



VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: EDUCATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF MINORITY REFORMERS

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Abstract

This paper highlights the impactful work of reformers from minority or marginalized communities in the field of education. These reformers challenged traditional paradigms and worked to make education more inclusive and equitable for marginalized communities. By advocating for the rights and empowerment of their communities, minority reformers contribute significantly to making education more accessible and equitable. Through their efforts, they promoted access to education, advocated for the rights of marginalized groups, and contributed to breaking down barriers to social mobility. By amplifying marginalized voices and perspectives, these reformers played a crucial role in shaping more inclusive educational landscapes, fostering greater equity and empowerment for marginalized communities in the process. This paper analyses the contributions in education made by three social reformers from the marginalized/minority groups.

Key words: Education, marginalised groups, social change

INTRODUCTION

. Historically, Kerala has maintained a significant lead in education among Indian states. The state excels in various social indicators compared to other Indian states, such as high literacy rates, increased student enrolment, greater representation of girls and students from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in schools, and lower student dropout rates. Kerala's distinguished position in education is not a recent development resulting from a sudden surge in educational activities. Rather, it is the outcome of a long-standing tradition of progressive policies implemented by the state's rulers from early times, coupled with the intellectual endeavors of its people over several centuries.

The historical framework

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kerala was deeply entrenched in a rigid caste system that perpetuated significant social, economic, and political disparities. The caste system created a profound chasm between the high castes and the lower castes, fostering an environment of polarized thinking along caste and creed lines. Each caste considered itself



superior to others, maintaining strict social distances and hierarchies. The high castes dominated land ownership, and occupations were strictly determined based on caste affiliations. The caste system held immense sway, denying large sections of the population access to education. This system perpetuated deep-seated inequalities and restricted the social mobility and basic rights of lower-caste individuals, shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala during that era.

In the context of the caste system in Kerala, restrictions to education were a significant aspect of the oppression faced by marginalized communities. The caste system denied access to education to large sections of people, particularly those from lower castes. In this situation, social reformers from marginalized communities played a crucial role in challenging the status quo and advocating for the rights of the marginalized to access education and other basic rights.

Importance of the study

Social reformers from marginalized communities have played a pivotal role in challenging systemic inequalities, advocating for social justice, and empowering their communities to achieve dignity and equality. In various contexts, these reformers have worked to dismantle oppressive structures based on caste, class, gender, and other forms of social stratification. Through movements, writings, speeches, and grassroots activism, they have sought to bring about transformative changes in societal attitudes and institutional practices.

Role of Social Reformers from Marginalized Communities:

Their efforts have contributed significantly to shaping discussions on social justice, equality, and human rights in the country. Their roles include the following-

Challenging caste-based restrictions: Social reformers like Chavara Kuriakose, Ayyankali, and Pandit Karuppan were instrumental in challenging the oppressive caste-based restrictions that hindered education, social mobility, and dignity for marginalized communities in Kerala, India. Their efforts were part of broader movements aimed at achieving social justice and equality.

Empowerment through Education: They emphasized the critical role of education in empowering marginalized communities. They recognized that education was a key pathway to breaking the cycle of oppression, achieving social mobility, and gaining dignity in a



society structured by caste hierarchies. These reformers worked towards making education accessible to marginalized communities, challenging restrictions that barred them from educational opportunities.

Promoting Social Equality: Promoting social equality involves working towards a society where all individuals have equal opportunities, rights, and dignity regardless of their background, caste, gender, religion, or other characteristics. Social reformers from marginalized communities often focus on promoting social equality by challenging systemic inequalities and advocating for the rights and empowerment of their communities.

Empowering Marginalized Communities: Through their efforts, social reformers from marginalized communities helped empower these communities to assert their rights, challenge oppression, and seek avenues for social mobility. Their activities involve enabling these communities to have control over their lives, access to resources, and the ability to make decisions that affect them. It aims to address the power imbalances and systemic barriers that keep these communities in disadvantaged positions.

The work of these social reformers was instrumental in paving the way for greater access to education and social justice for marginalized communities in Kerala. This paper analyses the contributions in education of three social reformers from Kerala -Chavara Kuriakose, Ayyankali, Pandit Karuppan- who shared some common goals and approaches in their work, despite their different backgrounds and specific focuses. All three were concerned with the welfare and upliftment of marginalized communities in Kerala. Ayyankali focused on Dalit rights, Pandit Karuppan worked through literature and education for social reform, and Chavara Kuriakose contributed to education and social upliftment. They emphasized education as a key tool for empowerment and social mobility for marginalized communities. Each of these reformers, in their own way, challenged the social inequalities and injustices prevalent in Kerala society during their time.

Chavara Kuriakose Elias-Empowerment through education and compassion

Chavara Kuriakose Elias was a radical and total transformer, not merely a saint confined to the Church and the Christian community, but who shed light and paved new paths for the wider humanity in general. He was an integral transformer who contributed immensely to the overall growth of the 19th century Kerala.

Chavara's Vision for Education



Chavara firmly believed education could bring social change, mobility, and development. He believed that ignorance was the root of all discriminations and that education was the means to wipe it out. He longed for social equality and dignity in a society divided by caste. His vision of education was egalitarian, aiming for education for all irrespective of caste, creed, religion, or sex.

In a society in which people were divided into several castes, he longed for social equality and social dignity. He aimed to achieve this social development through multi faceted tasks-establishing schools, printing books, emanating the role of a teacher and innovator and equally through charitable activities. His educational idea was of an all inclusive nature with a secular character.

