

The Paradigm and Practice of Pollution in Caste System in Malabar

C.M.Biju, Dr. C.Amirtha Jothi

Abstract— The practice of caste system and caste pollution in the traditional society of Malabar is considered as a lunacy by many social reformers and human right activists. There were strict theories bound up with the practice of caste system in many parts of Kerala. Untouchability and unapproachability were the main features of the caste system in Malabar. Laws and theories of the caste system made the lives of a section of people so horrible, even to a pitiable condition than the lives of beasts. Women were gagged by ceremonial rules and traditions.

Index Terms Atmospheric Pollution, Caste System, Ceremonial Pollution, , Community of Pollution, Contact Pollution, Distance Pollution

1 INTRODUCTION

THE Kerala society during the 18th and 19th centuries was essentially a caste dominated in nature. Generally, the Hindu society was so sharply divided on caste lines that the entire social intercourse was regulated by it. The observance of purity and pollution was one of the major features of the social division. There were hundreds of castes and sub castes in the traditional society of Kerala in which the Nambudiri, the generic name for the Malabar Brahmin, was at the top of the social hierarchy. The observance of pollution in the caste system was a strictly followed practice in those days. Every man considers himself polluted by the touch of one of a lower caste. Nambudiries were polluted by the touch of all caste below them. They were polluted by the approach of people belonged to some castes in Malabar. These were practiced as *Thottukudaima* (Untouchability) and *Theendikudima* (Unapproachability). Based on this theory, there were recognized scale of distances in which the members of the polluting castes must stand from the members of a higher caste or from his house. Untouchability was one of the evils prevailed in the society at that time. Caste was the foundation of the Indian social fabric in which pollution played a major role particularly in the society of Malabar. This article is an attempt to explain the concept, development and social impact of the practice of caste system and pollution in the traditional caste ridden society of Malabar.

The practice of ceremonial pollution and its social and psychological impact on women also exposed in this article. The existing realities and proposals are also given.

2. CASTE SYSTEM IN MALABAR

India is a land of hundreds of castes and sub castes. As a part of Indian sub continent, Malabar had its own particular customs and traditions with regard to caste system. The caste system or otherwise formulated as system of caste, can refer

on the one hand to a set of empirical castes but on the other hand it can refer also to the caste as an all-Indian institution.(Wiert Wiertsema, 1984). This system of caste formulated and set certain unwritten rules, which divided the traditional Hindu society of Malabar as upper class and lower class. The caste system had its origin in Kerala by about the 8th century A.D when the influx of the Aryan immigrants reached its peak. (A Sreedhara Menon, 1978, p-208)

The social status of an individual is decided not by his personality or capabilities but by the caste to which he belongs. In Malabar, the primal race distinctions can readily be traced in the broad division of Brahman, Nayar, Tiyan, artisans, and the supposed aboriginal tribes. (C.A. Innes, 1908, p-95) The Nambudiris or Brahmins occupied the top position in the entire hierarchy of castes in Malabar. Below them were the intermediate castes such as *Kshatriyas*, *Samantans* and *Ambalavasis*. The next category was of the *Sudras*, generally the Nairs. Tiyans or Ezhavas, Kammalans or artisans and other polluting castes belonged to the next order of social hierarchy. The depressed aboriginal classes belonged to the last order of social hierarchy in Malabar.

The Madras Census Report of 1921 strongly points out the influence of caste in the Indian society, as 'no Indian is familiar with the term Hindu as applied to his religion. If asked what is his religion is, he usually replies with the name of the sect (eg. Saivite) to which he belongs. (Census Report of India, 1921, P- 57). This caste feeling was so rigid and sensitive in Malabar even in the middle of the 20th century. The multiplications of castes and caste associations resulted in the development of a caste feeling or "Caste Patriotism" in many parts of Malabar. This feeling for the caste as a corporate body resulted in the growth of the ideas like endogamy, pollution etc. The caste associations encouraged hypergamy to maintain the 'purity' of each caste. The feeling of the concept of the purity of caste led to the growth of observance of pollution among the Hindus. It is important to note that Jews, Christians or the Muslims do not practice caste pollution.

2.1. THE CONCEPT OF POLLUTION IN CASTE SYSTEM

The Malabar caste system strictly practiced the concept of pollution. C. A Innes views that every individual considers

- C.M.Biju, Research Scholar in History, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India PH.0091 9495035909 E-mail cmbiju99@gmail.com
- Dr. C. Amirtha Jothi, Associate Professor (Retd.) Department of History, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, PH 0091 9994431565 E-mail c.amirthajothi@gmail.com

himself or herself polluted by the touch of one of a lower caste. (C.A.Innes, 1908, P-103). This concept was developed as 'untouchability' in Malabar. J.H Hutton defines the concept of pollution associated with the caste system. According to him it was refined to a unique complexity and was capable of being transmitted not merely on touch, but from a distance. (J.H. Hutton, 1969, PP-79-85). Laws and theories created by the beneficiaries of the caste system made the lives of a group of people so horrible. Untouchability and Unapproachability were the main pillars on which the concept of pollution was built in the traditional society of Malabar. This strongly built concept transferred from generations to generations as a necessity for the hierarchical existence of caste in the society. The beasts are free to enter anywhere irrespective of roads or temples, but the persons who got human lives were not allowed to enjoy such freedom, under the laws created by a group of human beings who consider themselves superior to others.

