



POIKAYIL YOHANNAN: A RADICAL DALIT LIBERATOR OF MODERN KERALA

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Abstract:

Kerala society was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. Its chief characteristics was the deep chasm which separated the high castes from the low castes. In spite of the centralisation of authority in the hands of the kings in Travancore and Cochin and the assumption of the direct administration by the English East India Company in Malabar, the upper castes like the Brahmins, the Kshetriya, and the Nairs, continued to enjoy many privileges and immunities. They constituted the land owning class and they freely oppressed the tenant class consisting mainly of such communities as the Mappilas, the Ezhavas, etc. At the same time the most pathetic condition given to a group of people, they were 'Dalits' or untouchables. Dalit or the groups traditionally regarded as untouchables were always remain as marginalised and subjected to oppression and exploitation. Kerala is not an exception to this. The present colonial Kerala provide more employment, but for Dalit it offers unemployment. The social reform movements and colonial modernity effected a transformation in Kerala society during the 19th and 20th centuries. The exclusion of Dalit from the 'public spheres' of Kerala really led to the formation of alternate space for their activities. Pandit K Karuppan, Poikayil Yohannan [Kumaran guru] C Krishnan and Ayyankali were few of the leaders who tried to identify an alternative space within the Kerala Society. This naturally led to the formation of an anti caste tradition within the Kerala society. The Bhakti movement of the Medieval period, helped the cause of the Dalit to certain extent, particularly in the spiritual sphere, the efforts of most of this movements during the british period were however limited to reform rather than aimed a total change and ultimately these movements failed to make any significant dent in the fortress of Hindu Orthodoxy. The establishment of political relations with the English East India Company and the favouritism of the colonial administration led to a favourable ground for missionary activities in Kerala. the missionaries led a life and death struggle to eradicate the rigidity of castism. It was in this atmosphere of coercive suffocation that radical Dalit sensibilities sought to give vent to their frustration and outrage thus it is in this context that the role of Poikayil Yohannan [Kumara Guru] of the 20th century colonial Kerala, acquires immense significance.

Key Words: Radical, Exclusions, Chasm, Coercive & Outrage

Introduction:

Kumaran guru, popularly known as Poikayil Yohannan, was born in a poor illiterate and untouchable pulaya family in Eraviprur, a village in the central Travancore in the Pattanamthitta district of modern Kerala. When he converted in to Christianity he renamed Kumaran as Yohannan. But at the same time the discriminatory policies and casteism with in the church made him did farewell to the Marthoma church and joined the Brethern Mission and Verpadu Sabha later, where also he was confronted with the same discrimination. This compels him to quit both the sect. The discrimination he faced at the various sect of Christianity, the betterness of slavery and its attendant evils made Yohannan to build up a space for the depressed.

His parents Kandan and Lechi were the serfs of anoble Christianity family in the locality namely Sankaramangalam. In a normal set up, the boy was brought up as a bonded serf. Since the members of the slave community were prohibited from selecting good faire names for their children, his parents named him 'komaran', did not get formal schooling, grew up as a herd boy and slave labourer. Education being the monopoly of the upper class, as he being the member of the depressed class, he connote continue his education. All these compelled him to think about the glorious tradition of his community, and how later they become slaves. At the age of ten he openly revolted against the evils of untouchability by establishing friendship with pulayas and having food with them. when he reached youth, he joined in the service of his master. They gave him meals in pattapala [petiole of Areca nut tree], actually which was the symbol of slavery. He decided to resist this kind of discrimination and he broke the pattapala once, It was the first reaction of Kumaran against the system of slavery. In every matter the depressed class or the Dalit, were forbidden to select on the basis of their wishes, including in religious matter. From very early time itself the depressed classes were suffered due to social inequality. So in course of time Kumaran became a member of the Marthoma Section of the Christianity, thus his new baptism renamed Kumaran as Yohannan.

