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TODDY TAPPERS ORGANIZATION AND COMMUNIST MOVEMENTS IN KURUMBRANADU TALUK

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Abstract:

Kurumbranad was one of the most important Taluks in Malabar District in the Madras Presidency during the British period. It was a fertile ground for anti-colonial struggles and nationalist activities. Kurumbranad also witnessed the rise of trade union movements in Kerala. Ezhavas or Thiyyas, the major community in this region had been involved in toddy trapping, their traditional occupation. Toddy tappers became the backbone of the Communist movement in Malabar. The toddy shop picketing as a part of the Non-Cooperation Movement and Civil Disobedience Movement and the excise policy of the British government negatively affected the toddy tapping and sale of toddy. This situation compelled the toddy tappers to organize themselves. The interrelationship between toddy tappers and communist movements helped the growth of the organizational structure and activities of both.

Keywords: Toddy Tappers, Communist Movement, Nationalist Movement, Trade Unionism, Abkari, Prohibition.

Introduction

Kurumbranadu was one of the prominent taluks in the erstwhile Malabar district of Madras presidency during the British colonial times. Kurumbranad had always been a fertile ground for nationalist movements and the innumerable peasants' and workers' movements organized by the Communist party. Toddy tapping is one of the traditional and rural-based small-scale industries in Kerala. During the colonial and post-colonial period this traditional industry is being directly controlled by the government. The sale of toddy earns good revenue to the government. It also provides large scale employment opportunities to the people. Traditionally, toddy tapping is a profession carried out by the Ezhavas or Thiyyas, a lower caste of Kerala. The Thiyya community had a monopoly in toddy trade from the very beginning. These industries provided livelihood for thousands of labourers.

The liquor industry generally consists of three kinds of liquor namely toddy, arrack and foreign liquor. Among these, toddy, the traditional alcoholic drink is the least intoxicating. Besides, an intoxicating drink, toddy has special place in celebrations and ceremonies such as marriage, burials, temple festivals etc. Toddy is a traditional intoxicant used by the low caste people. Toddy is extracted from the coconut tree using an indigenous technique developed by toddy tappers.

Interrelationship between Toddy Tappers and Communist Movement

The toddy tappers were one of the most backward sections who were exploited both by the government authorities and Abkari contractors. They were exploited professionally and economically and their condition was pathetic, both colonial and post-colonial period. In the 1940s onwards the toddy tappers became organized groups. They stood for against exploitation and organized struggle for political and social rights. This was mainly due to their intense politicization on account of its affinity and affiliation with the left ideology and communist movement. There existed a dialectical relation between the communist movement and the organization of the toddy tappers as they were complementary to each other.

The Thiyyas, the major community of Kerala and in kurumbranadu taluk engaged in coconut cultivation and its allied works. Toddy tapping is generally considered to be the traditional occupation of Thiyyas. The Thiyyas were untouchables, but they were not poor as the other polluting communities. In spite of their discrimination the Thiyyas adopted jobs and education offered by the colonialist government in 19th century¹. After that the number of toddy tappers was reduced in this community. However, it is true that toddy tapping is solely done by Thiyyas.



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Being a leading industry, toddy tapping contributed much to the economic sector of Kurumbranadu. The toddy provides a relatively stable Income to the cultivators. At the beginning of 19th century, an elite class had emerged among the Thiyyas, a significant among them were toddy tappers and contractors. Toddy had a significant role in the society of Kurumbranadu. More than an alcoholic drink it influenced the social stipulation, religion practices and economic condition of Malabar.

Calicut, the headquarter of Malabar district was the centre and birth place of trade union organizations of Kerala, It is significant that toddy tapper's union is one of the early trade unions of Kerala. The elaborate statistics of occupation and trades indicated in the census of 1901 confirmed the popular impression that Malabar is a comparatively wealthy and prosperous district and revealed it is manifold natural resources². Toddy drawing alone was supported fifty thousand people³. This profession contributed much to the economic development of the Thiyyas. However, later the situation changed and the government plundered the profit in the form of forced excise duties. Then toddy tapping became a profitless profession⁴. The rulers of the land had levied a sort of profession tax up on the drawers of toddy and distillers of arrack. This tax under the name of the knife, and still tax was continued by the British government and long survived in different parts of the district⁵.

The Excise tax was enhanced by Major Macleod, principal collector of Malabar in 1801-02, but after his time no further increase was made. It was varied throughout the districts⁶. Its limitations were pointed out by the Excise Committee of 1884. In 1886 a modified excise structure was introduced. In 1888 contract distillery system was introduced in Malabar.

