

Distress Relief and Social Reform in Malabar: The Role of A. V. Thakkar

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Abstract: There was a spate of social reform movements in Kerala in the early decades of the 20th century. These were initiated mainly by religious and spiritual leaders. A few communal organizations also arose during this period and sought to cure the ills from which their particular community was suffering. Besides religious zeal, they were motivated by progressive views. They fought against superstitious practices as well as caste based social discrimination. Despite all these eventualities, Malabar was rather insulated by these progressive developments. Following the rebellion of 1921, Malabar became a center of national attention, as the entire area was thoroughly devastated by the aftermath of the riot, socially, culturally, and economically, and paralyzed politically. Great personalities associated with several service organizations flocked to the area to conduct relief, reconstruction, and reform activities on a massive scale.

Keywords: Malabar Rebellion, Distress Relief, Reconstruction, Social Reform, SIS/DMRT.

INTRODUCTION

There was a spate of social reform movements in Kerala in the early decades of the 20th century. These were initiated mainly by religious and spiritual leaders. A few communal organizations also arose during this period and sought to cure the ills from which their particular community was suffering. Besides religious zeal, they were motivated by progressive views [1]. They fought against superstitious practices as well as caste based social discrimination. Many of the reformers like Vagbhatananda, Ayyankali, and Vaikunda Swamikal possessed extraordinary revolutionary spirit because they had to fight both against the conventions and traditions of their society as well as against authorities. Eventually, their movements had to be aligned with political developments. Vagbhatananda for example strongly supported the peasant's movements of north Malabar, as Ayyankali did for South Kerala because they believed that the caste system and related social evils were in part responsible for the slavery of the peasants.

Despite all these eventualities, it was quite surprising that these progressive developments rather insulated the Ernad taluk of Malabar. Though, the largest of the taluks in Malabar, Ernad was quite backward educationally. Extremely fertile and beautiful in landscape Ernad was typical for its ignorance, superstitions, social evils, poverty and fanaticism. It had been the locale for about fifty riots by peasants [2]. Here, earlier the landlord-tenant relationship was a feudal one. Gradually, following British regulations, the landlords were empowered with the right to evict tenants. The inevitable result of this exploitative socio-economic order perpetuated both by the British and by the landlords was the steady and continuous pauperization of the people, causing widespread unrest among the peasants, over and above all the social inequalities and heavy taxation [3].

In the meantime, the nationalist movement was gaining momentum in Kerala. Following the resolutions in the 1920 Nagpur Congress, there began a Non-cooperation movement in Malabar also. During this period when the Congress decided to take up the Khilafat movement along with the Non-Cooperation, it had a great impact in Malabar as was evident from the large-scale participation of people in both movements [4]. Even in the early years of the 20th century tenant protests were in vogue in Malabar. In the Malabar District Conferences, organized from 1916 onwards, the tenants were demanding a resolution passed on the landlord-tenant relationship. But that did not happen as late as 1920 when in the

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District Conference held at Manjeri, for the first time, a resolution was passed demanding legislation to regulate landlord-tenant relationships [5].

The next important political event was the first Kerala State (Pradesh) Conference of the Congress held at Ottapalam in April 1921, presided over by T. Prakasam. Representatives from various parts of Kerala attended the conference. It was therefore said that since the period of the Perumals, Kerala was trying to become one single unit under the Congress leadership. Naturally this sense of unity and resurgence was quite antagonistic to the Empire. From the very beginning of this movement, the British Government in India arrested its foremost leaders like Madhavan Nair, U. Gopala Menon, Ponnadath Moideen Koya along with Mr. Yakoob Hassan who was touring in Malabar in connection with the Khilafat campaign and imprisoned them at Kannur jail for 6 months conviction [6]. Even as the peoples' excitement could not be let down by such measures, at the venue of the Ottapalam conference its leader P. Ramunni Menon and a few workers were brutally manhandled for no obvious reason. The government's plan was a dual policy by which they wanted to suppress a section of the people by a reign of terror on the one hand and, on the other to provoke another section to outrages so that they could be suppressed on that ground. The Government was thus able to divide the people who were for a time unified in the Khilafat-Swaraj campaigns. This divisive strategy of the government aggravated the already prevailing tension between the landlords and tenants, sharpened the antagonism against the government's oppressive policies, and eventually paved the way for the Malabar rebellion, also called Mappila, or Khilafat riot [7].

The Malabar rebellion, which broke out by the end of August 1921 continued for about 6 months till the end of February 1922. It had spread over an area of 2000 square miles about 1/5 of the district of Malabar, and a population of nearly 2 million souls. However, according to historians it was difficult to characterize the uprising solely as freedom struggle or agrarian mutiny or religious (communal) conflict. It was viewed as a complex upheaval, a combination of the features of a revolt against alien rule, a violent protest against oppressive land relations, and a struggle for the establishment of political power based on religious tonette rebellion was characterized as "the most serious rebellion that India had to face since the mutiny" [8]. The rebellion reduced the life of the entire area to widespread destitution and untold miseries.

