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The mitavadi and social reform movement of the thiyya community

BIJINA M.

*Assistant Professor of History, CAS College, Madayi, Kannur Dt.,
bijinabhaskaran2015@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

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colonial modernity,
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Marumakkathay-
am, Janmi/ kudiyan
Relation

The Thiyyas constituted the largest outcaste community in Kerala. They did not have any political and social privileges in the traditional society of Kerala. The social reform movement launched by Sree Narayana Guru had a pivotal role in the social uplift of lower caste people, especially the Thiyya/Ezhava communities.

The objective of the proposed research paper is to examine the role of the Mitavadi journal published by C. Krishnan from Calicut in promoting an awareness of the social conditions of the Thiyyas among themselves. This journal provides a great amount of information about the life and problems of the Thiyyas in the twentieth century. The Mitavadi categorically stated that fight against all kinds of caste based social evils was essential to achieve the progress of the depressed Thiyya community. At the same time Mitavadi advocated modern education as a compulsory means for both Thiyya men and women to achieve their social and economic improvement. It was also mentioned in the journal that colonial rule was not an obstruction, but a catalyst to the social progress of the Thiyyas. In fact, the Thiyyas of Malabar always maintained more cordial and obedient relations with the Europeans. All the discourses presented in the Mitavadi seem to predict that social liberation of the Thiyya community was inevitable in the emerging social and political scenario of the first half of the twentieth century. This journal that echoed the ideas and ideals of its founder C. Krishnan had a revolutionizing effect in the life of the Thiyyas for social progress.

Introduction

The Mitavadi was a monthly publication started by Murkoth Kumaran and made a popular weapon by famous social reformer C. Krishnan for the struggle of the Thiyyas against caste discriminations and evils in the first half of the twentieth century. It was for the propagation of progressive ideas among the lower caste communities, especially the Thiyyas of Malabar. Caste discriminations became so worse in Kerala that made Swami Vivekananda to describe Kerala as a lunatic asylum. The Thiyyas of North Kerala and Ezhavas of South and Central Kerala formed the largest lower caste community in the State. But they were at the top stratum of polluting and untouchable communities and below the stratum of the Nair community in the caste hierarchy. It seems that the Thiyyas of Malabar were more advanced than the Ezhavas in terms of education and social progress. The present study is an attempt to examine the role of the Mitavadi journal in making awareness about the contemporary social issues faced by the Thiyyas and necessity of fighting against social evils and obstructions in the path of their educational and social progress.

The Thiyyas of Malabar were economically and socially a backward caste. Their hereditary occupation was toddy tapping but they actively involved in other occupations like agriculture, weaving, bullock cart riding, wood cutting, coir making etc. They had a hard working attitude that was necessary for their survival in the caste ridden society. Women actively participated in agricultural works, weaving, coir manufacturing etc. They remained a subservient class to the upper caste landlords of Malabar for their survival. They had no freedom and social dignity in the pre-colonial period. Until the middle of the nineteenth century both male and female were not even permitted to wear any garments above their waist. It shows how pathetic was the social status of Thiyyas and Ezhavas in Kerala. They had no right to enter temple premises and no right to worship upper caste gods like Siva or Vishnu. So they worshipped gods at the inferior stratum of divinity like Muthappan, kuttichathan and others .

The Thiyya and Ezhava communities experienced several types of social restrictions during the pre-colonial period. A census taken in Travancore state showed that there was not a single Ezhava in government service even as a peon on a pay of rupees five per month in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Even the educated among them did not get any job due to caste discrimination. That was why Dr. Palpu had to leave his country of Travancore and seek job in Mysore State.

Although both the Thiyyas and Ezhavas were treated as inferior communities in Kerala and they experienced the same discriminations from the upper caste people, the Thiyyas believed that they were superior to the Ezhavas. It was said that an Ezhavan will eat rice cooked by Thiyyan, but a Thiyyan will not eat rice cooked by an Ezhavvan . The Thiyyas followed marumakkathayam inheritance in contrast of the Ezhavas who practiced makkathayam system. There was no intermarriage between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas as the former considered the latter inferior group.

Within the Thiyya community there were two sections: one rich agricultural land owning class, who received traditional Sanskrit education. Several Sanskrit scholars emerged from this section. There were also Thiyya families which practiced Ayurveda and nattuvaiddya in this community. On the other hand there was a second group, which formed the majority consisted of landless workers, toddy tappers, weavers, cart pullers etc. This latter section of the Thiyyas suffered the most severe brunt of social oppression and economic exploitation.

The arrival of the Europeans and establishment of their commercial and colonial settlements in Kerala had much impact on the economy and society of the region. European educational activities benefited the lower caste people for their social uplifting and improvement in material life. The Thiyyas of Malabar interacted with the Europeans, mainly the British; hence there was change in the life of the Thiyyas during the colonial period. .

The Thiyyas being lower caste had no difficulty in establishing friendly relations with the Europeans. In fact, European officials, missionaries and merchants were more accessible to them than the traditional upper caste elites. British rule in Malabar introduced two important factors: first, a new education system accessible to all people irrespective caste and religious differences and second, new employment opportunities available on the basis of required merit for the job. These factors ushered an era of colonial modernity, to which the Thiyyas were attracted. The Thiyyas of Malabar obtained English education and hence became qualified to be appointed to new positions ranging from peons to deputy collectors in Malabar. Thus there emerged an educated and enlightened group from the Thiyya community who formed part of the emerging middle class under colonial rule.

