



Cover Page



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PAMBADY JOHN JOSEPH AND DALIT LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN KERALA

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Abstract

Pampady John Joseph is regarded as one of the greatest social reformers in modern Kerala. He was a dalit activist and was noted for his struggle against social evils and devoted most of his time for the liberation of the untouchables from the unethical practices of untouchability. He was born at Pampady, Kottayam in 1887. His father was Pampady John, a Christian who was converted from Pulaya caste to Catholic Christian. Joseph was educated up to the VIth standard at Trukkakara Mission School. He came to Kottayam in 1910 and then to Trivandrum in 1918. For some times he served as a teacher and felt that the Catholic Church was not treating newly converted Christians as equals to their Syrian counterparts, leading to dissatisfaction among the converts. He organized Cheramar Mahajan Sabha on 14 January 1921 to protest against the traditional attitude and customs of the caste Hindus and caste Hindu converts. Caste Christians as well as untouchable Hindus were allowed to be the members in Cheramar Mahajan Sabha.

Keywords: Dalits- Untouchability, Cheramar Mahajan Sabha, Sadhujan Dootan.

Introduction

The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the beginning of powerful social reform movements, which made unprecedented impact on the public life of Kerala. The protest struggles of dalits in colonial Kerala initiated an era of great socio-political awakening among them. Though the motive behind the intervention of colonial power in Kerala was guided by colonial interest, through the Christian missionary involvement it brought about signs of cracks on its caste-communal fortress¹. The emergence of social reform movements accelerated the pace of social change and created a conducive climate for the protest struggles of untouchable castes. They began to assert their identity and articulate their demands, raising the consciousness and self-pride of the downtrodden.

Early Life and Education

John Joseph played a decisive role in the social reform movement in modern Kerala. His works were mainly confined to the group of the dalit converts and Pulaya community because he believed that a social awakening among them would serve an inspiration to the non-Brahmin castes and set the pace for the great social change. As a socio- religious reformer, his main achievement was that he could rouse the social consciousness of the Pulaya converts and make them fight against the social evils that crept into their ranks².

Pampady John Joseph (1887-1940) was born in a Pulaya family at Manjur, north of Kottayam. He experienced from his childhood, the bitter effects of the caste distinction³. When the family settled down at Pampady⁴, they were converted to Christianity under the influence of the activists of the Church Missionary Society⁵ there. He was fortunate to receive a fair deal of education in the mission school. He had a varied life as a teacher in the mission school at Pampady and a military man during the First World War who travelled widely to different countries of the world as part of military service and a zealous missionary engaged in evangelical and other medical mission service⁶.

He tried to construct the history of the polluted castes based on their ancient heritage and glorious memories of the past. The turning point in the life of John Joseph was his association with Gnana Joshua⁷. Joshua had in his custody a rich collection of government records. Joseph learned it and believed that the Pulaya lineage was linked with the ancient Chera Dynasty of Kerala⁸. The ancient name of Kerala was Cheranad and its first inhabitants were a tribe called Cheramar who were also known as Cherumar, Cherumakkal or Cherar. They were the rulers, landlords, agriculturalists, poets and educated people of the land⁹. He even located a family called Aykara Yajmanans, living in a village called Kunnathunadu in central Travancore, belonging to this lineage. Thus, the original inhabitants of the soil were the Cheramar and the foreign invaders captured their country by conquering and making them slaves. The enslaved people began to be known as Pulayas¹⁰. On this basis he even changed his caste's name from Pulaya to Cheramar so that his people could be filled with pride about their ancient heritage. Pampady John Joseph thought that they should struggle against the Hindu mentality and obtain their lost rights under the banner of the 'Cheramar Mahajan Sabha'. The movement not only fought against the traditional attitude and customs of authorities of the church, caste Hindus and caste Hindu converts but also helped its members to obtain their lost rights and to lead a normal life in the society¹¹.



Cover Page



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Travancore Cheramar Mahajana Sabha

The partisan treatment of the converted Christians made John Joseph realize that conversion did not virtually encourage the development of the dalit identity. It created an identity crisis among the converted Christians, 90% of whom were the dalits. It was the context of this identity crisis and the growing dissatisfaction among the newly converted Christians that forced him to start a socio religious movement against the unequal treatment by the church authorities¹². Not only did he stand strongly for the new converts, but also fought with the authorities to get the due facilities for them. John Joseph decided to organize the converted people.