From the late 19th century, Fort St. George had begun to tax the native liquor industry. The government got its revenue from the tax on palm trees and from rental of arrack and toddy shops. Taxes on trees were increased every year. Thus, the stepping up of attempts by the government to tax the native liquor industry severely affected the traditional occupation of toddy tappers⁷. They protested against the taxation policy of the government and went on strike and boycotted auctions stating that they desired to abandon the use ferment liquor⁸. As toddy began to be taxed beyond profitability, shops decreased, tappers retreated and illicit tapping became the order of the day⁹.

In this situation in September 1918 Kottieth Krishnan, a prominent Thiyya leader in Thalassery and a few others associated with the Thiyya community, founded the Kerala Labour Union for toddy tappers who had decided to give up their professions¹⁰. The Jaganath temple, near Thalassery was to be the centre of rehabilitation activities and the union explored the possibility of setting up a business for dealing in Jaggiri, made from sweet toddy¹¹.

The Non Co-operation activities and the picketing of toddy shops by Congress and Khilafat volunteers also negatively affected this profession. Liquor shop picketing became major activity carried by Congress¹². The KPCC programmes involved an all out attack on the production and sale of today. Thus the Thiyya elites were not willing to invest in a trade which was becoming increasingly unprofitable and moreover, was tinged with the stigma of lowness¹³. Being a key speaker in a meeting of Thiyya community held at Vatakara during the days of anti-liquor campaign, Moorkoth Kumaran, a prominent leader of Thiyya community of Malabar spoke that "we have only one industry and it is toddy tapping. Congress is working g against it. They were jealous on some of us became rich through liquor production¹⁴.

In the initial stages the Communists also followed the policies of Congress were against alcohol. They strongly opposed liquor consumption. The Communists established reading rooms for assembling labours in the evening after their work. Fifty percent of shops were sold for lower rentals, and government excise revenue declined by seventy percent¹⁵.

Toddy tappers organisation and Communist organisations are deeply related to each other. The Social disadvantages and economic crisis created by the government policies, exploitation from contractors and objection from social reform organisations and the intense politicization of the toddy tappers by the political parties compelled them to organise themselves. In Kerala, the toddy tappers organisation is related to communist movement through its trade union



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organisation. During that time, British government imposed ban on Communist party and supporting organisations. Even after independence the ban was continued by the Congress government.

With the formation of Centre for Indian Trade Union in 1938, it became backbone of trade union movements. Even during the period of ban, CITU worked secretly and could win popularity among the masses within a short span of time. At places like Vatakara, Koyilandy, and Perambra the workers came to affiliate with it ¹⁶. In the initial stages, the communists were against the liquor industry including toddy. But they realized that this industry could provide livelihood for thousands of labours. The agitations against this industry like picketing of toddy shops caused the loss of support to the Communist party from these workers. Besides it, Congress was against toddy tappers and liquor. It indicated that Thiyyas were conscious about their traditional job and they did not support organisation which objected their profession. The Communists realised the problems of toddy tappers and cooperated with toddy tappers organisations in their struggles. The toddy tappers and Communist party went hand in hand in their fights for rights.

On 1st October, 1947 government prohibited liquor in Malabar. It made about 30000 tappers jobless¹⁷. Now the government permitted the tapping of sweet toddy and granted permission to make jiggery and societies were permitted to do it. In order to carry out it 19 societies were formed. Meanwhile the union of unemployed tappers emerged. They used Marxist terms to denote their situation. For instance, they published pamphlets. It was an exhortion for the violation of government rule and tap toddy.

The experience that the toddy tappers had faced, since the prohibition of liquor in 1947, made the organisation more vibrant one. For a period of twenty years, they could make an entry in to the minds of the large numbers of toddy tappers. The Communist movement now aligned with the assertion of the toddy tappers associations. In 1949 many toddy tappers unions were banned along with the Communist party. The activities of both communist and toddy tappers were carried out secretly. The government could not prevent the development of both of these movements. They could prove their public and popularity in the elections. In the election held in 1951, many toddy tappers union leaders were elected in to the legislative Assembly¹⁸.

After the lifting of prohibition of liquor in 1967, the toddy tappers felt the need for organizing themselves as to protect their lives and livelihood. The Communists converted the toddy tappers from slaves of brutal contractors to modern day human being and these workers became the leaders of the society. Comrade K.S. Chathu kutty, Chanthu master, K.G. Kelan, N.C. Sankaran, K.S. Kittuni, R. Sankaran and many others were arrested, jailed and tortured for their crimes of organizing workers against abkari contractors.

