

# Temple Entry Movement for Depressed Class in South Travancore [Kanyakumari]

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**Abstract:** The four Tamil speaking taluks of Kanyakumari Dist viz; Agasteeswaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam and Vilavancode consisted the erst while South Tavancore. Among the various religions, Hinduism is the predominant one constituting about two third of the total population. The important Hindu temples found in Kanyakumari District are at Kanyakumari, Suchindrum, Kumarakoil, Nagercoil, Thiruvattar and Padmanabhapuram. The village God like Madan, Isakki, Sasta are worshipped by the Hindus. The people of South Travancore segregated and lived on the basis of caste. The whole population could be classified as Avarnas or Caste Hindus and Savarnas or non-caste people. The Savarnas such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras who enjoyed special powers and privileges of wealth constituted the higher castes. The Avarnas viz the Nadars, Ezhavas, Mukkuvas, Sambavars, Pulayas and numerous hill tribes were considered as the polluting castes and were looked down on and had to perform various services for the Savarnas. Avarnas were not allowed in public places, temples, and the temple roads also. Low caste people or Avarnas were considered as untouchable people. Untouchability, one of the major debilities prevailed among the lower order of the society in South Travancore caused an indelible impact on the society.

**Keywords:** Temple Entry Movement, Depressed Class, Kanyakumari

## 1. Introduction

Untouchability is a unique phenomenon in the Hindu society. Though all the out castes had to face this unbearable evil, the parayas and pulayas were major sufferers of this social malady. The untouchability was the sinister aspect of caste system which created artificial barrier between man and man<sup>1</sup>. In fact the rigidity of the caste system made a large number of people as untouchables, unapprochables and unseeables to the privileged classes of South Travancore. The custom of untouchability tremped upon the primary human rights of the low castes and systematically prevented them from entering market places, towns, offices and temples. Temple entry also major problems of low castes people. This people were not allowed in temple and temple road also. Here many social reformers fought against those social practices.

## 2. Early Movement for Temple Entry

The right for 'Untouchables' to enter the temple roads and use other spaces which were exclusively meant for the upper caste people were the initial demands of the agitators who later on raised the demand for temple entry. K.Kumar, Pandit K.P.Karuppan, K.Kelapan, A.K.Gopalan, K.P.Kesava Menon fought against the denial of temple entry as social reformers. The low caste people's movement in certain areas was prohibited<sup>2</sup>. The rules did not allow the low castes to use public ways and temple roads. So many social

reformers against that oppressive activities. There were number of revolts in South Travancore for the cause of temple entry.

## 3. Revolt at Kumaracoil, 1854

Kumaracoil is the most popular temple in South Travancore, for the important Tamil God, Muruga. Kumaracoil is situated at the Velimalai hills in the Kalkulam Taluk about fifteen kilometers northwest of Nagercoil and three kilometers east of Thuckalay. It lies within the Jurisdiction of the Padmanabhapuram Municipality<sup>3</sup>. At Kumaracoil, a portion of the people were Nadars and presiding deity is known as Kumaran. In this famous temple, it was the usual custom during festivals the caste Hindu devotees used to walk on fire for claiming divine powers. The Non-caste Hindus were also regarded as the members of the Hindhu society with common faith; but they were not permitted in this Temple like other temples in South Travancore. The wealth and education gained by the Nadars, the social reforms of the reformers induced confidence, and made them to oppose the intolerable system. Consequently these people started a movement at Kumaracoil to enter into the temple. Vellayan Nadar, a resident of Kumaracoil decided to enter the temple. He started to perform the same formalities as high caste people did. After prayers and *Poojas*, he jumped into a large fire pit and danced in the flames for half an hour. Emerging out of the fire pit unscathed and followed by 12,000 Nadar devotees, he and his followers

<sup>1</sup> Sobhanan, B., *Temple Entry Movement and Sivakasi Riots*, p.22

<sup>2</sup> Sobhanan, B., *Temple Entry Movement in Kerala*, p.198

<sup>3</sup> Gopalakrishnan, M., *Gazetteer of India, Tamil Nadu State, Kanyakumari District*, 1995, p.1180

entered the Temple. The caste Hindus especially the Nairs and the Brahmins resisted their entry and it led to an open fight in which more than a hundred and fifty persons died. It was pioneering movement in Travancore against the unequal caste and social systems. Physical cleanliness, intellectual attainment and economic status never helped the non-caste Hindus to enter the prohibited areas near the Temple. The non-caste Hindus particularly the Nadars, were generally quiet progressive minded people who co-operated with the Christian missionaries. Because of the education given to them their life style was changed. The teaching of Vaikunda Swamikal, which helped a lot to break the unwanted and unworthy restrictions. After seeing their progress, the high-class people requested the Government to put an end to this. The Government in turn passed an edict of 1857. The edict of 1857 was issued by Dewan Krishna Rao during the reign of Maharaja Ultram Tirunal Marthandavarma (1847-1860). The edict prohibited the Nadar converts and the Hindu Nadars from using the roads leading to the temple and the roads used by high caste people. It also required them to make use of the roads and ways assigned for the low caste people. The edict further worsened the situation, and the low caste people considered that the attitude of the Nairs, was a stumbling block to their progress.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, at their instigation, the missionaries entered into the problem and brought before the Government of Madras, the disabilities and suffering of the under-privileged classes.