In course of time Yohannan realised the fact that the Christian never gave equal status to the converts, except at church meetings. However he read the Bible closely and started reaching the gospel to him fellow beings, he fined that caste discrimination as it existed in the church, that make him more disappointed. He felt that the Bible

could not give salvation to all, irrespective of caste and creed, and it had no value for the dalit. There for Yohannan rejected Christianity and its commandments as alien and worked for finding something new for the upliftment of Dalit. He worked mainly for the liberty of untouchability of all religion. Now he realised that the stage was ready for the emancipation of the depressed and scattered sons of soil, who unfortunately become slaves in the land of their birth. There are many factors that helped him for the upliftment of Dalit. Dalit in Modern Kerala faced many atrocities from the hands of upper class. 'Dalit' who have been subjected to systematic social discrimination mainly due to caste system or in terms of caste exploitation. In other words, dalits as representing those who have been ground down by those who have been above them in a deliberate manner. This mode of understanding Dalit also assumed that the category of Dalit implies an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution within the frame work of a theory of karma justifying hierarchy. For making better their socio economic condition, as well as their cultural, religious and other deprivation and disabilities, the Dalit have been engaged in struggle and protest movements of several types. Their method of opposition was mainly in the form of confrontation, resistance, opposition, and conflict with the dominant groups in order to achieve their life goal of social equality, social dignity, and de-stigmatised social identity. The protest movement of dalit asserted the demand for self respect, social dignity and equity and gave new direction to liberation struggles in their respective societies.

Colonial modernity had propelled social movements that helped to reconstitute the identities of the communities or social groups. Equality, social mobility and salvation, both material and spiritual were aimed at in this process. The practice of the senses and its fascination with numbers also played a significant role in the making of caste identities. The senses reporting could develop information on all social groups. This is more so regarding various Dalit groups, as these did not exist till date any documentation regarding them. The senses documentation helped to create unified caste entities, sometimes conceived within a defined boundary. Thus almost all groups were identified and the names of the caste entered in official records. This has, to certain extent, led to the genesis of untouchable activism and the formation of a global community and mass mobilisation as mentioned earlier.

However the irony is that the western principles of Democracy, equality, human rights etc that came to India in the 19th century with the colonial regime found favour with the elite, but instead of applying the same principles to all Indians, the privileged groups appropriated the egalitarian principles only for the nation of which they were the sole representatives. The reformers never critiqued and inequalities to the lower orders and women. Along with reform movement, the English educated landlords, clerks, professionals and scholars of the raj who together formed the emergent middle class, also ran caste societies or organisation to strengthen caste solidarity between members of the same caste. Though the Bhakti movement of the medieval period, helped the cause of the Dalits to a certain extent, particularly in the spiritual Sphere, the efforts of most of these movements during the British period were however limited to reform rather than aimed a total change and ultimately these movement failed to make any significant dent in the fortress of Hindu orthodoxy and obduracy. Since the problem was such that nothing tangible was achieved even up to the end of the British rule in India.

The establishment of political relation with the English East India Company and the favouritism of the colonial administrators prepared a favourable ground for missionary activities in Kerala supposed to console the Dalits who have been subjected to various social laws. The fabricated legality which imposed many restrictions, as stated, made the the dalit to look forward the missionaries for their material and spiritual advantages. The missionaries led a life and death struggle to eradicate the rigidity of caste and other evil practices which were imposed upon the Dalits. It also become instrumental to impart education to this downtrodden section of society. However the mission which had been functioned in tune with the British colonial capital later degraded as an instrument of exploitation to these unfortunate creatures. A missionary self scarifies is often extreme and their benevolence, especially in education and medicine, seems beyond question. But there is a fundamental basis in their outlook which polarizes people, in the idea that Christianity is superior to other religions and that only Christians can be saved. Behind a mask of weakness there is thus an enormous arrogance and violence in the missionary enterprise a fundamental closeness and prejudice against other culture and religions. Part of being objective there is to expose this bias.