Chavara's Initiatives for Education and Empowerment

Chavara established a Sanskrit school in Mannanam in 1846 where students from any caste or religion studied together. He was the first Indian to admit "untouchables" to schools and provide them with Sanskrit education. Soon he established some other schools in the nearby areas and all these were silver stars that spread light in the inner souls of the marginalized sections of the society. His revolutionary proposal to have an educational institution attached to every church was implemented and this pallikoodam movement became the Magna Carta for a revolutionary paradigm shift in the socio-cultural development of Kerala. Those schools became the incubators of a general public in Kerala society irrespective of caste and creed. Chavara provided food to students from poor families to support their intellectual and physical growth.

Chavara advocated for women's education, believing well-trained women were crucial for family sanctity and stability. They were extremely unprivileged, facing religious, social, and economic hardships. They lacked basic rights like education, property inheritance, and freedom of movement. Fr Chavara recognized education's role in empowering women and advocated for its implementation.

Fr Chavara started a printing press in 1846 despite challenges, and this press was the third in Travancore and the first under private ownership in India. It helped disseminate knowledge, literature, and devotional books to the Kerala church. The press led to the publication of Nasrani Deepika, the oldest existing Malayalam newspaper. Through this, people, including



young men and women, gained knowledge in their mother tongue and about the Kerala church and other areas.

Chavara played a crucial role in diminishing caste consciousness in Kerala by admitting children from lower castes to schools. His initiatives helped uplift marginalized and economically weaker sections. Today, Kerala's high literacy rate, high sex ratio, and high Human Development Index are partly attributed to the efforts of visionaries like Chavara. His work continues through his congregations and educational institutions, contributing to Kerala's socio-cultural development.

Ayyankali- fighter for dignity and rights

Among the reformers, the role played by Ayyankali is significant. He was a man from the downtrodden community. Through his fearless actions, he played a vital role in the upliftment of lower caste people in Kerala, particularly the Pulaya community. He was a remarkable social reformer, politician, and leader who fought for the rights and dignity of the oppressed in the princely state of Travancore, Kerala.

Ayyankali realized that lack of education was one of the key reasons for the deplorable conditions of his caste. He emphasized the importance of education for all children, regardless of caste, and worked to improve access to schools for oppressed classes. He recognized the importance of education in empowering marginalized communities and worked to establish schools and educational institutions that were accessible to all. Through his efforts, many lower-caste individuals were able to access education and improve their socio-economic status.

Before Ayyankali's movement, education in Kerala was highly unequal and discriminatory. The education system was dominated by the Brahmins and other upper castes. Ayyankali opened a school in Venganoor for Dalit children since he wanted to open the gates of the public schools for them. The upper castes were against that school, so they destroyed it in the fire. He wanted to send every child to the school. He strongly believed that every child has the right to get educated.

Thus, then Ayyankali started another movement for the right to education of Dalit children. Travancore Government issued an order mandating the admission of Dalit children in the public schools in 1907. A few officials of the government also tried hard to stop that order.



Ayyankali also fought hard to pass that order. That struggle ended after three years when that order was finally released for general people in 1910.

Ayyankali's pioneering efforts in organizing the first strike by agricultural workers in the region marked a significant milestone in the fight for education and rights of the Pulaya community. By demanding education for their children and withdrawing labor from the fields of upper castes, he brought attention to the injustices faced by marginalized communities. A key achievement was his push for government intervention to allow Dalit children to attend public schools.

Pandit Karuppan-Reformer through literature and wisdom

K.P. Karuppan, often referred to as the "Lincoln of Kerala," was a legendary figure dedicated to societal upliftment. Born on March 24, 1885, in Cheranallur near Eranakulam, Karuppan championed the cause of his own community and the Pulaya community. This was particularly challenging given the societal norms of that time, where Pulayas were treated as untouchables by upper-caste Hindus.

Karuppan worked to start schools and establish colonies for the progress of depressed classes. He also persuaded the government to provide scholarships and fee concessions for the education of children from these classes.

K.P. Karuppan wielded his pen like a sword, fighting tirelessly for the rights and upliftment of downtrodden communities and people. He engaged in an unrelenting battle for social redemption, challenging the oppressive caste system that perpetuated inequality and suffering. As a great social reformer, Karuppan utilized various forms of writing—poems, plays, songs, and essays—to advocate for the empowerment of those who had been subjected to physical, mental, spiritual, and moral torment.

Through his literary works and activism, K.P. Karuppan left a lasting impact on the social landscape of Kerala, particularly in advocating for the rights and dignity of the downtrodden. His legacy continues to be celebrated by those whose lives he touched through his tireless efforts for social reform.

CONCLUSION

The contributions of Ayyankali, Kuriakose Elias Chavara, and Pandit K.P. Karuppan were pivotal figures in challenging the societal and educational paradigms in Kerala, India. They



were instrumental in challenging societal and educational norms in Kerala, India, with a focus on empowering marginalized communities. Through their tireless efforts, they contributed significantly to the empowerment of marginalized communities by advocating for education, social justice, and equality. Through their distinct yet complementary efforts—Ayyankali's fight for Dalit access to education, Chavara's promotion of literacy and printing, and Karuppan's literary advocacy for the downtrodden—these reformers challenged existing social paradigms. Their work collectively underscores the transformative power of education in empowering marginalized groups and fostering social change. Their legacies continue to resonate, emphasizing the importance of inclusive education and social justice in creating a more equitable society.

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