

RELIGION AND LIFE, SOME NEW TRENDS, A STUDY ON THE PILGRIM HEAD QUARTERS OF KERALA

Deepa Roselin Joseph

*Assistant Professor, Department of History, St. Thomas College,
Pazhavangady, Ranny, Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India*

ABSTRACT

Religion is an important characteristic of the people in any country. This paper studies the changes in the religious trends of a hilly district of Kerala, Pathanamthitta, which is regarded as the pilgrim headquarters of Kerala. As far as religion is concerned, Pathanamthitta district is special in many ways. Belief in God is like breathing air to this pilgrim district of the State. Due to this reason, even the river sand bed of the district is rich with a religious color. Besides the traditional religious groups, the district is witnessing the growth of new sects probably in need of upward mobility. This is also because almost every other aspect of life here is deeply related to religion.

KEYWORDS: *Religion, Pathanamthitta, Witnessing*

Article History

Received: 21 Aug 2018 / Revised: 06 Sep 2018 / Accepted: 15 Sep 2018

INTRODUCTION

Religion is an important characteristic of the people in any country. Pathanamthitta district of Kerala is well known as the headquarters of pilgrim worship in Kerala. Historically, from the beginning of the Christian era, the district has been able to house new religions and religious sects. When the Brahmins from the other parts of the country established 32 settlements in Kerala, some of them like Aranmula Thiruvalla, Venmani were also in this district. Some other settlements are close to the district on the banks of river Pamba. This had geographical factors behind. The rich and fertile river valleys in the district made it best suitable for wetland agriculture and thus the Brahmins chose to settle down there. One of the most popular pilgrim centers of India, Sabarimala is located in this district. Recently, a number of new sects and new religious formations have either originated or come to prevalence in the district. The trend of emergence of new sects is seen mainly in Christianity and Hinduism. The geography, history, and economy of the district along with migration and such factors influence the religious profile of the district and the change in it over the course of years.

Population by Religion

The major religions groups in the district are Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. The other religious communities like Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists are insignificant as their percentage to total population is very negligible.

Demographically speaking Hindus constitute more than half of the population in the district in the three censuses which is in accordance with the all Kerala pattern. Regarding the Muslim population, Pathanamthitta is the district with the

least Muslim population in all the censuses. The Christian population constitutes 40.36% of the total population whereas in Kerala as a whole they constitute only 19.32%. But in the next censuses, the percentage decreased to 39% of the total population even though it retained the third rank among the districts of Kerala. Christians were the only major religious group in the district that showed a reduction in population proportion.

Profile of Religious Communities

The co-existence of different religions was the specific feature of pre-modern Travancore. Among the Hindus, the Nairs and Ezhavas were numerically superior. These two were identified as two distinct communities within the Hindu fold having their own distinct features and characteristics.

The Nairs occupied an important position in the social life of Travancore. Nairs are the Savarna Hindus who constituted the warriors, landed gentry and yeoman of Kerala. The Nair Service Society (NSS) is an organization created for the upliftment and welfare of the Nair community under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan. Though initially started to reorganize, strengthen and empower the Nair community the N.S.S, has extended the benefits of its service beyond communal and religious boundaries and has been playing significant roles in the social, economic, educational and political transformations of the concerned areas. The NSS is a three-tier organization with *Karayogams* at the base level, Taluk Unions at the intermediate and Headquarters at the apex level. Pathanamthitta district is covered by six unions - Adoor, Ranni, Pathanamthitta, Thiruvalla, Mallappally and Pandalam with Head Quarters at Changanacherry. The various departments functioning under the auspices of NSS brings in no small measure the social and economic mobility of that community.

The Ezhavas occupied an important position in Travancore. They were subdued for centuries under the dominating influences of Brahmins and Nairs and they constituted the upper layer among the lower castes. The Head Office of Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana, an organization created for the upliftment and welfare of Ezhava community is at Quilon. In the structure of Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, SNDP unions are the strongest part. Under each SNDP union, SNDP branches or *Sakhas* are coming whose activities are controlled by unions. Pathanamthitta had 5 Unions and 289 Branches.

The Christians were yet another important social group in Travancore even though numerically less than the Hindus. The introduction of early Christianity in this part of the Indian subcontinent might have happened because of the trade relations that this region had established with countries in the Mediterranean region from ancient times. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the Christian community of Travancore came to reflect all the three broad streams of this religion: the Roman Catholics, the Protestants, and the Orthodox. Pentecost movement had also its adherence to Travancore. It had its beginning in Mulakuzha near Chenganoor as early as 1925.

New Trends in Religion

Demographic changes in the Christian community especially the Syrian Christians, who constitute nearly half of the state's six million Christian population, are heading towards a zero or even negative population growth regime. Syrian Christians were not a very migratory community and concentrated in a small number of taluks. But when they began their demographic transition all the above-said characteristics changed a lot. Now the community has a low level of mortality and fertility rates. They had a high migration rate and are now spread out not only all over India but also all over the globe. Since Pathanamthitta district holds the largest number of Syrian Christian population the study and the results are

applicable here. Syrian Christians are the major emigrant group in Pathanamthitta. The large-scale out-migration of people in a search of job coupled with the high practice of family planning can be attributed to the reasons behind this fall in population proportion.

