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ASAN AND DALIT AWAKENING IN KERALA

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Abstract

Kumaranasan was a great poet and social reformer who emerged from the downtrodden castes. He was born on 12th April 1873 at Thommanvilakam Veedu in Chirayinkeezhu Taluk of Trivandrum district. In 1913 Asan was appointed as a member in Travancore Legislative Council. He met Sree Narayana Guru in 1891. Guru sent him to Bangalore for higher studies. He started a printing press, Sarada Books Depot in 1921. And he started 'Union Tile Works' at Aluva in the same year. He was the first secretary of SNDP Yogam which was founded in 1903. He edited Vivekodayam the mouth piece of SNDP in 1904 along with M. Govindan Nair who was its official editor. He was the only poet in Malayalam who became Mahakavi without writing a Mahakavyam. The prefix Mahakavi was awarded to him by the Madras University in 1922. He died on 16 January 1924 in Redeemer boat accident at Pallana River in Alappuzha. The spot where Asan met death is known as Kumarakodi.

Keywords: - Social Reformer -Poet- SNDP Yogam-Dalits- Untouchability-Unapproachability.

Introduction

Dalits have been subjected to numerous kinds of deprivations namely political, socio-economic and cultural in Kerala since time immemorial. The long history of their deprivations and exploitations led to the emergence of dalit protest movements in the state. A favourable environment for the emergence of the protest of dalits in Kerala was created by the social reform movements in the state during the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century¹. Simultaneously the dalit community also produced enlightened social reformers who led the struggles of the downtrodden castes. They awakened the consciousness of the dalits and taught them to become aware of their rights. Consequently the oppressed and the exploited castes started to rally round the demand for a legitimate place in the social order. Though Kumaran Asan belonged to the Ezhava community; he fought for the emancipation of all communities suffering from the disabilities of many kinds. Being an organic intellectual, he articulated a counter hegemonic discourse for changing the society itself, politically, economically and culturally and for this he got motivation from Sree Narayana Guru, his spiritual mentor². The vitality of his love for man and nature through his writings was unprecedentedly tremendous.

Early Life and Education

Kumaranasan was a great social reformer and a philosopher-poet who revolutionized Malayalam literature through his poems in the first quarter of the 20th century. Being the oldest of the modern triumvirate poets of Kerala, he transfigured and liberated poetry from the hands of condescending metaphysical poets of Brahmin society into a lyrical one. Thus, he introduced romanticism in Malayalam poetry³. Belonging to the Ezhava community, he eloquently brought forward the issues of class oppression, feudalism, imperialism, gender issues, and untouchability through his poems. He was also influenced by the teachings of Sreenarayana Guru and had a fascination with Buddhism. He is dubbed as 'Sneha gayakan' (Poet of Love) of Malayalam as he expounded the philosophy "Snehamanakhilasaramoozhiyil" (Love is all in this world) in his writings⁴.

Kumaranasan was born on 12th April 1873 in a merchant family belonging to the Ezhava Community at Kayikkara in Trivandrum district of Kerala. He is also known as Mahakavi Kumaranasan⁵. He was a philosopher, a social reformer and a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. His father was Narayanan Perungudi and mother was Kaali. His childhood name was 'Kumar'. Kumaran went to school at the age of 7. After a year's study there, he became the disciple of the great Sanskrit scholar Kochurama Vaidyan under whom he studied Sidhanta Kaumudi, Amarakosa, Krishna Vilasa and Raghuvamsa, which were customarily the works taught to the young⁶. A year later Kumaran joined the primary school started by the Government in the village and continued his studies for three years. He was appointed as a teacher in that school at the age of 14. But he could not continue his services there for official reasons. In 1917 Asan married Bhanumathiamma daughter of Thachakudy Kumaran – younger brother of Dr.P.Palpu's father⁷.

Influence of the Guru

What marked a turning point in the life of Asan was his coming under the influence of Sri.Narayana Guru, the spiritual leader and social reformer of the socially and educationally backward Ezhava community. The Guru was so much impressed with Kumaran that he predicted a bright future for his disciple. As a matter of fact, the association between Sri.Narayana Guru and Kumaran became mutually beneficial and contributory to the fulfillment of each other's mission in life⁸. Kumaran was deeply interested in Sanskrit and Tamil. His poetic sensibilities found expression in a few devotional lyrics in Malayalam like 'Bhakthavilapam' and 'Subramania Sathakam'. Like every other, he too began writing poems on themes of erotic love. Most of those early compositions are today extinct,



probably swept away by the tide of time, though some of them still live on the lips of his boyhood contemporaries. The Guru was immensely pleased with his diligent versification and gave him great encouragement to continue his labours in the vineyard of literature⁹.

