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V.T. BHATTATHIRIPAD AND TRANSITION FROM RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ORTHODOXY TO MODERNITY IN KERALA

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Abstract

V.T. Bhattathiripad was a social critic, well-known dramatist and one of the leading lights of social reforms in Kerala, especially in the Namboothiri community of the State. After his studies, he worked as a priest at the Mundamuka Sastha Temple. Through the magazines and journals like Keralapathrika and Yogakshemam he learned about the sufferings of his community. The freedom struggle happening in north India inspired him to attend the Congress meet held at Allahabad in 1921 which made him an outcaste from his community but it induced him to start his fight against casteism. He wrote a number of books which include a play; Adukkalayail Ninnu Arangathekkku and his memoirs, Kanneerum Kinavum and many critics consider them as notable works in Malayalam literature. He encouraged widow re-marriage in the Brahmin society and tried to reform the conservative practices of the Namboothiri community in particular and the society at large. He also conducted the first mixed-race marriage in the Brahmin society. He is credited with starting the progressive theatre movement of Kerala at a time when stage performances were in the hands of social reformers and political activists.

Keywords:Culture, Hegemony, Yogakshema Sabha, women's Empowerment.

Introduction

The socio-religious condition of Kerala during the later medieval period was more complex than in any other parts of India. The institution of caste was deep rooted in the social structure of Kerala. It completely segregated the society into a number of self-contained groups. Each group was obliged to safeguard its own exclusive interests, characteristics, and positions. They had their own customs, traditions, governance and style of living. It also brings several social evils such as pollution, slavery, untouchability, and unapproachability¹. The wave of social reform movements surged over Kerala in the late 19th century and early decades of 20th century. The colonial domination and spread of western education and rationalism brought changes in the 19th century Kerala society. The newly emerged educated middle class followed a critical attitude towards the traditional institutions, beliefs and social relations. They supported the struggles for bringing structural changes. The reformers gave leadership to the people to fight against the caste-based social discrimination and other evils deeply rooted in the society².

The Namboothiri women were subjected to severe restrictions and were absolutely under the tyrannical dominance of the men folk. Although among all classes of women, the Brahmin women enjoyed a singularly high and unlimited superiority, they were not free from social taboos³. The male dominant Namboothiri communities implement oppressive customs and rituals like Ghosha or veil system, child marriage, dowry, illiteracy and polygamy and to distort the personality of the Namboothiri women. There were separate living spaces for women and men of Namboothiri illoms. They were not supposed to come to the portico of the house⁴. The desire for a male child was so strong among Namboothiri Community. After the age of six, Namboothiri women were confined indoors, and not seen even by their own fathers or brothers. They were allowed only praying, a bath and cooking in the kitchen⁵. Well-versed in Sanskrit and traditional knowledge and chary of imbibing the elements of change occurring in the 19th century, the Nambutiri remained, on the whole, conservative. It was within this context that Kerala witnessed the coming of VT Bhattathirippad⁶ and his reforming zeal.

Early Life and Education

V.T.Bhattathirippad popularly known as VT was one of the modern social revolutionaries who successfully led a social reconstruction of the Namboothiri community. He was born in Mezathur in a poor Namboothiri family which could not provide him with the benefits of modern education. His Upanayanam and initiation into Vedic studies took place at the age of six⁷. After being educated at home and under the village Othikkan VT was taken to Patakkara Mana near Perintalmanna for higher studies. Though the people of the mana were strong votaries of tradition and caste rules, they were also exponents of the modern culture. It was here that VT first came in contact with modern trends and the new life style like riding the bicycle⁸. After his education at Patakkara VT moved to Mutukurissi Mana. However, he could not continue his study and came back to home and aimlessly wandered for some time. At this time his family fell into a great economic crisis. Therefore, he was forced to work as a priest in a temple at Mundamuka near Shornur⁹.



