

THE ROLE OF N. KUMARAN IN VAIKOM SATYAGRAHA

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Abstract

Mahakavi Kumaran Ashan is one of the makers of modern India. He was one of the Trimvirate poets of Kerala. He was also a philosopher, a social reformer and a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. He fought against the inequalities of a caste ridden society and passionately sang of individual dignity, social freedom and the brotherhood of man. In 1904 Kumaran Asan was selected as the representative of Sree Moolam Popular Assembly. He was also elected as the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam's first General Secretary. Up to 1919, July 20 he was on the post, except in 1906. The personal magnetism and charisma of Guru and the intellectual excellence and poetic genius of Asan worked wonders in the society and within two decades after the establishment of the S. N. D. P. Yogam, the intent Ezhava community, turned into a vigorous and progressive social force. In the 12th session of the Assembly Kumaran Asan drew the attention of the Government to this evil and referred to roads in Vaikom, Tirunakkara, Suchindram and a few other places and demanded the removal of the prohibition boards placed near some of these temples.

Key Words : N. Kumaran, Vaikom, Satyagraha, Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, Unapproachability.

Introduction

N. Kumaran is one of the makers of modern India. He is also known as Mahakavi Kumaran Ashan. He was one of the Trimvirate poets of Kerala. He was also a philosopher, a social reformer and a disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. He fought against the inequalities of a caste ridden society and passionately sang of individual dignity, social freedom and the brotherhood of man. Kumaran Ashan initiated a revolution in Malayalam poetry in the first quarter of the 20th century. His works are an eloquent testimony of poetic concentration and

dramatic contextualisation. This paper gives an account of N. Kumaran's contribution of Malayalam poems and the relationship of Sree Narayana Guru. It also analyses the interpellation in the Travancore Legislative Council and how to lead the Vaikom Satyagraha.

Ashan was born in a merchant family belonging to the Ezhava community on 12th April 1873 at Kayikkara, a small coastal village of Kerala. He was the second son in a family of nine children. His father, Narayanan

Perungudi was well versed in Malayalam and Tamil. His mother was Kaali. Asan inherited his taste for Kathakali and classical music. Kumaran trained in Mathematics and Sanskrit for which he had a passion. Even though through his father's effort, he got a job as a primary school teacher and an accountant the job two years later to pursue higher studies in Sanskrit. He undertook a studentship in poetry under Manamboor Govindan Asan. He wished to learn yoga and Tantra and worked as an apprentice in a Muruga Temple at Vaikom. He composed a few devotional songs for the benefit of regular worshippers at this Temple.

Ashan And Sree Narayana Guru

Kumaran was dogged by ill health all through his early life. When he was eighteen, Sree Narayana Guru visited his house at the request of his father. Kumaran was bedridden at that time. The great saint suggested that Kumaran should stay with him and become his disciple. The little boy found the invitation irresistible. Thus began a new phase of life for the young lad.

Kumaran's meeting with Sree Narayana Guru can be compared to the meeting of Naran with Sri Ramakrishna. While Naran became a full – fledged swami, Kumaran continued as a lay disciple of Narayana Guru and made substantial contributions in the field of poetry, literature and social renaissance.

Swamy took the fledgling devotee under his care and in 1895 Kumaran was sent to Bangalore for three years for higher studies in Sanskrit, at the Sree Chamarajendra Sanskrit College. He specialized in Tarka Sastra. He could not take the final exam because during that time plague was existed. Leaving Bangalore he came to Madras and after a brief stay, left for Calcutta to join the Sanskrit College. His teacher was Mahamahopadhiyaya Kmakhya Nath who encouraged the poetic gift of his student and prophesised that he would one day become a famous poet.

Gurudeva's aim was to create an organization which would bring together people

who wanted to be such good men. Such an organization was open to all regardless of caste or religion. In Gurudev's vision was to start an organization, open to all, would ridicule the caste differences, blunt the harshness of class conflict and gradually demolish the caste barriers. It was with the aim of fostering an awareness and unity and to spread the ideals that Gurudev decided to launch Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. Thus was established SNDPY with Gurudev's blessing. The Yogam came into being on 7th January 1903. Kumaran Ashan was elected as the yogam's first General Secretary. Up to 1919, July 20 he was on the post, except in 1906.