2.2 CLASSIFICATION OF POLLUTION

The caste system upholds two types of atmospheric pollutions. The first one is the pollution communicated by members of a lower caste to those of a higher. There were two types of pollution conveyed by members of a lower caste. They are "Contact Pollution" and "touch pollution".

The second type of atmospheric pollution is the ceremonial pollution, which too may be either "contact pollution or "touch pollution"

2.2.1. POLLUTION COMMUNICATED BY CASTE

In Malabar, caste manifests itself the fact that the touch or approach of persons of lower castes carries pollution. In order to avoid the touch or approach of the member of polluting castes, the observance of 'contact pollution' and 'distance pollution' were in practice in Malabar. The taint is supposed to become pronounced as actually to affect the atmosphere and carry pollution to persons, houses and so on within a radius of several yards from the person who is the centre of infection. (C.A.Innes) there was a recognized scale of distances at which members of the polluting castes must stand from the members of upper castes and from their houses. The Tiya-pad and Cheruma-pad were the distances at which a Tiyan and Cheruman has to keep from the members of the upper castes respectively. For example, the distance was about 24 feet and 74 feet for Kammalan and Nayadis respectively. The former was an artisan caste and the latter belonged to the aboriginal caste.

2.2.2 CEREMONIAL POLLUTION

The ceremonial pollution is an atmospheric pollution communicated by all members of the Hindu community irrespective of caste, age or sex. It is a pollution conveyed by a ceremonially polluted person to the members of the same caste or family. A birth or death in family entails pollution on

all members in the family and of those families which have community of pollution. The "infected" persons are not allowed to enter temples or to touch others. The period of ceremonial pollution is 16 days, which is removed with particular ceremonies by priests. A feast is conducted at the end of the ceremony, which is a signal for the end of ceremonial pollution.

2.2.3 WOMEN AND POLLUTION

The traditional society of Kerala curtailed the freedom and individuality of woman. The traditional society believed that women are polluted during their monthly period and delivery, which conveys atmospheric pollution. They were not allowed to touch others or enter the master rooms and kitchen during their monthly period. They had to stay alone in a separate room or even in the verandah. These practices were prevailed in the society of Kerala even in the middle of the 20th century. The women were helpless to question those injustices when their womanhood was questioned by certain unscientific beliefs.

2.2.4. FOOD AND POLLUTION

As rice is the staple food of the keralites, cooked rice is an item that decides pollution in caste system. In no case will a man eat rice cooked by a man substantially lower in scale in the caste system. Separate lines were allotted for each caste in public feast in connection with marriage or such occasions.

3. SOCIAL IMPACT OF POLLUTION

The practice of pollution in the caste system and the observance of ceremonial pollution created far-reaching consequences in the traditional society of Kerala. The lower castes were denied the right of education, use of public roads etc. They had to keep away from the places of worship. They had to find out their own methods of worship. The denial of education created a generation of ignorance in Kerala. The lack of education made them illiterates that seriously affected their social and economic activities. Ignorance kept them aloof from scientific modes of medical treatment, which affected their physical health. Thus, deprivation from education also reflects in the sectors of human development. (Bibek Debroy and Laveesh Bhandari, 2003,p-35). The feeling of inferiority was a blow to the personality development of the individuals. The denial of temple entry was another major social issue in the traditional society. Attempts to enter public places of worship by the lower caste Hindus made a dent in the relation between the upper castes and lower castes. The latter compelled to seek alternatives to offer prayer to God. This requirement developed in to a number of small temples or kavus, which were installed within the boundary of their premise. The local worship resulted in the development of particular type of ceremonies and practices that differed from one to another.

The restriction in the use of public roads was inhuman and the basic violation of the right of an individual. Mr. Thurston of the Madras Museum interviewed few Nayadis, an aboriginal tribe of Malabar, at Shoranur in 1901. He narrates the inconvenience of the practice of "atmospheric pollution" as by reason of the pollution which they carry traditionally with them, to avoid walking over the long bridge which spans the Bharatha Puzha (Ponnani River) and follow a circuitous route of many miles.(Thurston, 1901 in C.A Innes- 104). Apart from this, the members of the upper castes when walking along the road utters a warning grunt or hoot to persons of lower castes, who there upon retire to the necessary distance, which is practiced in the caste system.

