Villuvandi Yathra of Ayyankali: A Movement towards Democratic Culture in Kerala

DIVYA S
Research Scholar, Department of History University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus,
Thiruvananthapuram - 695581, Kerala

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ABSTRACT Dalits who are referred as untouchables has been eventually make struggles for the space in public sphere. Kerala is not an exception to this. Kerala society was popularly known for its castest hierarchical tradition. But when the socio reform movements started in the nineteenth century, the situations began to change. The movements of Ayyankali played a significant role in making State democratic. This paper intends in spacing his struggle ‘Villuvandi Yathra’ in the freedom struggles for the democratic culture in Kerala.

Keywords: Hegemony, Public Sphere, Social identity,

Introduction
Identifying the space of Dalits and their struggles in the society is one of the most discussing matter in which social scientists are trying to find answer for past a few decades. Even though they were the economic pillars of the country, socially educationally and politically exploited and neglected by the Hindu caste tradition for long centuries. They were the victims of cultural hegemony of the savarnas. But the nineteenth century witnessed social upheavals among the different sections of society. for acquiring social space and identity. Ayyankali, social reformer and popularly known as ‘the father of modern Dalits’ made independent struggles for acquiring social and political identity for the Dalits in Kerala. When looking close to the topic villuvandi yathra of Ayyankali is placed in the history of the democratic movement of Kerala.

The convergence of Kerala into a ‘modern’ and ‘democratic’ state is the result of a long process of social movements spearheaded by downtrodden leaders in different parts of the state. The main issues around which most of their movements have been centered in the colonial and postcolonial periods are confined to the problems of social injustice and inequalities. The continuous experiences and knowledge about the past resulted in the awakening of submerged consciousness of these people and their movements brought them from the darkness of ignorance to the light of life. Among the social movements, Ayyankali movement played a vital role in transforming Kerala into a modern and democratic state. It is the struggle against the hegemonic power structure of the society and it centered on human rights of individuals.

The central objective of the struggles of Ayyankali was the attainment of social freedom and identity. In the caste based society, the relation between outcasts and society was based on the social structure which never let them enjoy social freedom. So naturally their life became irrational, non-communicative and without interaction for centuries. They were not part of the public sphere which was invaded by the savarna who prevented from voicing their opinion.

In order to get the same, he thought that the Dalits should be free from the hegemonic power structure and they possess right to life, right to liberty, right to education, right to equality etc. The steps taken by him for social freedom and justice such as walking along public roads, entering the public markets, to break the upper caste domination in education, to resist the traditional ban in the mode of dressing and use of ornaments are very important and highly revolutionary in the freedom struggle of the oppressed. Because his struggles were to counter the existing concept of hegemony and he demanded social space for them. So his entry in to the social arena is so significant in the history of Kerala.

Ayyankali’s social activism started with the historic journey in 1893 an event famously known as Villuvandi Yathra was a forceful entry of Ayyankali into the public roads and streets which were denied Dalits for centuries. Villuvandi Yathra, demanded space to Dalits in public sphere. His move towards the caste- Hindu public sphere was different and important because he used actions and ideas alike in this struggle. Roads are used as essential to the development of a society and human community and they make a cultural contribution to the economic development and growth and brings important social benefits to the society. But here the accesses of the varied significance of roads by the depressed were blocked by the caste rules of the society for centuries. So they could not enter more areas and engage in economic and social development in any sense. So naturally they couldn’t become part of the infrastructural public assets in the society and because of lack of communication and freedom they could not consider the pulse of the economy. In short these people were affected by any development agenda such as by linking producers to
markets, workers to jobs, students to school and the sick to hospitals etc. Movement of these people was not possible and barriers remained which blocked any betterment of living. Moreover, they were totally unaware about the social cohesion and integration by restriction of access to the power centre of the society. Ayyankali understood the importance of road as a power centre and 'being public' was the only way to liberate the people which would be the turning point in their lives.

His chosen objects for his struggle actually revealed his intelligence and negation alike. Ayyankali used the bullock cart, which can be considered as the first vehicle of the struggle for freedom. Here it is to be noted that he selected villuvandi as an instrument to express his idea of freedom. As per the law and custom, in this time Villuvandi was used only by the King and later it became a vehicle of rich people among the upper caste which showed their social status. In fact it was a savarna vehicle and it was considered as the symbol of frippery in that period. Buying villuvandi by an outcaste was the violation of social codes and caste Hindus did not allow the untouchables to use the same on public roads. But Ayyankali was very brave and least bothered about the consequences. In order to protest against the dominant culture of the society he used Villuvandi as a symbol of the struggle and made his very first heroic move in the history of Kerala. More than just passing through the forbidden path, Ayyankali nursed a firm hope that the responses to the journey in the villuvandi would be great, an instrument designed to transform the concept more appropriate than the dagger. His actions aroused two fold responses in society. The conservative society was provoked by the activity of Ayyankali but the subaltern groups woke up with self awareness and confidence. He challenged the caste laws and presented a democratic idea that everyone could use what they wanted to use. Here it should be remembered that Ayyankali strategically used symbols like white and healthiest bullocks because both were considered as symbols of power and prestige of the savarna. And more over, by using healthiest bullock, he revealed that they were not weak but they had strength to challenge the existing system. A pair of silver bells was hung on the neck of bullock cart and when it moved this bell made a ringing sound. Once they heard the sound 'hoy hoy', they were forced to skedaddle from the scene. But it was the first time in the history of Kerala that a depressed one was reporting his entry in to the public space.

The choice of clothes to wear was a signal to express dominance and subordination in society and Ayyankali wanted to demonstrate that his choice of clothes was arbitrary and that is could proclaim his identity. Till the time untouchables were not allowed to wear white and fine clothes and they were only permitted to wear filthy dress or tie one piece of cloth around their waist as the symbol of subordination. As Sanal Mohan says, "the mode of dressing is capable of emitting messages of dominance and subordination. In the caste hierarchy it is very obvious that the mode of dressing and caste had an inverse relationship. So dress patterns remained a powerful signifier of caste identity in that caste based society. This was primarily to make possible the easy recognition of people belonging to the savarna and avarna jatis and to avoid physical contact. Through the use of white dress and white object Ayyankali established their right to choose what they wanted to use. So he intelligently used dress as a tool of social change. It was a revolutionary step by Ayyankali towards democratic process of the country.

Ayyankali become relevant in the sense that the Colonial Government in 1865 and 1870 issued orders by which all people got the right to travel through roads with wheeled vehicle and to use public roads. The Resident's letter to Madhava Rao, the Dewan of Travancore also guaranteed entry of road to all people without any restrictions. Though there was the decree of the King, the upper caste did not allow the downtrodden to enter into the public roads. The 1885 decree of the King states that if any person should resist the downtrodden from entering public road will be punished. But these laws could not bring any changes in the case of downtrodden in the country. This clearly shows that the segregation of castes was very severe and it was fully controlled by the caste norms. It exposes the complex way in which political society forges links and appropriates even the domain of culture to reinforce the status quo. The government failed to take actions against these privileged groups and continued the 'strategy of neglect' about the issues of the avarna. Through the entry to the public sphere Ayyankali directly checked the dominance of the savarna and negligence of Government alike.

The central issue of his movement was the creation of social identity of Dalits. He convinced that access to public places, the right to wear fine clothes etc is equal to everyone. The struggle of Ayyankali which combines ideas and actions brought out the spirit of democratic culture in Kerala and his struggles based on human rights led Kerala into a modern, civilized and democratic one.
References

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