

Intrusions into the Domains of Dominant *Jatis*:

Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkan and the Ezhava Uprisings in Central Travancore

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Abstract

In the early decades of the second half of the 19th century, in Central Travancore, Ezhavas and people belonging to other depressed *jatis* resisted the oppressive engagements of the dominant *jatis*. Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkan was the inspirational force behind these engagements. His engagements were multi faceted. He developed cultural, political, economic and religious tools to challenge, retaliate and intrude in to the domains of the dominant *jatis*.

Key Words: *Jati*, Ezhavas, Kathakali, Temple

Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkan was a prominent and wealthy person belonging to Ezhava jati who resisted oppressive engagements of the dominant *jatis* like nairs and namboodiries in the central Travancore region.¹ The activities of Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkan were important for various reasons and those seek attention from various angles. The liberation of the Ezhavas from the dominant *jatis* was what he fought for. As can be seen from various incidents, he along with his men retaliated to the attacks of the Nairs and other dominant *jatis* and their associates.

Developing Multi- *Jati* Platform

In the process of retaliation, he was consciously generating a unity among the people belonging to various *jatis*. Take for example the non- cooperation programme he launched at Pathiyur region. It was a call not to the Ezhavas alone. He tried to build a political platform combining the people belonging to the Ezhava, Tree Climber, Pulayan and other *jatis*.

There is a vision in building such a platform driving in these *jati* groups. It reflected the understanding which Velayudha Panikkan had, regarding the tactics to be developed to put pressure upon the dominant *jatis*. He was very much aware of the impact of the economic pressures, when put on the dominant *jatis*.

His call for abstaining from the work in the fields and groves of the dominant *jatis* reflected the tactics of building economic pressures. He rightly internalized the situation when he made a common platform for the Ezhavas, - which prevented the people of dominant *jatis* to

substitute and engage the people of one jati for other for rendering necessary labour in the fields and groves. This move on the part of Velayudha Panikkan also helped the people to break the jati rules regarding the distance the people belonging to a jati should maintain from the people of other jatis.² Even though this cooperation was purely for political reasons and its impact was not long lasting or universal, it in disguise helped to hamper jati rules with respect to the distance to be maintained to an extent.

Some cases in which he involved and called for unified actions against the dominant *jatis* were, as follows:

(1) The retaliation against the attack of the ezhava women for wearing cloth below the knee at Pathiyur region near Kayamkulam in 1859. The right for wearing cloth below the knees was reserved for the women belonging to Nair jatis. The Ezhava women were not permitted to wear the cloth below the knees at that time. Hearing the incident Velayudha Panikkan reached the region and retaliated. Thereafter, he called for a non-cooperation movement against the dominant jatis. He called for the unity of Ezhavas, Tree climbers and Pulayans against the Nairs and other dominant jatis who attacked the Ezhava lady. They abstained from the jobs in the fields and groves of these sections. The Nairs pleaded forgiveness to get this boycott withdrawn.³

(2) The retaliation against the attack on a woman belonging to the Ezhava jati for wearing nose rings was also important. The incident happened near Panthalam. Velayudha Panikkan interfered and conflict broke out.⁴

There were several such instances in which Velayudha Panikkan interfered and retaliated against the attacks of the dominant jatis. But the major contributions of Panikkan were two: (1) the establishment of first Kathakali Yogam of Ezhavas at Mangalam and (2) the establishment of first Ezhava temple- the Mangalam temple, Arattupuzha region, Kollam.

Ezhava Kathakali Yogam

He appointed Ambalappuzha Madhava Kurup, a famous Kathakali performer who was also an employee under Chembakassery Rajah to teach the youngsters belonging to Ezhava jati, Kathakali. It was the first ever *Kathakali Yogam* established by Ezhavas with Ezhavas as performers. In 1862, they staged the first performance.

