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## SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF CHAṬṬAMPI SVĀMIKAL

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### **Nineteenth Century Kerala**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala witnessed the emergence of a new social order in South India under the impact of divers religious, social, economic and cultural influences. Even from the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional social structure had begun to show signs of cracking up. The most important feature with which social reform movements in Kerala have concerned themselves was 'inequality' based on birth which is found everywhere in India. The second is the religious belief in superstitious practices which exists in some form or other among the various classes of the human race.

Keralan society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not based on the principles of social freedom and equality. The lower castes who formed the majority of the population had to bear several social and economic limitations, all because of supposed caste inferiority. Untouchability and unapproachability were the main channels through which inequalities were sustained. Neither inter-caste marriage nor inter-dining was in vogue even amongst the various sub-castes. Denial of entry into temples was another disadvantage experienced by the low castes.

### **Reform Movements**

However, now and then, reformers made their appearance in Kerala also as in other parts of India and though religion was their main field of activity, the brunt of their exertion began to fall upon the social structure too. Every

religious reform movement rises out of certain grievances, certain demands and certain hopes of the society. The common people were wooed by spiritual reformers to accept changes not only for the salvation of their souls but also for the improvement of their social and economic conditions.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala witnessed two such powerful social reform movements, the impact of which was felt by the members of the upper castes too. Brahmins, kshatriyas and other upper castes also came within the fold of these movements and advocated radical social reforms. The All India Hindu Reform Movements led by such organisations as the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophical Society and the Aryasamaj influenced a section of the Hindus of Kerala. The services of Swāmi Āgamānanda (1896-1961) of the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashramam, Kaladi, to the cause of the eradication of caste barriers and harijan uplift deserve special mention. But the reform movements which made the greatest impact on the public life of Kerala were of local origin and were led by Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal (1853-1924) and Sree Nārāyaṇaguru (1856-1928). The pioneer work and didactic approach of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal and Sree Nārāyaṇaguru were primarily responsible for the social change in the State. They worked for the upliftment of the lower castes and untouchables. They advised the people to get educated, for it was the first step to qualify themselves to fight for social equality. Nārāyaṇaguru erected many temples where entry was allowed to all. He harped on the dictum 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for humanity'.

### **Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal: Birth and Education**

Kunjan Pillai, known also as Ayyappan, and later as Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal, was born in the Malayalam year 1029 (A.D. 1853) in the month of Chingam at a suburban village of Trivandrum as the first child of Vasudeven Nampootiri of Tamarasseri Illam and Nangamma Pillai, a Nair lady belonging to Kochallurkodu Veedu. Even though his father was a brahmin Kunjan fought for the cause of non-brahmins and lower caste people.

As his family was poor, he could get no formal education, but learnt Malayalam from his father and started to pick up Tamil and Sanskrit from his friends who were studying under local teachers. His earnest attempts to learn came to the attention of a Sanskrit teacher who invited him to attend his classes. This early thirst for learning branched out into many fields.

He became proficient also in kathakali dance, mridangam and the use of other musical instruments as well. Outgoing and friendly, Kunjan Pillai enjoyed giving performances of his various skills such as reciting the *Rāmāyaṇa* with

extraordinary beauty and demonstrating many types of drumming. But his interests were not merely at the level of enjoyment. His yearning to know took him to the depth of his own psyche and prompted him to search for a teacher to guide him. He disregarded all conventions of caste and openly questioned such divisions of human kind.

Studying in Trivandrum with Pettayil Raman Pillai Asan, Kunjan's aptitude and desire to learn earned him the position of Monitor (Chaṭṭampi) and earned the name which was to stick to him thereafter, Chaṭṭampi. His poverty and a sick mother led him to work as a labourer, and then as a government servant, a Kaṇakkupillai (clerk). But a person with a spirit yearning to soar in freedom was not remain long in the box of a small clerk's office with the limited horizon government service has to offer.

Soon his search led him to roam again. He spent some time as a disciple of an unusual man, Suberaya Paniker, the Manager of the Residency of Travancore State, and a yogi who lived a life of restraint, devoting his free time to teaching Vedānta and Yoga, by name Thaikkāṭṭu Ayyāvu. from him Kunjan Pillai got initiation into sannyāsa and received the name Shaṇmukhadāsan, indicating that he was a devotee of God Subrahmaṇya. He also learnt logic from a scholar from Tamil Nadu.

Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal used to spend time with Perunnelli Krishnan Vaidyar who was well-learned in Sanskrit and was a literary figure of the times. His library was full of classics and his house was frequented by scholars, writers, critics and musicians. Nārāyaṇaguru, contemporary of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal, also used go there. In fact the two had dedicated themselves to a pattern of life to benefit all, not seeking personal pleasures or rewards. Each was fully absorbed in the search for fundamental reality and had left behind the usual social patterns, especially those relating to the consciousness of caste differences. Each felt and expressed a deep sense of devotion in his own way.

Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal shared what he had been learning from Thaikkāṭṭu Ayyāvu and took Nārāyaṇaguru to him. A year after Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal had been initiated, Guru was initiated by Ayyāvu and given the name Shaṇmukha-bhakta. Thaikkāṭṭu Ayyāvu evoked love and respect from both the young men, later to be known as great religious and social reformers of Kerala.

### **Social Philosophy**

Svāmikal upheld the supremacy of experience and reason in all human affairs. According to him mere authority ascribed by beliefs and customs is nothing even in religious matters. Svāmikal mercilessly exposed the hollowness of

many shallow religious concepts and beliefs. Svāmikal vindicated that the organised religion of Hinduism as well as Christianity and Islam adulterated the religious thought by changing the universal law of knowledge for all. He tried to purify the religion by removing these unnecessary restrictions.

### Right to Religion

The most important work of Svāmikal is *Vedādhikāra Nirūpaṇam*. It is a unique appraisal of the precepts of Vedānta which challenges the reader to penetrate to the depth of Chaṭṭampi Svāmi's vision and experience.

Svāmikal through this work proclaims that the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavad Gītā* and other authorities have established that the study of Vedas was not prohibited by any authority to non-brahmins. Examples of various instances in which śūdras and low castes learned and taught Vedas and attained Supreme Bliss through a life advised by the religious thought are placed before us in this work. Svāmikal stressed that one should become a brahmin not by birth but by way of life.

In *Cristumata Chetanam*; Svāmikal gives us the cream of Christian religious thought contained in the holy text. With all due respect to the teachings using the logic contained in them Svāmikal severely criticised the misinterpretations the organised church gave to the original texts. The trend of missionaries of the time in offering material benefits for accepting Christianity was vehemently opposed in this work. His other known works are *Advaitacintāpaddhati*, *Prācīna Malayālam* and *Adhibhasa*.

### Cāturvarṇya

In *Prācīna Malayālam* by examining ancient history of Kerala as well as authoritative Vedic texts Svāmikal establishes the high position that non-brahmin castes enjoyed in ancient Kerala. He argues that the Namputiri, Emprān and Potti were originally Dravidians. *Prācīna Malayālam* was planned as a weapon against the dominance of Namputiri brahmins and the evils of caste system they forced upon Kerala society.

In *Prācīna Malayālam* states that in *cāturvarṇya* also one can become eligible to be in any *varṇa* only if he is having the qualities ascribed to that *varṇa*. Otherwise even if he was born to parents of that *varṇa* he will not become eligible for that *varṇa*. So a brahmin will be a brahmin only if he lives as per the rules ascribed to a brahmin. So a human being according to the true meaning of religious texts belongs to the *varṇa* of which his qualities resemble. He concludes that deeds only can qualify one for a caste if there is such a division.

### Position of Women

Chaṭṭampi Svāmi's views on the position of women in society were far in advance of his times. Even in the present day male domination is prevalent in all fields of human activity, not only in Kerala but all over the world including advanced countries like the USA and UK. That is why womens' liberation movements are building up everywhere. But we have to doubt whether these movements are able to establish the equal status which women deserve. Svāmikal in his talk at Vanitā Sammelanam at Cochin stated that the first letter/sound A: contains *Brahman* and *Prakṛti*, the male and the female forces, from which everything originated. In the absence of either force nothing will happen.

Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal accepted a Guru from a low caste in the social structure. He visited the houses of lower caste people, lived with them and dined with them. His life of simplicity, renunciation, study, *ahimsā* (non-hurting), compassion and abundant love inspired a number of disciples to find in him a true Guru to guide them on their path to wisdom.

### Fire will Never Die

In his last days Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal devoted himself to quiet contemplation and receiving visitors. He followed the progress of the Vaikkam Satyagraha, the mass action of civil disobedience attempting to make Kerala temples open to members of all castes with great interest, seeing it as an important struggle in the progress towards the elimination of caste discrimination. He had great faith in satyāgraha. He was of the view that what was essential was a temple entry satyāgraha. At Vaikkam the satyagraha was only for the use of the road round the temple walls by the untouchables. Svāmikal was full of praise for the leaders of the satyagraha, Sri. K.P. Kesava Menon, George Joseph, A.K. Pillai, T.K. Madhavan, Chittezhathu Sankara Pillai and Chattukutty Nair, for their sacrifice. Svāmikal also followed the activities of Mahatma Gandhi for uplifting the lower caste people. Whenever he commented on Gandhi he said that his birth was with a great purpose. On one morning, during his last days, pointing to the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi he said that Gandhiji was one of the great men then living anywhere in the world. According to Svāmikal the picture itself made clear that his greatness would shine even more brightly in the years to come. Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal knew that the fire he had lit would remain till everything got purified and the people became happy and peaceful.

