



Aishwarya K S

Assistant Professor, School of Gender Studies, Mahatma Gandhi University,
Kottayam, Athirampuzha, Kerala, India

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Abstract:

Mahatma Ayyankali is a seminal figure in the initiation of the anti-caste movement in Kerala. His concepts and contributions to the societal renaissance have been disseminated throughout the state via numerous means, including literature and memorial lecture series. However, the majority of these biographies and discussions frequently omit the epistemological context of his work, instead treating his contributions as mere historical events that occurred in colonial Kerala during the 19th century. THP Chentharessery's biography of Mahatma Ayyankali provides a comprehensive insight into the philosophies and life of Mahatma Ayyankali. The ideas and contributions of Mahatma Ayyankali will be examined in this essay from a philosophical perspective.

Key Words: Mahatma Ayyankali, Philosophy, Dalits, Anti- Caste Movement, Renaissance.

Introduction:

The historical background of Kerala and the characteristics of caste society must be understood before one can appreciate the contributions and ideas of Mahatma Ayyankali. Thiruvithamkoor (Travancore) was self-declared as a Hindu state in India during the 19th century. (Kapikad, 2017). Serving Brahmins of the state was considered to be a part of Dharma, and the question of equality and justice was never in the picture. (ibid). Verifying the strict preservation of caste hierarchies and customs in the state was among the crucial responsibilities of the Travancore society's rulers. (ibid). A thorough investigation of these traits reveals that the previous rulers had no policies or initiatives aimed at promoting the welfare of the populace. (ibid). During the 1800s the society of Kerala strictly abided by all the rules and norms of the caste system. The society thus remained static with no dynamics in the structure. There were no concerns of change or revolution in the society because the responsibilities of Pulayas, Parayas, Nairs, Brahmins, and others were already prefixed. Without any social or geographic mobility, people were born in the same location where they lived and died there as well. In the 19th century, Kerala's caste system operated in this manner (ibid).

The Savarna population's labor was not the cause of Kerala's agricultural success and way of life. Kerala's topography encouraged the growth of agriculture. In addition to these climatic benefits, the Savarna groups used Adivasis and Dalits as "agricultural slaves" (Karshika Adimakal), working on the fields and lands for the so-called upper castes. Kapikad (2017)

The Missionary Movement in Kerala emerged with the philosophy of 'saving the soul.' The phenomenon of conversion, which was thus brought about by the preceding objective. This movement led to the establishment of press media, schools, etc. with the objective of standardizing the language Malayalam. The static characteristics of the society started changing to a significant extent. The so-called "lower strata" in Kerala, in contrast to other regions of the nation, were the ones who first proposed the idea of revolution and self-realization. (Kapikad, 2017). At this juncture in history, we must read and comprehend Mahatma Ayyankali.

Childhood:

Ayyanakali was born on 28th August 1863 to Ayyan and Mala in Venganoor, a village in Trivandrum. (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007) He belonged to the Pulaya community. (Dalit community). His father worked on Adiyalan Parameswaran Pillai's land. Impressed with the loyalty of Ayyan, Parameswaran Pillai donated five acres of land to him, and thus Ayyan also persuaded his children to become involved in agriculture. (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007) Ayyankali's family was thus powerful compared to other players in the village who did not own land. Although Ayyankali has matured as a result of witnessing and experiencing the harsh realities of caste and untouchability, he also had a brave and self-assured personality and participated in martial arts. (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007). Known as the Oorupillai or Moothapillai, he had a group of friends with whom he would spend every evening after work taking part in recreational activities like singing folk songs, etc. (Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007) Ayyankali himself was trained in Kalari, and he, along with other youth who were also trained in martial arts, formed an army known as Ayyankali Pada to initiate an anti-caste movement and spread awareness among Dalits. They worked across different places like Neyyattinkara, Venganoor, Kottukal, Chovvara, Mullur, Vellar, Balaramapuram, Pachallur, etc. (Neravath, 2018)

Villuvandi Yathra [Bullock Cart Ride]:

Politics of Roads in Kerala:

Unlike other states, the geography and usage of public spaces were molded around the roots of the caste system. The first public welfare department was established during the 1860s in Travancore. The fund was distributed by the King mainly for murajapa festivals, and these funds were also collected from the people. Travancore rulers engaged in a practice of making people work for the authorities without paying them and just giving them food. This was the time when the king dropped or rejected the idea of building roads. The king rejected the plan because there was no requirement for roads in Kerala. The upper-caste Namboothiris travelled in chariots, which were carried by the common people (Shudras and Dalits), and the nature of the roads, the bumps and pits, etc., was never a concern for the ones who sat inside the chariot. (Kapikad, 2017)

After the construction of roads in the later years, the roads were categorized into two types, Rajpaths and Grampaths. (Rajaveethi and Gramaveethi). The gramveedhis were more for private use, whereas Rajpaths were considered as public roads. In

1886 the Travancore government opened the public roads to everyone. But the untouchables were not allowed to travel through the roads. (Kappikad, 2017). This was the social context where Ayyankali rode a bullock cart (Villuvandi) through the roads in 1893. Dalits were also not allowed to ride a bullock cart. A group of Savarna men came to attack him, but Ayyankali, who was trained in martial arts, fought back and defeated them. The clothes and mannerisms with which Ayyankali stood above the bullock cart represented the strength of self-esteem and self-confidence. (Neravath, 2018)

Ayyankali was doing more than just playing a difficult role in this occurrence. The bullock cart ride, or villuvandiyathra, was an act that challenged the caste system that was in place in the community. This act effectively asserted democracy and encouraged Dalits to participate in anti-caste campaigns throughout the state.

