

Struggles Of Chattampi Swamikal Against Caste Divisions in Kerala

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Abstract

Kerala produced many great social reformers and literary scholars. Chattampi Swami was one of the leading figures among them. He had a unique personality. He was the pioneer of Kerala renaissance and reformation movement. He was a great yogi too. He studied the Vedas and yogic texts with a child like curiosity and openness of mind. He was innately blessed with two qualities. He made revolutionary attempts to explain Vedic theories to ordinary people in a simple language and thereby to free them from the darkness of ignorance. He was a great visionary and Strived hard to liberate Kerala society from the grips of caste system and social injustice. This article describes the role of Chattampi Swami in liberating Kerala society from its social shortcomings and contributions to enrich the Kerala literary scene.

Keywords: Renaissance, Reformation movement, revolutionary, Scenario, Wisdom

Introduction

Kerala produced many great social reformers and literary scholars. Chattampi Swami was one of the leading figures among them. He had a unique personality. He was the pioneer of Kerala renaissance and reformation movement. He was a great yogi too. He studied the Vedas and yogic texts with a child like curiosity and openness of mind. He was innately blessed with two qualities. He made revolutionary attempts to explain Vedic theories to ordinary people in a simple language and thereby to free them from the darkness of ignorance. He was a great visionary and Strived hard to liberate Kerala society from the grips of caste system and social injustice. This article describes the role of Chattampi Swami in liberating Kerala society from its social shortcomings and contributions to enrich the Kerala literary scene.

Early life

Chattampi Swami was born on 25 August 1853 at Kannammoola, a suburban village of Trivandrum in southern Travancore. His father was Vasudevan Namputhiri, a Nambudiri from Mavelikkara, and his mother was Nangamma, a Nair from Kannammoola. He was formally named Ayyappan but was called by the pet name of Kunjan - meaning "small male baby" - by all. As his parents were not able to provide him formal education, he learned letters and words from children of his neighbourhood who attended schools. Also he learned Sanskrit by overhearing the classes at a Brahmin house nearby. Knowing his thirst for learning an uncle took him to the traditional school conducted by Pettayil Raman Pillai Asan, a renowned scholar and writer who taught him without any fee. It was there that he earned the name Chattampi on account of his assignment as the monitor of the class.

Caste Divisions and Social Inequality in Kerala

In the caste hierarchy the Brahmins stood at the top. The Pulayas, Parayas etc. were placed at the lowest. The Nairs were placed in the middle. Within each caste there were levels and sublevels such as “high” Nair and “low” Nair, etc. The upper castes enjoyed life and others were deprived of joys and pleasures. Most people were helpless victims. The inhuman, caste-based political system of the 19th century made Vivekananda to call Kerala an asylum of lunatics. He described Kerala of that time in this way: “I doubt if any greater foolish thing than what I have seen in Malabar has occurred or happened anywhere in the world at any time earlier. What interference would you draw except that these Malabaries are all lunatics, their homes so many lunatic asylums, and that they are to be treated with derision by every race in India until they mend their manners and know better”. He continued: “Shame upon them that such wicked and diabolical customs are allowed; their own children are allowed to die of starvation, but as soon as they take up some other religion they are well-fed. There ought to be no more fight between the castes”.

The caste defined whether Keralites were allowed to approach each other, how much distance should be maintained, whether they should eat together, touch each other and how they should address each other. Those from higher castes believed they would be “polluted” if they touched those from lower castes. So a necessary bathing process was carried out straight after “pollution” or on returning back home. Castes would also define whether a girl can be married only to the other caste or not. It would define whether the wife can enter husband’s kitchen and whether it is essential for one to bath if he touches his children. This was the state Kerala operated at that time. And this caste custom helped Christian missionaries in their aim to convert Hindus to Christianity. It was almost impossible at that time to break the walls of the existing castes and change your caste. Converting to Christianity meant freedom and equality, no caste restriction. There were also promises of material benefits. So many Hindus in large groups converted to Christianity. The basic idea of Christianity is love and its missionaries did everything that was against this principle.

In Hinduism there is Ultimate Knowledge or Moksha concept (soul freedom). Everything joins God and everything is part of God. However, the caste system that existed in Kerala state of India at that time violated human rights and denied lower caste people the right to Moksha and Ultimate knowledge as Sanskrit, Vedas teaching and learning were all the monopoly of Brahmins at that time. Sanskrit was a vital language at that time as all indigenous knowledge was recorded in it. Hearing Vedic chanting, let alone learning or teaching Vedas, was prohibited to lower castes. Hearing Vedas by low castes would result in sealing those ears with hot lead as it was thought that Vedas are polluted if somebody from a low caste hears them.