An important role in the relief operations was played by voluntary organizations like YMCA, Aryasamaj (Lahore), Seva Sadan Society (Poona) and the Servants of India Society. In the first phase of the relief work these agencies worked separately with different agenda. But later, with a view to bring about uniformity of work and activities and, to achieve greater efficiency, their relief work merged into Malabar Central Relief Committee (MCRC). The Servants of India Society along with these organizations and other bodies offered workers for the organization and administration of relief and for the collection of funds [9]. The Society's work in Kerala was marked by profound sense of dedication and unfailing commitment for the cause of the destitute, downtrodden and the deprived, irrespective of caste, creed and community biases, and delivered in the true secular spirit, under the supervision and direct involvement of selfless personalities like G.K. Devadhar, R. Suryanarayana Rao, A.V. Thakkar, V.S. Sreenivasa Sastri, V.R Nayanar, and Mrs. V.R.Nayanar. They were all guided and inspired by the precepts of their master G.K.Gokhale, the founder of The Servants of India Society, and the ideals of the Society as laid down in its Constitution, viz., (1) creating among the people by example and by precept, a deep and passionate love of the Motherland, seeking its highest fulfillment in service and sacrifice; (2) organizing the work of political education and agitation, basing it on a careful study of public questions, and strengthening generally the public life of the country; (3) promoting relations of cordial Its goodwill and co-operation among the different communities (4) assisting educational movements, especially those for the education of women, the education of backward classes, and industrial and scientific education; (5) helping forward the industrial development of the country; and (6) the elevation of the depressed classes [10]. Though politically dubbed as "Moderates" the Servants of India Society founded by Gokhale was described as "the power house of India's national movement" constituted by a band of "ascetic pilgrims of politics" who were to function as a cadre of "political missionaries" on account of the missionary zeal, determination and commitment to the cause of the nation which its members very astutely practiced. Being inherently constitutionalists and opposed to agitational politics, Gokhale was considered along with Count Cavour, the Italian statesman as "masters of the possible" [11]. According to him young men with intellectual capacity, devotion to duty and mental elevation would work as "national missionaries" infused with a spirit of self sacrifice. Thakkar's life-long association with SIS vividly illustrates the deep impact of Gokhale's ideals in shaping his vision. While a young man the example of Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Justice Mahadeva Govind Ranade influenced Amritlal so much that they were almost gods for him [12].

Through his constant engagement in the activities of the SIS/DMRT, and by his periodic presence both as a leader and a dedicated worker, A.V. Thakkar, had greatly energized the social reform work of Malabar. Amirtlal Vithaldas Thakkar (popularly known as 'Thakkar Bappa') was born on 26 November 1869 at Bhavnagar in Sourashtra region of Gujarat in a middle class family as the son of Vithaldas Thakkar and Mulibai. After receiving his L.C.E. (Licentiate in Civil Engineering) from Poona Engineering College in 1890, he worked as an engineer in Porbander and later went out of India to serve in laying the first railway track in Uganda (East Africa). Then he served as chief engineer in Sangli State for some time and later was employed in Bombay municipality as an engineer. There he saw the miserable conditions of those scavengers who had to dispose of the refuse of the whole town of Bombay. He was shocked to see the filthy colonies where

the sweepers had to live and made a firm resolve to devote the rest of his life to alleviate the lot of these people. It was his friend Dr. Hari Shrikrishna Deva who introduced Thakkar to Gokhale on November 13, 1905 when the latter was on a visit to Sangli, and was then just thinking of setting up the Society. He was also ardently devoted to Gandhi, who considered himself a “non-member member” of the Servants of India Society, owing to his respect for Gokhale, whom he considered as his political Guru. In the same manner, Thakkar could be considered a 'non-member' of the Gandhi Seva Sangh, and followed his directions in all matters. His concern for the poor and destitute earned for him the title “Deenabandhu” [13]. While working in Bombay, Thakkar also met his third guru-Gopal Krishna Deodhar. This devoted social worker founded Seva Sadan in Poona, and was a member of the Servants of India Society and had established its branch in Bombay. Bapa used to go to him to discuss problems relating to uplift of the depressed communities [14].

In 1914, he resigned and became a member of Servants of India Society and took up social work. His attachment to the poor led to a growing aversion for wealth and he spurned opportunities of great financial success. In 1920 he did an excellent job as a relief worker among the famine-stricken areas of Orissa, a province of chronic drought. Till 1932 he was closely associated with several welfare and relief organizations of Gujarat and Assam. An ardent advocate for the rights of the untouchables and the tribals *he was deeply committed to the cause of their upliftment*. A special term, ‘Adivasis’ was coined by Thakkar in 1930s for the purpose of classifying the forest dwellers of India who were kept out from the mainstream, and so continued to be downtrodden.

