



Journal Homepage: -[www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com)  
**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
 ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)**

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/10057  
 DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/10057>



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### KERALA RENAISSANCE AND 'JATHIKUMMI'.

Anitha Isac.

#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 20 November 2019

Final Accepted: 25 November 2019

Published: December 2019

##### Key words:

Casteism, Discrimination, Feudalism,  
 Modernity, Renaissance, Untouchability

#### Abstract

This article deals with the social milieu of Kerala about a century ago when casteism with all its social vices prevailed and the movements organized against it. A number of literary works also had a major role in the process. Jathikummi, a poem, authored by Pandit Karuppan who had emerged from the fisherman community at Kochi is sought to be examined in this article. The study juxtaposes and examines the casteist scenario at the time of the composition of Jathikummi and the current social situation in Kerala Vis-a Vis the caste system.

Copy Right, IJAR, 2019,. All rights reserved.

#### Introduction:-

Kerala is acclaimed as the land of a unique culture and tradition. Various people and various popular organizations have contributed in abounding measure to the formation of the state. There are scholars who opine that the culture of Kerala took its shape as a result of the tolerance as well as struggles of the people. The renaissance and modernization of a region often go hand in hand. This is true in the case of Kerala too. The culture of Kerala is all-inclusive. The movements launched by the depressed classes, which were more often than not bloody, were the triggering force of the cultural and social renaissance in Kerala. Its ideological basis was the perception that casteist discrimination was a sociological reality and that transcending it was imperative to usher in a new social order. The renaissance in Kerala emerged against the backdrop of the transformation of the land from feudalism to modernism. Every dynamic society is constantly subject to enlightening change. If this transformation should be complete, the citizens of a society shall enjoy intellectual, economic and cultural equality. The modernization of a society is stimulated by renaissance. There are scholars who hold the view that the Kerala renaissance is exemplary in this respect.

How can the dawn of renaissance break in a society torn apart by intolerance and religious rivalries? Has renaissance occurred where people killed one another in the name of faith? Has modernization taken place where the poor were denied higher education? Shouldn't the renaissance processes be revived in Kerala in this situation?

#### The Social Background of Kerala:-

The word renaissance is derived from a Latin word meaning rebirth. In this context, it denotes the development of a culture drawing its inspiration and energy from past glory. One may now recall Swami Vivekananda's description of Kerala as a lunatic asylum in the closing decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The efforts to bring about Kerala renaissance were marked by the struggle against the social iniquities that prevailed at that time. Then the land of Kerala was in a parlous state. The caste system with all its vices prevailed in the land where people of the lower castes were treated as beasts. Untouchability, unseeability, and unapproachability were the order of day. It was a manifestation of the slavish position they were reduced to by the aristocracy.

**Corresponding Author: - Anitha Isac**

Address: - Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, St. Thomas College Pala, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala.

The discrimination and segregation the lowcastes suffered were obvious from the dress they wore, the food they ate and the language they spoke. They were denied fair wages for the work they did. Most of the manual works were done by the lower castes such as the Parayas, the Pulayas, the Cherumas and their ilk. But it was their landlords who enjoyed the fruit of their labour. They had no right to take the public roads where animals freely roamed. They were meted out capital punishment even for trivial transgressions. Chitravadham [inflicting maximum torture not leading to death] was also in practice. No wonder, Vivekananda called Kerala the land of the mad.

### **The History of Renaissance:-**

It was in Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that the renaissance movement began. The hallmark of the movement was that it laid stress not only on spiritual values but also on secular values. It was the French historian Jules Michelet who employed the word, 'Renaissance' to refer to the movement that spread across the whole of Europe. He described it as a unique phase in history in which a new universe was discovered. Francis Baker gave a philosophical basis to the renaissance movement. The political evolution it took was in a great measure due to the vision of thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau leading eventually to the French Revolution. The concepts set forth in the 'Communist Manifesto' by Karl Marx and Engels were also stimulated by the Renaissance whose seeds had been sown about three and half centuries earlier.

