



ARATTUPUSHA VELAYUDHA PANICKER AND COUNTER HEGEMONIC RESISTANCE MOVEMENT IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker was a 19th-century social reformer and warrior, known for his fight against many social evils prevalent in the state of Kerala. He was born into an affluent Ezhava family known as Kallisseril, in the small independent province called Mangalam, near Haripad in Alappuzha district. He challenged the domination of upper castes and brought about changes in the lives of both men and women. Achippudava strike – to earn women belonging to oppressed groups the right to wear a lower garment that extended beyond the knees. Ethappu strike – the struggle for the right to wear an upper body cloth by women belonging to backward castes. Mukkuthi Strike – for the rights of lower-caste women to wear 'mukkuthi' or nose-ring, and other gold ornaments. These struggles played an important role in challenging the social order and in raising the dignity of women belonging to the lower strata of society in public life. He also established the first Kathakali Yogam (area-based schools for the classical dance form Kathakali) for the Ezhava community in 1861.

KEYWORDS

Social Reformer-Eshava Family- Achippudava Strike -Mukkuthi Strike -Kathakali-

INTRODUCTION

Arattupuzha Velayudhapanikkar (1825-1874) was one of the prominent revolutionaries creating a social circumstance leading to the emergence of modern Kerala. He was born in a rich family at Arattupuzha (now in Alappuzha district). Therefore he did not have to face many injustices and exploitations faced by his contemporaries belonging to his own and other inferior castes¹. He received better education in the traditional way by inviting traditional teachers (*asan*) into their home². He was well versed in Tamil and Sanskrit literature, astrology, traditional medicine. Though modern educational institutions had already been established in Travancore by the LMS³, he had not undergone education in this system. The *avaras* how much rich they might have been, were not even permitted to use the common roads frequented by the elites, go near the temples or the houses of feudal lords, etc. They were not allowed to wear ornaments and were prohibited from wearing clothes beneath the knee and above navel. This injustice reached the extent that, it regulated even simple movement of the human body above or below the set regulations of castes in which their parents and thereby themselves belonged to⁴.

Mangalam Siva Temple

Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker's most important contribution was the foundation of a Siva Temple at Mangalam. It was the first attempt from the side of *avarna*. There is a story behind the foundation of this temple. In 1027, he visited Gokarnam temple. He also visited vaikom siva temple and learned the *Pujas* and festivals of there. He entered in to the temple disguised himself as a Brahmin⁵. After studying all the temple procedures, he returned to Mangalam and founded the Mangalam temple. This was a revolutionary attempt from the side of a lower caste man. Through the foundation of this temple, he was trying to upgrade the position of *Ezhava* community and proved that *Ezhava* class is not inferior to other communities⁶. The privileges and rights which were enjoyed by the upper class as for the right to worship in temples of Brahmanic tradition were brought down to the *Ezhava* class through his attempt.

The foundation of a Siva temple by Arattupuzha Panicker attracted the attention of Sree Narayana Guru. The activities of him inspired the Guru very much. Narayana Guru wanted to visit the Mangalam temple and to understand the circumstances in which Arattupuzha Panicker was compelled to install a temple to quench the spiritual thirst of the *Ezhavas*⁷. But unfortunately when he reached Mangalam Temple, Arattupuzha Panicker was absent. Therefore they could not meet each other.

Kathakali Yogam

One of the main activities of Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker was the foundation of a kathakali yogam. During that period *Ezhava* deprived of performing Kathakali, with headgear and *pacha* (a makeup style) costumes. He could not bear up these restrictions and founded a Kathakali Yogam in M.E.1036 with the support of Ampalapuzha Madhavakurupu. Many *Ezhavas* were attracted towards this Kathakali Yogam and by the end of M.E. 1037 they were able to perform

Kathakali with the prohibited ornaments (*Pacha & Kireedam*)⁸.

The puranas and the Ithihasas were the main source of Kathakali stories. The characters are *Devas*, *Asuras* and kings. The new Kathakali Yogam was not palatable to the upper class. But they were not in a position to oppose him directly because of the sound economic and military position of Velayudha Panicker. He was very strong, but had to face severe threat from the side of the orthodox section of society. They complained to the Government about his activities. At last the issue became controversial one and Government interfered into it. But the decision of the government was favorable to him⁹.