Early Works

Some of the earlier works of the poet were 'subramanya Sathakam' and 'Sankara Sathakam' where in Ashan voiced his devotional aspirations. His short poem 'veena poovu' is a literary classic. It paved the way for a new movement in Malayalam literature. His elegy *Prarodanam* mourns the death of his contemporary and friend A. R. Raja Raja Varma, a famous grammarian. His 'Khanda Kavyas' (poems) like *Nalini*, *Leela*, *Karuna* and *Chandaalabhikshuki* won critical acclaim as well as popularity. In 'Chintaavishtayaaya Seetha' he displays his poetic artistry, while in 'Duravastha' he patiently and skilfully tears down the barriers created by feudalism, orthodoxy and casteism and consummates the dictum of the Guru, "One Caste, One Religion, One God for Man."

He wrote the epic poem 'Buddha Charitha' for which he got inspiration from Edwin Arnold's 'Light of Asia'. While in *Duravastha*, he revealed his revolutionary zeal for fighting caste distinctions; a few other poetic works had a distinct Hindu or Buddhist slant. Kumaran Ashan received the 'Mahakavipattom' for his true and heart touching work 'Duravastha'.

Member Of Sree Moolam Popular Assembly

The Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in the erstwhile state of Travancore was the first popularly elected legislature in the history of

India. Its predecessor legislative council was formed in Travancore in 1888 with eight appointed members. Sri Mulam Thirunal Ramavarma, who became Maharaja of Travancore in 1886, established it in an order issued on 30th March 1888. In 1898, the strength of the council was increased to fifteen, comprising nine officials and six non – officials.

In 1904, a lower house called the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly (Sree Mulam Praja Sabha) was formed with 88 members to provide for increased participation of the people in the administration. Its membership was limited to representatives of landlords and merchants. Although not a legislature, it was intended to give the people an opportunity to bring to the notice of the government their requirements, wishes or grievances, and to make government policies and measures better known to the people. The members of the assembly were not elected but chosen, two from each taluk, by the District heads from among landholders who paid annual land revenue of not less than Rs. 100, and landholders or traders whose net annual income was Rs.6000 or above.

In 1905, the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly began to have elected members. Out of the new strength of 100 members, 77 were to be elected and 23 were to be nominated. Voting right was limited to persons who paid an annual land revenue of not less than Rs. 50, or whose net income was not less than ten years of standing, and having their residence in the respective Taluk were also eligible to vote.

In the second year of the establishment of Sree Moolam Popular Assembly, the Ezhava community was given representation there by the government nominating Kumaran Asan, the General Secretary of the yogam, as a Member. The personal magnetism and charisma of Guru and the intellectual excellence and poetic genius of Asan worked wonders in the society and within two decades after the establishment of the S. N. D. P. Yogam, the intent Ezhava community, turned into a vigorous and progressive social force.

In the beginning of the twentieth century the Ezhavas, as noted earlier, had no voice of their own; but by 1920, their voice became pre-eminently sharp and clear that the Government considered it expedient to accommodate the interests of this community in the scheme of administration. In all the sessions of the Popular Assembly from the beginning the Ezhava members pressed on the attention of the Government the extreme irksomeness of their social position in public places and the urgency of its removal. The most distressing of these disabilities enumerated in the Ezhava Memorial and repeated in every session of the Assembly, were the prohibition imposed on the community to utilize certain schools on account of the proximity of them to temples and palaces and also the existence of *tindal palakas* or prohibitory notice-boards on public roads in the vicinity of temples which prevented their enjoyment of the right to walk along them.

Demand For The Removal Of Prohibition Boards

In the 12th session of the Assembly Kumaran Asan drew the attention of the Government to this evil and referred to roads in Vaikom, Tirunakkara, Suchindram and a few other places and demanded the removal of the prohibition boards placed near some of these temples. Unapproachability in general and the prevention of the right to walk along these roads in particular had been made the subject of specific petition in the Assembly. Government did not deem it necessary to examine the rationale of the issue much less to do anything to remove the specific grievances. As N. Kumaran put “It is one thing for Government and their officers to say that they would take their own time to come to a decision. But it is quite another matter to those who are reminded every moment of their life that they are only fit to be underdogs and that they are not to have even some of the elementary rights of man which under the laws of God and of man are absolutely inalienable and indefeasible.”