It was in Bengal that the light of Indian renaissance was first lit. At a time when the sublime ideals of equality, liberty, fraternity and secularism were unheard of in Kerala, the renaissance triggered the demand for social emancipation which was inspired by the movements in Bengal. Vaikunda Swami initiated the agitation aiming at social reforms in 1820. That the poor and marginalized sections of the Indian society rose up in revolt against the oppressors with all the moral and physical force at their command and the publication of the 'Communist Manifesto' in far away Europe in 1948 synchronized gives a peculiar intellectual satisfaction to the Indian imagination. The anti-casteist movements were in effect nationalist movements which have not yet been historically evaluated. Moreover, they have been ignored because of casteist considerations. There is no denying the fact the leaders such as E.V. Rama Swami Naiker, Vykunda Swami and Ayankali were the pioneers of the agitation for the emancipation of the suppressed sections of society.

The agitation of the depressed classes in Kerala can be classified under many heads. The first phase starts with 'sartorial freedom'. It was their mode of dress that distinguished a member of the high caste and low caste. It was at a time when even women were denied the right to wear minimal clothes to disguise their nudity that the womenfolk of the channar community began to wear 'rowka' there were instances of members of the lower castes being tortured for wearing the 'rowka'. 'The Channar Revolt' signalled a new chapter in the history of Kerala renaissance. This enabled the depressed people to hold their head high.

The movement launched by Ayankali against the feudal system that sought to impose the domination of the Brahmins destroying all human values was a defining event in the history of Kerala. Ayankali sought to endow the Pulayas with the confidence to take the public roads through his 'Villuvandi Samaram' [travelling in a chariot]. 'The Right to Travel Movement' of the year 1898 was another historic event. The first agricultural boycott under Ayankali was launched in 1907, whose aim was to ensure the education of children belonging to the untouchable castes. Although the government issued an order in this regard in 1907, it came into effect only in March 1910. Consequently, the Pulaya community had to face many repressive measures.

At the time, equality of opportunity, secularism and justice to all were unheard of in this part of India. Now the social emancipation of the depressed classes in Kerala became an inevitable social imperative. The prominent figures who played a pivotal role in the social renaissance of Kerala were Sree Narayana Guru, Vagbadanta, Ayankali, Chattambi Swami, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Pandit Karuppan, Poykayil Yohannan and a host of others. The installation of the 'Ezhava Shiva' and the interdining of different communities under the leadership of Sahodaran Ayyappan were all crucial events of the time. The Vaikom Sathyagraha (1924-25), the Guruvayoor Sathyagraha (1931-32) and Paliyam Sathyagraha (1947-48) were also epochal incidents.

It was Saith Sanahathulla Makti Thangal who sought to lead the Muslims in the path of renaissance in Kerala. Besides, Chalikkath Kunjahammad Haji, Sheik Muhammad Maheen Hamadani Thangal and Vaikkom Abdhul Khader Moulavi were also in the bandwagon of the movement. It was at a time when the Dalit Christians were a marginalized and downtrodden segment of Kerala society that Poykayil Kumara Guru whose former name was

Poykail Yohannan while he was a member of the Marthoma Church headquartered at Thiruvalla appeared on the scene and founded the 'Prathyaksha Reksha Daivasabha' to fight religious discrimination.

#### **The Theme of Jathikummi:-**

Pundit Karupan was a social reformer belonging to the Dheevara community. He it was who authored the celebrated poem 'Jathikummi' denouncing casteism, when it prevailed in Kerala with all its inhuman manifestations. The poem had a revolutionary impact on the social scene. It begins with a condemnation of the evils of untouchability. Written in 1905, it was published only in 1912. The poem was informed by the longing of the depressed classes for their social and political emancipation. It was composed in the form of a folksong to enlighten the illiterate simple populace on the uncivilized nature of untouchability. Its poem was based on 'Sree Shankara's Maneeksha Panjakam' in which Lord Shiva, disguised as a 'Paraya, was described as having materialized before him. Karupan here denounces the strongly prevalent view of the times that a Paraya was a depraved person while a Brahmin was positioned at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. "There is only one caste for all humankind who are the children of one God; Then untouchability is a blasphemous aberration", thunders the poet. A wiseman has neither caste nor the feeling of untouchability. He has only blemishless bliss. Thus Karupan stresses in his poem the imperativeness of dispelling all ignorance and superstition.

