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## MANNATH PADMANABHAN: MODERNITY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF UPPER CASTES IN COLONIAL KERALA

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### Abstract

Mannathu Padmanabhan was a social reformer and freedom fighter of Kerala. In 1893 Padmanabhan began his career as a teacher in a government primary school. From 1905 he changed his profession and started practicing law. In 1914 he established the Nair Service Society. His main ambition was to uplift the status of the Nair community. From 1915 he became full-time secretary of the Nair Service Society. In 1924 he took part in the Vaikom Satyagraha. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1924, to support Vaikom Satyagraha, Savarna procession was set out from Vaikom to Trivandrum under the leadership of Mannathu Padmanabhan. In 1947 he became a member of the Indian National Congress and took part in the agitation against Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer's administration in Travancore. In 1949 Padmanabhan became a member of the Travancore Legislative Assembly. He was honoured with the title Bharata Kesari by the President of India. He also received Padma Bhushan in 1966. He died on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1970, at the age of 93.

**Keywords:** Social Reformer- Freedom Fighter- Nair Service Society-Savarna Jatha- The Liberation Struggle.

### Introduction

The dawn of the 19th century witnessed the birth of new vision- a modern vision among some enlightened sections of the Kerala society. This enlightened vision was to shape the course of events for decades to come and even beyond. Reformers like Mannathu Padmanabhan understood that ignorance and backwardness in the society was responsible for hindering its progress and development<sup>1</sup>. When the British missionaries started spreading Christianity, he criticized and questioned many of our social and religious practices. The desire to reform the society was so strong that he was now ready to face challenges as well as resistance from the orthodox people of Kerala. According to him society should be based on the concepts of liberty and equality both for men and women and this was possible only by the spread of modern and scientific education especially among the women<sup>2</sup>.

### Early Life and Education

Mannathu Padmanabhan was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1878 at Perunna, a village in the Changanassery Taluk of the Kottayam district of Kerala. His parents were Eswaran Namboothiri of Nilavana Illam and Mannathu Parvathy Amma. He completed his formal education from a local school and graduated from a nearby reputed college<sup>3</sup>. Since he was born into a family with humble background, he had to pick up a job much earlier in his life. When he landed in a teacher's job in 1893, he was only 16 years old. While he was working in a local primary school, he enrolled himself for a course in Law<sup>4</sup>. Since the course was taken on a part-time basis, it took a while for him to complete it. After a period of 12 years, he changed his profession to become a junior advocate in a Magistrate court nearby. After gaining requisite experience in the field of law, he became a reputed advocate in the region<sup>5</sup>.

The plight of the Nair Community that was witnessing its own decadence and disintegration, precipitated by extravaganza, superstitious veneration for antiquated and anachronistic customs and tradition, filled him with anguish. These conventional Nair social practices were indigestive to him. He tried to evaluate the then Nair socio-economic practices in accordance with the Western yardsticks and found throughout the Nair society of the day was on the brim of a collapse; therefore, he arrived at a conclusion that the Nairs as a caste group deserve proper and timely treatment or therapy<sup>6</sup>. Mannath Padmanabhan was too pragmatic and functioned as a product of western utilitarianism and liberal thoughts.

### Evolution of Nair Service Society (NSS)

Mannathu Padmanabhan organized a group of young men and registered a Nair Karayogam at Perunnai, Changanacherry in 1912. It was expanded into Changanacherry Taluk Nair Samajam in 1913 with Sri Mannam as its secretary. In order to strengthen the organization throughout the state, Sri Mannam and a group of fourteen zealous young men gathered at Mannathu House at Perunnai, Changanacherry on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1914 and founded the 'Nair Samudaya Bruthya Jana Sangha' for the service of the Nair community. Besides, they aimed at inter-communal harmony, educational advancement and economic upliftment. K.Kelappan and Mannathu Padmanabhan were the founding president and secretary respectively. On 11 July 1915 the Sangha was renamed as the Nair Service Society. The headquarters of the organization was located at Perunna, Changanacherry. N.S.S. was established in the lines of the Servants of India Society of Gopalakrishna Gokhale<sup>7</sup>.