The establishment of Kathakali Yogam for Ezhavas was an important move on the part of Velayudha Panikkan. Kathakali was widely recognized as an art form of the jatis that

belonged to the inner circles of jati system. Philip B Zarrilli has observed the jati domain in which this art form developed in its initial stages as follows:

The initial evolution of *kathakali* into what eventually became a virtuosic dance-drama depended on close artistic collaboration between royal patrons and their Nayar soldiers-turned-performers. The royal patrons possessed the literary capabilities and aesthetic sensibilities which shaped the art as it developed; the performers, in service to a ruler, possessed the embodied ability to realize in performance what their patrons desired.⁵

Zarrilli continues his observation regarding the people who were related to the patronage of performance and appreciation of Kathakali. He says:

Once their interest had been aroused, Namboodiri patronage was of course possible since they possessed both the appropriate rank and the socio-economic means to provide support for the art. As land-holders, the largest Namboodiri households could support new artists either by recruiting from the ranks of their own service jatis, or by bringing new individuals into their service. Thus, we find early in *kathakali* history that Namboodiri patrons often brought to their households Nayers in service to royal families who had previously trained in the art... As patrons, the royal and ritual elite, including Namboodiris who became involved in the art, also played the role of ideal audience members—a role gradually defined as that of the *rasika*/connoisseur whose taste and appreciation had to be cultivated through education.⁶

Zarrilli has also observed the importance of *kathakali* as far as the State of Travancore was concerned. He says:

In Travancore, Martanda Varma's consolidation of power and wealth made it economically, socially, politically, and aesthetically possible for future rulers like Kartika Tirunal Maharaja and others to become model royal patrons, operating with a degree of largess hitherto impossible in smaller petty principalities.⁷

By the act of patronage to a Kathakali Yogam of the Ezhavas, Velayudha Panikkan was challenging the monopoly of the people belonging to dominant jatis as patrons, performers, viewers etc. By introducing such an art form which maintained its presence within the domains of dominant jatis to Ezhavas, he was also interfering in the history of Kathakali. More than

anything Panikkan was challenging the *jatiist* politics with respect to body- classified within the columns of pure and impure.

Kathakali was not merely an art form having performance value alone. It was an ideological art form which reiterated the Brahmanical social norms and their aspirations and visions regarding the state. The story line of this art form depended much on the Epics- Bharata and Ramayana, Bhagavata and Puranas. Thus the characters invoked on the stages were either divinely or demonic but undoubtedly having super human capacities. As has been pointed out, the stories enacted in Kathakali were adapted from the Ithihasas, Puranas and Bhagavatha. Thus it has Brahmanic gods and mythic kings as characters. These characters fall into the genres of *Satvika*, *Rajasa* and *Tamasa* reflecting the jati affiliations of the divinity. Even the demonic nature- the other of divinity- in essence was the corrupt form of divinity- the aberration from divinity, which essentially has to be tracked back into the divine streams. Thus the stage of Kathakali was a master platform from which the Brahmanical visions of divinity and refinement of demonic were communicated. The population among which the art form attained its base - the dominant sections of society including Brahmins, Royal families, Ambalavasis and Nairs- clearly declared the nature of themes the art form communicated.

By establishing Kathakali Yogam and selecting members of Ezhava jati as performers, Velayudha Panikkan was challenging the very idea of inferior body status associated with jati diktats. Through Kathakali Yogam, he was preparing a stage for the people belonging to Ezhava jati to perform the roles of gods, kings, Brahmins, the divine characters and demons- the abberated divines. Thus Kathakali yogam was not only an institution for learning and performing Kathakali but was a cultural platform upon which the Ezhava bodies were liberated from the impurity tags of jati clutches. The performers, when they perform, reflects the gods and the divine and the abberated divine elements- the demonic- through their bodies. This was important: it was an act of grabbing and nullifying the claims regarding their cultural heights about which the dominant jatis were reiterating. This was important: the people, who were considered as polluting and hence were kept at distance from the people belonging to the dominant jatis, were attempting to manifest the gods and goddesses worshipped by the people belonging to dominant jatis and heroes adored by them. This was important: it was like imbuing the confidence among the people belonging to the Ezhava jati breaking the inferior mindset which were generated by the historical, social and institutional pressures inflicted upon them by the jati system.