There is no denying that Jathikummi succeeded in galvanizing the depressed classes of people to a great extent. The futility and fatuity of the caste system driven home by Jathikummi is ever relevant. Karupan inspired the emergence of the cultural and social renaissance of all the exploited sections of society while most other reformers focused only on the progress of their own community. Karupan Jathikummi has a universal appeal as it seeks to bring development to all oppressed classes and castes.

#### **The Relevance of Jathikummi:-**

The last two centuries have been witness to multiple instances of lower caste agitations. Concomitantly, many literary pieces dealing with the plight of the poor also emerged. Nevertheless, their condition still leaves much to be desired. Resultantly, the lower castes of Kerala society do have to fight for their rights relentlessly even now. Intercaste marriages involving lower caste brides and grooms are still frowned upon as is borne out by the brutal murder of 'Kevin' in 2018. Although all Christian Churches proclaim that all the faithful are the children of one God, discrimination based on casteism is rampant among them all. For example, not a single low-caste person converted to Christianity has so far been ordained a Bishop in the Catholic Church.

It is a fact that the oppressed people in Kerala are yet to scale to a higher social plain. Many a battle against oppression injustice and exploitation remain to be fought and won. Turning the back on these realities would not help in improving the situation.

#### **Conclusion:-**

New evidences and a new ethics entail the deconstruction and reconstruction of history. This is true in the case of the history of Kerala too. Only a Renaissance can lead to the progress and development of a society. What crystallizes from an evaluation of the cultural history of Kerala is that it is the organizations, agitations, and literary works that paved the way for the renaissance and modernization of Kerala society. Even as the question of the renaissance and modernization of the Kerala society is discussed and debated, it still remains a polemical point. If only all the sections of the society have the opportunity to share the resources equitably can it be said that modernization has effectively taken place. If it has failed, we have miles to go before a new dawn of enlightenment breaks. The literary works of every age mirror the changes that take place in every society. Works such as Pundit Karupan's Jathikummi have always been seeking to walk up a people from their lethargy. Kerala has always recognized and interiorized the message of such works. It is indubitable that poems like Jathikummi are still relevant in Kerala.

#### **Reference:-**

1. Abubaker, Kathiyalam. Keraliya Navodhanavum Vaghabadananda Gurudevanum. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, 2016.
2. Bahavudheen, K.M. Kerala Samoothakhadana Mattangla. Calicut: Olive publication, 1999.
3. Bhaskaranunni, P. 19<sup>th</sup> Nootandile Keralam. Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2012.

4. Chirappadu, Rajesh & Erumeli, Rajesh K. Indian Navodhana Nayakar. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2018.
5. Das, K.K.S. Dalit Janatagude Swathathriya Samaram. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society. Ltd, 2017.
6. Gopakumar, P.F. Keraliya Navodhanam. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2007.
7. Govindapillai, P. Kerala Navodhanam Oru Marxist weekshanam. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha publishers, 2003.
8. News paper. The Indian Express. (Kevin Joseph murder case) May -24-2018.
9. Radhakrishnan, K.S. Jathikummiyum Mattu pradhana krithikalum. Kottayam: DC Books, 2013.
10. Shivadasan, P. Kerala Charitram Sambavangalilode. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha publishers, 2007.
11. Sreedharamenon, A. Kerala Samskaram. Kottayam: DC Books, 2007.
12. Sreedharamenon, A. A Survey of Kerala History. Kottayam: DC books, 2007.
13. Thankachan, Pooyappilli. Pandit Karuppan Viplavum Kavithayilum Samoohika Ranghathum. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative society Ltd, 2016.
14. Vidhyanandan, V. Pandit Karuppan. Kochi: Pandit Karuppan Academy, 2012.