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Rani Gowry Lakshmi Bai: Abolition of slavery in Travancore

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Abstract

Slavery the terrible evil, that existed in Kerala particularly in Travancore even from the early period of her history. It is in fact a universal evil. As far as the origin of slavery is concerned with the beginning of the caste system in Travancore. Generally people were categorised as Brahman, Kshetriya, vaishiyas and Sudras. Of these the Sudras were considered as the Dalits and might have been reduced to the status of slaves. From here slavery began to develop in Travancore. Slavery and Slave trade are common in that period. In the early period of human life slavery might have had its crude and primitive nature. The main reason for the so called situation is lack of education that reduced their thinking capacity. In some areas of Travancore there were some kinds of badge used by the Dalit people for showing them as slaves. For example pulayas of Kollam used ornaments, made out of stones and metals. They had no right to use gold and silver. Generally these ornaments were known as "Kallumala". These kallumala were absolutely the symbol of slavery. many social reformers came forward for eliminating this slavery. But unfortunately they were failed to eliminate completely. The arrival of missionaries marked a turning point for the abolition of slavery in Travancore, particularly the works of lady Missionaries like Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Mault among the slaves. For this purpose they concluded many treatises, particularly after the discussion with Rani Gowry Lakshmi bai. The treaties of 1795 and 1805 played a leading role in this respect. At the same time the contribution of Rani Gowry lakshmi bai's contribution is everlasting and ever remembering. For saving the dalit from the state of slave she introduced number of reforms. By the proclamation of 1812, Rani gowry lekshmi bai issued a notification to the abolition of slavery. In short in this article i intended to give a clear picture about the slavery, abolition of slavery and contribution of Rani Gowry Lakshmi bai. anyhow we know that slavery and slave trade existed even still in different part of the world. So in that sense we blessed with the abolition of slavery.

Keywords: Slavery, slave trade, kallumala, badge, evil

Introduction

Slavery is the worst concept in society. From time memorial itself many social reformers try to eliminate these evils in the society. In this respect the role of Rani Gowry Leksmi bai was really appreciable one. As a lady she took a courageous effort. She was the maharani of Travancore from 1810 till 1813 and Regent from 1813 till her death in 1815 for her son Swathi Thirunal Rama varma. It is true that she was the only Queen of Travancore to have used in her own right for two years before becoming a regent. She was born in 1791 to Princess Attham Thirunal, senior Rani of Attingal of the Travancore Royal Family, adopted sister of Maharajah Balarama varma. Similarly the Maharanis of Travancore styled as the "Ranis of Attingal". Anyhow gowry Lakshmi bai was one of the most popular Queens and introduced several reforms in the state. Before her accretion the Travancore ruled by the unpopular ruler Maharaja Bala Rama Varma. During his period Travancore faced number of external problems, revolts and unnecessary battles and intrigues, including the most important revolt of Velu Tampi Dalawa. Dalava died in 1811. Unfortunately at the death of Maharaja, Gowry Lekshmi bai, the senior Rani of Attingal was nearly twenty years of age. Similarly there were no eligible male members in the family which meant she must have to take responsibility of Travancore and run the administration till the birth of a heir. But her accession was not very easy because a member from the Mavelikkara branch of royal family, a distant cousin, Prince kerala Varma who was the pet of previous ruler, staked a claim on the throne which was anything but substantiated. The Raja sought the help of British Resident. Anyhow, finally Gowry Bai made the Regent Maharani of Travancore in 1811.

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After entering in to administration she introduced number of reforms. During that time Travancore contained large number of Devaswoms or Temple Corporations that that held large areas of land and controlled most of the important and wealthy temples in the country. These officials were absolutely under corruption and mismanagement and Rani decided to eliminate these corruption and brought all these under government control. The most remarkable contribution of Rani was the abolition of slavery.

Origin of slavery

Many factors responsible for the origin of slavery in Travancore. As we know that the early history of Travancore was fluctuating. The social condition was also worse in this time. In Travancore there were number people considered as slaves, particularly they belongs to the communities like pulaya, paraya, panar etc. The interesting factor is that during second chera empire [800-1102] the pulayas enjoyed high status as like the upper caste. The Pulayanar Kottai of Trivandrum was the center of Pulaya ruler who established his control over the surrounding parts. Regarding this we get many evidence from inscriptions. It is noted that the pulaya princess kotha by name is said to have ruled over Kothamangalam of Nedumangad taluk. From this we understand that she enjoyed her power to control people. But in course of time this community lost its power, and reduced to the status of slaves. The arrival of Brahmins from North were responsible to create caste and barriers, and created a section of people known as slaves. Naturally they established their supremacy over the land as well as the people of various region of Travancore. At first the original inhabitants of Travancore raised opposition against this kind of atrocities. This would create many problems in Travancore. Brahmins claimed their superiority over the inhabitants of Travancore. And they introduced as strategy that those who support them elevated to a good position and those who oppose them reduced to a situation of slave. Naturally it destroyed the harmony of social life for several centuries and paved the way for the introduction of inequalities based on casteism. Thus in short the caste system existed in Travancore.