#### 4. Struggle in Thickenamcode

Thickenamcode village in South Travancore is situated twenty kilometers west of Monday Market. At Thickenamcode there was an Ammancoil. On 10 March, 1859, the Nadars carried the ashes of deceased member of their caste for immersion, accompanied by music and blowing conches through the way. The Chettis and other caste Hindus who had already assembled at the spot prevented the Nadars from proceeding and directed them to the path which is outside the village. As a result, a scuffle occurred in which eighteen persons received serious injuries. T. Madava Rao, the Dewan of Travancore wrote to General Cullen, the British Resident to Travancore that "a large number of *Shanars* (Nadars) having, contrary to usage endeavored to carry with music the bones and ashes of a deceased *Shannar* by the road which lies close to the Village *Pagoda* at Thickenamcode. The Chetties opposed it and tried to prevent the procession. Mutual attack and scuffle started. In the meantime, the Shanars plundered the jewels from Pagodas, to the value of 4731/2 *Panams* and having wounded eighteen Chetties". On 28 March 1859 Shungoony Menon, the deputy *Peishkar*, examined the proceeding held by the district police of Eraniel and found out that the case was of a serious nature, and directed the Police officer to settle the case peacefully. So a special Commission was set up and it gave the judgement in favour of the Chetties.

<sup>4</sup> Cover File No. 215, English Records, Kerala Secretarial, Trivandrum

Four Nadars got imprisonment with hard labour for periods varying from one to three years, and seven others were fined Rs.30 each.

#### 5. Fighting at Vadiveeswaram

Vadiveeswaram was a Brahmins dominated village at Nagercoil. They never allowed the depressed classes to enter the streets. In that Village, Rev. James Duthie, a missionary of the L.M.S. made arrangements for the marriage of a Brahmin widow, and so the Brahmin of the village entered the houses of the widow and threatened her father. In spite of the threat the marriage took place<sup>5</sup>. From that day onwards the Brahmins considered the Christians as outcastes and they were strictly prohibited from entering into Brahmins streets. After this marriage a serious incident took place in 1872. When two Zenana workers entered the street at Vadiveeswaram, they were beaten to death by the Brahmins. The L.M.S. records state that "their umbrellas were wrested from their hands and broken before their eyes, their cloths were torn and mud was thrown at their faces, and strong hard working men pushed them down into the tank and killed them". The L.M.S. Missionaries took it as an offence and complaints were sent to the Travancore and Madras Governments and the Madras government instituted reinvestigation of the matter.

#### 6. Kurichi Incident

Kurichi was a small village situated very near to Suchindrum Temple. It was thickly populated by Nanchil Nadu Vellalas, and they never allowed the low caste people to walk through the streets. They were also highly jealous of the activities of the Salvationists in and around Suchindrum, and therefore the Salvationists were also not permitted to walk along the Vellala streets with chapels, umbrellas, and turbans. If anyone violated this rule, severe punishments were meted out to the offender. There were instance of violation. Colonel Jesuretnam, a member of the Salvation Army, rode on horseback along this street. The villagers chased the horse and cut off its tail. They also threw stones at the Colonel and wounded him severely and cashed him. Chodalaimadan and Millan Thambi were the main culprits and Colonel Jesuretnam took shelter in a nearby school. Later a case was filed and they were made to pay a fine of Rs. 50 with one month rigorous imprisonment.

#### 7. Suchindram Satyagraha

Suchindram is a pilgrim centre situated on the southern bank of Palayar. It is situated at a distance of eight miles to north-west of Kanyakumari. Suchindram is an enchanting village surrounded by paddy fields, coconut groves, tanks, the river, channels and delightful flower gardens. Strictly speaking Suchindram means the place where "Indra" attained Suchi or purification. In Suchindram the Trimurtis viz; Brahma, Vishnu and the Siva were together worshipped for the

<sup>5</sup> Yesudas, R.N., *The History of the London Missionary Society in Travancore (1806-1908)*, pp.202-203

first time. But the earliest name of the Temple was the shrine of Konnai Adimathar (siva). Later the Temple was called Suyampulingam of *Trinity*, and was built in the Dravidian style and contains numerous inscriptions of great archaeological importance. In this Temple, the restrictions prescribed in the agamas were most meticulously observed. The Nampoodiri priest alone was allowed to go inside the *Garbhagraha* for poojas<sup>6</sup>. A member of the *Vattappalli Madam* is permitted to go upto the portico of the *Garbhagraha*. The so called higher castes among the non-Brahmins like the Vellalas, Nairs and chettis were permitted to go into the *Ardha Mandapa* and the *Tirucurras Mandapa* to the back of the *Garbhagraha*.