Women were another section of society who were affected by the evil sides of the ceremonial pollution. The well to do families had their own facilities to observe ceremonial pollution in connection with the monthly periods and delivery of their women. They maintain separate rooms or out houses for this purpose. It is very clear that they had serious psychological issues. Teenagers had fear and serious stress during their monthly periods because of the practice of isolating them from other members of the family.

3.1 ECONOMIC IMPACT OF POLLUTION

Education is considered as the most potent means of enhancing human development both in terms of economic well-being as well as in terms of health of an individual and his family. (Bibek Debroy and Laveesh Bhandari, 2003,p-35) Hence, the refusal of the right of learning was a blow to the economic welfare of an individual. The traditional society neglected or rejected girls' education for hundreds of years. As a result, they remained in the premises of their residence without enjoying sufficient air of freedom. They had their own problems that remained unaddressed for centuries. The male dominated society was least bothered to the issues of women. Due to these reasons, the members of the lower castes as well as women belonged to both upper castes and lower castes remained as weaker sections in the society. It is very clear that professional women constitute a distinct category of working women, owing to their higher academic achievements and greater socio- economic status. (Poonam Arora, 2003). Recent studies reveal that the monthly income of the professionals is important for assessing the level of their economic status. A regular monthly income can be earned by acquiring higher jobs after getting higher education. So the refusal of education in the traditional society affected the economic status of individual.

4. EXISTING REALITIES

Nowadays the caste system is not so rigid as it was practiced till Indian independence. Attempts of social reformers and legislative initiatives by the government had weakened the practice of caste system in India. However, caste feeling and caste organizations are still active and effective in various fields such as politics, education etc.

Commercialization of caste feeling is a new trend in many corners of the present society.

The family lineage and living arrangements are centered on men, and inheritance and succession practices tend to neglect women as well. ((T.K.Roy and S. Niranjana, 2004) There are attempts to violate the human rights in many parts of society. The present status of the oppressed classes are far away from the objectives of the United Nations Human Development Report published in 2000. (Human Development Report,2000,p-1)The Report was published for the United Nations Development Programme.which declares; human rights and human development share a common purpose- to secure the freedom, well being and dignity of all people everywhere.(Human Development Report, 2000)

The traditional caste ridden society of Malabar had gone through fundamental changes due to the influence of social reforms, western education, and legislative initiations by governments etc. The Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936 was a landmark in the history of India. The Indian constitution proclaims untouchability as a major offence.

5. PROPOSALS

Weaker sections of the society requires special and continuous attention from the government, NGOs, Charitable organizations etc. irrespective of their caste, creed, religion, gender and nationality.

Formulate appropriate programmes and introduce them effectively.

Weaker sections should get voice in the matters of administration, inheritance and succession practices.

Wipe out the remains of the traditional caste system, which remained unattended in various parts of Malabar.

Try to make the society of Malabar a "Global Village"

6. CONCLUSION

The Malabar caste system and the observance of various types of pollution have weakened. The practices like untouchability and unapproachability are not practiced in Malabar. But the observance of ceremonial pollution is still in practice without much changes. At the same time, gender inequality exists in many families where women enjoys weaker role in decision-making. Moreover, control over resources and physical movements make women inferior to men even in the 21st century. The equal level of freedom in various socio- cultural settings such as religion, caste, economic status, gender, education, public etc. is essential for the manifestation of perfection exist in the individuals of Malabar.

REFERENCES

- [1] Wiert Wiertsema, The Caste System and the Hindus and Muslims of Kerala *Journal Of Kerala Studies*, March-December 1984, Vol.XI, Parts 1-4., p-82, Kerala University, Thiruvananthapuram. 1984
- [2] A. Sreedhara Menon,Cultural Heritage of Kerala, An Introduction, East-West Publications Pvt. Ltd., Cochin, January 1978, p-208

- [3] C.A. Innes ICS, Malabar (Gazetteer) Vol. I and II. Edited by F.B Evans ICS , 1908 Government of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers Department , Thiruvananthapuram, 1997
- [4] Census of India,1921, VOL. XIII, Part I, Madras,1922, P- 57
- [5] J.H.Hutton, Caste in India: its Nature, Function and Origins, Oxford University Press, Bombay,1969, pp-79-85
- [6] Bibek Debroy and Laveesh Bhandari, District Level Deprivation in the New Millennium(Ed), Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi,2003
- [7] Poonam Arora, Professional Women Dual Role and Conflicts- Manak Publications (p) Ltd. New Delhi, 2003.
- [8] T.K.Roy and S.Niranjan, Indicators of Women Empowerment in India, *Asia- Pacific Population Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 3,September 2004,ISSN 0259-238X, p- 23, United Nations, Thailand
- [9] Human Development Report 2000, p-1, Published for the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.