Many factors responsible for the the growth of slavery in Travancore. Most of the caste below the Nadars and Ezhavas, such as pulayas, Parayas, Paravas, Kuravas and Vettuvans were generally regarded as slaves. Generally the wars and conquest between petty chieftains and prince were always followed by the capture of the vanquished. It is true that these vanquished were afterwards made slaves. Pathetically during the time of famine the parents used to sell their children for petty sums of money to work in the houses or in the fields of the rich. Naturally later they were converted as slaves by these rich people. Similarly women of higher caste, in case of relation with men of low caste, were invariably reduced to the position of slave. This was clearly depicted in the book of Francis day "The Land of Perumals".

In that time there exist a custom known as "Pula Pedi" also pushed many into slavery. Similarly the debtors who could not pay loans sold themselves to creditors and served them as slaves till their liabilities over. It is true that in a caste dominated society there was no value for individuals. The Brahmins occupied the top position in the society; they claimed descend from Brahma who created them from his head, while the low castes were created from his feet. This was the situation in ancient time. Even the Rajas of Travancore sold the members of the defeated kings family as slaves. Some evidence shows that the women and children of

eight Knights who were extirpated in 1732 were handed over to fisherman as slaves. In addition to this another source of supply of slaves consisted of the high caste female who were exposed to punishments when detected in immorality or breach of caste rules and regulations. By checking the caste rule we can understand that, Brahmin women who lived with a low caste man immediately become the untouchable and naturally she become the slave of the ruler. Even if the Nair women who violated the rules of their community were liable to sold by the sovereign when they came for transgressions before her relations. Moreover by taking advantage of the economic sufferings of the poor Dalit people the slave traders seduced the people, purchased them and exported them to any other parts of the world. Kuravas were another set of slaves in Travancore sometimes they claimed higher status over pulayas and parayas.

Method of occupying slaves

For transferring the people in Travancore they followed peculiar custom, the first was the "jennum" or sale, by which the slave property of the master. And the value of the slave was given and the property of the slave was transferred to anew master, so it was the duty of new master to look after the slaves in the same manner as done by the former master. Another method was "kanam" or montage. its procedure was that the proprietor would get two thirds of the value of the slaves. Besides, he was entitled to get a small quantity of rice yearly as a token of his partial claim over the slaves. At the same time he could reclaim and recover the slaves on repayment of the money that he had borrowed. And no one force him to pay any interest. Similarly a slave died while he was in the custody of the new master, that master responsible for returning a slave of equal value. The third way of obtaining slave was by letting them for Pattam or rent. The annual hire was eight Panams for a man slave and four Panams for for a woman. The second and their tenures were highly abominable for the person who exacted the labour and furnished the subsistence of slave. All we know that the slave not received no kinds of education at all. The house of slave popularly known as "Madam", which means hut and their children were popularly known as "monkeys". The slave feared to look at the face of their mater and speak freely. Even at the time of their speech the slave had to place the hand over the mouth lest the breath should go forth and pollute the person. During this time different type of tax imposed upon the slave. A special tax imposed upon the slaves on their marriage and on special occasion they were squeeze of their hard earnings. And the slaves were compelled to pay a tax for the heir they grew, and moustache they had. Shamefully to say that even the women should pay a tax called the breast tax. Even though the government did not take any necessary step to ameliorate their sufferings. By exploiting the situation the officials too tried to extract much from them and did not take anything for the welfare of slaves. The upper caste considered the slaves as their property and their position was less than that of animals. In later periods the masters used their slaves in field and kept them away from their houses. The masters never allow the slaves to touch them. Even death punishment was given if they happened to touch accidentally. If a pulaya wanted to marry he had to convey his desire to his master, who however was bound to meet the expenses of marriage. Similarly as long as the wife remained with the husband, she worked for the master of husband. All children of slave belonged to the control of their master. At the same time the husband wanted to meet his wife he should seek the

permission of their master. The husband, wife and children brought to the market like cattle and sold or auctioned without kindness. And in the fields when they were at work the slaves starved and lodged like buffalos. They had to work without rest from morning to night under the scorching heat of the sun for rice and that too was kept at a distance. Thus in a caste dominated society the upper caste had the right to sell or kill the slaves. In addition to the pulayas another category of slaves is that Parayas. Like the other slaves they also maintained by their masters who extracted labour from them. In addition to these the Vettuvans were hunters who belonged to the slave caste and there were several denominations and sub-division among them. The value of a Vettuvan women was very low as compared with that of many other slaves. The upper caste always commit many atrocities over the slaves. We already said that the slaves had to observe certain approved distance in their dealings with higher caste people. They had no right to travel through public roads, no right to enter in to market, public places etc. they were strictly banns from entering the market for selling their goods. Similarly an agrestic slave belonged to the lowest strata in the Hindu hierarchy they were not only untouchables but also unapproachable too. They were considered as non-caste Hindus. According to Barbosa, if a Nayar women was touched by Pulayas she was made an outcaste for life. Similarly the system of unapproachability was also very sever in Travancore. The restriction imposed by the caste rule on the low caste was absolutely brutal. It is true that they had to keep a stipulated distance from the high caste people in proportion to their stage in the social order.