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In VT's life, his stay at Mundamuka was decisive for two reasons. First of all, it was here VT realized that he was illiterate and became ambitious to learn both Malayalam and English. When a school-going girl asked him to help her to do her homework, VT was ashamed to find that he was unable to assist her because of his lack of education. He was deeply influenced by this event. However, with the help of the same girl VT started learning and soon managed to read Malayalam letter¹⁰. VT later justified his illiteracy in the context of the prevailing internal backwardness of the Nambuthiri community; since the system of their education consisted only of memorizing the stanzas of the Vedas.

Greatly moved by modern education and culture, V.T. gave up his priestly job and decided to make enough money to join a school. He went to Trivandrum in 1918 to participate in the Murajapam. He had considerable benefits from his stay at there¹¹. He was able to collect money from various ceremonies of the Murajapam and sought the help of many Nambuthiris to learn English¹². He was also able to understand the pulse of Trivandrum politics of those days. VT was fortunate in setting up friendship with K.N. Kuttan Namboothiripad, the future editor of the Unni Nambuthiri and a firebrand radical among the 'Nambuthiri Yuvajana Sangham' and with whom VT worked running the journal later¹³.

Yogakshema Sabha

VT joined in the 'Yogakshema Sabha'¹⁴; a pioneering institution advocated reforms among the community which was organized in the year 1908. The liberal youth wing in it, undaunted by opposition from the orthodox, went forward with English education and other reforms. And under the auspices of the Sabha a Namboothiri school was started at Edakkunni, a few miles south of Thrissur, for teaching English to Namboothiri boys¹⁵.

The radical young men under 'Yogakshema Sabha' directed their energies towards the opposition of all instruments of social and political repression. The periodicals like the Yogakshemam and the Unni Namboothiri propagated social reforms among the Brahmins¹⁶. The weekly journal Yogakshemam started its publication from Thrissur in 1909. It took up issues affecting the Namboothiris especially those related to English education, and marriage reforms. It played a very significant role in the activities of 'Yogakshema Sabha'¹⁷. The Unni Namboothiri, a journal which functioned as the mouth piece of the Sabha criticized the custom of Polygamy, Purdah and drew attention to the educational backwardness of the community¹⁸. The 'Namboothiri Yuvajana Sangham' under the radical leadership of V.T. Bhattatirippad campaigned for social emancipation of the community. The youngsters in the Sabha wanted to put an end to the evils in the community and they succeeded to a great extent in their endeavour in due course¹⁹.

From kitchen to the stage

Theatre has powerful influence on audience and has played an important role in Kerala in promoting national sentiments and effecting social change. The Malayalam play Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku (From kitchen to the stage) written by V.T. Bhattatirippad himself was staged during the annual conferences of 'Yogakshema Sabha'. V.T. Bhattatirippad fully utilized the potential of theatre in his reforming activities and thereby strengthening the cause of nationalism²⁰. The theatrical play was in favour of liberation of women in Namboothiri families, enslaved by superstition and orthodoxy for centuries. In a foreword written to this work, K. Kelappan, the eminent nationalist, had highlighted the importance of this play in bringing out social reforms among the members of Namboothiri community and their miserable situation of orthodoxy and traditionalism²¹. The impact of his drama on Namboothiri women was so impressive that many of them came out of kitchen to participate in the nationalist movement. The staging of the drama Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekku at Edakkunni in December 1929 played a crucial role in the success of the reform movement and in the emergence of VT to a place of prominence²².

The existing situation in the Namboothiri community compelled VT to write, in his play that 'I can be born as a dog, as a cat and as any wretched creature, but not as an Appan (the youngster) in a Nambuthiri house'²³. The drama was with a purpose to liberate their women folk from kitchen to the public stages. It ridiculed all the ill treatment meted out to the Namboothiri women. Thus, it played a truly revolutionary role in educating the Antaranams²⁴ about the crucial issues of communitarian interest. As a consequence of these activities there was an unprecedented awakening among the Namboothiris.

