



Cover Page



T.K. MADHAVAN AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY IN KERALA

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Abstract

T.K.Madhavan (1884-1930) was a social reformer and journalist. He was born on 2nd September 1884 at Karthikappally, as son of Kesavan Channar of Alummoottil family and Ummini Amma of Komalezathu family. He was very active in social reform movement and decided to start a newspaper Desabhimani in 1915. It started as a weekly newspaper and after two years since its inception, Madhavan became the editor. He was a prominent leader of the Temple Entry Movement, which fought for the entry of oppressed and low-caste communities to the temples of Kerala. In all his speeches he pressed for the right of temple entry for all. In 1924, Vaikom Sathyagraha was started under the leadership of Madhavan to get the right of oppressed classes to walk along the road in front of Vaikom Mahadeva temple. He was arrested and imprisoned. Finally, the Maharaja of Travancore agreed to open the road to all class of people and the Vaikom Sathyagraha was a great success. However, he had to continue his struggle for the temple entry. He was the only Malayali to attend the INC session at Kakkinada, Presented a resolution on Eradication of untouchability. In 1927 he was made organizing secretary of the SNDP Yogam. Madhavan died at his residence on April 30, 1930 at the age of 46.

Keywords: Social Reformer- Journalist, SNDP-Vaikom Sathyagraha, Sree Moolam Popular Assembly.

Introduction

The reform movements in Kerala was initiated and led by the middle class under the influence of both traditional and western ideas. The reformers of Kerala came mainly from intermediate and lower caste background. Their caste perspective was clear from the nature of the issues they exposed, mainly the problems of the lower castes namely casteism, education, obscurantist social customs and practices¹. The British conquest and the consequent dissemination of colonial culture and ideology had led to an inevitable introspection about the strengths and weaknesses of indigenous culture and institutions. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform socio- religious life was a commonly shared conviction². The social base of this quest which was generally, but not altogether appropriately been called the renaissance, was the newly emerging middle class and the traditional as well as western educated intellectuals³. In the late 19th century in Kerala there emerged a great towering personality; a saviour of the suffering men named T.K. Madhavan, a great social reformer, journalist and revolutionary.

Early life and Education

T.K.Madhavan was born on 2nd September 1884 at Karthikappally, son of Kesavan Channar of Alummoottil family and Ummini Amma of Komalezathu family⁴. Alummoottil family was one of the wealthiest in the state of Travancore that time. Though he hailed from an affluent family, Madhavan experienced caste discriminations from his school days itself. Though the material status of him was same as that of many caste Hindus, his social identity along with freedom was challenged by the existing caste hierarchy⁵. It is a fact that his education in a catholic institution and his real-life experiences made him realize that there should be a change in the caste ridden society of Kerala. It was this thought that brought him to the forefront of the struggle for freedom and justice, the fruits of which the Ezhavas and people of other communities enjoy today⁶.

Even though he had only high school education Madhavan gained good skill in speaking and writing in English language by his own hard work. In the age of 17 he made a spell binding speech at 'Sree Moolam Praja Sabha'⁷, the subject was 'Disabilities of Ezhavas in Government service'. Everyone in that sabha including Divan V P Madhavaravu, appreciated him for the great speech. T. K's first struggle was for 'Human Equality'. Those days the 'Avarnas', Christians and Muslims were not permitted to join in government jobs like revenue, army etc. T.K started fight against it. Moreover, he coordinated people and conducted meetings in every place like Kottayam and Trivandrum. By his continuous effort, at last government permitted them to join in revenue services⁸.

One of the earliest Keralites who had taken up the cause of women's education, gender equality and liberation of women from the trap of tormenting taboos and abominable customs, Madhavan married at the age of 23, Narayani Amma of Kayyalakkal, a divorcee with two children in 1909⁹.

In 1915 Madhavan founded the newspaper Desabhimani¹⁰ to publicize Ezhava grievances and achievements. With his articles and editorials, Desabhimani, in spite of its occasional financial predicaments, became a veritable mouthpiece of the communities in



Cover Page



social distress and the redoubtable intercessor of the SNDP Yogam¹¹ and of the Civil Rights Movement or forum for equal citizenship. He fearlessly used the columns of the Desabhimani to condemn the heinous deeds and demanded the soulless men who indulged in them should be apprehended and awarded deterrent punishments¹². He raised the question of temple entry in an editorial in Desabhimani in 1917. He continued his campaign against inequalities, untouchability and fought for the right to freedom through his paper. By addressing and attending public meetings and conferences, Madhavan developed his orational talents to become one of the most powerful speakers. His thought provoking articles and his choice of powerful words made him one of the eminent journalists of his time¹³.

