

Combating Communalism and Casteism: Misrabhojanam (Interdining) and the Secular Public Space in Modern Keralam, 1900-1947

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1. Introduction

Charles Mourice de Talleyrand remarked that 'only those who had lived in France before the Revolution of 1789 had really experienced the great divide in history'. The nineteenth century also experienced a similar divide in human history and it was more concerned with identity and destiny all over the world. Sheldon Pollock has also remarked that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed changing of the world universally. The world responded in different ways against these changes and everyone began to take part in the world economy in one way or the other. Inter dining or the *misrabhojanam* was an integral part of the transformation occurred in India in this century. The entry of colonial modernity redefined the nature of literate and literary communities in South Asia. The study looks at the evolution of the public space in modern Kerala under the colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2. Review of Literature

The subject matter of study is broad and it is almost impossible to review such a vast literature. This social distancing was the major problem that hindered a joint movement against colonialism and conventional practices in India. Primary materials stocked in archival repositories and other places are large along with secondary sources. Newspapers and vernacular literature of the period gives us evidences of changes taking place in the Kerala society.

3. Caste, Religion and Food Practices

Religious and Caste differences in Indian society prevented the interaction between them from the ancient period. The system was maintained by the upper class literature and social practices. The class distinctions travelled along with the social distinction system and it spread to all parts of social life. There were reflections of this system in the form of large scale caste oppressions, migrations of people, severe exploitation of human labour and protests in various forms. The lowest among them were subjected to unseeability and the lower classes were subjected to untouchability in general.

The arrival of new religions, colonial modernity, linkage with global market, missionary activities etc., created a new atmosphere in modern India to challenge the age old norms of caste system. Many years before this, several philosophers and religious priests had already questioned these norms. The arrival of Islam through commerce and political expeditions in northern India attracted the lower classes to escape from the chains of caste oppressions.

The situation of Kerala was highly favourable to this transformation as, large number of Malayali people began to move to different parts of the World in the last two centuries. This class questioned the norms of caste system and challenged the feudal system which maintained caste and religious distinctions in the society. Plantations, migrant labour, commercial activities, Christian missionary activities, better educational opportunities, the work of social reformers etc., created a conducive atmosphere in Kerala to promote changes in food practices.

4. Evolution of the Public Space in in Modern Kerala

The Intervention of colonialism in India produced a society which was not modern or feudal. The Indian society had to abandon its feudal structure to a great extent due to the intervention of industrial modernity which was imported to suit the interests of colonial rule and investment capitalism. The new society was not only modern but increasingly impoverished due to the colonial rule. The same transformation happened in the colonies of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

5. Racial Interaction in India:

There was a demand for European-Indian interaction as a preliminary requisite to fight racialism in colonial India. The theosophical movement which argued for this cooperation claimed that the racial difference between India and Europe could be solved by creating interaction between them. The stand was taken from an imperial point of view and it stressed that the presence of the imperial state was necessary in India to fight conflicting interests existing in the country on the basis of caste, food, language etc.

6. The Home Rule Movement and Political Manifestation

The Home Rule Movement in South India led by Annie Besant was the outcome of many forces. Though the Society denied any link with the Movement, in reality the Theosophists and the Theosophical Lodges were the machinery behind the Movement. As the Society did not want to intervene in the affairs of the princely states, the Movement found its effective political manifestation only in the British provinces in India.

7. History of interdining in Kerala

The segregation of the society in Kerala into numerous castes and religions prevented the evolution of a public society like that of an industrialised society. Kerala was politically divided into three distinct landscapes according to the nature of the state. Thiruvithamcore and Kochi were two states ruled by royal families. They had become allies of the colonial state under the subsidiary alliance system. Malabar, the northernmost part of modern Kerala was part of the British presidency centred at Madras and had become a distinct district since 1800.

8. Home Rule and Social Transformation:

The Home Rule movement in Malabar was an opportunity for the progressive minded Malayali people to develop interdining as an alternative tool of social action against caste distinctions and untouchability. The reading public in South India were attracted towards the movement in large number due to the political tempo created by the movement.

9. Opposition to the Supporters of Modernity:

There were organised movements from orthodox groups to isolate and punish those people who supported progressive movements like interdining and breaking of customary rituals and practices. Boycotting of families and individuals took place in Malabar and other parts of Kerala. These ostracisms happened in the form of denial of social services by different castes and family members attached to the caste, family and the individual. These individuals were not invited for marriages in the family or caste, denied services by the caste barber, denied participation in death rituals of the family or caste members etc.

10. Social Distinction in Tea Shops

The tea shops in Kerala which appeared in large number in the first half of the nineteenth century, maintained the caste distinction. This was a new platform in the public place and a new mechanism developed in the tea shops which appeared under colonialism by keeping different types of glasses for people belonging to different communities. The Ezhava people had to wash the tea glass in which they drank tea after use. This helped the tea shop owner to provide tea in the same glass to upper caste people. One such incident is reported by P S Velayudhan when he visited Thrikkakkara near Ernakulam. The leaders of the anti-colonial struggle in Kerala took a firm stand for secularist ideas and they could implement it in their private lives.

11. Combating Communal and Caste Distinctions

The interdining was an effective tool in countering and fighting caste and religious separatism. This was utilized by the social reformers and freedom fighters in the context of Kerala. Large number of social reformers in nineteenth century started opening their *ashramam* with free access to all religionists and members of different castes. The teachings of these spiritualists focused upon material changes by insisting unity of the people against injustice. Ayya Swami or Vaikunta Swamikal in the nineteenth century spoke about this unity and he is said to have utilized a common well to teach people the essence of unity. It was a good beginning of social change. The capitalist society appearing in the urban spaces and colonial offices were necessitating this modernity to ensure success in the market. The teachings of the spiritualists stood for unity of the people for social change. This

message was taken over by Sree Narayanna Guru when he spoke about 'one caste, one religion and one god' for human beings.

12. Multifaceted Freedom Movement

The freedom movement in Kerala was different from those which took place in other parts of the country. Since the problem of disunity of the people due to caste and religious differences was a vital issue in the society, the prime duty of the anti-colonial movement was teaching the principles of unity of the people. Thus, parallel to the fight against foreign domination, the national movement undertook the duty of fighting untouchability, poverty, illiteracy etc., prevalent in the society. By the end of nineteenth century, the leadership of the movement spoke about the necessity of opening schools, running night schools for teaching literacy, helping the poor, opening industries etc. As a result a number of schools, poor homes, *ashramam*, hospitals, libraries etc., sprang up in the country.

13. Conclusion

The movement for the freedom India from the control of the colonial government in India was a distinct one due to its character and peoples' involvement. One important reason for the genesis of changes in the society was the natural result produced by the modernity appeared in colonial India. The capitalist investments taking place in nineteenth and early twentieth century India wanted to open everything to the market forces. Opening of the public institutions was a chief phenomenon during this period.

While looking at the change from a critical point of view, the *misrabhojanam* never attempted to create a new public dining culture in Kerala. It merely copied the upper class vegetarianism and abandoned the distribution of non-vegetarian food.

Though it could question social distinctions, it did not attempt to kill caste as an institution. But the spirit it given to the new youth was creating far reaching impact. The new generation undertook the message and they interacted with people of all communities and castes and they worked with active support to secularism and social unity.

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Dr. Sivadasan. P