

RELIGION AS AN EMANCIPATORY PROJECT TWO DALIT 'RELIGIOUS' STORIES FROM COLONIAL TRAVANCORE*

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ABSTRACT

Putting aside the conventional notions of 'religion' and the alluring debates of 'religious conversions', this study, as a working synopsis, tries to understand how dalits looked at religion and religious congregations of their own, by bearing an argument that these two notions used as an emancipatory project to elevate their own subjugated internal selves as well as external social selves in the context of colonial modernity. For doing this the present paper examines briefly the life of two dalit religious leaders i.e., Poyykayil Sri Kumaragurudevan and Sri Subhanandagurudevan and their activities in colonial Travancore.

Keywords: Dalit Religion, Poyykayil Kumargurudevan, PRDS, Subhanandagurudevan, Atmabodhodaya Sangham, Colonial Travancore.

Introduction

So far as Social Science is concerned, 'faith' or 'belief', which played a crucial role in shaping the course of the history of humankind, never attained enough importance to make it its subject matter. Most of the wars, bloodsheds, and struggles across world were actually either by and of or for 'faith' or 'belief'. Studies on religions also thought only through the constrained eyes of sociology, where 'faith' or 'belief' is often pushed to the realm of 'religiosity', which falls in the sphere of theology in the contemporary systems of thought. Quiet contrary to these concerns Social Science has to take a turn in its outlook and need to be have a 'reverse gaze' from the point of view of the 'oppressed'. This, I believe, helps to seek how religion and their own 'faith' or 'belief' played a major role to resist the oppression and make their survival possible. By saying this, at least as far as the dalits are concerned, what I

* This article is a slightly revised form of a paper which I presented in the "Two Month Workshop on Researching the Contemporary" CSDS Delhi, on 29th August 2014. I express my sincere thanks to the discussants like Prof: Adithya Nigam, Prof: Prathama Banerjee, Prof: Ravi Sundaram and my friends for their interventions. I express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Manmathan M. R. for his valuable suggestions to slightly modify it. I am deeply indebted to Utthaman M. K., Divakarankutty P. C., Ashokan Nambiyar and M. R. Renukumar for providing me the materials and their valuable suggestions. Apart from all, I am solely responsible for all the shortcomings of this paper.

precisely mean is that we need to look at from the people's point of view to understand the role of 'faith' or 'belief' that helped to formulate their own life-world in their life-struggles. And thus, by examining its social science aspects, this is an attempt to look at the role of religion as an emancipatory project and its foundational element i.e. 'faith' or 'belief' and its function in the anti-caste mobilisation in the early twentieth-century Kerala, especially Travancore. This paper briefly tries to investigate the lives of Poykayil Sri Kumaragurudevan and Sri Shubhanandagurudevan and their respective religious sects namely *Prathyksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)* and *Athma Bodhodaya Sangham* and venture to argue the above mentioned conceptual formulations.

The Context

Let me introduce briefly the social context of Kerala, Travancore in particular, during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where these two leaders and their movement emerged. During this time the condition of Dalits, the then untouchable castes were very pathetic than any other social groups in the globe. Not only untouchability but unapproachability and even unseability prevailed. It was a system based on graded inequality, in which each of the castes should keep their socially instructed distances by caste norms. To put it in other words, an untouchable had to maintain a distance of 64 feet from a namboothiri Brahmin, and the other middle-ordered castes kept their places in between this distance and occupied their own socially prescribed places and strictly observed these caste distances (Bhaskaranunni, 2000: 136-137). Along with so many caste observances, irrespective of where they belong in the caste hierarchy, people lived their lives, with a fear of being polluted and subjected to be out-casted, which is the most degrading form of social expulsion, if they curtail any of the caste norms (Bhaskaranunni, 2000: 30; Padmanabhamenon, 1986: 251-252). Though slavery in its most brutal form embedded with caste, abolished by Princely State of Travancore with its Law in 1855 (Kusuman, 1973; Nair, 1986), it prevailed even thereafter for several decades. The efforts of Christian Missionaries, and the benevolent attitudes of colonial governmentality, brought initial changes in the society.

This was the social condition in brief and as a response to these oppressive socio-political and cultural subjugations, several social groups emerged under their own leadership through different forms of unification paradigms by asserting their own subjectivities. We could see that 'religion' was one of the powerful motifs in most of these unification processes, and it was in fact played a crucial role in the phenomenon called *Samudayavalkaranam*¹ (communitisation, i.e., the formations of

communities) latter. Among dalits, Poyykayil Sri Kumaragurudevan and his PRDS and Sri Shubhanandagurudevan and his Athmabodhodaya Sangham deserve special mention due to not only their critical engagement with lofty religions and society but also their consistency to remain their critical little religion to alive in the present, as living artefacts of anti-caste struggle in Kerala from dalit side. Nevertheless, these personalities were contemporaries of other dalit and lower caste organic intellectuals, who shared their ideas, brotherhood and spaces and belonged to the same constellation of anti-caste struggle. Let me briefly introduce these two dalit religious personalities.

