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C.V. KUNHIRAMAN AND THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT IN KERALA: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

C.V.Kunhiraman was a social reformer, man of letters, founder of Kerala Kaumudi and a journalist. He was a follower of Sree Narayana Guru. He was born in 1871 as the son of Velayudhan and Kunhichali of Mayyanad. Kunhiraman stopped his schooling at the VIIIth standard. He started a school for lower caste Hindus at Vellamanal, Mayyanad, Kollam. He opened his journalistic career in Sujananadini, published by Paravoor Kesavanasan. As an activist in the SNDP Yogam, Kunhiraman was elected its general secretary in 1928 and 1931. He launched Kerala Kaumudi in 1911 at Mayyanad as a weekly newspaper that had grown over the years as one of the most influential dailies in Malayalam and has raised its voice against injustice on all fronts. Its sharp criticism and powerful language created a trend in Travancore. Kunhiraman was also the editor of Malayalarajyam, Navajeevan, Navasakthi, Yukthivadi, and Vivekodayam and has been hailed for his role behind the historic Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936.

Keywords: Social Reformer, Civic Rights, Abstention Movement, Temple Entry, The Struggle for Responsible Government.

Introduction

In the 19th century Kerala Society was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and dogmas. All religions in general and Hinduism in particular had become a compound of magic, animism, and superstitions. The abominable rites like animal sacrifice and physical torture had replaced the worship of God. The priests exercised an overwhelming and unhealthy influence on the mind of people¹. The faithful lived-in submission, not only to God, the powerful and unseen, but even to the whims, fancies, and wishes of the priests. Social Conditions were equally depressing². The most distressing was the position of women. The birth of a girl was unwelcome, her marriage a burden and her widowhood inauspicious³. Another debilitating factor was Caste. It sought to maintain a system of segregation, hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status, hampering social mobility and fostered social divisions. There were innumerable other practices marked by constraint, status, authority, bigotry and blind fatalism. Rejecting them as features of a decadent society, the reform movements sought to create a social climate for modernization. The conquest of India by the British during the 18th and 19th centuries exposed some serious weaknesses and drawbacks of Kerala social institutions⁴.

The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform socio- religious life was a commonly shared conviction. It also brought in completely new set of ideas. The exposure to rationalism that came to signify modernity brought a change in the outlook of a select group of Kerala. The introduction of western education had the far-reaching impact on the Kerala Society. Through the glasses of utility, reason, justice, and progress, a select group of individuals began to explore the nature of their own society. There was a gradual emergence of public opinion. The resultant cultural change led to introspection about Kerala traditions, institution and culture⁵. The socio- intellectual revolution that took place in the 19th century in the fields of literature, science, politics, philosophy, and social reforms is often known as Kerala Renaissance. An important part of this Renaissance was reforming Hinduism from within on the basis of rationalism. Many progressive personalities – through their intellectual and organizational leadership – played decisive role in nurturing the social protests⁶. C.V. Kunhiraman played an important role in the making of modern Kerala, is a typical example of this kind of leadership.

Early Life and Education

C.V.Kunhiraman was born in a poor family as the son of Velayudhan and Kunhichali at Mayyanad near Kollam in 1871. He had his elementary education at the L.M.S missionary school, Mayyanad and Government High School, Kollam. He studied only up to fourth forum which is equivalent to the present VIIIth standard. But his passion for knowledge induced him to read extensively including the classics like Mahabharata, Ramayana and other literary works that enabled him to fight against the superstitions of every kind⁷. He started a school for the lower caste Hindus at Vellamanal in his village Mayyanad and became its Head Master. Meanwhile, he appeared for criminal test equivalent to Law Degree and came out successfully. Though he started his career as a teacher later he opted to be an advocate and joined Paravoor magistrate court as a criminal lawyer⁸. He used his pen as the weapon to fight against the dirty customs existed in Kerala society.

As a journalist

Kunhiraman started his journalistic career and got acquainted in the literary circles through his writings in Sujananadini⁹. Subsequently he served as its sub- editor. He inaugurated a new era in the socio-political mobilization of the Ezhavas by starting a



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newspaper–Kerala Kaumudi¹⁰ which enabled him to represent the marginalized people in the public sphere of Kerala. Its sharp and vibrant criticism and powerful language inspired the aggrieved communities of Kerala and created a favourable condition for socio-political action¹¹. He also worked as editor of publications like Bhashaposhini, Malayalarajyam, Navajeevan, Navasakthi, Yukthivadi, and Vivekodayam. In addition to his credit as a prolific writer, Kunhhiraman also functioned as a member of the Sree Mulam Prajasabha¹². Like Dr. Palpu, Kumaran Asan, and Sahodaran Ayyappan, he also worked under the spiritual halo of Sree Narayana Guru. In fact, he adopted a material approach enriched by the spiritual principles of Sree Narayana guru for the transformation of a major community of Kerala from the position of polluting community to the status of a powerful one in Kerala¹³. He very effectively utilized Sree Narayana Guru as a chief instrument in the upliftment of Ezhava community.