As far as the rules of feudal lords of South Travancore is concerned it is so crude and primitive. They were selfish and they exercised untold cruelties upon their peasants. Even the peasants did not have the right to worship in the temple of the high class. Usually in temple there were regular scales of distance beyond which certain caste must remain at a prescribed distance. Similarly the caste producing distance varied, so also the distance to be kept to avoid temple pollution also varied from caste to caste. During this period the caste people were the custodian of all arable as well as waste lands. the economy of the country always centred around the agriculture. But for a slave the possession of the piece of land was a day dream. They always worked to cultivate the land and take the yield to their masters. In spite of the dedicated social service rendered by them they could get in return was "contempt, neglects, and indifference" from their masters.

During this time Marumakkathayam system existed in Kerala and the people had to pay an amount as fee called Adiyara. It amounts to one fourth of the value of the property. naturally this system also create sever hardship to the people. for them it is difficult to pay a fee to conduct and arrange marriage. There exist a particular type of tax known as "Kuppakkache" in the nature of pole tax was imposed on Parayas and ezhavas in the Taluk of Thovalai. It was only after 14 century that the condition of people become more pathetic. Any how the condition of slaves was more pathetic. It was after the arrival of missionaries that their witnessed great change in the life of dalits. Missionaries present an appeal to Madras Government, so with the instruction of Madras Government Travancore government decided to pass an Act for the emancipation of the slaves. Here arises the significant role of Rani Gowry Lakshmi Bai. She directly observed the situation of the people, by seeing that she feel so sad. Thus after a deep thinking Rani issued two proclamation in 1815. On the basis

of this the very first declaration said that Christians were exempted from taxation, another proclamation said that the Christians were exempted from forced labour namely-oozhiam. But this proclamation cannot eliminate the entire problem of society because large number of low class Hindus suffered the same as before. The opposition of the people were absolutely futile. The Christian Missionaries came forward for the rescue of Dalit.

The sincere effort of two lady Missionaries like Mrs. Mead and Mrs Maulk marked a turning point in the life of Dalits. They started Boarding school at different parts for admitting slave girls. Their chief aim was to secure freedom for the slaves. For this they paid the cost of the slaves to their masters. For freeing them from the bondage. But some masters refuse to accept money because their was to retain their slaves. During this time Rani also felt the necessity of saving the poor people from the hand of upper caste. Slave owners oppressed the slave too much and so they protested for their rights and privileges. By the treaties of 1795 and 1805 that were concluded between English East India Company and Travancore, the company occupied most decisive political power. This empowered the British with the right to interfere in the political affairs of Travancore. During this time Col. Munro became the Resident Diwan of Travancore, he know very well that the whole Travancore was under the grip of evil slavery, which was an unfortunate institution. It is interesting that he maintained good relation with Rani Gowry Lakshmi Bai [1811-1815] from him Rani learn the pathetic condition of the people of Travancore. As a result she introduced many reforms which helped the slaves to get certain privileges denied to them. So by the proclamation of 1812, Rani Lakshmi Bai introduced a notification for the abolition of slavery. On 21 vrichikam 987 this proclamation was published. The theme of proclamation is that, "with reference to the natives and foreigners who for the sake of profit, buy at a cheaper rate, the boys and girls of several low caste people of this country and sell them for a higher prices, take them to a distant places and pay tolls at sea ports and thus make a regular bargain of them. As this is really inhuman and disgraceful custom, which ought to be checked, we here by noticed that no person shall, for purpose of cultivation buy or sell pulayas, kuravas, malayars, vetars, pariah and others in mortgage, janmam or pattam, as is done in many places or arear title deeds with the prominent land holders of the place concerning them or engaged such people for cultivation and that no people of any other caste shall beyond this natural customs, buy or sell children of their own caste or pay toll to the sercar. if any one raise his voice against this proclamation and has a regular dealing of the slaves shall be subjected to sever punishment, their property should confiscated and they themselves banished from the country".