However the mission work, resulted to ascertain extent, in social mobility and created an awareness which even made the Dalits to raise their voice against the discrimination of the mission itself the Hindu caste system which already denounced the dalit were now deserted by the Baptists too. In short the Dalits were betrayed by both Christian and Hindu religion. Those who embraced Christianity expecting equality and social justice ended up as mere piece of black clouds, trapped among white one and black crows among a bevy of white cranes. Since 19th century, radical social reformers like Phule, Ambedkar etc had raised their voice against the atrocities of the Brahmin dominated caste system .it was Ambedkar who had been regarded as the founder of Dalit discursivity a foucauldian sense, for he is a figure who provides a paradigmatic set of term, image sand concept that organise

thinking and experiences of the past, present and future of society, doing so in a way which enigmatically surpasses the specific claims that the Dalit puts forth.

The oppositional forces represented by Dalit movement were sought to be contained controlled and demolished by the hegemonic structures of power in political and social sphere. The unholy alliance between feudal forces and the bourgeoisie in the political sphere on the one hand and between the Brahmanical system of domination and control in the social cultural sphere on the other hand tried to white wash the inequalities and the resulted oppression in society under the grab of the so called development policies. In reality these policies pushed the already oppressed communities further in to dissolution, depriving them, shelter and the like. It was in this atmosphere of coercive suffocation that radical Dalit sensibilities' sought to give vent to their frustration and outrage, thus aligning themselves with other revolutionary and radical movement at least for retrieving identity. It is in this historiographical context that the engagement with return history problematized by Poykayil Yohannan of the 20th century colonial Kerala, acquires immense significance.

Poykayil yohannan felt that the bible could not provide salvation to all, you of cast and creed, it had no value for dalits. Yohannan, there for rejected Christianity and its commandments as alien and having nothing to do with welfare of his people. Through his writings and speeches he mainly addressed to the untouchable of all religions. One of his arguments substantiate his position is like this. In the New Testament are certain Epistles by saint Paul and others to whom did saint Paul write this epistles? to Romans, Corinthians etc..., there was not even one return to the Pulayas of Travancore. There for there is no revelation in those epistle for you, but only for the Romans, Corinthians ect. The revelation to you, pulayas of Travancore is through me. The Christian doctrine that the kingdom of heaven to belongs to those who suffer and to those who are persecuted; is a negation of truth he declared. The discriminatory policies of castism within the church made him did farewell to the marthoma church and join the birthern mission verpad sabha [other sets of Christianity] later, where also he confronted with the same discrimination. This also made him cute both a sects. The discrimination he faced at the various sects Christianity, the bitterness' of slavery and its attendant evils made yohannan to build up a space for the depressed. Now he realised that the stage was ready for the depressed and scattered sons of the soil, who unfortunately becomes slaves in the level of their birth. His attempt was note an attempt at establishing a different within the Christian fold but one of establishing a new dalit religion, of which he was profit and the preacher. He preached a new sermon 'the adi davida' that emerged in due course as the cardinal principle of dictum, the PRDS [prathyaksha raksha daiva sabha].

Yohannan remained that dalit in India were the inheritors of a rich ancient culture. Yet conventional historiography had conveniently forgotten the dalit and the great contribution they had made for mankind. Yohanna articulated the concerns of the subaltern marginalised in established church. He vehemently Christians the rationale behind the prevalence of castism the church as its role in dividing the laity of vertically. Further yohanna identified the lack of return history as one of the reason for enslavement of Dalit. Slavery represented as an institution that had fractured the Dalit by its forced trade in human beings with an absolute disregard for familial relations and by dismembering families and kind groups.