Emancipation Through Education:

Ayyankali strongly believed that education has the power to emancipate oneself from the oppressive chains of the society. (Neravath, 2018) The school system began in Travancore under the missionary administration. Later on, Travancore kings also set up a school, but Dalits and Shudra students were socially excluded. An educated Dalit was considered to be a 'sin' in the society. In 1906 a law was passed that gave permission to Pulayas to build a school if they wanted. Ayyankali did not want a separate school. He wanted all the students to be taught in the same class with equal resources. When Ayyankali brought Panchami, a Dalit girl, to Kandala Kudi Pallikoodam School in 1914, she was denied admission even though Ayyankali had an order from the Travancore ruler permitting her entry. A huge clash broke out the day Panchami entered the school. Upper-caste men burned the bench Panchami sat on. Following this event, a strike was organized by the workers led by Ayyankali, raising the slogan that they would let weeds grow in the field if their kids were not allowed to go to school. Panchami's entry to school, therefore, is a historical event in Kerala when it comes to the educational rights of Dalits.

Sadhujana Paripalana Sankham:

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kerala witnessed different phases of the Renaissance. In 1907 Ayyankali formed an organization known as Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sankham. The primary philosophy of the movement was against the practice of untouchability. Apart from the anti-caste movement, the main objective of the organization was to attain and spread the ideas of Dalit consciousness and self-assertion. Ayyankali was inspired by the then renaissance heroes such as Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaranasan, etc. The organization used to meet every Sunday, and both Dalit women and men actively participated in the meetings. (Neravath, 2018)

The Politics of Attire-Kallumala Samaram:

During 1818 there was a declaration that prevented Pulayas, Parayars, etc. from wearing gold ornaments. The Dalit women were supposed to wear stone ornaments. This was a representation of slavery. In 1915 Ayyankali led a strike on the abolition of the stone ornaments. (Kallumala Samaram). For this purpose, Ayyankali didn't choose the means of violence. Instead, he diplomatically arranged a peaceful conference, and he conveyed the requirement of Dalit women to wear golden ornaments like others to the authorities, and with their permission, all the Dalit women who were present removed the stone ornaments in front of everybody. (Kapikad, 2017)

Ayyankali was a fervent supporter of clothing politics. He thought it was more than just a change of clothes when someone changed from one shape to another. Rather, it symbolizes the self-representation and transformation of one's identity and soul.

Political Representation:

As part of the anti-caste movement, Ayyankali identified that political power or representation is important. He got nominated to the Travancore Praja Sabha. The main demands that Ayyankali raised in the meetings were regarding education, employment, and land rights of Dalits in the state. (Neravath, 2018) His primary demand was that "there should be at least ten B.A. graduates from my own community. Despite his own lack of literacy, Ayyankali recognized that education is the way to empowerment. The educated Dalits were not to be revolutionary, in his opinion. He thought that education alone would subtly bring about a revolution in a community. Kapikad (2017).

Decline of Sankham:

Ayyankali's idea was to unite all the marginalized communities together in the fight against the oppressive caste system in Kerala. Unfortunately, after the time of Ayyankali, there were inner conflicts within subcastes, and each caste formed their own separate organizations. The influence of communism also attracted Dalit youth towards it, and they started becoming a subset wing of the communist party in Kerala. (Neravath, 2018)

The Philosophical Standpoint-Reflecting the Ideas of Mahatma Ayyankali:

Aesthetics: The concept of beauty was rethought by Ayyankali as a result of his politics toward clothing. By donning a variety of garments that displayed the sign of self-respect and confidence, he posed a challenge to the usual notion of the body of an oppressed individual. In addition, his beliefs motivated a great number of Dalit women to participate in a variety of groups that advocated for the freedom to dress in a manner that was of their own choosing.

A posteriori knowledge: A posteriori knowledge is a type of knowledge that is known through experience, also known as empirical knowledge. In the context of the anti-caste movement, Ayyankali's cognitive knowledge was founded on his own life experiences and lived realities.

Empiricism: Ayyankali himself was a member of a Dalit community in Kerala, and he got an understanding of the facts of the caste system and the rules that govern it by his own personal experiences. Empiricism is the ability to acquire knowledge via experience. Despite the fact that he was illiterate, he saw education as the most important factor in achieving freedom and empowerment.

Ethics: Ayyankali questioned the very ethics and moral legitimacy of the caste-based social order that perpetuated inequality and exclusion. By challenging entrenched hierarchies and practices of untouchability, he envisioned an alternative social reality grounded in dignity, justice, and equality. His efforts were not merely acts of protest but were directed towards the creation of a just and humane society, where social inclusion, equal access to resources, and the recognition of human worth irrespective of caste would form the foundation of collective life.

Conclusion:

Mahatma Ayyankali has demonstrated, through his life and beliefs, the significance of 'self' from the perspective of a Dalit, and his contributions to the anti-caste campaigns in Kerala are significant for people of all ages. According to Ayyankali, the concept of beauty and the soul of an oppressed person in society was rethought as a result of their thoughts of aesthetics and dress. Therefore, while examining the anti-caste politics of Kerala, it becomes imperative to undertake a reflective engagement with the works and struggles of Ayyankali. His interventions not only illuminate the lived realities of oppression and resistance but also provide a critical framework to understand the processes through which marginalized communities asserted their rights and dignity. Ayyankali's praxis, anchored in questions of education, labor rights, and social inclusion, continues to offer valuable insights into the historical foundations of Kerala's social justice discourse. Reading his contributions reflexively allows us to move beyond a celebratory narrative and instead engage critically with the complexities, limitations, and radical possibilities of anti-caste politics in Kerala.

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