After joining the SIS he soon engaged himself in the famine relief work in the Western Province, and other activities like co-operative work, education of the Bhangis, welfare of Khadi workers and prohibition campaigns. His work among the Bhils was much admired. He founded the Bhil Seva Mandal in 1922 to elevate the condition of the Bhils and other aboriginals of India [15]. He was president of the Bhavnagar State Subjects’ Conference in 1926 and in 1928 he presided over the Kathiawad States People’s Conference. During the civil disobedience movement of 1930, Thakkar was arrested and sentenced to 6 months prison with hard labour. But he was released after 40 days. He founded the Gond Sevak Sangh (later renamed Vanavasi Seva Mandal) in 1944. The *Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh* was founded on 24 October 1948 on his initiative. He also served as Secretary and Trustee of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Fund [16]. Thakkar visited forests in Assam, rural Bengal, drought affected areas of Orissa, Bhil belts in Gujarat and Harijan areas of Saurashtra, Mahar areas of Maharashtra, untouchables in Madras, hilly areas of Chhota Nagpur, desert of Tharparkar, foothills of Himalaya, coastal areas of Travancore to undertake his mission of empowering Harijans.

As the SIS was opposed to political works like Satyagraha, Thakkar chose to work in the area of Harijan service, which was quite in tune with the ideals of the Society. When Gandhiji established the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932, Thakkar was chosen as its general secretary. In one of his appeals for the Harijan cause in 1939 Mahatma Gandhi called him affectionately “Bappa” meaning “Father of Harijans” in recognition of his unstinted and dedicated services for the cause of the untouchables of India. In Tamil Nadu, Thakkar was fondly known as “Appa Thakkar”, as he was instantly answering questions thrown to him, as a know-all, a term which later came to connote any wise and knowledgeable person. He travelled with Gandhi in 1933-34 throughout India to convey the messages of the Sangh and to organize its units in various parts of the country. The Malabar branch of the Sangh was formed in 1932 itself, under the leadership of K. Kelappan [17].

In 1935 Thakkar visited Kerala to gain a firsthand knowledge of the condition of the life of Harijans and other depressed classes there [18]. In 1941 he visited Calicut. In his speech given as a reply to a commendation given to him, he exhorted that a good amount of work remains to be done among the “thottis” and the tribals [19]. He further gave suggestions to reconstitute the Malabar Branch of the Sangh at a meeting held at Payyanur presided over by V.R. Nayanar (the Hon. Secretary of the DMRT) and attended by members like K.A. Damodara Menon, P. Sankunni Nambiar, M. Chadayan and Swami Anandathirtha.

Thakkar's next visit to Kerala was in 1943, when the condition of Malabar was quite distressful due to cholera. He inaugurated at Gopalapuram a building meant to accommodate the children of cholera victims. He asked the teachers of the Gopalapuram School (Gokhale School) to take special care of the orphaned children [20]. He then proceeded to Muttom near Pazhayangadi and inaugurated an orphanage for the Muslim children. The Muslims of Muttom accorded him a grand welcome. He reminded the people that more than thirty thousand people lost their lives in Malabar due to cholera. Again, with Nayanar he proceeded to Mathamangalam near Payyanur. He attended the annual day celebrations of an Ayurvedic dispensary, which was working there. In one year nearly 10,000 people were given treatment from this dispensary. He made arrangements for the education of Paniya boys of Thalolkadu area. He also distributed dhothies to the Harijans and Paniyas who gathered there. Another meeting was held at Mathamangalam elementary school in which M. Chadayan, Swami Anandathirtha and K.G. Nambiar spoke. Thakkar Bappa and party then stayed as the guests of Vengayil Nayanar of Kanayi.

In 1948 he came to Malabar to visit the Nayanar Memorial Paniya Colony built at Chelod near Nilambur. He was accompanied by his Secretary, Ram Saran, DMRT Honorary Secretary, L.N. Rao and Shyamji Sundardas. He was satisfied with the work done there. Thakkar Bappa was a man who devoted his entire life for the cause of the down trodden- the untouchables and aboriginals. He was inspired by the ideals and principles of Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Mahatma Gandhi. When he decided to associate himself with the SIS in 1914, Gandhi rightly described him as a loan of Harijan Sevak Sangh to the SIS [21].

CONCLUSION

The Servants of India Society through the aegis of the Devdhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust (DMRT) launched a large number of programs in these respects. One of its leaders A.V. Thakkar played a very significant role in the activities of the DMRT. However the invaluable services rendered by men like A.V. Thakkar through SIS/DMRT have not been properly considered by historians. This paper is an attempt to understand the role of A.V. Thakkar in the distress relief and social reform activities in Malabar in the wake of the rebellion of 1921.

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