Poyykayil Sri Kumaragurudevan and PRDS²

Kumaragurudevan was born in 1879 in a Paraya family, who were slaves of a rich Syrian Christian family in Eraviperoor near Thiruvalla of the Present Pthanamthitta District of Kerala. His initial name was ‘Kumaran’ (Samithi, 1983: 26). Because their Landlord was Christian, he got a chance to learn to read and write, and ferociously read Bible and related literature during the off-time of his work, herding cattle. Even in his adolescence he expressed great talents in oratory mixed with his enchanting poetical skills, which amazed his friends and neighbours. Thus at the age of eighteen Kumaran and his family were baptised as Christians in the same church of their Landlord’s, i.e. Marthoma Church and adopted a new Christian name, Yohannan. His intrinsic skills of oratory and unfulfilling enthusiasm in biblical and religious knowledge made him an *Upadesi*, pastor in the church. Though whosoever converted into Christianity, the untouchables in the Church faced very bad treatment within the Church, and Yohannan’s experiences were not different from that. Thus he and his followers came out of the Church, and joined in the Brethren’s Church. Due to the similar experiences he again changed his Church and joined in the *Verpadu Sabha*. After coming out from the *Verpadu Sabha*, later he started independent gospel activities within which, he attracted large number of believers especially from the lower castes. The Syrian Christians felt provoked and they tried to even murder Yohannan several times and fortunately he survived from these attempts. Wherever he preaches gospel, he used the themes of slavery, liberation, and so on, with this the Syrian Christians felt offended and they levelled several malicious charges against him including blasphemy. During at the time of a secret meeting at night in Vakathanam, near Kottayam in 1908, he asked to his followers: “Did you find any saying about your slave experience in the Bible? Do you believe that the Bible will help you to liberate yourself from your pathetic experiences? If not then why do you need this? Throw it in to the fire”, he

commanded. Thus yohannan and his followers burnt the Bible (Samithi, 1983: 47).

In one of his poem Yohannan expressed his critique of the Christian missionary activities, which resulted the mushrooming of different churches on the basis of caste discrimination, and implied his desperation. He sang:

“One church to the Pulayan
One church to the Parayan
One church to the Marakkan, who is a fisherman
Though Churches and Churches came out and arrayed
I did not see any change in the discrimination”³ (Samithi, 1983: 37).

These activities provoked the Syrian Christians and they plotted criminal cases against Yohannan. During this time he conducted a procession with his followers in thousands, who dressed in pure white cloths with a slogan that “peace for world” which interpreted as he was spreading public appeal in favour of Germany. With all this convictions Yohannan got an arrest warrant and appeared before the court at Changanacherry, where he declared his name of the church for the children of the slave as *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*(PRDS) in 1910. The Magistrate could not find any guilt in his calm, peaceful and logical answers and freed him from all the charges (Samithi, 1983: 63).

It is evident that one occasion Yohannan expressed his agony on his own people’s deprivation of spiritual wellbeing and an indication of his departure from lofty religions, once he sang:

“We travelled like an orphan through the off roads-
Of Hindu religion
We travelled like an orphan through the off roads-
Of Christian religion
We won’t get admission in Hindu religion
We won’t get admission in Christian religion”⁴ (Appachan, 2011: 45)

Subsequently PRDS harnessed its growth and it became a well organised religious movement of the oppressed, irrespective of any sub-caste feelings, under an evoked notion of ‘slave memory’ as its basic theme of Unity⁵. Having become a God-like figure Poyykayil Yohannan led his people in any of their hardships they faced and people began to believe him, submitted their full faith in him. He prescribed cleanliness, healthy life, self-reliance and self-respect and cultivated a sense of owning their own land among the untouchable castes, which were totally new experience for them.

PRDS under the leadership of Poyykayil Yohannan flourished as a spiritual as well as a political movement of untouchables in Travancore. They bought their own lands, built their own churches and dwellings, established

schools including English medium, developed cottage industrial work places and so on and so forth. In 1921 Yohannan was nominated as a member in the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly (*Praja Sabha*), where he relentlessly pleaded for the policy measures from the government to uplift the condition of the untouchables. He met the high level authoritative people from both native and foreign side including the Maharaja to the viceroys and submitted series of memorandums to them in this regard. With all his ceaseless efforts and spiritual leadership for leading untouchable populace to a dignified life, people affectionately called him “Appachan”, the father and came to known as Poyykayil Appachan. He passed away due to ill health in 1939, and his second wife, Jnanamma became the leader of the movement. Under her leadership PRDS gone through drastic changes and Poyykayil Yohannan renamed as Poyykayil Kumaragurudevan. PRDS is still a very dynamic influential movement in Southern Kerala and it has around 2.5 lakhs members as followers.