Career

In 1917 Madhavan took over the daily newspaper, Desabhimani. He was involved in the Temple Entry Movement, which fought for the entry of oppressed and low-caste communities to the temples of Kerala. He fought for the right of temple entry for all¹⁴. In 1918 Madhavan was elected to the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, a legislative council of Travancore. In the same year he made his maiden speech at the Sree Moolam Assembly in lieu of his uncle Komalezhatu Kunjupillai Chekavar. He presented a resolution seeking permission of temple entry and right to worship to all people irrespective of caste and community¹⁵.

Side by side with his struggle for the abolition of untouchability, T.K. Madhavan took the lead in organizing the 'Travancore Civil Rights League'¹⁶ in 1918. In the same year Madhavan took the initiative in forming the Tiyya Passive Resistance League to restore to the Ezhavas the social rights they had lost in the whirls of the emergence of caste system. He was of the opinion that freedom and equality when deprived are to be fought for and gained¹⁷.

T.K.Maghavan and Vaikom Satyagraha

The Vaikom Satyagraha was one of Kerala's most important organized agitations for the eradication of untouchability and unapproachability. Its direct objective was to secure the basic civil rights of marginalized castes and to give them access to the public roads surrounding the Shiva temple at Vaikom¹⁸. The satyagraha commenced on 30th March 1924. Three men from different castes—Kunjappi (Pulaya), Bahulayan (Ezhava), and Govinda Panicker (Nair) – walked hand in hand on the road leading to the Shiva temple. They ignored a board that denied entry to lower castes. They were stopped by patrolling policemen who only permitted Panicker to enter. The men remained firm in their resolve to enter the road together. They were arrested but promptly replaced by another three protesters. This marked the commencement of the Vaikom satyagraha which lasted 20 months¹⁹.

The architect of the movement was T.K. Madhavan, a social reformer and journalist. He protested against the various forms of caste discrimination such as distance pollution, exclusion from places of worship and denial of civic rights. Lower castes could not walk on public roads near temples, could not hold Government jobs and their children could not study in Government schools²⁰. Though Madhavan moved a resolution in 1918 to gain access to public roads and temples, it was rejected on the grounds that it was a religious issue. He then approached Mahatma Gandhi in 1923 for support to launch an agitation for temple entry. Gandhiji approved and suggested methods of civil disobedience and non-violent satyagraha²¹. T.K. Madhavan also joined the Indian National Congress and drew attention to the Vaikom issue. As a result of his efforts, an anti-untouchability committee was formed by the KPCC. It was decided to inaugurate the program at Vaikom on 1st March 1924 by leading a procession through the forbidden roads around the temple. However, the risk of violence made the leaders change the date to 30th March²².

Some of the caste Hindu organizations like Yogakshema Sabha of the Nambutiris led by Kuroor Neelakantan Nambutiripad also passed resolutions in favour of the demand of the avarnas²³. Leaders and supporters from other communities like K.P. Kesava Menon, K. Kelappan, George Joseph and Mannath Padmanabhan stood with T.K. Madhavan in the satyagraha. Madhavan was arrested and imprisoned. At last Mahatma Gandhi arrived on the scene²⁴. Finally, the Maharaja of Travancore agreed to open the road to all class of people and the Vaikom Satyagraha was a great success. However, he had to continue his struggle for the temple entry. After the Vaikom Satyagraha many such movements were organized by the social reformers in different parts of Kerala²⁵. The movement for temple entry registered its crowning victory when Sri Chitra Tirunal Balarama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore, issued his famous Temple Entry Proclamation on November 12, 1936²⁶. The outcome of the Vaikom Satyagraha is noted by Prof. K N Panikkar, an eminent historian of Kerala in his essay, "Vaikom Satyagraha: Struggle against Untouchability" narrates the history of the peaceful agitation against the discrimination towards people of lower castes in Vaikom Shiva temple. The satyagraha succeeded in making the problem of untouchability a matter of public debate and had also created a climate of public opinion against the oppressive practice. The authorities finally responded to this pressure and decided to grant some concessions. Gandhiji's interventions also helped in arriving at a compromise. Consequently, the roads around the Vaikom temple, except for two lanes leading to the eastern gopuram, were opened to all castes without discrimination. Following the announcement, the satyagraha was called off on 23 November 1925. It was the first step in the struggle against religious obscurantism and paved the way for the later temple entry act (1936). The movement



Cover Page



brought a historic change in the fate of Kerala. It shook the foundations of the regressive practice of untouchability and paved the way for a better, equitable future for the coming generations²⁷.