Moreover, some roads were prohibited to be used by lower caste people, temples couldn’t be approached by lower caste people. This was a contradiction according to Chattampi Swamikal views as God welcomes all people no matter what their caste is, if any. The aim of Chattampi Swamikal was the building up of a Hindu Society joining together on equal terms different castes such as Nairs, Ezhavas, Nadars, Pulayas and Parayas. He opposed to unjust customs and Brahmin domination. Chattampi Swamikal questioned the caste system and unfair treatment of low castes in terms of religion, education and social opportunities. He said: “The caste-based hereditary divisions are corruption of the Vedic ideal of non-hereditary varna vyavastha, which was based on merits, qualities and actions of the individuals. A few distorted this for their self-interest and introduced untouchability and denied educational and religious rights to the low castes. The failure of Hindu society was largely due to its degeneration and divisiveness.”

He himself gathered his ideas from India’s own traditions and sources. He was well versed in Tamil, Sanskrit, Malayalam, so he blended Vedic and Dravidian thoughts related to non-dualism and non-violence. He was a unifier. He wanted a casteless and equal society. Sankara philosophy gave inspiration to Chattampi Swamy as 1000 years before he reestablished Chaturvarnya in India but later that system was misinterpreted for wicked motives by high castes.

Disciples

All the later disciples of Swami consider Narayana Guru as Swami's first disciple. In 1893 Swami met his second disciple, Neelakanta Theerthapada, a Sanskrit scholar and an expert in treating snakebites. Inspired by Swamikal, he prepared many works interpreting Advaita for the common man. He also reformed the social and religious rituals and rules and prepared manuals for them. He died in 1921 and Swami installed a Sivalinga above his Samadhi Peeta, which is the only temple, consecrated by him. In 1898, Theerthapada Paramahansa became Swami's disciple. He, too, worked for the removal of caste-related injustices in Kerala society. He established many ashrams and also Theerthapada System for the line of sanyasins following Swami's teachings and methods. Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Abedananda, and many other saints ascribe to Swami the responsibility for their turning to spiritual life. Swami has also many grihastha disciples like Bodheswaran, Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidhyan, Velutheri Kesavan Vaidhyan Kumbalath Sanku Pillai etc. as well as sanyasi disciples like Neelakanta Therthapada and Theerthapada Parmahansa who played very important role in renaissance and reformation in Kerala.

Teachings of Chattampi Swamikal

- Avoid boastful thoughts about your physical achievements and material accumulations. Contemplate over the ultimate reality of existence. That alone will give meaning to life
- The whole universe is the manifestation of the one. The apparent differences between different objects are only an illusion. An understanding of this truth will lead to liberation and salvation
- This universe is the manifestation of but one mind. Alienation between one mind and another mind is unnatural. The mind of man is in no way different from the mind of any other creature
- Enslavement of woman is a manifestation of male arrogance. It is against all canons of justice and ethics. It is criminal, immoral

Creations of Chattampi Swamikal

The variety is represented by the works of Chattampi Swamikal illustrates the vastness and depth of his scholarship. The compositions of Swami have come out in various forms of single stanzas, muktakas, bhajan songs, essays, critical works, translations, commentaries, short notes, and letters. Vedadikara Nirupanam is considered as one of his greatest works. It refuted the baseless customs and rules that existed in Kerala. For the first time in the region's history the work questioned the monopolization of Vedas, sciences and education by a minority. Vedadikara Nirupanmam has infused strength and inspiration to the subaltern groups to fight for their rights and spread the ideas that lead the movements for reformation and renaissance in Kerala.

Swami led a wandering life and left what he wrote with those who were with him at the time of writing. There were no later attempts to collect and conserve them, which led to the gradual loss of many of his works. A few works that got unearthed and published eight decades after his death and inspiring serious discussion show the value and the extent of the loss that occurred to Kerala society which was at one time unmindful of preserving his works. Recently Centre for South Indian Studies has initiated Chattampi Swami Digital Archive (CSDA) project as an attempt to collect and collate documents related to Swami that still exist.

Conclusion

He was innately blessed with two qualities. He made revolutionary attempts to explain Vedic theories to ordinary people in a simple language and thereby to free them from the darkness of ignorance. He was a great visionary and Strived hard to liberate Kerala society from the grips of caste system and social injustice. Infact Chattampi Swamikal was an ever shining star in the history of modern Kerala. His life and works helped Kerala society to make giant leaps by transforming itself and revolutionizing religious and social perspectives. Study of Modern History of Kerala will be incomplete

without considering the role of Chattampi Swamikal. He interfered in social problems with spiritual wisdom, with a clear understanding of religion, transcending the caste barriers and unjust customs. He campaigned for eradication of caste barriers and other inequalities from the perspective of Advaitistic insights. His work questioned the supremacy and monopoly of the Brahmins .He always stood for the uplift of the downtrodden people.

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