The influence of the Guru had another salutary effect on Kumaran. He turned away from love for the time being and was immersed in bhakti. The result was, there flowed from his pen a large number of devotional lyrics which led him into acquainting himself with many books in Tamil and Sanskrit on Vedanta. Therefore, before long he became a great thinker and an ardent worshipper of nature¹⁰.

How he-known originally as Kayikkara Kumaru-came to be known as Kumaran Asan is a simple story. There was a temple dedicated to Lord Subramania in a village near his own. Kumaran stayed in that temple for a few years, engaged in devotional practices. During this period, he received a few boys of the locality for instruction in Sanskrit. Consequently, he came to be called ‘Asan’ or teacher, which appellation has ever since remained part of his name¹¹. Once, the Guru invited Kumarasan to stay with him in his ashram at Aruvippuram situated near the Neyyar River. Asan accepted the invitation and accompanied the Guru, to spend the next three years at the ashram as his disciple. Both of them used to go round the country and educate people on social and spiritual problems. The frequent tours undertaken by the Guru and the disciple enabled the latter to penetrate into the social life of the Ezhavas and form vivid impressions about their socio- economic disabilities an experience which stood him in good stead when he set about his missionary work for the upliftment of the community later¹².

Asan and Dr.Palpu

Sri Narayana Guru and his disciples including Asan visited to Bangalore. Dr. Palpu, an unforgettable personality in the history of the Yogam, was at that time residing there, practicing medicine. He accorded a warm welcome to the Guru and his disciples and treated them with princely hospitality. The subject of the discussions between the Guru and Dr. Palpu was naturally that of uplifting the Ezhava community. Their conclusion was that education should be spread among the youths of the community in order to rear up a new generation of leaders of thought and action¹³. Consequently Dr. Palpu agreed to defray the entire expenditure of one promising young man, and the choice clearly felt on Kumaran who was a member of the entourage.

Kumaran started a new life in the house of Dr. Palpu at the age of 22. At his mentor’s instance he joined a Sanskrit college, where admission was restricted to the caste Hindus of Bangalore, through the good offices of Sir K.Seshadri Iyer¹⁴. He took up the study of ‘Nyaya’ with logic as his optional subject. At the end of the course he could not appear for the ‘Nyaya Vidwan’ examination because he was expelled from the college as a result of an agitation by Caste Hindus against his continuance in the college. Asan was disappointed; but Dr.Palpu sent him to Madras where he was accepted as an inmate of the house of Dr.Nanjunda Rao¹⁵. But six months later, Dr.Rao sent him to Calcutta on the advice of Dr. Palpu. Joining the Sanskrit college in Calcutta, Asan pursued the same subject ‘Nyayastra’, attending simultaneously lectures in grammar and poetry. During the 3 years he lived there and used to contribute articles to periodicals in Malayalam under the nom-de-plume of ‘A Bengali’¹⁶.

Kumaranasan could not succeed in securing a degree in Calcutta too, as the college was closed consequent upon the outbreak of plague in the city. He was forced to leave for Bangalore, where Dr. Palpu had returned after his foreign tour¹⁷. Later he went to Trivandrum in the company of Dr. Palpu, after spending five years in Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta to pursue studies in Sanskrit. But those years had a very salutary effect on the mind of Kumaranasan because of the wonderful opportunities it afforded him to come into contact with the literatures in Kannada, Tamil and Bengali. His stay especially in Calcutta provided him with the much-needed equipment in English whose literature fascinated him very much. His notes on poems and diary-entries were all in English-a fact which proved his intimate contact with that world language¹⁸. He must have had a wide range of reading in English literature which covered Keats, Shakespeare, Shelley, and others.

Asan and S.N.D.P Yogam

The awakening that was noticeable among the Ezhavas through the tireless efforts of the Guru had to be harnessed to purposeful objectives of regeneration. Therefore, it became necessary to register a body that would act as a lighthouse to the community. The result was that in 1902 the S.N.D.P Yogam¹⁹ was registered as a society to guide the socio-religious and educational progress of the Ezhavas. Asan spent all his energies with a deep sense of commitment to the development of the Yogam so that before long it became the beacon-light of social revolution among his fellowmen. Branches of the Yogam came to be started all over Kerala.

