went to Chengannur high school to take up the post of head master. The new situation gave him the chance to interact with society and social problems²⁴.

After his college education Krishnan Nambiathiri's ideas on society became broader. He began to think democratically. Thus his traditional concepts were changed in accordance with the necessity of society. He began to analyze traditional teachings and reinterpret for modern society²⁵. It is said that the first direct intervention of him in a social issue was the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924-1925. When Mahatma Gandhi visited the Satyagraha, he was asked to translate the Sankarasmrti which was used to re-inforce the caste discriminations

by the orthodox people. He affirmed that the author of Sankarasmrti was not of Sri Sankara and pointed out its grammatical mistakes, style of composition and semantic problems which were quite different from the works of Sankaracharya. This interaction of him in the Vaikkom Satyagraha was the beginning of the transformation of his views in to a humanistic way of thinking²⁶.

Krishnan Nambiathiri was not able to continue his job at High School due to his intense longing for asceticism. He resigned his job and joined Sri Ramakrishna Mission and started his Mission work at Tiruvalla Asrama in 1925. After two years of his service there, he received Sanyasa from Nirmalananda Swami with the name Agamananda in 1928²⁷. The Foundation of Asrama at Puthukkat, was the first attempt of him after his Sanyasa. He was very much eager to know more about Indian culture and understood that without traditional and deep knowledge in ancient Indian sastras like nyaya, mimamsa and vedanta, he could fulfill his dream. Therefore he decided to set out for North India to acquire traditional knowledge on the above sastras. He travelled many places in North India like Belur, Kasi and Varanasi and contacted many scholars during those periods²⁸. Unfortunately he could not continue his mission for a long time. The north Indian food made his stomach disease stronger and so he returned to Kerala in 1935. From North India, he directly reached Vaikkom Mahadeva temple on 17th October 1935, one day before the festival of Vaikkom Astami²⁹. There he had to participate spontaneously in a function, as a spiritual orator, arranged by his friend, T.K Sankaran Nair³⁰. A crowd was waiting for hours to hear the speech of him. Without any preparation he delivered a stirring speech at the Vaikkom temple. It was a new experience for the people of Vaikkom and a new beginning for his career. The Vaikkom speech of him paved the way to the system of spiritual lectures throughout the temples of Kerala in connection with festivals³¹. He was an eloquent speaker and used it as a great weapon against social evils. He realized that the common people could accept the changes of society, if they would be seen through a spiritual way. The lectures of him mainly aimed at the religious tolerance and social upliftment of the downtrodden. As a follower of Vivekananda, he tried to re-organize his ideas in the society through his lectures. He used many citations from various texts such as the Dharmasastras, Itihasas, Puranas, Vedas, Upanisads, Bible, and Koran in his speech³². After the Vaikkom speech, he started to build an Asrama at Kalady with the help of Parayath Govinda Menon³³. He founded the Asrama on 20th April 1936 and named it Sri Ramakrishna Advaita Asrama. The Asrama later got affiliated with the Sri Ramakrishna Math, Belur in 1941. From a small building left by him, the Asrama has gradually expanded into a huge institution with several activities³⁴.

Swami Agamananda's Philosophy

The philosophy of Advaita formed the basis of Swami Agamananda's societal perspectives. The thoughts of him are based on the philosophy of Vedanta and its core is Advaita. The propagation and popularization of Advaita among the common people formed his main mission of life. He suggested Advaita philosophy and its practice as the atonement for all socio-intellectual problems of the world³⁵. He was fully conscious of the merits of the materialist views. He wanted the combination of the best ideas of spiritualism and materialism. He never denied the importance of economic progress of human beings and considered it as an important means of self realization. Economic achievements also help man for liberation. That is why the ancient Indians gave importance to economics and its allied subjects. He was fully cognizant of the profound changes taking place in the society in the wake of modernization³⁶. He did not neglect the social realities and problems and does not oppose the various types of religious worships such as idolatry and other religious observances. Moreover he thought that these systems of worship are the steps to supreme reality. They are the preliminary means towards the reality and each step of these systems reduces the distance to the realization. On the basic concepts of Advaita, he believed in all the movable and immovable materials of the entire world and considered them as the symbols of the supreme truth. Therefore it is no mistake to adore these things. This equality concept leads men to various types of worship³⁷.

Agamananda considered poverty and famine as the primary problems of the society. Economic inequality and problems of poverty create social anarchy. The society which faces socio-economic problems wants no religious instruction but food and shelter. Religion and spirituality are not the primary necessities of society. One cannot understand the spiritual ideals of life with an empty stomach. In this

way he took interest in the socio-economic reformation of society³⁸. Social upliftment of the poor, to him is the primary step towards Vedanta realization. He got these ideals mainly from the Advaita Vedanta and from the western education. He recognized the four fold Varma systems of Hindu religion as a creative power of the ancient society. But he did not consider it as suitable to the modern society. He realized that the pathetic condition of the Sudras as the result of the priesthood dominance in the society who had been trying to suppress them and interpolate all the scriptures according to their vested ideas. He blamed all the greedy tendencies of the Brahmanical tradition and accused the priestly class for the cultural downfall of the society³⁹. He strictly opposed the supremacy of priesthood in cultural sphere and agrees with the opinion of Swami Vivekananda on the society, where the priests rule the people without restraint. The narrow minded priests always obstruct the social progress. Therefore they should be kicked out from the society and be removed from the post of religious masters.