The demographic transition has thrown up new concerns in the district. Christians were a prosperous community commanding extraordinary political clout in Kerala. This is likely to be affected in the future if the decline in the numerical strength is continuing. The most important structural changes that occur here is the rapid rise in the population of the elderly and the decline in the number of children. Even though the State is also in tune with these changes it is more among the Christians.

There also occurred movements originated within the framework of Missionary Christianity, but moved beyond the limits of the missionary project and eventually offered a critique of it like *Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS), the assembly of those who are saved by God. This is a socio-religious organization founded by Poikayil Sree Kumara Guru Devan aimed to articulate the interests of the Dalits. The assembly with no sacred books, ritualistic practices, and priestly classes was the culmination of the efforts of its founder for a democratic church capable of embracing all those who were joining to worship God. At present, *Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) is a religious movement that signifies the lower caste assertion and a consciousness on their part which prompts them to leave the established paths of the traditional religions and to embark on attempts aimed at the creation and development of religious identities for themselves.

Dravidian Class United Front (DCUF) is another new religious formation which owed its inspiration mainly to *Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS). The headquarters of DCUF is at Mukkada, only a few meters north of the Pathanamthitta district, in Kottayam district. Dravidian Class United Front (DCUF) was founded by Sabharaj, who was born on 2nd October 1926. The Dravidian Class United Front (DCUF) was named with a specific sense and care about terminology. Instead of using the name of any existing class or caste to show its identity, it calls itself "Dravidian". This was to show that the members belonged to the race that really owned and authored the earliest of the Indian civilizations - the Harappan. Incidentally, the mouth organ of the DCUF was named *Saindhavamozhi* which means "the word of the Indus valley people". This was part of the argument that they were not really slaves but the ancient original and real inhabitants and owners of this land. Evidently, DCUF was predominantly a political formation which had its roots in the social milieu of the period and was expressed in religious terms.

The new religious formations have certain characteristics: (i) they are founded and fostered by the lower castes themselves; (ii) they distance themselves from the traditional religions in organization and faith; (iii) the founder is often deified; (iv) they uphold the enlightenment values like equality, equal opportunity for all and respect for the constitution etc.; (v) *Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) can be seen imbibed many of the notions and ideological traits and even terminology from Christianity even though it is a totally different and new religion; (vi) the new religious formations were predominantly political in nature; (vii) they base themselves on the unjust social scenario.

This trend has bearings on globalization which foster localization and the deconstruction of meta-narratives. The general, universal and common codes give way to the particular and individual expressions and constructions. Religious identities now get closer to the socio-economic identity of the followers and because there is a multitude of the latter, the former also get multiplied and diversified. Without the creation of a new religious identity, the upward movement or the attempt to upward movement would not probably be complete or even effective.

This is also because almost every other aspect of life here is deeply related to religion. This could be a factor working behind the origin and growth of the new sects.

REFERENCES

1. George Mathew, (1989) *Communal Road to a Secular Kerala*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company
2. Mathew Varghese, 2005, "The Indigenous Tradition of Syrian Christians of Kerala, A Perspective Based on Their folk Songs: Marriage, Customs and History", *Indian Folklore Research Journal*.
3. Mariam George, 2006, "Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and Dalit Unity in Kerala", *Review of Social Sciences*, 7
4. Manoj M.B. and Anuraj Thirumeni, 2009, Thiru P. J. Sabharaj, Ormma, Rashtriyam, Adayalam, (Mal.) Kottayam: Kottayam Dalit Centre for Social and Cultural Initiatives.
5. Nair Service Society, *Administrative Report 2009-10*, Changanacherry: Nair Service Society.
6. Padmanabha Menon K.P., 1933, *History of Kerala, Vol.III* (Cochin: Government Press.
7. Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal, (1992) *Kerala Charithram*, Sukapuram: Vallathol Vidhyapeedom.
8. Ramachandran Nair R., (1976) *Social Structure and Political Development in Kerala Trivandrum: The Kerala Academy of Political Science*.
9. Robin Jeffrey, (1976) *The Decline of Nayar Dominance, Society and Politics in Travancore (1847-1908)* New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
10. Sanal Mohan P., 2005, "Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala", *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 28.
11. Suresh Thoompunkal, 2008, *Sree Kumara Darsanavum Dalit Vishayangalum*, Kottayam: Swathy Books.
12. Zachariah K.C., 2006, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala, Demographic and Socio Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited.
13. Zachariah K.C., Mathew E.T. and Irudaya Rajan S., 1999, *Impact of Migration on Kerala's Economy and Society*, Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies 1999