

Socio-Cultural Study of Ezhavas in Kerala

**Synopsis submitted to
Madurai Kamaraj University**

**J. Jeba Shyni
Reg. No.:F10010
Full Time Research Scholar
PG & Research Department of History
Government Arts College, Melur**

**Guide & Supervisor
Dr. A. Antony Selvaraj
Associate Professor & Head
PG & Research Department of History
Government Arts College, Melur**



July 2021

SYNOPSIS

Socio-Cultural Study of Ezhavas in Kerala

This study is about the marginalized community named Ezhavas who have been living in the state of Kerala for a long time. Ezhavas, who had long been neglected on various platforms, including society, economy and culture began to rise in the late twentieth century. This study examines how the Ezhavas moved from a neglected position to a slightly higher position on various platforms.

Geography

Kerala is located along the eastern side of the Arabian Sea, at the extreme southwest of the Indian subcontinent. It is encircled by Tamil Nadu on the South and East, and Karnataka on the North. It has a total area of 38,863 square kilometres. The southern part of Kerala was formally known as Venad. The central part of Kerala formed the Cochin State. Malabar which lies in the North of Cochin formed another part of Kerala. In 1956, State Reorganization was brought based on language. So Malayalam speaking areas of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar were formed into one State known as Kerala which came into existence on 1st November 1956.

People

Kerala is an abode of numerous castes. Caste hierarchy was widespread in Kerala. It was discriminated against based on caste and religion. Based on religion, they were divided into Hindus and Non-Hindus. Non-Hindus like Christians, Muslims, Jains and Buddhists were included in this category. But altogether the Hindus, Christians and Muslims remained as majorities. Caste discrimination played

a major role. People were divided into high Caste or Caste Hindus and low Caste or Non-Caste Hindus. The high Caste people were called Savarnas, whereas the low Caste people were known as Avarnas. The Savarnas dominated society and enjoyed several rights. But the Avarnas were denied basic human rights.

The Ezhavas

Among the low Caste Avarnas, Ezhava Community held the top position. The Ezhava community was considered to be a neglected Community and called untouchables. The Ezhavas are Hindus. Though they were Hindus, they were considered Untouchables and even unapproachables. They were not permitted to go near a Nayar, a Brahmin, a Namboodri and the Vellalas. Their traditional occupation was toddy tapping from the coconut and palm trees. During the 20th century, there was a great awakening among the Ezhava Community. The miserable condition of the Ezhavas was brought to light in 1891. The Ezhavas prepared a Memorandum. It was known as “Malayali Memorial”. The Memorial informed the Government about the disabilities of the Ezhavas. In 1895, at the Indian National Social Conference in Pune, Padmanabapillai, one of the leaders of the Ezhava Community raised the issue of the plight of Ezhavas. Sri Narayana Guru, an ascetic brought in revolutionary changes in Ezhava life and thought. The formation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam brought in high-level development in the Ezhava Community. This Organization played a political role before Independence and opposed the Government of Sri C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer and wanted equal rights along with the High Caste Hindus.

The growth of the Ezhava Community was spectacular. The Community which has been considered as Untouchables had grown up to the level of dictating Kerala political affairs. The Ezhava Community excelled in developing the cultural activities of Kerala. Nayars, Christians, Muslims and Ezhavas are the notable Communities in Kerala. Ezhava Community is one of the prominent communities in Kerala. These four Communities are numerically having the same number. Each Community has played an important role in the activities associated with the State. Among the four Communities, Ezhava Community has played the greatest dynamism.

The Ezhavas were one of the downtrodden communities of Kerala. They resembled Nayars in dressing and wearing ornaments. But they were refused to dress as such. Ezhava women were denied the right to cover their bosoms. Heavy taxes were also imposed on them. They were forbidden to worship high caste deities. In other words the Ezhavas were denied basic human rights. They saw social awakening after the advent of Sree Narayana Guru. During the early part of the 20th century, they were influenced by the philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru. The Ezhavas though being poor didn't accept food from the Communities lower than them in social rank. But as days passed by, they have removed this practice. His teachings were responsible for the removal of untouchability from both the minds and lives of people.

Though the Ezhavas were marginalised in society, they developed a great culture. There were renowned physicians and scholars among them. They were well versed in the art of Kalari and they gave their participation in the Travancore army.