The vairavis, Chaliyars, Potters, and oil mongers were allowed entrance within the precincts of the temple upto the Dhavajastamba, but not beyond. The Ezhavas, washerman and Barbers were admitted into the steets but not inside the temple. But the Nadars, Pulayas, Parayas, Pallans, and the Kuravas were strictly prohibited from entering in the streets of Suchindram. Teru marachans were put at the entrance of all the main streets proclaiming the prohibition of entry to the depressed classes. *Teru marachan* means bamboo screens merchants. It was used for preventing the entry of the untouchables into the streets where the high caste people resided. These restrictions imposed on the low caste people for centuries, attracted the attention of the leaders, and they fought for their just rights to enter the temples and temple road<sup>7</sup>. It was during that time the *Vaikam Satyagraha* was started in 1924 and E.V.R; popularly known as Periyar with many Tamilians also participated in the *Vaikom Satyagraha*<sup>8</sup>. It gave inspiration to the people of South Travancore to fight for their rights.

#### 8. The proclamation of 1936

Due to the agitations of the people and the efforts of Christian Missionaries. The Travancore Governments conceded the first demands of the people. It was the proclamation issued by Sri Chitira Tirunal Balarama Varma the Maharaja of Travancore on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1936 by which entry for all Hindus irrespective of their caste distinctions was allowed into the Hindu temples from immemorial. This proclamation granted such rights to them which was culmination of a serious of protracted struggles waged by different sections of untouchable castes, social reformists and other enlightened sections of Travancore society<sup>9</sup>. Among them were the Ezhava memorial, Sree Narayana Movement, Vaikom Satyagraha, Guruvayur Satyagraha the support of enlightened Savarna Hindu leaders and a serious of representations made to the government by different sections

<sup>6</sup> Travancore Law Report, Vol.X, Trivandrum

<sup>7</sup> Nagam Aiya.V., *The Travancore State Manual, Vol.I*, Madras, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Cover File No.1627, English Records, Central Archives, Trivandrum

of society. Sri Chitira Thirunal appointed a committee in 1932 to study the question of temple entry and its report was submitted in 1934. the government did not take any action on the report on account of the conflicting views of the committee members on temple entry. In 1936, however, the government resolved that all public roads, public tanks, public wells, chatrams etc. maintained by them out of general public funds shall be thrown open to all classes of people irrespective of the caste to which they belong. During this period, as instructed by Gandhiji, a memorandum signed by, around 50,522 *savarna* Hindus, was submitted to Maharaja. Further, the Indian National Congress and other organization as the Hindu Mission, NSS, SNDP Yogam and Harijan Seva Sangam were also campaigning for temple entry. Considering the pulls of multiple factors like the long-standing demands of polluted castes, increasing favourable attitude of the savarna Hindus and the favourable aspects of the reports of the committee, the Maharaja issued the Temple Entry Proclamation. The Proclamation of the Maharaja was a historical and revolutionary event as far as the destiny of the downtrodden caste were concerned. They were given a message of hope and confident in their struggle for social equality. It is considered as the most progressive act ever made in the history of modern brought about a silent and bloodless revolution in Hindu society. Gandhiji hailed it as a miracle of modern times and a *smiriti* which is the people's charter of spiritual emancipation<sup>10</sup>. Thus the proclamation has repaired one of the crucial social disabilities suffered by polluted castes for centuries and such it has inspired subsequent low caste people protect struggles and endeavour to emerge as equal citizens.

#### 9. Conclusion:

The Temple Entry proclamation introduced a change in the Hindu Society by destroying the last vestige of discrimination against two million human beings. The Proclamation put an end to the long standing crude and harsh customs and conceptions of the Travancore society. This proclamation brought about a silent and bloodless revolution in the Hindu Society. The Movement occupied a unique place in the socio-religious life change the low caste people. *Avarnas* were given the right to enjoy the temple worship. The proclamation was a milestone in the history of Travancore and later in rest of India as well. In fact the lower section of people were emancipated from the centuries old social in justice.

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<sup>9</sup>Ravindran,T.K., *Vaikkom Satyagraha and Gandhi*, 1975, p.58

<sup>10</sup> The Temple Entry Proclamation Memorial Souvenir, 1942, p.2

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