

Social Reforms Of Travancore Under Rani Sethu Parvathibai

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ABSTRACT

Travancore was one of the princely states located in the southern part of Peninsular India before and after India's independence till 1956. It had some other names such as ParasuramaShethram, Malabar, Malai Nadu and Venad. Travancore witnessed many female rulers. Among them Rani Parvathibai's administration was attracted the attention of several. When she was assumed the power as regency she was very young and without any experience of the country and its affairs. Naturally the world entertained serious apprehensions of her capacity to rule. But her natural intelligence, quiet and kindly nature and a robust patriotism combined to make her one of the greatest rulers of Travancore. The administration of Parvathi Bai was favourable to the people. Agriculture and trade registered substantial progress during her period. Cultivation of waste lands and hill tops was given main concern. Freedom of trade was assured within the state. Numerous unjust feudal levies were abolished. She introduced a number of reforms intended to establish social freedom and civil equality. She was tolerated to the Christians and the Muslims.

KEY WORDS :

Vanchidesam, Vanavanad, Thiruvadidesam, Dharmarajyam, Adiyara, Fanam, Sirkar, zamorin

Introduction:

The state of Travancore lies in the extreme south west of India. It was the most antique of all Indian states. The state had several other names like Vanchidesam, Vanavanad, Thiruvadidesam and Dharmarajyam. The Travancore is the anglicized form of "Thiruvithancode" which means the "abode of prosperity". Because of its natural beauty it is called the "Kashmir of South". Travancore was an Independent princely state while India under the rule of the British Government. It is bounded on the north by the state of Cochin and the district of Coimbatore in the east by the Western Ghats and the districts of Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli, on the south

by the Indian Ocean and on the west by Arabian Sea. Malayalam is the dominant language in Travancore. It is the mother tongue of the majority of the population. Tamil is also spoken by the people of in certain areas.

The prominent religion of Travancore is Hinduism. The broad principles of Hinduism influence the religious life of people. As early as in 52 A.D., Christianity was preached by St. Thomas. This shows that the kings of Travancore had not only tolerated Christianity but actually encouraged it from the very beginning. Islam was spread in Travancore by Sheik-ibn-Dinar. The people who live in Travancore are the Brahmins, the Nambudiris, the Nairs, the Vellalas, the Nadars, the Ezhavas, the Sambavars and the Pulayas.

Early History: The Ay Kings

The accounts left behind by the foreign travellers in India and the Tamil Sangam works throw light on the ancient history of Travancore. An Anonymous author in his book named “Periplus of Erthrean Sea” refers to Travancore. Ptolemy was the next European visitor who has referred to this region in his book “Geography”, which was compiled in 140 A.D. According to him, the kingdom of the Ays flourished to the South of Chera kingdom and it extended up to Kanniyakumari.

Pandya Rulers

There are ample evidences in literature and inscriptions to show that Pandyas were always in contact with Travancore and ruled from 765 A.D. to 1290 A.D.

Chola Rulers

In the beginning of the 10th century A.D., certain portions were annexed to the Chola Empire by Parantaka I (907-955 A.D.). From 985 A.D. to 1122 A.D., Raja Raja the great,

Rajendra I, Rajathi Raja Rajendra Dev a II, ViraRajendra, AdhiRajendra, Kulottunga I ruled over Travancore. Later on the Vijayanagar and Nayak rulers attacked Travancore.

A New Turn

During the reign of MarthandaVarma from 1729 to 1758 A.D. Travancore took its real shape with its capital conquests, consolidated the royal authority, reorganised the administration and earned the title “Maker or Modern Travancore”. His successors who ruled over Travancore were Rama Varma (933-973 M.E.), Bala Rama Varma (973-986 M.E.), and GauriLekshmiBai (986 -990 M.E.).

The Accession of Rani ParvathiBai (1815-1829)

In 1815 Rani GauriLekshmiBai died leaving behind her a daughter and two infant sons. Her sister GauriParvathiBai then became Regent for SwathiThirunal, the eldest infant son of Rani GauriLekshmiBai. Though GauriParvathiBai a mere girl of 13 when she became Regent, she was so intelligent that she soon grew up to be one of the greatest ruler of Travancore.

Social Reforms

By a proclamation of 993 M.E. (1818 A.D.) the land holders of Nanchilnad were released from certain oppressive demands exacted from them by certain dignitaries known as Mudalis and Ambalakkar who, under the guise of collecting Sirkar revenue from the riots levied numerous unauthorised contributions for their own benefit in connection with social and religious functions. Concessions were granted to riots for bringing new lands under cultivation. In the same year, the imposition of tree tax was restricted to eight kinds of fruit bearing trees.