John Joseph founded the Travancore Cheramar Mahajana Sabha¹³ in which both Hindu and Christian dalits enrolled as members. He and Parady Abraham Issac were elected as the general secretary and president of the Sabha respectively. His slogan was 'to organize through lineage and not through religion'. A group of Pulayars joined the Cheramar Sabha attracted by this slogan. The movement established by John Joseph flourished in Thiruvalla and spread to other places like Changanacherry and Kottayam¹⁴.

Dissension

Meanwhile, differences of opinion surfaced within the ranks of Cheramar Mahajana Sabha. Consequently, Cheramar Christian Sabha was formed in 1923 under the leadership of Asirvadam Asan¹⁵. Subsequently, such Christian Churches were established in certain other places too. Solomon Markose¹⁶, formed a Church known as Cheramar Daiva Sabha at Othara near Thiruvalla. Soon the Church established parishes at nearby places like Adoor, Kollakkadavu, Mepral, and Preyar. Thus, the Christian and Hindu Cheramar were divided into two sects. Yet John Joseph was not anguished at this division as he counted the 'blood bond' of dalits as more important than the religious differences and was optimistic about their reunion in future¹⁷.

John Joseph tried to construct a history for the polluted castes based on their ancient heritage and glorious memories of their past. This was a new attempt in constructing a dalit identity and in instilling self-confidence and pride among the subaltern sections. He also reacted against the problem of caste oppression within the Christian Churches where the Christian converts were not treated equally¹⁸. He was optimistic in forging unity among the dalits and he viewed them always as a single community beyond its varied caste loyalties.

Sree Mulam Praja Sabha

Through his socio-religious movement, Pambady Joseph generated the awareness about the lost rights in the minds of converted Christians and untouchable Hindus. They decided to unify for the common cause under the banner of the Cheramar Mahajana Sabha. This change made him an undisputed leader amongst them¹⁹.

In recognition of the meritorious and dedicated services rendered by John Joseph for the emancipation of the untouchables, in general and converted Christians, in particular he was nominated to the Sree Moolam Popular Sabha²⁰ on 8th June 1931. Joseph presented a memorandum to the British Parliament on 24th April 1935 and pleaded it to accord all the civil rights to untouchables on a par with the others. As he found untouchable Christians not getting equal privilege and treatment in the Church, Joseph advised to construct own Churches and temples²¹.

Other Activities

Despite of the tremendous pressure he mounted on the authorities of the state, not much happened in the socio-religious space of the society. Therefore, John Joseph exhorted his community members to build their own religious places at their own places. For this purpose, he teamed up with other like-minded leaders to generate land bank for the benefit of members of the Cheramar Mahajana Sabha²². The lands from this land bank were then distributed to the landless members of the Mahajana Sabha. The lands so acquired were also used to build religious places for the community members for the worship purposes. John Joseph also took steps to establish a financial banking system to help the community members to become financially independent²³.

Literary Works

In order to substantiate his views on the caste system that was prevalent in his lifetime, he drew the excerpts from the medieval and modern Indian history books that tell that the Cheramar, Kuravar, Parayar, and Pulayar belong to the Adhi Dravida race of the country. He wanted to popularize his views on the existing caste equations amongst the people of his caste. In order to do this, he started a Magazine by the name 'Sadhujan Dootan'²⁴. Through his book 'Cheruma Boy', he questioned the members of the Christian Catholic Church for their apathetic and discriminatory attitude towards the untouchable Christian converts²⁵.



Cover Page



Conclusion

Pampady John Joseph's movement highlighted the socio-religious foundation of the dalit emancipation process that played an important role in the empowerment of the polluted castes. In fact, he fought against the problem of caste oppression in the religious realm, an important area of confrontation between the dalits and the upper castes. Actually, John Joseph was the first leader in the State who taught the working class people about identity politics²⁶. In this struggle, he acted as a crusader of dalits' unity and worked for the mobilization of them as a single community. He was a visionary in constructing the dalit identity and infused a spirit of self-esteem and identity among the untouchable castes. As such, the contribution of Pampady John Joseph was remarkable in awakening the consciousness and identity of the dalits in Kerala.

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4. It is a small town 16 kilometres east of Kottayam in Kerala.
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Cover Page



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