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The history of the organization is closely linked up with the history of Mannathu Padmanabhan-the 'icon of Nair identity'. The relentless zeal of this enlightened leader and the dedicated services of other great leaders of NSS like Ambalappattu Damodara Asan, Changanacherry Parameswaran Pillai, Kalathil Velayudhan Nair and others transformed it into a powerful and vibrant organization of Nair community<sup>8</sup>. Though the primary objective of NSS was the reformation of Nair community, the organization extended its activities in different spheres such as social, economic and educational fields. It fought against the evils of casteism, untouchability, joint family system, expensive and unnecessary social practices like Talikettu Kalyanam, Therandukuli, Pulikudi etc. The reform of Marumakkathaya system or the matrilineal system of inheritance which existed among the Nairs also drew its attention<sup>9</sup>. He understood the importance of education for the development of the community and established a wide network of educational institutions throughout the state. At the same time, he was keen on acquiring landed property and other assets including the founding of different institutions under the banner of the organization. In addition, he maintained a sympathetic attitude towards other communities particularly the untouchable castes<sup>10</sup>.

The Nair community realized that the superstitious and superfluous rituals were the main reason for the backwardness of the community. It drained away their scarce resources. They wanted a religious reformation to take the community forward. The early history of NSS is replete with instances of fighting superstitions by an enlightened group of Nair youths. Within a year of forming NSS, Mannam and a group of young Nairs entered the Subramani Swami Temple at Perunna violating an age-old custom prescribed for the Sudras. If a death occurs in a family the Sudras (Nairs) can enter the temple only after 15 to 16 days. This prohibition is called pula. After thirteen days of Mannath Padmanabhan's uncle's death, he entered the temple for worship and the priests filed a civil suit against the Nairs. This sparked an interesting discussion about the irrational thinking among the Nairs which resulted in the degeneration of the Nair community<sup>11</sup>. Mannam ascertained that one community had no power over the others, and the Nambutiri community had no authority to prescribe rules for the Nairs.

Temples had their important role to play in NSS in touching their religious sentiments and feelings which had to unite the community. When Mannam began his organizational work, one of the priorities was to renovate the temple at Perunna. Breaking all traditions, a Nair became the poojari (priest) of the temple. This was a revolt against Brahmin supremacy. It was done by staying within the religious framework and gradually protesting against the domination of one community. The genesis of the movement was the realization that oppression was central to the backwardness of the community<sup>12</sup>. In fact, the efforts of NSS against untouchability and opening temples for all castes sprang from this sociological compulsion. It is remarkable to focus the point that Mannath Padmanabhan had declared his family temple to all irrespective of caste and creed even before the celebrated Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore.

### Agitations against Untouchability

Though born into an upper caste family, Mannathu Padmanabhan was concerned about the lives of the people from the oppressed castes. Therefore, he was at the forefront of the agitations against the oppression of these castes. In fact, he was amongst the leaders who successfully spearheaded the Vaikom Sathyagraham. As a result of the Vaikom Sathyagraham, the Maharajah of the Princely state of Travancore had to sign the famous Temple Entry Proclamation to allow the members of lower castes to worship in the temples of the state<sup>13</sup>.

One of the highlights of the satyagraha was the Savarna Jatha. The idea of Savarna Jatha was suggested by Mahatma Gandhi. Mannath Padmanabhan, who had active interest in the crusade for the abolition of untouchability, organized the Jatha of the caste-Hindus from Vaikom to Trivandrum to express their solidarity with the satyagraha and to submit a memorandum to the Regent Maharani seeking the grant of freedom of movement<sup>14</sup>. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1924 under the supreme command of Mannath Padmanabhan the march began. The marchers were given rousing receptions on the way and thousands thronged on the sides of the road to offer garlands and refreshments. Of the receptions, the one that they had at Sivagiri, the abode of Sree Narayana Guru, was the most inspiring and memorable. The guru told the leaders of the Jatha that there was no other mechanism to record the opinion of the savarnas than the Jatha, which had veritably brought about a radical transformation of Kerala society<sup>15</sup>. Mannath Padmanabhan unreservedly acknowledged that the Guru was a farsighted revolutionary social reformer, a great pure soul and a chivalrous spiritual leader.