In the afternoon of 23 May 1924 Svāmikal requested a ganjira player to play the instrument for some time. Then he himself took the instrument and played it

merging himself in the divine music. Then he wanted to sit alone in the room. After sometime when a disciple entered the room he sought help to sit in *Padmāsana*. Then he slowly closed his eyes. An unusual peace and happiness was reflected in his face. He entered his *Mahāsamādhi*.

### **Joining of the Masses**

The rise of communal organizations dedicated to the cause of social reform helped to supplement the activities of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal and Sri Narayana Guru. The most important of these organisations were the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and the Nair Service Society (NSS).

The Nair Service Society (NSS) was founded on October 31, 1914 by Mannath Padmanabhan with a band of zealous young men under his leadership. In the early years it provided effective leadership to many movements for social reforms like the eradication of the barriers of sub-castes, the abolition of old decadent and wasteful practices like *Tālikeṭṭukalyānam*, *Tiraṇṭukuli* etc., and the mitigation of the evils of the joint family system among the Nairs.

### **Laws of Inheritance**

Another movement of socio-economic importance was the agitation for reform in the laws of inheritance and marriage. The earliest initiative in this regard was taken in the Nair caste and it was very much influenced by the teachings of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal on family relations, the position of women, wealth and related matters which was highly criticised by the orthodox Nairs in the initial stages.

Keralan society comprised several castes like the Nairs, Ezhavas, the Najanad Vellalas, Mappilas etc. who followed the Marumakkattāyam system of succession and inheritance. The absolute powers exercised by the Kāraṇavar in the Marumakkattāyam family led to the revolt of the younger generation against the system. Though the wife and children of the Kāraṇavar had no legal claims to his wealth and property, in actual practice, they appropriated for themselves all the gains which the Kāraṇavar was able to make out of the management of the Taravāḍ property.

A movement for the abolition of the system was started in Travancore under the auspices of the Nair Service Society and it won the support of all the progressive sections of the community. The first Nair Regulation of 1912 was an important piece of legislation in this regard. But it did not give complete

satisfaction to the progressive sections of the community. It resulted in the second Nair Regulation of 1925 which provided for individual partition and also deprived the nephews of all claims to the properties of their uncles. The Act also made polygamy illegal. The Nair Act was followed by the Ezhava Act of 1925 and the Nanjanad Vellala Act of 1926, providing for similar changes in the law of inheritance and imposing legal prohibition in the matter of polygamy.

### **Reform of Religious Practices**

While Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal established the philosophical principles that gave equal authority over religion to all human beings, Nārāyaṇaguru clearly laid down these ideas about religion in a simple way in which even the ordinary illiterate people could understand and argue for their rights. Man's religion does not become full if it does not unite together the spiritual doctrines of Hindu Yogic ascetics, non-violence of Buddha, love of Jesus and brotherhood of Mohammed the Prophet. His religious doctrines were yogic culture, non-violence, love and universal brotherhood. Religion is not meant for the welfare of the inner world of man alone. Physical and spiritual betterment had to result from religion.

### **Right to enter Temples**

Influenced by the religious teachings of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal and Sri Nārāyaṇaguru the people of Kerala started the major struggle of the social reform movement, being the famous Vaikkam Satyāgraha (1924-25), which was primarily for establishing the right of the non-caste Hindus to walk along the four roads leading to the Śiva temple at Vaikkam. Finally, after the repeated intervention of Gandhi, the three approach roads to the temple were formally opened to all Hindus irrespective of caste. But the prohibition continued on the eastern road.

### **Conclusion**

The views of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal on casteism is relevant to the present social setup in India, especially in Kerala, where even today caste-oriented activities are organised and sponsored by various caste-organisations. Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal clearly stated that the authority on anything claimed by any caste is baseless; it is the way of life and deeds that should give authority. But in Kerala a majority

of people still believe in caste. Though caste has more or less ceased to be the yardstick for social status, educational institutions are in the hands of the caste organisations, employment opportunities are provided on caste-basis and developmental schemes are mainly organised on this basis only. Even politics are controlled by caste. In this situation, the teachings of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal about caste are to be widely popularised. Man should get opportunities for making profit out of his intelligence and ability. The theories of Chaṭṭampi Svāmikal on casteism can do a lot even in the present grave situation.

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