The activities of the Yogam centered round the religious and social disabilities of the Ezhavas. Untouchability and unapproachability had to be eradicated. But Dr. Palpu and Asan would not advocate mass conversion into Christianity or Islam to remove those handicaps, because they felt that Ezhavas had every right to remain Ezhavas within the Hindu fold and achieve social



and educational progress along with the other castes. Asan had a very busy time as the Yogam's Secretary going round the entire State and educating the members of the Committee on the ills they were suffering from. The lethargy of the people had to be broken and a passion for enlightenment had to be created among them. All this meant great and unremitting labour on the part of Kumaranasan, who rose to the occasion²⁰.

Activities of the SNDP Yogam were in need of publicity and with this end in view a magazine called 'Vivekodayam' was started with Asan as its editor. Soon the journal gained vast popularity and circulation among the members of the Ezhava community. Apart from being the focus of the activities of the Yogam it served as a forum for Asan's literary pursuits. Before long it developed into a literary periodical, and all lovers of literature, irrespective of caste or community hailed it as a welcome addition to the group of literary journals that were then in vogue in Malayalam. First published in 1904, its subsequent issues carried educative articles on the socio- economic conditions of the Ezhavas and instructions on the organization of Yogam branches, in addition to a large number of articles of cultural and literary interest²¹.

Asan and Sreemoolam Praja Sabha

In the absence of any favourable response to the urge of the lower-class people for social change, Kumaranasan was successful in upholding the voice of the marginalized and the downtrodden. He chose poetry as the best medium to create favourable response among the literate masses. Asan lived in the incipient era of political stir and in Travancore this consciousness had first manifested with the presentation of the Malayali Memorial²². The Malayali Memorial was followed by the Ezhava Memorial, signed by 13176 members of the Ezhava community that was presented to the Maharaja on September 3, 1896. It demanded that all Ezhavas should be made beneficiaries of all those rights and privileges which were being enjoyed by their brethren who had become converts to Christianity. The Government's response was frustrating²³.

Asan's socio- political action attained a new horizon when he entered the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly. When it was constituted in 1904, the Ezhava community claimed a membership in the Praja Sabha. When Kumaranasan was nominated to the second session of the Assembly in 1905, he raised his voice against unfair treatment of the lower classes and the denial of educational opportunities to them. The first Ezhava member to raise his voice against the unreasonable treatment meted out to the community in a state body was Kumaranasan²⁴. Naturally his patriotism had to be limited to solving problems that confronted the disabled communities. In his view only after achieving social equality, political consciousness can be instilled among the depressed classes.

Regarding the relevance of technical education Kumaranasan had a progressive outlook. He demanded that young men from the backward communities must be sent to technologically advanced countries for acquiring knowledge in technical subjects and special training in the organization of industries. He said "coir, yarn, and copra" are mostly in the hands of the Ezhavas. Regarding vernacular education, Asan stated that the old vernacular higher education should be revived. The Ezhavas had a special attitude for medicine. As most of the Ayurvedic treatises were written in Sanskrit, the Ezhava youth would not then be admitted into Government Sanskrit Patasala at Trivandrum²⁵. Therefore, he requested that it should be thrown open to the youths of Ezhava, Kaniyan, Syrian Christian and other communities also. Regarding education he pressed upon the Government the need for persistent action to spread education for the girls.

Asan and Buddhism

Kumaranasan, though born a Hindu, had great inclination towards the precepts and practices of Buddhism. Works like 'Karuna' and 'Buddhacharitam' are clear indication of his disposition to Buddhism. It is little wonder that he should have been so inclined to Buddhism when it is considered that apart from taking interest in spiritual matters, he was the leader of a downtrodden community which seriously considered at one time the proposition to leave the Hindu community with its ugly caste restrictions. In the second decade of this century the leaders of Ezhava community in Kerala advocated wholesale conversion into a religion where barriers of caste did not exist. But the large majority of the community did not, however, favour change of religion²⁶. In these circumstances, it was only natural that Asan spoke in terms of continuing in the Hindu fold and striving at the same time, to lead a crusade against the evils of casteism in the religion.