Now let us turn to the story of Subhanandagurudevan.

Sri Shubhanandagurudevan and Athmabodhodaya Sangham⁶

Shubhanandagurudevan was born in 1882 in a paraya family near Thiruvalla of central Travancore in Kerala. His first name was Paappan (Theerthar, 1989: 201). From his childhood onwards he showed a spiritual inclination and said to have gone through an ecstatically spiritual experience at the age of seven. He got a formal education till second standard fortunately through a missionary school though the untouchables never allowed to study in schools during these period. Immediately after the death of his mother, at the age of twelve, he left his home and became a spiritual wanderer, and had been associated with several religious belief systems. Attracted with Christian missionary activities he converted in to Christianity and received the Christian name ‘Pathrose’ and worked with them for nine continues years and later came out of it (Vijaya Prasad, 2010: 27). In his entire religious quest, he was trying to find out a solution for the evils of caste system and wanted to destroy it completely. But he never got a satisfaction or solution from any of these religions. Eventually he continued his spiritual search and finally undergone a deep meditation (*Tapas*) for two years, eleven months and twenty two days (1915-1918) beneath a Punnamaram, an Alexandrian laurel tree in Cheenthalar, a remort forest area near Peermade in Idukki District, where it believed to that he got *Athma Bodhodayam* (Vijaya Prasad, 2010: 28) which can be loosely translated as self-enlightenment or self-realisation. He adopted himself a new name “Subhanandan”, the one who possess good and supreme bliss.

After his attainment of *Athma Bodhodayam*, he reached Cherukole a small village near Mavelikkara of Alapuzha District and founded an *Asramam*, in 1918. The next year, in 1919 he founded *Athma Bodhodaya Sangham*, through this he preached his teachings and addressed downtrodden people, attracted large number of disciples including upper-caste Hindus. Artist Ramavarma Raja, uncle of the Sri Chithira Thirunal, the then Maharaja of Travancore has later became the Patron of the *Athma Bodhodaya Sangham*. People called him with awe as Sree Subhanandagurudevan and his essence of teachings and ideals codified in a sentence as “*Athma Bodhodayam Subhanandam*” i.e. the self-realisation is the good and supreme bliss and he proclaimed that he born for destroy caste through his knowledge, *Athma Bodhodayam*, which he attained through his rigorous penance and intense meditation and he stood for “one caste one religion and one God”. His fascinating and spontaneous speeches and recitation of fine poems, known as *Keerthanams*, carry his spiritual messages, emphasised in anti-caste themes, attracted large number of people⁷. It also enabled Subhanandagurudevan and his disciples, not only to organise untouchables as his believers and followers but also gathered large number of upper caste people as either disciples or friends and strong supporters. Naturally Subhanadagurudevan and his *Sangham* met serious threat and strong oppositions and humiliations from the caste ridden society. Gurudevan was ridiculed as ‘Parayan Swami’ and several times fortunately escaped even from murder attempts. He used to travel during night to avoid these kinds of dangers.

Subhanandagurudevan and his *Sangham* worked hard for uplifting the untouchable castes even in its material realm. They started weaving schools and other cottage industries attached to their several *Asramams* situated in different parts of Travancore. They opened orphanages, old age homes, and Ayurveda hospitals and Vaidya Salas . He advised his followers to cultivate cleanliness and instructed to wear fine and neat dress. He taught them to use refined language and built stable mind, good character and behaviour. In 1934 Subhanandagurudevan visited Mahatma Gandhi, when the latter visited Kerala, at Mavelikkara. Eventually in his speech Subhanandagurudevan said that though we could achieve independence through our politically organising power against the British slavery, Indian people can only experience real human freedom until we end completely the caste discrimination and its dreadful inequality (Theerthar, 1989: 102). After hearing about his activities Gandhiji offered his support to *Athmabodhodaya Sangham*. Having a strong believe that the caste discrimination concretised through temples, in 1935 Subhanadagurudevan and his 400 disciples conducted a long march towards

Travancore palace from Mavelikara to see the Maharaja Sri Chithira Tirunal for convincing him to the importance of temple entry (Theerthar, 1989: 111-114). After his relentless efforts to liberate the downtrodden both spiritually and socially, he attained *Maha Samadhi* at the age of sixty nine in 1950. *Athma Bodhodaya Sangham* is still continuing its spiritual mission and having nearly three lakhs of followers.