Agamananda's ideology about one's duty is derived from the ancient concept of dharma. According to him the dharma not only indicates the self realization of the individual but also aim at the socio-empirical progress in the life. It gives happiness and prosperity to men and all living beings. And the practice of such religion can be considered dharma. He thinks that the code of dharma is the Vedas⁴⁰. He aimed at the reinforcement of dharma in the society, and tried to propagate its present value in the modern systems of social institutions.

Social Activities

Agamananda selected Kalady as the centre of his socio-cultural activities. With the foundation of the Advaita Asrama at Kalady, he tried to serve the common people. He gave more importance to educational activities along with his Asrama. He started the Brahmanandodayam Sanskrit School at Kalady in 1936 and took care to permit more students from downtrodden communities there. In the same year he started a Gurukula at Kalady⁴¹. Considering the lack of facilities to the lower caste students, Agamananda started a Harijan hostel in 1940. In 1953, he started the Sri Sarada Ayurvedic Dispensary and gave free service to the local people. With the help of Kuttan Menon Parayath⁴², he served the Harijan people and tried to uplift their socio-cultural and economic condition. Many students belonging to the lower section of society obtained high position in government services and in other spheres, by the encouragement of him. As in the Vaikkom Satyagraha⁴³, he also participated in the famous Satyagraha of Guruvayur in 1931 and delivered a series of lectures with K. Kelappan⁴⁴ throughout Malabar. Theoretically Agamananda did not agree with communism but he kept a good relation with the communist leaders of Kerala.

Works Of Swami Agamananda

Agamananda was a famous writer, besides being a powerful speaker in Malayalam, English and Sanskrit. He wrote in the contemporary journals and newspapers such as Bharatapatrika, Desabandu, Kesari, Keraliyyavujanamitram, Mathrubhumi, Prabodhini, Malayalarajyam etc. for many years⁴⁵.

Before his asceticism, Agamananda started publication of a monthly named Bharatanidhi in 1924. It was aimed at the propagation of Rig Veda among the common people. He translated Rig Veda into Malayalam and published articles in it. But he could not continue it due to the cold welcome of the people. Another remarkable literary contribution of him was the publication of Puranasancika⁴⁶. It was a quarterly journal for the publication of the Puranas in Malayalam. He published it from Trivandrum under the patronage of Rama Varma⁴⁷. He translated and published Vishnupurana in Puranasancika.

Agamananda started a publishing wing in the Asrama and published many books and journals. He published Amrutavani and later Prabhudhakeralam to propagate the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Apart from these editorial activities, he wrote many books in Malayalam and Sanskrit. Sri Narayanaguruswamikal, Sri Sankaracharya Swamikal and Brahmanandiyam are the Malayalam works and Advaitasrama stotra valisengrathana and Dharmah are the Sanskrit works written by him⁴⁸. The works of Swami Agamananda are aimed at the propagation of the Advaita dharma which was used as the tool of his social transformation. His socio-religious movement was based on this Vedanta ideal. He rejected the discriminative ideas of Sri Sankara and at the same time he tried to protect the teaching of Sankara from hard criticism and interpret it towards social mobility⁴⁹. As a social activist in Kerala, he mainly focused on the changes in

religion, the caste issues and its discriminatory practices.

CONCLUSION

Through all his institutions and movements, the practical side of Agamananda's concept gave more energy to the renaissance process of Kerala society. He used the term dharma in most of his writings and speeches for social mobility. He was born in the peak decades of colonialism in Kerala. Therefore he had been influenced by the direct and indirect influences by the colonial visions⁵⁰. He did not avoid the indigenous concept on egalitarian society and intertwined the tradition with modern views and did not confuse while opposing the unwanted customs and tradition. The concept of dharma interpreted by him is not completely free from traditional frames. But it is considered that the conceptual potentiality to reject and accept the tradition is moulded and developed in a particular phase of history. Thus the religious and traditional concepts also acted as the catalyst power to the social renaissance.

Swami Agamananda was a noted preacher of Vedanta and was equally noted for the practice of its doctrine. His personality had many facets that of a social activist, religious reformer, secularist thinker, propagandist of the teachings of Vivekananda, educationalist, writer and a great orator. His writings, eloquent speeches and cultural activities have contributed a great deal to the process of social mobility and modernization of Kerala.

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3. His Parents were Puthumana Narayanar Parameswarar and Vatasseri Lakshmi Antherjanam. His father was the manager of the head of south Math, Trissur and he also performed priestly duties in various temples in those days.
4. He was a famous scholar in Indian medicine, astrology and tantra
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