Asan and his literary Contributions

The poet who most clearly symbolizes the poetic revolution in the first quarter of the 20th century is Kumaran Asan. As a poet, thinker, social reformer, legislator and political activist Asan stood up as a towering personality. He rebelled against out-modeled literary conventions. He fought against the inequities of our cast-ridden society and passionately sang of individual dignity, social freedom and brotherhood of man. Therefore, nationalism was interwoven through his literary work. He was rightly said as a symbol of the consciousness of modernity²⁷. His shorter poems are charming. Children's poems are profound hymns of universal appeal, vivid descriptions of nature and moving inflictions on social evils. The vision Asan embodied informs of rare freshness of genuineness. He played a leading role in the evolution of modern poetry and in the transformation of modern Kerala society. Kumaranasan was



honored by Prince of Wales as a distinguished Indian poet and presented with silk shawls and a gold bracelet on 13th January 1922 at the Madras University Senate hall²⁸.

His early discipleship of Sri Narayana Guru and his Sanskrit studies at Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta were important influences on his poetic development. The three and a half years he spent outside Kerala provided him with a kind of broad outlook and deep sensibility which would perhaps have been impossible if he had stayed at home. A deep moral and spiritual commitment became part of Asan's personality and when after a spell of writing devotional poetry, he turned to secular themes, he could produce something without any precedent in the language. Veena Poovu (A fallen flower, 1907) combines the lyrical and the elegiac with the romantic²⁹.

It was, however 'Nalini' (1911), hailed universally as a path finder in Malayalam poetry that added lustre to Asan's literary immortality. The publication of this poem opened the floodgates of criticism from conventional critics and tradition-bound literary judges. But this storm blew over after some time and Asan continued his labours in the field of literature with unabated zeal. 'Leela' (1914) is a tragedy of love in which the poet has opened up a new path of unconventional, but real, love which is intensified by separation and made poignant by the final tragedy in which the reunion of the lovers, Leela and Madanan, takes place³⁰.

The year 1920 Asan published his well-known 'Chinthavishtayaya Sita' What with its philosophical reflections, emotional content and convectional originality, the poem has few equals and none to excel it. It is a monologue in which Sita is presented in a new light as an aggrieved woman who puts Sree Rama in the dock and assails him in strong but decent terms for the treatment meted out to her. Ultimately the ill-feeling vanishes from her and she becomes cleansed and purified in mind to make a re-assessment of the whole situation. The poem has been rated as the masterpiece of Asan by many critics³¹.

His 'Duravastha' and 'Chandalabhikshuki' are purposeful pieces of a clarion-call for social reform. While the former evoked a furious storm of protest from caste Hindus and Muslims, it themed on an incident during the Moplah Rebellion of Malabar in 1921, the latter is based on a Buddhist legend which services to bring out the absurdity and hollowness of casteism³². 'Duravastha' describes the story of Savithri, a Nambudiri lady, who ran away from hearth and home, sought refuge in the hut of a pulaya, Chathan by name and finally married him. The purpose obviously was to bring out the hollowness and ridiculousness of casteism by uniting a highborn maiden and a low-born man in happy wedlock. But its literary merits are not of a high order³³. 'Chandalabhishuki' is a sister piece whose aim is also to preach against caste. But the difference is that a low-caste woman, Matangi, falls in love with a Buddhist mendicant, Ananda and is ultimately accepted by Lord Buddha as a disciple, realizing the purity of her love. The love affair is, however, left undeveloped, presumably because of the change in Matangi. Asan has enriched Malayalam literature with a few translations too. 'Buddhacharitam' is an elegant, free translation of Sir Edwin Arnold's 'The light of Asia'³⁴.

Death

He died aged 51 as a result of a boat accident on 16th January 1924 while returning to Kollam from a function in Alappuzha. The boat capsized at Pallana and all on board drowned. The name of the boat was 'Redeemer'. The spot where Asan met death is known as Kumarakodi³⁵.

Conclusion

The life and writings of Kumaranasan was solely dedicated to the socio- political upliftment of the marginalized sections of the society. He crystallized the spirit of the age through his genius in language and literature. Asan's genius as a poet is multidimensional and is related to his commitment to elevate human values. With his progressive and egalitarian outlook, Kumaranasan led the crusade against marginalization of the lower strata of the society. Till the end of his life the ambition that flamed in his heart was to bring out social solidarity and love between various castes and creeds³⁶. As the timekeeper of modern age, his discourse through literature acted as a powerful propaganda against the evils of the time and the role played by this organic intellectual in effecting social renaissance was certainly momentous and dazzling. He raised the voice of the marginalized by tearing down the age-old customs and conventions through a counter hegemonic discourse that helped the society to rectify the self-defeating norms and practices immeasurably and to rejuvenate itself. Thus, Asan was not only a revolutionary in life, religion and literature but also a great prophet.

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