

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MISSIONARIES TO THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE

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Abstract

South Travancore is in Kerala in India. It includes the districts of Kollam Trivandrum and Kanyakumari. In South Travancore origin of slavery was closely associated with the inception of the caste system which in turn was based hierarchical social order. Slavery was officially recognised in this area. The lowest section in the society was the slave caste. In their movements among the common people, the missionaries came to know the pitiable condition connected with the slavery that existed in South Travancore and the miserable condition of the slaves. Missionaries presented a memorandum on the lamentable plight of the slaves to king Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma through Resident. It made the king to issue the proclamation of 1855 by which slavery was legally abolished.

Keywords: South Travancore, Slavery, Missionary Abolition of Slavery.

Introduction

Slavery is a social evil that its origin in time immemorial. “Slavery” says Toynbee is an non-voluntary system of personal reaction resting wholly upon force. The Tamil term for slave is a ‘Adimai’. Slavery is closely associated with the caste system. Historically the caste system in India defined communities into endogamous hereditary groups called ‘Jatis’. ‘Jatis’ were grouped by the Brahminical text under the four well known caste categories viz Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Certain people were excluded altogether ostracized by all other castes and treated as slaves. The scheduled castes sometimes referred to as untouchables and Dalits.

Factors that led to the emergence of slavery in South Travancore

The caste system was unknown in South Travancore in the early years, and her people shared with it a common cultural heritage. With the coming of the Brahmins into Travancore around the 10th century A.D. the whole scenario changed. From then on caste has been the dominant factor in the economic and cultural life of South Travancore. Society was divided into two large sections, the high and the low caste or the pure and the polluting caste. Brahmins were the only caste exempted from all social and religious disabilities. The kings of South Travancore regarded it their sacred duty to please the Brahmins and to rule the country in accordance with the advice of the Brahmin scholars.

The lowest section in the society was the slave caste. The government, the temples and the rich high caste landlords owned them. There were also several kinds of slaves. During famines parents used to sell their children into slavery. Debtors who found it difficulty to pay back loans, sold themselves to creditors and served them till the liability was over.

Status of Slaves in Society

Pulayas:

One of the slave castes was 'Pulaya'. Pulaya is derived from 'pula' which means 'ceremonial pollution'. They were the backbone of agriculture, in this country where the economy centered on agriculture to a very large extent. They worked from morning till night in the rice field. In spite of the commendable social services rendered by them what they got in turn was contempt and neglect. The houses of the pulayas were miserable, huts formed of sticks cut off of the woods, with walls of mud and thatched with grass or coconut leaf. They had no admission to the markets and they had to stand apart at some distance and make purchases or sales as well as they could. The pulayas were not permitted to wear gold or

silver ornaments. Their dress and habits were extremely filthy as no one is willing to wash for them and no washerman of their own, like other caste. Public street was inaccessible to them.

Parayas:

Another caste to which of the slaves belonged to South Travancore was Parayas. Paraiyan is not only associated with drumming but also with several menial works. They were bought and sold like cattle. When a cow or bullock died it was left where it fell and only the Parayas would cut it up and carry it away. The paryas had to live in crowded 'paracheris' beyond the village limits under unhygienic condition away from the habitation of the higher caste people for whom they laboured.

The slaves could not even speak the language of the ordinary people. The slave had to address his master and even the very young male members of his family as yejaman (master) and refer to himself as 'adiyen' (servant) and his own children as 'monkeys' and 'calves'. His master's house he referred to as 'illam' (mansion) while his as 'madam' (hut). The lower castes were banned from entering the temples and even the roads leading to them. They were compelled to render grievous uliyam services (work without pay) to the sirkar. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas, to carry pots of water on the hip.

Efforts taken by the Missionaries to Abolish Slavery

It was the missionaries who first raised their voice against slavery. It was they who drew the attention of the public as well as authorities to this evil. The arrival of protestant missionaries was a land mark in the history of South Travancore. They ushered in a new era of thinking based on rationalism and liberalism. William Tobias Ringeltaube was the first protestant missionary to arrive in South Travancore. He attacked caste system and laboured for the equality of all human beings. As a social reformer he pleaded for the abolition of Uliyam services and caste distinction and fought for the right of women belonging to the unprivileged classes to cover their bosoms. The L.M.S. missionaries had been trying various methods to emancipate the slaves. Mrs. Johanna Celestina Mead, an English missionary's wife decided to alleviate the pitiable condition of slaves through schemes of women's education by admitting slave girls in the Boarding school. Where they were taught the making of lace, along with reading and writing. Rev. Mead thought that by the spread of education slavery would be weakened.

The major step towards the abolition of slavery in South Travancore began in 19th March 1847 when the missionaries presented a memorandum on the lamentable plight of the slaves to King Uttram Tirunal Marthandavarma through Resident. Missionaries requesting Uttram Tirunal to make a proclamation abolishing slavery. The chief measures proposed were (i) it should be penal as in British India by the Act of 1843 (ii) Slaves should acquire and possess property like other caste (iii) hereditary slavery should be done away with. As a first step towards abolition of slavery they wanted the king to emancipate the sirkar slaves from their bondage. The Maharaja knew that such a revolutionary step as the abolition of slavery would kindle the wrath and opposition of the high caste. Their emancipation, he feared would upset the economy of the whole country and cause a social convulsion in the state, for which he was not prepared. His reply sent to the Resident through the Dewan gave the assurance that they though he could not take such a decisive step at once, he would certainly improve the condition of the slaves by passing regulations from time to time. It was General Cullen the Resident of Travancore who forwarded a memorandum to the Dewan on 12 March 1849.²² It provided that (i) that no public officer should date i.e. (1843) enforce any Decree or order of the court or demand of rent or revenue by the slaves (ii) that slaves should acquire and possess property like all other classes and that no person should dispossess them of such acquired property on the plea that they are slaves. Even this representation did not produce any positive result. After that several strongly worded letters were written by the Resident which finally moved the Maharaja to action. With this end in view the State Government drafted a Proclamation and it was sent to the Resident for final approval.

Proclamation of 1853

The state government drafted the proclamation of 1853 by which slavery was legally abolished. It declared children of sirkar slaves born after 15th Sept. 1853 free. But the proclamation of 1853 did not grant equality of the emancipated slaves before the law. The Madras Government was unhappy about the proclamation made by South Travancore.

Thus, even after the proclamation of 1853 there was considerable pressure on South Travancore for creating the necessary atmosphere for the maintenance and survival of the emancipated slaves. It made the king to issue another proclamation.

The proclamation of 1855

June 24, 1855 is a red-letter day in the annals of south Travancore. It was on that day the proclamation of 1855 was announced. The proclamation of 1855 was issued liberating all slaves, Government and private. At this time, it was estimated that 1,36,000 slaves were set free. Slavery was legally abolished in south Travancore.

Conclusion

Thus, the role of the missionaries in the abolition of slavery was unique. The zeal and enthusiasm of the missionaries in the amelioration of slaves must be duly appreciated. It was their drive and initiative which shook the conscience of all. The missionaries depend on Government action alone, they acted as the vanguard of the reform movement by striking at the roots of this evil through a pragmatic approach. They took special interest in educating the slave children. The involvement of the missionaries in this and similar activities made the lower rank of the people look upon them as their protectors.

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