It was in this context of modernity that the felt an intense need to understand their past, or to search for a past which was not available in any of the dominant text. The most memorable move of yohannan was his declaration and boycott of the Maramon convention. He declared 'god is incarnated through him for the liberation of the slaves. The concept of 'Moksha' and heaven 'could be experienced on earth while living. This concept life after death is meaningless. It is meaningless to say that soul would enter 'paraloka' after death. Since god incarnated in the world from time to time practice and rituals in the name of god is useless and meaningless. Generating such a Dalit consciousness he may be ranked among the post modern thinkers of the blacks like Cornel West, Belhooks, Tony Morrison, Paul Gilroy and others. In short we can say that the efforts of Poikayil Yohannan was a successful one because he succeeded to generate a consciousness among the Dalit for untouchable, mainly through his writings and discourses. To a good extent that enable people to think about their privileges'. Yonnana remained that Dalit in India were the inheritors of a rich ancient culture. Yet conventional historiography had conveniently forgotten the dalit and the great contributions they had made mankind. They had in fact become a rice left out of history. He articulated the concerns of the subaltern marginalised in the established church. Vehemently Christians the rationale behind the prevalence of castism in the church as its role in dividing laity of vertically. Further yohannan identified the lack of written history as one of the reason for the enslavement of Dalit. He pointed out that slavery represented as an institution that had fractured the Dalit by its force trade in human beings with an absolute disregard for familial relations and by dismembering families and kin group. He pointed out that Dalit felt intense need to understand their past. There for according to him search for social roots forms and essential part of the social and political programme.

He was nominated twice in 1921 and 1931 to the Sri Mulam popular Assembly as a representative the Dalits. The assembly yohannan pointed out the slave cast were the early inhabitants of Kerala. But later they were

scattered, enslaved and deprived of their possessions as result of the onslaught of the cast men. That administration failed making the Dalit the owners of at least a fraction of the land, once they owned. The soil of modern Kerala was made fertile by the blood and sweat of countless cruelties, whose lives their sacrifice in that process. Due to the everlasting cruelty of history, the success of those who laid down their lives for the building up of a new social order were being neglected throughout the century. As a solution, yohannan suggested that the government should not distribute land to any other cast, without distributing it first to all the members of the depressed classes. He continued struggles for land to the landless and economic assistance for their material benefits. He also laboured for their educational progress and job opportunities. To some up, his evangelism and contribution as a member of the legislature could establish 'a sense of oneness' among his followers and to build up a separate identity for the Dalit. In other words, through instrumentality of history he tried to make his people feel pinch of their current deprivation.

To conclude significant of PRDS lies in the fact the demand for eradication of untouchability was taken up more seriously by the Kerala society. The movement led by PRDS was instrumental in effecting an unprecedented impact on the society which finally culminated in the genesis and triumph of innumerable and cast movement like civic right movement, vaikom satyagraha, the abstention movement and finally temple entry movement. By problematizing the Hind and Christian faith, searching for all histories and introspecting causes for constant denial of identity, Yohannan sought to curve a Dalit god and the Dalit religion, as stated earlier. In spite of all his mission, a mission to liberate, the ill-fate of dalit continues. Here our great job is to offer a panacea to overcome the crises and examine how could they be articulated and how could dalit assertion become possible. By 1990's Ambedkarism and dalit themes were gaining ground everywhere as an alternative ideological frame work, in a period in which the accessibility for combining and economic and social themes could no longer be denied, the scope for dialog was growing.

Conclusion:

Historiography has acquired a radical turn with the coming of 'history from below' and debates on alternative histories. It has necessitated a critique of the dominant paradigm of historiography from the margins in order to engage with dominance and subordination. This opens up the possibility of various articulations of history by subordinated social groups to explore the prospect of a radical practice of the discipline. The subordinated social groups generally termed as 'Dalits' who have been subjected to systematic social discrimination mainly due to cast system or in terms of cast exploitation. In other words Dalits are representing those who have been ground down by those above them in a deliberate manner. This mode of understanding Dalits also assumed that the category Dalit implies inherent denial of dignity, the sense of pollution within the frame work of a theory of Karma justifying hierarchy. In order to ameliorate the deprivation and disabilities, Dalit have been engaged in struggle and protest "movements" of several types for a long time and have organised assertive efforts for their respective societies. The protest ideology involves resistance opposition, confrontation and conflict with the dominant groups in order to achieve their desired goal social equality, social dignity and de-stigmatised social identity. The only demand of the protest movement of Dalits are self respect, social dignity and equity and gave new direction to liberation struggle in their respective societies. Any how the role played by Poikayil yohannan for the upliftment of dalit is ever remarkable. His efforts can evoke the dalit people from a pathetic conditions to a progress.

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