The successful staging of the drama at VT's house, even in the midst of the strong opposition from his elder brother supported by conservatives, in fact symbolized the surrender of the conservative elements and the triumph of the radical reform programme²⁶. The staging of the drama had played a crucial role in bringing about a new vigour among the reformers and a changed attitude even among the Antaranams. VT played an important role in liberating them by bringing his own wife outdoors and by encouraging other women to come out to freedom defying publicly the custom of ghosa.

VT portrayed modern men and women from his community who rejected the ways of orthodoxy and narrated the stories of



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the victims of contemporary social system. He utilized the medium of short story to criticize several Namboothiri customs of dowry, trial by smarthas, gender inequality and male dominance. As a consequence of these activities there was an unprecedented awakening among the Namboothiris²⁶. His short stories exposed the evil practices, irrational rituals and false beliefs, expensive customs and ceremonies practiced by the community. Udbuddhakerala, started in 1937 under his editorship also popularized his ideas among the people.

He also ruthlessly attacked ill-treatment meted out to young Namboothiri women. He encouraged widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage and urged the Namboothiri youth to marry women of their own caste so as to avoid spinsterhood in their community. He called upon women to come out of the kitchen, throwing away their customary umbrella²⁷. He published a pamphlet exhorting his fellow men to burn down temples. All these infuriated orthodoxy and he was declared as an outcaste. Undaunted, he went on fighting contributing inflammatory articles to Unni Nambutiri.

Kannirum Kinavum (My Tears, My Dreams)

It is VT's celebrated autobiography that maps his transformation from a young boy schooled in his ancestral calling of priesthood to a radical writer and activist. It is both the story of a young Namboothiri man and that of a community, told in a style that is unique in Malayalam literature. The narrative is in the form of interconnected essays that invoke the tragic plight of the majority of Brahmin households in Kerala, mired in convention and ignorance and locate V.T. Bhattathiripad's own self-awakening in the collective struggle of committed progressive young men and women. Though it is an autobiographical narrative, the focus is on the society as a whole and on the Namboothiri community in particular²⁸

V.T. Bhattathiripad was one of the leading lights of social reforms in Kerala, especially in the Namboothiri community, then reeling under the burden of orthodoxy. "I was absolutely thrilled as the veil of ignorance was torn to pieces and as I felt the smile of knowledge upon me",²⁹ he recalls in his celebrated memoir 'Kanneerum Kinavum' to explain his excitement when he learnt to read from the little girl who had initiated him into the world of letters. His words resonate with the idea of Enlightenment succinctly summed up by Immanuel Kant in his famous opening sentence in his essay 'What is Enlightenment?': "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity."³⁰

The book 'Kanneerum Kinavum' covers the author's early life and sheds light on a phase of the history of the Namboothiri community preceding the turbulence that brought about the changes and freed it from the manacles of religious rituals of Brahminism and decadent feudalism³¹. As late Malayalam writer and poet G. Kumara Pillai observed, Kanneerum Kinavum is a narration of events that set the stage for the expression of Bhattathiripad's intense sense of freedom that later led to a major turning point in his life and his community³². It is the story of events and encounters that paved the way for the transformation of an ignorant Namboothiri youth born as an Apphan³³ to a writer and social reformer.

Bhattathiripad's writings as a storyteller and playwright cannot be distanced from the reformist Zeitgeist of the first few decades of Kerala in the 20th century that gave birth to what is known as Kerala renaissance which in essence represented the society's encounter with modernity. Kanneerum Kinavum allows the reader to have a glimpse of the contours of a community's engagement with modernity. The memoir contains warm recollections of women who flipped by his life including his mother³⁴. The author likens the quintessential Namboothiri woman with the old stone-lamp in the west wing of a Namboothiri illam: "she burnt unsteadily for some decades until, oil dwindling and flaring one last time, she died out."³⁵ The author's focus on the plight of 'antharjanams' is emblematic of the concerns of the reformists in the community. Equally touching are his sketches of Apphans who were not allowed to marry from the community and had no rights over the family property.