Religion as an Emancipatory Project

Having referred to the ‘subordinated peoples’ attempt to emerge in to the history, Prof: G. Aloysius expressed his view that the multifarious and scattered emancipatory efforts of the generally lower and excluded castes, tribes and other marginalised sections of the society in the modern period were, in varying degrees autonomous, implying thereby an inspiration and trajectory of their own (Aloysius, 2000: vii). Here we can see that both Poyykayil Kumaragurudevan and Subhanandagurudevan emerged from the lowest untouchable castes and carried their mission to emancipate entire untouchable community through their own heuristically invented religious ideas and found their own autonomous religious organisations as a critique of the existed lofty religions in the context of colonial modernity. They confronted lofty religions, survived from the frictions of the colonial civil society and dealt with colonial State strategically. They built a social space, which relentlessly engaged in dialogue with the opposing societal psyche and forced them continuously to change. Though these little religious sects emerged and flourished in the matrix of colonial modernity, they were neither traditional nor modern and it was something different from that. From this what I mean that they came out from the traditional values and norms by offering a critique of it and flourished in the context of colonial modern by imbibing its possibilities to sustain but stepped out from it by being made a new but non-modern entity. If we did not look on this matter very carefully we may fail to understand its nuances.

This ambivalent nature or ‘doubleness’ of these two religious sects in fact suggesting a new vantage point for looking at the anti-caste intellectual labour in colonial India. Through this formulation if we take the case of Ambedkar, as suggested by most of the post-colonial scholars from India as ‘unalloyed modernist’, by sometimes pointing his three piece suite as a complete symbol of modernity, can be a gesture of dissent. Interestingly, Poyykayill Kumaragurudevan suggested his followers to wear clean white dress while Subhanandagurudeven instructed to his followers to wear clean and neat dress, as a symbol of purity of mind and human dignity in the context that the untouchables were not allowed to wear even proper dress. Similarly,

Ambedkar suggested “proper, clean and decent clothes, which is an “object of respect” and “enhances ones personality” (Dayal, 2011: 44-45). He used to wear his English suits when he appeared before English officials as well as native upper-caste political as well as social elites. He used to wear ordinary dress when he appears before his fellow folks. But he used to wear Indian dress for Viceroy’s Parties (Dayal, 2011: 46). What I am suggesting here is that when we compare these three figures, the commonality is that, though this may apparently suggesting to the symbols of modernity but in contrast to that, it was an outcome of what they were aware of the ‘politics of appearance’ or ‘politics in appearance’, which was formulated in fact in response to their social context.

Similarly, Poyykayil Kumaragurudevan’s *PRDS*, Subhanadagurudevan’s *Athma Bodhodaya Sangham* and Ambedker’s Navayana Buddhism were in fact are heuristically invented religions through which, they offered a critique of both traditional and contemporary society and lofty religions. Here again we could see that through their attempts they used the colonial modern/modern apparatuses to form their own ‘new kind of religions’ but stepped out from it, by using belief or faith as its foundational forms of making a collective consciousness among themselves for liberating inside and outside of the social life world. Any attempt to read these phenomena as simply as ‘modern’, which actually coming out from the ‘political correctness’ of the critique of modernity, would fail to capture the intricacies of these. To put it in other words the critical edges of these religions simultaneously critiquing the traditional as well as colonial modern/modern society and religions and claiming a status of ‘new critical religions’. By doing this it is essentially imagining a socio-political and spiritual emancipation for the dalits.

NOTES

- ¹ The term *Samudayavalkaranam* was pointed out by Sri K. K. Kochu, a dalit thinker and popular writer in Kerala, through his several writings in many Malayalam periodicals from 90s onwards.
- ² I prepared the biographical accounts of Poyykayil Kumaragurudevan by referring some of the biographies on him like Chentharasery, 1983; Samithy, 1983 and Renukumar, 2009 and articles appeared in different periodicals like Sanal Mohan, 2005 and Sanal Mohan, 2006.
- ³ Translation is mine.
- ⁴ Translation is mine.
- ⁵ For more details on how PRDS used ‘slave memory’ as an artifact or a basic theme of unity see Sanal Mohan, 2006.

- ⁶ I prepared the biographical account of Sri Subhanandagurudevan by referring the works like theerthar, 1989, Prasad; 2010 and Thiruvadikal, 2010.
- ⁷ For more details on Subhanandagurudevans spiritual teachings see Thiruvadikal, 2010.

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