C. Krishnan and *Mitavadi*

C. Krishnan was born on 11th June 1867. He was a great social reformer in Kerala, who fought against caste discriminations, superstitions, poverty, untouchability and other

evils. He gave importance to the ideals of humanism, social justice and democratic values. He was not only a social reformer but also a journalist, advocate, rationalist, banker and political worker also a propagator of Buddhist philosophy. Although Calicut was the principal center of his activities his social reform movement covered entire Malabar region . Though C. Krishnan belonged to a janmi family, he began his public life by fighting for the protection of tillers from the oppression of the janmis. He actively participated in the work of prohibition of liquor consumption. C Krishnan exhorted the use of liquor was the major cause for human misery. In fact, as a social reformer, Krishnan was profoundly influenced by the teachings and ideas of Sree Narayana Guru for the welfare of the depressed class peoples . He presided seven times in the S.N.D.P annual conference from 1912 to 1933 .He was the chairman of the prohibition of Malabar liquor board, and member in district board, Malabar educational council, Calicut Municipal Council.

C. Krishnan understood the importance of a publication to spread the message of social reform and to make the people, particularly the Thiyyas, aware of the existing social problems in Malabar. It was for this purpose he started the Mitavadi from Calicut and later he became famous with the name of Mitavadi Krishnan. He was a famous journalist and editor even before the emergence of Mitavadi Magazine .The Mitavadi was originally published from Tellichery from 1907 onwards by Moorkoth Kumaran. After its publication had been stopped from Tellichery, it was shifted to Calicut in 1913 by C Krishnan who continued its publication as a magazine and later as a weekly. Moorkoth Kumaran contributed many articles to Mitavadi dealing with Kerala Varma and A R Rajaraja Varma. The biography of O Chandu Menon , the author of Indulekha, was first published in the Mitavadi. There was a regular column for the notes of Sahodaran Ayyappan in this journal for a short period.

C. Krishnan made this publication a weapon for the Thiyyas to fight against caste discriminations. The motto of the Mitavadi was that: it was thiyvarude oru malayalamasika (a Malayalam magazine of the Thiyyas). The editor stated that the aim of the magazine was to help the Thiyyas to solve their problems through the columns of Mitavadi. During the period of C.Krishnan the Mitavadi became very popular through its successful journalistic accomplishments.

The Mitavadi was published from Calicut as a monthly from 1913 to 1921 and then as a weekly until 1938. The ideals of Sree Narayana Guru and the philosophy of Buddhism constituted the ideological framework of the publication. Rationalism and humanitarianism were the hallmarks of this publication. This monthly journal

gave importance to social reforms and progress of the weaker section of society especially the Thiyyas of Kerala. The image of Sreekandaswara Temple was in the cover page of every journal. The Mitavadi became a popular journal in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore as well as in foreign countries like Ceylon, Burma and Singapore.

The main focus of this journal was community development activities. The Mitavadi championed women's rights, condemning the oppression of violence against women. It always upheld the ideal of equality of men and women in the society. Both men and women should have equal civil rights and equal opportunities. C.Krishnan openly violated the prohibition order to use the roads near the Tali temple with the help of Manjeri Rama Ayyar . The Mitavadi often stated that the community development depended on the welfare of women and children. Education was essential to enable women to fight for their progress and equality. The famous leaders of the Thiyya community like Churayi Kanaran, Uppet Kannan, C. Krishnan worked for the liberation of women from clutches of orthodoxy. These leaders argued that the men and women of Thiyyas should earn education on the same pattern, otherwise this will create problems to the development of the community.

The Mitavadi discussed issues like Janmi-Kudiyar relations and other social and economic problems in Kerala society . C.Krishnan was a social reformer those who also known as the editor who fought for the poor . The Mitavadi, Deshabhimani, Kerala Kaumudi and Sahodaran were the first newspapers in Kerala which considered the social and economics of issues of downtrodden communities as the most significant topics for journalism.

The attitude of educated Thiyya community to colonial rule in Malabar was reflected in the Mitavadi. This publication always held a supportive and justifying stand towards colonial administration . The new politics and administrative system introduced by British were published in the Mitavadi. The Mitavadi published the news related to court cases, municipal administrative system, educational matters, changing life style of the people etc. C. Krishnan organized an essay competition on the topic “the measures for the prosperity of the Thiyyas”. He argued that conversion to budhism or to follow independent religion is a better way to improve the status of our community . Later the essays were published in the Mitavadi journal.

This journal exhorted that one has to throw away the caste based Hinduism to become truly religious and spiritual. The monthly journal Mitavadi was an important tool for the development of the downtrodden people. Actually the activities of Mitavadi C.Krishnan were a noted one and created social change in kerala. All

the discourses presented in the mitavadi seem to predict the social liberation of the Thiyya community. The history of Kerala's development is incomplete without due recognition of C.Krishna,s life and carrier. Publication of his journal came to an end before his demise in 1938.

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