Rajanirangam

Thus the 'Young Men Association' in 1924, decided to start a revolution. It was at this stage that V.T. published a book entitled 'Rajanirangam' a collection of four short stories, which depicted the life of Namboothiris, especially women. The literary men were not allowed to have a vision of Nambutiri women even in their works. Rajanirangam grabbed the attention of Namboothiri society, especially women and it helped them to understand their life in a deep sense³⁶. V.T. expressed his views not through speeches but through his works and life.

Yachana Yathra

Yathra or Begging March was led by V.T. Bhattathirippadu in 1931 from Trissur to Chandragiri River which lasted for seven days. Aim of this begging march was to enable the poor children to get educated. It was a struggle for the freedom of Namboothiri children who did not have enough money to pay fees, buy books and even change their clothes³⁷.



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Gender equality

Like Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotiba Phule, VT was an advocate of widow re-marriage for a Brahmin woman. The way the Namboothiri movement took up the issue of the widow explains how male interests and priorities determined the reform agenda. In spite of the pitiful condition of the widows in the community, their sufferings were not a part of the discussion till at the end of 1927. The most important reform of widow re-marriage was introduced into the Namboothiri community only after the Unni Namboothiri movement led by VT Bhattatirippad gained strength³⁸. The first widow re-marriage in the Namboothiri community was a historic incident which stirred the minds of the people of Kerala. Here VT stood for gender equality. The spectacular incident of the marriage of a widow in the history of the Namboothiri community took place on 13th September 1934, between Uma Antarjanam and M.R. Bhattathiripad, at Rasikasadanam, VT's house at Tritala³⁹.

The Namboothiri youth demanded Malayala Brahman Regulation, and as a result of their persistent efforts the Travancore Malayala Brahman Regulation and Madras Namboothiri Acts were passed in 1930 and 1933 respectively. These Acts provided the junior members of the Namboothiri family with the right to get married within the caste and thus permitted the children of the junior members of an Illam to become legal heirs to the property. Polygamy and irregularity with the Nair women consequently came to an abrupt end⁴⁰. The reform movement among them raised issues of individual right to property, polygamy, opposition to the old persons marrying young girls and choice in marrying.

Role in Freedom Movement

From the early years of the second decade of the 20th century, individual Namboothiris and the Sabha as such had started showing interest in the National movement. But since the movement was in its infancy in Kerala, and as it was dominated by the intelligentsia, the Namboothiris were not able to find a leading role in it. But with the entry of Mahatma Gandhi into the movement, and with the introduction of his constructive programme, large numbers of Namboothiris began to cooperate with its activities. It was the influence of the Gandhian programmes throughout had attracted many Namboothiris including VT to the national movement⁴¹.

V.T. Bhattatirippad, who attended the Congress meeting at Ottapalam in 1920 as a volunteer was a representative to the 1921 session in Allahabad⁴². Under his influence Namboothiri ladies like Arya Pallam came to the forefront of nationalist movement in Kerala⁴³. Since the early decades of the 20th century, the trends foreign social reform as a part of nationalist movement had emerged among different communities and created an atmosphere for social change.

VT was an ardent nationalist and social reformer who vehemently criticized the superstitious customs existed in the Namboothiri community. He had championed the cause of social change in the Namboothiri community through his writings and various activities⁴⁴. The last few years of his life which VT quietly spent in his native village produced the impression of a volcano being at rest after a furious eruption. VT contributed much to the radicalization and modernization of the society especially the Namboothiri community. VT as the redeemer saved the community from the deplorable and inhuman condition of pre-reforms days and led the community towards modern and secular life⁴⁵. He is the harbinger of a new civil society of Kerala.

Conclusion

The activities of VT played an important role in the process of socio-religious renaissance in Kerala. He was one of the few people in his time to realize completely the significance of modern age. He knew that the ideal of human civilization does not lie in isolation of independence, but in the brotherhood of inter-dependence of individuals as well as nations. His attempt was to establish Kerala people in the full consciousness of their own cultural personality, to make them comprehend the reality that was unique in their civilizations in the spirit of sympathetic cooperation.

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