Installation of Siva Idol

Apart from the establishment of Kathakali Yogam, as pointed earlier, Arattupuzha Velayudha Panikkan had consecrated the idol of Siva and built a temple at Arattupuzha region- Mangalam Temple. Regarding the establishment of Temple, Kenneth W. Jones observes as follows:

In 1852, Velayudha Panicker travelled to Goa where he learned the Brahmanical rites used in high-jati worship. In 1854 he established the first Izhava temple for the worship of Lord Shiva, a type of worship hitherto forbidden to the Izhavas.⁸

The date of installing the idol and making of temple is highly debated. But considering the dates proposed by the scholars, it can be said that he had conducted such a consecration of Siva idol in the Mangalam temple at Arattupuzha during the period in between 1852- 1854.

This consecration of Siva idol was the first one of its kind done by an Ezhava in the Central- Southern region of Travancore.

Through the installation of the Siva idol and building of the temple, he was- in a sense- continuing the activities of the followers of Vaikunta Swamikal, which they were performing in the Southern Travancore region.⁹ An important difference seen is that Velayudha Panikkan installed the Siva idol whereas Vaikunta Swamikal and his followers installed Mirror, Krishna and Amman. Another difference is in the ritual side. The installation of the idol by Velayudha Panikkan was entirely different from those done by Vaikunta Swamikal or his followers. It is believed that, he during his travels in Goa region, had mastered the Brahmanical rites and had done the installation as per the Brahminical scriptures. Thus the act of Panikkan was entirely different from those of the people belonging to the Vaikunta movement. Vaikuntar as discussed above was building up a pantheon and set of rules entirely different from those of the Brahmins. But in the case of Velayudha Panikkan, he was attempting to appropriate the Brahmanic domains of rituals and pantheon. From the very fact that he followed the Brahmanic rites to install the Siva idol, his affiliation to Brahmanic systems is evident.

Estimate

Thus while Vaikunta Swamikal attempted to build a democratic platform to be used for the elevation of the people who associated, irrespective of jatis, Velayudha Panikkan had no visions as such. He was very much interested in the movement of Ezhavas into the inner circles of the jati system.¹⁰ Even when he was unifying the people of other jatis of outer circles as

Pulayans, woodcutters etc., he was doing that for the benefit of the Ezhavas- to get their demands accepted. Velayudha Panikkan was never interested in keeping such social- jati coalitions permanent. His attitude will be clear if we look at the people whom he selected to the Kathakali Yogam. That nobody other than Ezhavas was members of Kathakali Yogam reveals the attitude. The greatest contribution of Velayudha Panikkar to the History of Keralam through his activities during the third quarter of 19th century was the attitude to push the jati of outer circles into the inner circles- culturally and politically. This centripetality of the jati ambitions arose among Ezhavas of Travancore with the activities and social works of Velayudha Panikkan

Notes and References

¹ P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathompathaam Noottandile Keralam*, (hereafter, Pathonpatham Noottandu) Thrissur: Keralam Sahitya Akademi, 2000,, p. 1186.

² N. P. Unni, *Sankarasmrti (Laghudharmaprakashika)*, Torino, 2003

³ K. G. Narayanan, *Ezhava- Thiyya Charithra Padanam*, Kayamkulam: Anaswara Publications, 1984.

⁴ P. Bhaskaranunni, *op. cit.*

⁵ Philip. B. Zarrilli, *Kathakali: Dance Drama Where Gods and Demons come to Play*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ Kenneth. W. Jones, *op. cit.* p.180. The year of establishment of the temple is a dispute matter. There are scholars who had given the year of installation as 1852 and 1853 differing from the year provided by Kennath W Jones.

⁹ For the discussion see, P S Manojkumar, 'Formation of Hindu Religious Identity in Kerala: A Study of Socio-Religious Movements (1792- 1936) (Ph D Thesis,Kannur University, 2016)

¹⁰ *ibid.*