As a result of this many taxes such as 'Talayara,' 'Valayara' were also abolished by proclamation of 1815. In the same year another proclamation issued the taboo imposed on dalits in carrying umbrellas, lights and a knife chained with gold and in wearing ear-rings was removed. Even though there exist the opposition of upper caste. Unfortunately the proclamation was not a complete success, because slaves continued to be bought and sold. Even the government itself owned number of slaves. Though the effort taken by Rani Lakshmi Bai was really appreciated they indirectly aimed at the retention of slavery in Travancore for future generation. Missionaries continued their effort to eliminate slavery from society. They submitted series of memorandum and petition to eliminate the grievances of slaves and passed the Indian

Government to find out an early solution to this social evil. However, the government also felt that the earlier proclamation could neither be abolished nor contained; hence, a fresh legislation was issued in 1843. It was after the death of Rani Lakshmi Bai, she handed over the administration to her son. Like the Rani Gowry Bai the Raja also worked for the welfare of the people. Even though an Act passed by the Rani it is not able to find a lasting solution for abolishing slavery, but at the same time it was a great effort done by Rani as a lady, it gave great inspiration to others.

Act of 1843

Government of India felt that the proclamation of Rani Lakshmi Bai was not a complete solution for the removal of slavery, in a sense it is ineffective. So the Viceroy and Council decided to enact another act in 1843 for the emancipation of the slaves. During this time Travancore was ruled by Raja, after Rani Lakshmi Bai, so the missionaries send more petition to Raja, for the emancipation of slaves. finally in 1847 the missionaries submitted a memorandum to Utram Thirunal Maharaja portraying the plight of the slaves for consideration. It was under with this petition that the demand for the abolition of slavery in Travancore began. Under this circumstance General Cullen was the Resident of Travancore who forwarded the memorandum to the maharaja for necessary action. So on behalf of Maharaja, the Diwan replied to the Resident that "his Highness would never fail to give his attention to the unfortunate class of people referred in the missionaries' petition. At the same time the resident was not satisfied by the reply sent by the Dewan. Anyhow the Missionaries continued their effort to compel the Resident. Finally in 1849 passed a memorandum by Dewan of Travancore, "Recommending certain measures for improving the condition of slaves and for the gradual abolition of slavery in the state."

In his memorandum to the Dewan, the Resident requested the Dewan to observe the provision of the act passed by the Indian government. And he also pointed out some suggestions regarding the abolition of slavery. Finally the Travancore authority expressed their willingness to look into this vital issue and they prepared a draft proclamation and sent it to the Resident. But at the same time the Resident found that the draft proclamation was inadequate. Finally on 20 November 1852, the Dewan sent a revised draft largely observing the guidelines laid down by the Resident in the memorandum dated 13 March 1849 and submitted it for the approval of the Resident. Similarly in September 1853, the Travancore authorities prepared another draft of proclamation and the copies were sent to the diwan of Cochin and the Resident of their consideration. The Resident "perfectly approved" the same.

However the proclamation of 1853 was not free from drawbacks. The drawback of the 1853 proclamation was so glaring, the Resident wrote a series of letters to the Dewan of Travancore. In one of the letter he requested the Government to discontinue the tax levied on the sarkar slaves. In addition to this in another letter Resident mentioned the cruel practice of selling free men as slaves. But unfortunately there witnessed an indifferent attitude of Travancore Government. As a solution for this the Resident suggested the re-publication of the proclamation of 1853 by her Highness, the Maharani for the formation of another proclamation which is more definite than this. For clear the matter the Government arranged many discussions. Finally on June 1855 issued another proclamation, the aim of this proclamation was the

complete abolition of slavery. Similarly the final blow to slavery in India was struck by section 370, 371 of the Indian Penal Code, which came force on January 1862, on the bases of this proclamation any person found to possess slaves became punishable.

Conclusion

In short in the history of abolition of slavery in Travancore, is closely associated with the untiring and persistent efforts of missionaries. At same time we never forget about the role played by Rani Lakshmi Bai. The British Resident of Travancore like Colonel Muro and General Cullen openly interfered in the administration. The effort taken by Rani Lakshmi Bai is really memorable. As a lady she faced many obstacles. any how this gave great inspiration to the coming rulers. The role of Utram Thirunal, the Raja of Travancore also played a leading role in this respect. He being a symbol of the period in which he lived, wanted to preserve the status as far as possible. It is true the Travancore authority know that the abolition of slavery would surely disturb the social balance cemented and fortified by age old customs and institutions. Any how the effort taken by Rani Lakshmi Bai added fuel to the burning fire, and finally this resulted the abolition of slavery from Travancore. the Proclamation of 1815 also equally important, because due to this act the famous Talayara and valayara were abolished from Kerala society. The act of 1843 is also assumed special significance. Only because of the implementation of this act we can see a great change and relief from the system of slavery. Finally on 1852 another act passed by the government and it witnessed the complete abolition of slavery.

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