The toddy tappers in Calicut were organized under different ranges. In the Kurumbranadu taluk it attained more strength. Trade union leaders faced many difficulties in their mission to organise toddy tappers. Trade unions faced strong opposition from the part of shop contractors. The contractors restricted their labour from the meeting with trade union leaders. The toddy tappers were brutally exploited by the Abkari contractors and their lives were under the mercy of the contractor. The absence of class consciousness among the toddy tappers was the next problem. The trade union leaders had to engage in the intense politicization of the toddy tappers by stating the exploitation of the elite groups and also the authoritative rule of the government.

The increase in the membership of the organization was due to the activities of the communist movement. It is notable that majority of the social base of toddy tappers union was consisted of Thiyyas. It is also noticed that many of the early leaders of the movement belonged to the Thiyyas. Sometimes trade union leaders were attacked by goons of Abkari contractors when they went to the shop for canvassing labours.

The climax of the toddy tappers agitations is remembered as 'Kulamuri Samaram' or cut the flower buds of coconut trees. The strikers decided to cut the flower buds of coconut trees from which the agents of the shop contractors were producing toddy. During the night time, simultaneously at several places the flower buds of coconut trees were cut off.



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In 1967, the Communist government under EMS Namputhiripad granted permission for toddy industry in Malabar. In 1969, toddy shop auction started in Malabar region. The Toddy Tapping Law was a great relief to the toddy tappers and the Thiyya community which benefited much from this law. During the period between 1947 to 1967 there formed to many toddy tapper association in different ranges of Malabar. The first union of toddy tappers was formed in Anthikkadu near Trissur.

In the Kurumbranadu and Vatakara area M.K Kelu, a prominent communist leader organized toddy tappers and began agitation. As a result of strong straggles the government allowed license to shops and auctioning of toddy shops. Another demand of the union of Vatakara range was that to apply an approved measure for toddy and to fix the price of toddy at 40 paise per litre and Rs.10 as bonus for a year. At Memunda shop tappers on went fasting in front of contractor's house for bonus on the day of Thiruvonam. The tappers also conducted picketing of shops at Nut Street and Meppayil for demanding the enhancement of wage and bonus. Such interventions strengthened the union.

When the Communist party extended their support to the association of toddy tappers, the socialists were sided with the contractors. The formation of toddy tappers union at Orkatteri and Eramala became more difficult as of the great support to contractors from the side of socialists. Finally with the help of Kuyyale Gopalan, the Orkkatteri shop committee came into existence. Then the workers started strike for bonus and wage rise. First, it was a Satyagraha and later it changed in to 24 hours picketing. It lasted for one month and eight days. Within One week after starting the picketing the contractor and their goons attacked the picketers. The services of Pokkan, Kunkan and Aandi were remarkable in this occasion. At last the demand of the tappers was approved by the contractors. Similar toddy tappers strikes were organized in other parts of Kurumbranadu taluk like Manappuram, Adiyur and Memunda. In Nadapuram region T Ayyappan, K.Vasu and P K Moidu were the leader who organized toddy tappers. The most important centres of union activities were Thottilpalam and Thalikkara.

As a result of the long struggle conducted by the toddy tappers union, the welfare board for toddy tappers came into existence in 1969. It is the first welfare board for particular labours in Kerala. It had huge assets and thousands of toddy tappers joined it as members. In 1982, the Congress government under K Karunakaran, followed a policy which supported foreign liquor and arrack. The government of Achuthamenon tried to implement the "Doora Paridhi Chattram" or the law which prohibit the working of toddy shop within the 400 meters of educational institution and places of worship. This government allowed the leasing of shops without any solvency and security²¹. Karunakaran government implemented licensing system for toddy tappers.

In 1982, K Karunakaran government appointed a commission under the chairmanship of AP Udayabhanu to study about liquor prohibition. The committee consisted of the secretary for tax, financial and health department. V.R Krishnan Ezhuthachan, Pof.G Kumarapillai Dr. M. Leelavathi were also included in this committee. This committee was appointed to advice the government in the matters like how the loss of revenue for government through liquor prohibition can overcome? And how to overcome the employment issues created by prohibition? This committee submitted its reports after elaborate discussions and enquiries. The core recommendations of this committee was that liquor prohibition is unscientific and impractical. Instead of toddy prohibition the commission recommended for awareness programmes. The committee also stated that the prohibition of toddy leads to the illegal production of liquor.

Conclusion

The combined agitations of toddy tappers and communists helped them too much. They could attain many concessions and privileges. The communists provided great support to the toddy tappers at present also. By giving restless support to the toddy tappers the Communist party could attain huge support from toddy tappers, especially from the Thiyya community. This is the truth behind the communist party support to toddy tappers from the very beginning. Now toddy tappers union is one of the well organized trade union not only in Malabar but also Kerala too.



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