Kumaran Asan who was the first made a

concert effort to convince the Government of the necessity of removing the bar on the public roads. He said “there were certain public roads and streets to which they were not admitted. Certain places were inaccessible to them on account of proximity of temples. But there was no uniform principles adopted in these cases. The Ezhavas could not go up to the outer wall of the Suchindram temple during the festival period, though they could do so at other times. During certain occasions whole villages were closed against the low caste people in Nanjanad. The prohibition would seem all the more serious when it was known that even scavengers were excluded and that sanitation was not attended to during those periods. In the Vaikom temple, the valan (Hindu fisherman) could go as far as the western tower-gate to present the cord of the flag-staff, but neither he on other occasions, nor Ezhavas, could go so far. There were boards put up on the roads on all sides of the Tirunakkara temple prohibiting the Ezhavas and other low caste people from passing along these roads. Similar restrictions were enforced on the roads near the Tiruvarpu temple also.” He said that “the Government should see that the places to which the backward communities could have access at any time, and those where they could be reasonably admitted were declared open to them at all times. Stringent orders should be issued to the District Magistrates not to renew the notice boards prohibiting them from having access to certain places. The royal proclamation of 1040 granting all the backward communities access to all public roads etc. should be republished for general information.”

Vaikom Satyagraha

In connection with this interpellation, the Peishkar, reported amongst other things, the existence of three notice boards on the northern, southern and western sides of the Vaikom Temple. These were situated a furlong, 56 furlong and 2 furlong respectively from the gopurams on each side concerned. The notice boards prohibited the *theendal jatis* from going further into the approaches of the Temple. The

Peishkar also added that the roads in question fell under the category of common highways the use of which regulated by local usage and custom. The existence of these notice boards on public roads leading to and around certain sirkar temples, prohibiting the use of certain portions of the said roads by Non Caste Hindus, was considered a source of grievances to them. The questions were carefully considered by the Government and regarding to the Vaikom Temple, the following decisions were arrived at in December 1922.

1. To shift the notice board on the western entrance to a point west of the *Althara*.
2. To put up a gate at that point which is removed from the temple wall by 66 feet, with a fresh notice board declaring that the portion of the road to the east of it was not open to the public;
3. To acquire the bazaar on either side of the road to the east of the gate and to declare it to be Sanketam;
4. To put up a notice board of the same description on the northern side of the Satram compound, the Satram being conserved for use of caste – Hindus;
5. To put a similar notice on the eastern side of the temple at the site at which the board formerly stood, i.e., at a distance of 970 links from the gopuram; and

To shift the notice board on the south to the south – east so as to admit of the lane in the locality being thrown open to all classes. The Government made it clear that their decision was strictly in accordance with the recorded opinion of the *Tantri* that non – caste Hindus should be kept at a distance of 64 feet from the outer walls of the temple.

The legal implications of the subject had been stated by Subbier, the Law Member of Legislative Council. He concluded that:

1. There are two classes of roads recognised in Travancore
2. Public highways have been opened by Government notification to all classes of His Highness subjects and even otherwise

as a matter of right they may have access to them.

3. Common ways are those around a temple and streets occupied by particular communities and those which have been specially notified by Government as not open to all classes.
4. That roads leading to markets, public offices, hospitals, from town to town and through which traffic is carried on ought to be thrown open to all classes.
5. There is nothing illegal in having notice boards put up restricting the use of such roads by certain classes even though the road belongs to Government and is maintained by Government.

In fact, Kumaran Asan who first made a concert effort to convince the Government of the necessity of removing the bar on the public roads in Vaikom Temple. As early as 1905, the Ezhava member from Karthikappalli, Kochu Kunju Channar, raised the question of permitting the Ezhavas to walk along the roads passing near the Haripad temple. But Government did not deem it necessary to examine the rationale of the issue much less to do anything to remove the specific grievances. Asan's efforts to force the issue of the temple roads on the Government that ultimately compelled them to permit discussion on the question of Temple entry.

Conclusion

N. Kumaran was moderate in politics he resorted to recognised constitutional means to achieve social reforms. He was not against the right of lower castes to enter temples; he was to be sure, not merely for the right to enter temples for worship but to have the right to perform the tantric rites too in the temple.

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