

Social Reforms of Sree Chattampi Swamikal in Kerala

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Abstract

Sree Vidyadhiraja Parama Bhattaraka Chattampi Swamikal (1853-1924) was an orthodox interpretation of Hindu texts citing sources from the Vedas. Swamikal along with his contemporary, Narayana Guru, strived to reform the heavily ritualistic and caste-ridden Hindu society of the late 19th century Kerala. Swamikal also worked for the emancipation of women and encouraged them to come to the forefront of society. Swamikal promoted vegetarianism and professed non-violence (Ahimsa). Swamikal believed that the different religions are different paths leading to the same place. He strongly opposed the conversion activities of the Christian missionaries but was not against Christianity. Chattampi Swamikal throughout his intellectually and spiritually enriched life maintained a large number of friends from different regions of Kerala. He authored several books on spirituality, history, and language staying with these friends.

Keywords: Chattampi Swamikal, Social reformer, against Christianity, Women society and non-violence.

Social Reformer of Kerala

Chattampi Swamikal was one of the people who managed to transform Kerala state of India and its society. He was a special social reformer, an unusual one. Without establishing any organisations he conveyed the required message among the people in Kerala. Chattampi Swamikal initiated religious and social reformation in Kerala. During the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century when he lived and worked the vast majority of people were helpless victims of social, economic and political exploitation. The caste hierarchy was the evil of the society in Kerala state of India and the cause of unjust treatment, which Chattampi Swamy was trying to change and guide Kerala state to a more stable and harmonious way of life.

Through Chattampi Swamikal's work the reformation in Kerala state of India was initiated. He and some of his disciples managed to provoke such changes in the system that the knowledge of Sanskrit and Vedas became available to all castes in Kerala and temples opened its doors to all castes too. The life of lower caste people improved a lot and it became possible for them to learn and teach Vedas, to establish and maintain their places of worship. Chattampi Swamikal taught that only your deeds, not your birth, can define you as a person. He embarked on the idea to reform Hinduism. He believed that religion should lead to freedom of soul, spiritual happiness, guide people in moral development and it should not

be used to suppress or control anyone but only to improve people's lives. As a result he rejected the idea of a caste-based society. For him a caste did not matter.

At that time inter-dining was prohibited, which meant that a Brahmin would never eat with an Ezhava and a Nair would never eat with a "low" Nair, for instance. However, Chattampi Swamikal not only went inside the homes of people of different castes but he also ate with them and taught them his ideas and views regarding the society and religion that he held. Chattampi Swamikal stood for equal rights for all people no matter what their caste was. He argued for equal political, economic and educational opportunities to all.

Unlike many other people of that time Chattampi Swamikal didn't organise any mass movements neither did he work with any established organisations nor did he establish any organisation himself. He instilled ideas and concepts in people just by living in their houses and talking to them. He lived what he preached. Thanks to Chattampi Swamikal the original Hindu texts were interpreted and people were made to understand the adulterations that led to the unjust social system. Superstitions, unjust customs, inequalities were revealed. Child marriage, polygamy and other customs were stopped or reformed as Chattampi Swamikal destroyed intellectual base and authority for Brahmin domination in religious, economic and political spheres.

Caste, position and power defined what a human being was in Kerala state of India at that time. Chattampi Swamikal understood that only through Nairs and Ezhavas Kerala could be led to a future progress. The inspiration that he gave to Nairs and Ezhavas at that time was necessary for the reforms that they started. So he was the generator of the reformation which led to the social progress of Kerala. It is surprising how Chattampi Swamikal and his disciple named Narayana Guru, both of whom came from lower castes of society, initiated such impressive changes but we must remember that they were sanyasins who have no caste in Hindu society. Narayana Guru also proclaimed the idea "One caste, One religion, One God". Both of them strongly believed and supported the idea that temples should be used not only for worshipping but also as cultural and educational centres of the people. Not once they asked to divert the money misused for temple festivals to support the poor. Narayana Guru often stated "Whatever the religion is a man should progress".

Swamy reformed Hinduism and revived it from the path of degradation. At the end of the 19th century Hinduism was at its worst. Concepts and principles were misinterpreted to protect monopolies of an upper class. In Travancore Census Report 1941 it says that the inroad of other religions and the attractions they offered influenced the people for leaving Hinduism for material benefits. The other religions also had economic and political support from powerful sources and some unfair and bold methods were used to spread those religions. As a result of work that Chattampi Swamikal carried out Guruvayur Temple was opened to Hindus of all castes in 1931. On the 12th November 1936 Maharaja of Travancore issued Temple Entry Proclamation allowing all non-caste Hindus to enter the Government temples the doors of which were closed before.

Chattampi Swamikal awakened the Hindu society. His teachings inspired others and organized people against caste-based injustices. Narayana Guru who was Swamy disciple with Neelakanta and Paramahansa devised new norms of social and religious rites with an aim to eliminate caste differences and religious hatred. Ayyankali who belonged to Pulaya caste drew his inspiration from Chattampi Swamikal and Narayana Guru teachings fighting for social equality and justice. He tried to make school available to all castes including the Pulayas. The Pulayas were agricultural labourers deprived of civil rights and could not use public roads and places. They had no access to public education. In 1905 Ayyankali started his serious work but only in 1914-1915 it became the reality and Pulaya children could start studying in schools without any disruptions.

Life and Works of Chattampi Swamikal

All these improvements initiated by other people were the result of Chattampi Swamikal teachings and views. During his life Swamy wrote some works which were later published by his disciples and

devotees. "Pracheena Malayalam" refutes rights and privileges held by higher castes. It also refutes the caste based economic and political authorities. Chattampi Swamikal quoted authentic sources and proved that the legend that Kerala state of India was a gift of Parasurama was false. He established that the original inhabitants of Kerala were Nayakans and they brought prosperity to Kerala and it was Brahmins who came later and enforced the unjust caste system.

Through research Chattampi Swamikal established that Nairs and Ezhavas have a common ancestral group with an advanced culture and civilization of their own. Another work written by Swamy is "Vedadikara Nirupanam" that sets forth the right of all castes to study Vedas, establish temples and access education.

Conclusion

Whereever Chattampi Swamikal went, he was the source of knowledge and wisdom to others. He had his samadhi in 1924 where a Shiva temple was later constructed and Panmana ashrama was established. Every year people gather there to remember Chattampi Swamikal's life and the value of the teachings that he spread during it. Chattampi Swamikal was an extraordinary man living a simple life and setting an example for others in accordance with his views on casteless society, fair social and educational systems. Not only did Chattampi Swamikal transformed Hinduism but thanks to his life and work Vedas and Sanskrit became available to study and teach to all castes from which enormous number of people benefited. As a result of his work education and temples were no longer the property of Brahmins and all those exploiting other low castes in Kerala. Remarkable changes took place in Kerala due to Chattampi Swamikal teachings and the work of his followers too. Kerala was no more the land of cruel injustice and inequality.

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