Organized and led by Mannath Padmanabhan, the Vaikom Satyagraha and the Savarna Jatha helped to influence public opinion in the State in favour of the temple entry for the low caste people to worship. While a majority of the public was in favour of temple entry the Brahmins objected to it. In order to accomplish freedom of worship for all Hindus irrespective of their castes, the NSS continued its campaign in various parts of Kerala. Mannath Padmanabhan was the Chairman of the Guruvayur Satyagraha<sup>16</sup>.



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One of the chief objectives of the NSS was to bring reforms in the traditional matrilineal system of inheritance<sup>17</sup>. The NSS wanted this reform because the joint family system had failed to work harmoniously. Prior to the founding of the NSS the Nair leaders like Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai introduced a bill suggesting the partition of thavazhis<sup>17</sup>. This is known as the first Nair Act of 1912; because it gave provisions only for the thavazhi partition. Most of the liberal leaders did not accept it<sup>18</sup>.

The fact that Nair marriage was not considered being legally valid and one's own children were completely shut out of inheritance of property, were opposed on moral, ethical and pragmatic grounds. Further, the fact that joint family property cannot be converted to individual property and even sub division according to thavazhis (branches) was not allowed normally, were great deterrents to material prosperity in the context of commercialization of agriculture<sup>19</sup>.

It was in this ground; another Nair Act was proposed under the leadership of Padmanabhan in 1925. In this Act provision was made not only for the thavazhi partition but it provided also for equal sharing of the tharavad property for all the tharavad members. The act also made polygamy illegal. It prohibited the marriage of a female less than 16 years of age<sup>21</sup>. This age limit stopped the traditional custom of marriage in talikettu form, particularly of a girl before puberty.

Realizing the fact that development of the community on modern lines is instrumental only through education, the NSS started its first school in 1915 at a village called Karukachaal near Changanassery. They started several other educational institutions, including schools and colleges by following the model of missionaries. These institutions promoted the knowledge of modern faculties of knowledge system and thereby strengthened the process of acquiring social mobility and progress among the Nairs<sup>22</sup>.

Affection towards one's own community does not mean hostility towards the other communities. Desire for self-betterment should not lead to environmentally towards the wellbeing of others. These views were maintained by Mannath Padmanabhan throughout this life. He considered both Ezhavas and Nairs as equally strong communities in the Hindu religion. And that is the reason why he took initiative to join hands with the SNDP to form the Hindu Mandalam to promote co-operation among the Hindus<sup>23</sup>. The meeting of the representatives of the two communities, held at Changanassery in 1950 favoured casteless Hindu Mandalam. In that meeting Mannam Padmanabhan Said, "I realize and believe that Hindu community is much important than the Nair community, and that is the reason why I am favouring the resolution for the creation of the Hindu Mandalam"<sup>24</sup>. Later in his life Mannam renamed himself as "Padmanabhan" removing the sir name, stating that caste should not be a dividing factor amongst the human beings.

After dedicating his life to the cause of NSS and Nair community, Mannam began to tour the length and breadth of the state to popularize the organization amongst the members of Nair community. During this period of his life, Mannam was marked for simplicity, complete devotion and determination to succeed. These attributes could successfully appeal to the general public. As a result of this, he could win the hearts of the people by destroying the impregnable forts of superstition and a formidable citadel of resistance in them. Gradually, he began to conquer the unexplored areas of his philanthropic work and started building other institutions under NSS out of nothing<sup>25</sup>. Because of these activities undertaken by him in a selfless manner, the institutions built by him still carry forward the legacy left behind by him.