T.K.Maghavan and SNDP Yogam

T.K.Madhavan was closely related to the activities of Sree Narayana Guru. He realized that the casteism and religious problems should be solved not only in Kerala but also nationwide. He had put a big effort in making SNDP Yogam a strong structured organization. He planned new ideas and programs in SNDP Yogam yearly meetings and implemented effectively²⁸. He came up with educational seminars, Industrial exhibition, Ayurveda seminars etc. He got appreciation from Kumaran Asan for these efforts²⁹. The Pallathuruth meeting got more importance with the presence of Sree Narayana Guru and a huge crowd attended the function. T.K. Madhavan started the SNDP Yogam activities from Kuttanadu, and made to join 3100 new members to SNDP Yogam, at that time the total members of SNDP yogam was 3878. His continuous efforts added 15,000 new members from 14 Taluks to SNDP Yogam and also added 10 unions, 225 branches³⁰. When we go through the biography of T.K. Madhavan, we could see meaningful life of a great warrior. T K gave his life to the backward communities and against the social injustices in Kerala³¹.

With support of SNDP Yogam, T K coordinated a strike against liquor. This strike got very historical importance, and in 1906, Sree Narayana Gurudevan gave a famous and important message against liquor 'Liquor is poison, do not make it, do not give it and do not have it'. After continuous strikes and meetings conducted everywhere in Kerala, the government promised him to stop liquor business within few years³².

In the special meeting of the Yogam convened at Alleppey in 1927 T.K. Madhavan was elected as its organizing Secretary. T.K Madhavan formed a voluntary organization 'Dharma Bhata Sangham' to strengthen the activities of SNDP Yogam³³. It was T K Madhavan who wrote the biography of Dr. Palpu. His association with the SNDP Yogam and Sree Narayana Guru is not an unknown fact. In order to popularize the principles of SNDP Yogam, he introduced innovative ideas such as educational seminars, industrial exhibitions and Ayurveda seminars. As a result of the meritorious services rendered by T.K. Madhavan more and more people joined the Yogam and it became a popular body. Madhavan was peerless and prodigious. He was a master orator and his organizational skills were exceptional as his revolutionary genius³⁴. He was the only non-Christian who spoke in the Maramon Convention of 1922. He spoke on the topic 'Kerala and Christ'. He was the first to use the stage as a medium of mass enlightenment. He took keen interest in establishing libraries and centers of arts. He actively participated in the activities of the Indian National Movement and exhorted women to fight against untouchability. When Mahatma Gandhi visited Kerala, he stayed at Sivagiri Ashram and met Sree Narayana Guru. In this meeting T.K. Madhavan participated and shared his views with Mahatma Gandhi and Guru. He advised the people of Kerala not to use intoxicating drinks³⁵.

Madhavan had a major role in transforming the Ezhavas into a strong and radical political community. He worked at the grass root level and organized the people of his caste into a strong and single entity. He played an important role in the strengthening of the SNDP Yogam.

Death

Madhavan died at his residence on 27th April 1930. A monument was raised in his honour at Chettikulangara. In 1964 T.K.Madhava Memorial College was founded at Nangiarkulangara³⁶.

Conclusion

As a social critique in Kerala, Madhavan mainly focused on the changes in religion. That is why he faced the caste issues and its discriminatory practices. The content of his activities was a process of long deliberation on the socio-religious condition of Kerala during 19th and 20th century. Madhavan was one of the foremost and earliest builders of the Indian National Congress in Travancore³⁷. Indeed, his contribution to social change in Kerala has been so remarkable that has become one of the leading architects of contemporary society in Kerala. A dynamic leader endowed with a passion for social justice, Madhavan tried his level best to liberate the people foreign Kerala from the clutches of caste system and untouchability. The works and lectures of him played an important role in the process of socio-religious renaissance of Kerala society.

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Cover Page



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Cover Page



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