Civic Rights

Rani Parvathi Bai encouraged by appropriate acts the belief that government was their sole protector and arbiter of their fortunes. The unlawful collection of moneys, whether by the representatives of the aristocracy or by the professed leaders of the Ezhavas, Nadars and Mukkuvas were forbidden under rigorous sanctions. It was impressed upon the Mudaliyar of Alakiyapandipuram that he should not regard himself as anything superior to an ordinary subject. Men of influence were distinctly told that if they continued the old practice of exacting payments from the people for the exercise of ordinary civil rights, such as the celebration of marriages, the performance of funeral ceremonies, using palanquins or wearing head dresses (Thalayilkettu), they would meet the condign punishment. The officers were strictly warned against similar acts of exaction. Civic rights were to be respected.

Orders were issued prohibiting the impressments of labour to carry loads for government without payment. If supplies and services were requisitioned from the people they were to be paid for at the prescribed rates. The British regiments in Travancore were also placed under the ordinary law so far as they remained in Travancore territory. They were forbidden to seize the property of the inhabitants in the tracts through which they passed from Puliwara to Quilon and back or to impress labourers for their service. Thus the rule of law was firmly established.

The officers were placed under strict disciplinary rules. Rank afforded no immunity. For example, a Tahsildar was awarded twenty four stripes besides rigorous imprisonment for twelve years for dishonest conduct in connection with his official duties, making profit by participation in the illicit trade of salt. Rules were laid down that even the taxes paid by the landholders should be received by three officers the Parvarthikar, Chanthrakkar and Tahsildar, sitting together. Due provision was made for complaints being made against offending officers. The agencies of protection were assured by the Government.

Abolition of Adiyara

Members of communities low in the social scale were, for the first time, allowed to use ornaments of gold and silver without paying the adiyara. (Adiyara: Payment to the king for the privilege)

Permission to tiled roof houses

A prominent instance is afforded by the proclamation issued by Rani permitting all per subjects to have tiled roofs for their houses. The significance of this change will be fully understood only when it is remembered that even the chiefs of Malabar could not have their palaces tiled without causing offence to the more prominent rulers like the zamorin.

Abolition of Dowry System

The higher strata of the population were not let alone. Seeing that large were demanded as dowries by intending Namputhiri bridegrooms the Rani issued a proclamation which deserves citation. All virgins in the families of Namputhiris and Pottis should be remitted between the ages ten and fourteen. No person shall demand and none shall pay more than 700 fanams (Rs.100) as dowry. All the women above fourteen, remaining unmarried, shall be married within a period of two years from this date. Those who violate this law will be subjected to judicial process and punished in conformity with the Dharma Sastra.

Abolition of Poll Tax

The poll-tax charged on castes such as Ezhavas, Vannars, Kavuthis, Chetties, etc. was abolished. From time immemorial the low caste people in Travancore suffered much from the oppression of the government and caste Hindus. The government levied oppressive and severe taxes on them. The most obnoxious was a capitation tax. The manner in which it was collected

angered the people more than the amount of the tax, although they kept quiet. In 1754, a head-tax was imposed on the Nadars to meet the military expenditure. The meanest tax was one Kuppakacca, a house tax, one fanam for each hut. The Nadars, Parayas and Pallas paid this. There was also an important tax named purusantaram, a tax of 258, nominally levied by the government on all heritable property. The Nadars groaned under the yoke of the heavy poll-tax imposed on them generations before. They paid poll-tax not only for those who were alive, but also for the dead. To escape from paying this excessive tax several Nadar families emigrated to Tirunelveli. The government then went to the extent of collecting the amount of tax from the representatives of the families thus emigrated. The revenue accounts of Travancore for 1807-08 show that the Government collected Rs. 88,044 as poll tax from Nadars and Ezhavas and Sirkar Pattam tax on trees from which they drew toddy to earn their livelihood amounted to Rs. 18,523 while the poll tax on Chettis and other castes amounted to only Rs. 4624.

Progress of education

The progress of education in Travancore has been responsible for the compilation of a large number of books on every subject of importance. The start was given by Rani Parvathi Bai more than one hundred years ago.

The reign of Parvathi Bai, though short, was a bright period in the history of Travancore. She was a clear-headed, sagacious and firm minded ruler. She respected the traditions of the past, but was anxious to effect reforms which facilitated the evolution of the administrative system, recognising the needs of the times. Thus the reign of Parvathi Bai was remarkable as one of the best periods in the annals of Travancore State. We learn in Indian History of several queens who in the absence of male members in the ruling dynasties kept up the reputation of their ancestors by efficient administration as well as by leading military forces to resist invasions from outside.

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