C.V. Kunhhiraman, always devised tactics in presenting issues in newspapers and considered reader’s mentalities in presenting the issues. Each editorial had taken a different slant, presenting arguments tailored to the newspaper’s particular readership. He always maintained that opinions should be neither an iron cage nor brittle and was accordingly able to slip himself as necessary into the antithetical positions of extremist nationalist¹⁴.

Literary works

Apart from his journalistic work, Kunhhiraman wrote number of literary works and the important among them are Arabikkathakal, Durga Kshethram, Ente Sreekovil, Oru Sandesam, Panchavadi, Sree Narayana smrithi, Unniyarcha, Vyasa Bharatham, and K.C. Kesavapillayude Jeevacharithram. His genius as a critic was revealed through his review of the works Mayoora Sandesam, Nalini, and Unnuneeli Sandesam¹⁵. Meanwhile, it was an age of organizational mobilization of Ezhavas under SNDP Yogam which raised its voice of protest against the denial of civic and human rights to Avarnas. The Yogam was in the vanguard of the fight for the rights of the depressed classes, especially the non-caste Hindus. But the voice of protest was mainly through representations to rulers and Government, newspaper writings and pamphlets¹⁶. As a journalist, reformer and organizer, C.V.Kunhhiraman came into contact with the SNDP Yogam and became its General Secretary in 1928 and 1931.

The Civic Rights Movement

C.V. Kunhhiraman played an important role in all the socio- political movements started in Travancore from 1900 till his death in 1949. His support became crucial in the Civic Rights, Abstention and Temple Entry Movements and the Struggle for Responsible Government- all of them were the stepping stones for the progressive transformation of Kerala society. The Civic Rights Movement was the first popular political movement started in Travancore by the aggrieved communities of the Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims for getting due share in the government service including the revenue department and for access to all public amenities¹⁷. Traditionally the revenue department was considered inaccessible to the non- caste-Hindus and non- Hindus because Devaswoms had been attached to that department. Christians and Muslims were debarred from the appointment in the Revenue department on religious grounds while the Ezhavas and other lower castes on caste grounds. When the movement progressed C.V. Kunhhiraman submitted a memorial in 1928 to the Simon Commission¹⁸ for communal representation of the aggrieved communities. He demanded for the Ezhavas either representation by separate electorates or reservation of an adequate number of seats in the general electorates. He effectively used the pages of his newspaper ‘Kerala Kaumudi’, membership in the popular assemblies and his position as the General Secretary of S.N.D.P Yogam for the cause of the aggrieved communities.

Abstention Movement

During the regime of Sri Chitra Thirunal, who was enthroned in 1932, there were some radical reforms in this field. It was alleged that the new constitutional reform was the brain child of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the Legal and Constitutional Advisor of the Maharaja. The Legislative Council was divided into Sreemoolam Assembly and Sri Chitra State Council. In protest against the inadequacy of the Constitutional reforms of 1932, the Nivartana (abstention) movement was started, as the Ezhavas, the Christians and the Muslims who constituted 70% of the population, apprehended that the new reforms, owing to the provisions for restricted franchise on the basis of the area of possession of property and other qualifications, would secure for them only a few numbers of seats in the enlarged legislature than the Nayers¹⁹. C. V. Kunhhiraman was in the forefront of the protest movement against the new regulation. He demanded apportioning of the seats on the basis of population. When the Government turned a deaf ear to the voice of protest, Kunhhiraman along with the other aggrieved communities organized a Joint Political Congress and exhorted the voters to abstain from voting. The Government at last conceded their demands to a certain extent by introducing communal reservation in appointments to the public service²⁰.

Temple Entry Proclamation

The situation created by C.V Kunhhiraman for the Temple Entry Proclamation of Travancore on 12th November 1936 which saved Hinduism from its impending danger of destruction and put a stop to the conversion propaganda of the Christians in Travancore.



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The Proclamation put an end to the long-standing crude and harsh customs and conceptions of the Travancore society. It brought about a silent and bloodless revolution in the Hindu Society. Avarnas were given the right to enjoy the temple worship²¹.

Struggle for responsible government

C.V. Kunhiraman played an important role in the struggle for responsible government in Travancore. He effectively used his pen and platform for attacking the policies of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer²². Even though C.V Kunhiraman could breathe the thin air of democracy and peoples' power with the attainment of independence of the country, he could not survive to witness the formation of the state of Kerala and the emergence of the democratic government²³. He passed away in 1949.

Conclusion

C.V.Kunhiraman's voices and wordings were instrumental in the transformation of Kerala polity and society. In short, the name C V Kunhiraman is a symbol of courage and transformation in the history of Malayalam journalism, the history of Kerala's renaissance and in Malayalam prose. He glistened as the sun of Renaissance in the dark ages of racial inequalities and the underlying social anomalies. He gave a sense of identity to the depressed communities as a class against the Brahmins.

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