### Freedom Movement

Mannam gave strong leadership to the freedom struggle. His entry in the field of independence struggle was like a whirlwind, which soon spread in all its vicinity. With his entry his followers and co-workers flowed to the fold of Congress party. In 1947, Mannathu Padmanabhan joined the Indian National Congress (INS) and led the party's agitation against the infamous misrule of the Travancore state by Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer<sup>26</sup>. He wanted to implement the American model in the state administration. This caused huge uproar in the society and many community leaders upped their anti- against this move. When Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer resisted the integration of Travancore with India in 1947, Sri Mannam led a political struggle for the integration<sup>27</sup>. Though Mannathu Padmanabhan was arrested and imprisoned for two years, he was soon set free following the resignation of the Dewan. Subsequently the integration of Travancore took place. Through the participation in the freedom movement organized by the Congress party, Mannam gained the stature of a mass leader. Owing to this, he was nominated to the Travancore Legislative Assembly in 1949.<sup>28</sup>

### The liberation struggle (Vimochana Samaram)

After the independence, the first communist government took over the mantle of running the state of Kerala. The Liberation Struggle of 1959 was launched against the policies of EMS ministry especially the Educational Act introduced by Joseph Mundassery, the Minister for Education<sup>29</sup>. Political parties such as Congress, PSP, Muslim League and RSP joined together with some communal organizations, which were provoked by the provisions of the Educational Act. During the liberation struggle, the "Jeevasikha Jatha" started from Angamali was led by Mannath Padmanabhan. Due to this movement, the first communist government headed by E.M.S.



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Namboodiripadu was dismissed and the President's rule was imposed on the state. With the falling of the communist government, the move to introduce the education reform bill also fell flat<sup>30</sup>.

In appreciation of Mannath Padmanabhan's valuable services to the nation, the President of India awarded him the title 'Bharata Kesari' (Lion of India). In 1966 he was also awarded Padma Bhushan<sup>31</sup>. Mannam passed away on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1970 at the age of 93. Mannam Samadhi is in Perunna. He wrote many articles, an autobiography (Ente Jeevithasmaranakal), and a travel book, Our Trip to the Federal Malay States (FMS). His style was virile, forthright and very effective<sup>32</sup>.

### Conclusion

Mannath Padmanabhan was one of the greatest revolutionaries and organizers in Kerala. He was the life, soul, spirit and moving force behind the Nair Service Society. Undoubtedly, the secret behind the success of NSS was the selfless service and relentless efforts of Mannathu Padmanabhan<sup>33</sup>. He utilized his abilities, cultural heritage; organizing expertise and artistic talents for the welfare of the country and his community. He made the public service as an unending duty of his life. The orations of Mannam in removing untouchability, in the struggle for temple entry, in the up lift of Harijans, in protecting the rights of the community, in rallying the soldiers in independence struggle, and in the struggle to dismiss the first Communist Government in Kerala were historical events<sup>34</sup>. Mannam has given food a Harijan with him in his house. This was indeed a revolutionary act at that time when Harijans were not permitted to enter into a household of an upper caste. Mannam was in the forefront of the struggle to have the right of worship to all sections of Hindu community including lower caste. Thus, the contributions of Sri Mannam have been multifarious-a political activist who was associated with the political history of the state, a social reformer who advocated the social uplift of the polluted castes and above all, an enlightened leader who reformed and empowered his own community.

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16. It took place in 1931-32 and was a Satyagraha (non-violent protest) in present Thrissur district, which was then part of Ponnani Taluk of Malabar district, now part of Kerala, which was an effort to allow entry for untouchables into the Guruvayur Temple.



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17. It is a law of inheritance through maternal nephews and nieces. It was exceptional in the sense that it was one of the few traditional systems that gave women liberty, and right to property. Under this system, women enjoyed respect, prestige and power. In the Marumakkathayam system, the family lived together in a Tharavad which comprised of a mother, her brothers and younger sisters, and her children. The eldest brother was known as the Karanavar and was the head of the household and managed the family estate. Lineage was traced through the mother, and the children "belonged" to the mother's family. All family property was jointly owned. In the event of a partition, the shares of the children were clubbed with that of the mother. The Karnavar's property was inherited by his nephews & not his sons.
18. Sometimes when Tharavad or family grows extremely large, the descendants of the family are divided according to various female lines (Thai Vazhi; Thai means mother and Vazhi means line). They would live in separate buildings and may own that portion of the joint property which is theirs in the partition and which is managed by the Karanavar.
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