Mukkooti Vazhakku (The nose-ring agitation)

Another movement of similar kind organized by Velayudha Panikkar was against the ban on wearing nose-ring at the Panthalam market. During those times lower classes were deprived of the right to wear ornaments made of Gold. The women of the *avarna* castes were prohibited from wearing ornaments like gold ear-rings, nose-rings and bangles in Pandalam, when an *Ezhava* woman wore a golden nose-ring, she was humiliated by *savarnas* and her nose- ring was plucked away forcefully¹⁰. Hearing this news his rage found no boundaries. He ordered to make thousand nose-rings and started for Pandalam on a horse. He gave golden nose-rings to the *Ezhava* ladies. Some of the *Ezhava* did not wear the nose rings. They were forced to wear it. He and his followers stayed there for a few days. Though the *savarnas* did not like what he had done, they did not their challenge him, as he was having the support of an armed group and had himself proved to be a relentless fighter in the cause of social equality and justice¹¹.

Ethapu Samaram (The first upper cloth Agitation)

The *Ezhava* ladies were not allowed to cover their bosom. The Channar Rebellion¹² drew the attention of the Government to this issue, but the situations never changed. An *Ezhava* girl was insulted in Kayamkulam, as she covered her bosom with a small piece of cloth. The orthodox people insulted her and they fit (Vellaykamodu) on her breast. The news went to the ears of Velayudha Panicker. He went to Kayamkulam with a large number of upper cloths and gave it to the *Ezhava* ladies who came there. Velayudhya Panicker forcefully covered the bosom of the women, who hesitated to accept the words of him¹³.

Death

Velayudha panicker was assassinated at the age of 49 by a henchman sent by the Savarna lords while in deep sleep in his boat in the Kayamkulam Kayal near Perumpally.

CONCLUSION

Thus we can see that Velayudha panicker tried to bring a sudden change in the society which had been rotten by the irrational and superstitious customs and traditions imposed on the society by *savarnas*. The formation of *Kathakali Yogam*, the foundation of Mangalam Siva Temple, nose-ring agitation, upper-cloth agitation and the lower-cloth agitation that led to the non co-operation struggle were

great acts of bravery and chivalry of him to establish equality in society¹⁴. He was able to bring about some changes, which were temporary in nature, in the society. But the temple that was founded by him still radiates the glory of his great achievements and efforts to purify the rotten society due to the strict and rigid caste observations. The spirit of resistance and rebellion against hegemony, the cause of social justice and human rights, the agenda of radical revolution and democratic cultural politics and struggle unleashed by this immortal activist against caste and Savarna Brahmanic hegemony of Kerala is unique, contemporary and even futuristic.

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3. The LMS was formed in 1795 as an inter-domination body for spreading the gospel of Christ. In India, the activities of the LMS started on 5 December 1804. Col Macaulay granted permission for the introduction of Protestant missionary activities in Kerala. The LMS missionaries' activities spread to areas between Kanyakumari in the south and Quilon in the north. The LMS was widely accepted by the locals because in the southern parts of Kerala, low castes, especially the Nadars and Parayas suffered from several social disabilities and burdens from the orthodox feudal society. The LMS activities created a new consciousness among the oppressed classes. They preached against the social discrimination and the oppressive social practices. Their efforts helped to protect the human rights of the low castes and strongly challenged the oppression and exploitation by the higher castes and the authorities. With the help of the missionaries, the low castes realized their age-old social disabilities and discriminations. The missionaries wrote that 'our work is to promote the eternal interest of the people and if we can procure for them some relief from their temporal distress, it will be our delight to do so' (Annual Report of the London Missionary Society, 1841, p.72).
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12. The Channar Lahala or Channar revolt, also called Maru Marakkal Samaram, refers to the fight from 1813 to 1859 of Nadar climber women in Travancore kingdom of India for the right to wear upper-body clothes covering their breasts.
13. K.Saradmoni, K. 1973. *Agrestic Slavery in Kerala in the Nineteenth Century*, New Delhi: Indian Economic and Social History Review, 1973, PP.134-138; V.T.Samuel, *One Caste, One Religion, One God: A Study of Sree Narayana Guru*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1977, p.87.