The Ezhavas also performed Folk dances like Kthakali, Koothu, Ottam Thullal and Mohiiyattam. Maharaja Swathi Thirunal encouraged them and patronized their art. The Ezhavas were also responsible for literary and cultural development in Kerala. They also followed certain peculiar aspects. They were commonly called as superstitious beliefs. They were well known for their superstitions like Rahukalam. Social Taboos were associated with women and children. As the Ezhavas were not permitted to worship high caste deities, they worshipped demons and followed many blind beliefs.

Survey of the Sources

For the Cultural and Social life of the Ezhavas in Kerala, source materials have been collected from Repositories. Primary sources associated with the cultural activities of the Ezhavas are available from Kerala Archives and the Record Office in Chennai Egmore. From Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam Office located at Kottayam, a lot of primary information associated with the social and cultural activities of Ezhavas was obtained. The Government records kept in Travancore Archeological Section have also been consulted. The social conditions of the Ezhavas were written in palm records and this palm leaves records supply, primary sources associated with the Ezhavas. The Periyavedu Olla Documents, kept in Trivandrum Archives also give first-hand information about the Ezhava Community.

The Kerala Society Papers also have got sufficient information about the Ezhava Community. In addition to the collection of Primary Sources from the Archival Centers, first-hand information was also collected from the personal interviews held with elderly persons of the Ezhava Community. In addition to these

Primary Sources, many Secondary Sources have also been consulted. The prominent among the Secondary Sources were, 'A Survey of Malayalam Literature' written by K.M. George, 'The Decline of Nayar Dominance' by Jeffry Robin, 'A Survey of Kerala History' by A. Sreedhara Menon, 'Gazetteer of Kerala, Quilon' by A. Sreedhara Menon, 'The Ezhava Community and Kerala Politics' by G. Rajendran, 'Caste and Tribes of South India' by Edger Thurston, 'The Beautiful India-Kerala' by S.A. Rahman, 'The Travancore State Manual Vol-IV' by T.K.Velupillai, 'The Caste System in Tamil Nadu' by K. K.Pillai, 'Social History of Kerala, the Dravidians' by L.A. Krishna Iyer, 'Native Life in Travancore' by Samuel Mateer, 'People of India- Kerala' by K.S. Singh was consulted and valuable pieces of information were supplied by these Secondary Sources.

English records kept in the Kerala Secretariat in Trivandrum and Kerala state Archives in Trivandrum provided information about the life of the Ezhava community people. Administrative reports and the Gazette notifications brought in changes in the lives of the Ezhavas. The Ezhava backwardness was changed because of the direction given by the Madras Government to the Travancore Government. The Travancore Government did not give any privilege to the Ezhavas. The Ezhavas informed the British Government about their conditions. The Christians Missionaries in Kanniyakumari District also wrote about the pitiable condition of the Ezhavas. The British Government from Madras threatened the Travancore Government. All these threatening letters are kept in Trivandrum archives. Consequently, concessions were granted to the Ezhavas at the threat of the Madras Government. All these correspondents in English, Malayalam and Tamil,

kept in the Trivandrum record office also gives us requisite information for the study of the Ezhavas of Kerala.

Research Methodology

In the exposition of the thesis, Survey Methodology, discussion type Methodology, Analytical Type of Methodology, Inductive Methodology and Detective Methodology have been utilized. At the bottom of every page, footnotes are noted and at the end of the thesis Bibliography has been prepared and enclosed. In the preparation of the Bibliography, both Primary and Secondary Sources have been listed. Thus, the methodology has been properly utilized in the study.

Scope of the Study

The study of the Ezhava Community in Kerala portrays the social life of the Ezhava Community. This reflects the subjection of Backward Communities under the dominant Caste Hindu personalities. There are so many low Caste Communities, suffering under the domination of the high Caste People. The study of the Ezhava Community exposes the scope for the study of the Backward Classes all over the State. So the scope is vast and the concentration of the expansion of the low Caste members needs to be studied in detail. Innumerable Primary Sources and Secondary Sources are available in the Archival Repositories, which can be made use of for the study for other Backward Classes.

Limitation of the study

The thesis has been exposed from the available source materials from Tamil Nadu and Kerala Archives. So the study has been brought out with the available Primary and Secondary Sources from the Southern Record Offices. In these records,

the subject preparation is limited. Still, full justice has been done from the limited number of available sources collected.

Though this topic covers the period from the Sangam age, the scholar gives importance to the period of the 19th and 20th century due to the availability of sources. This study focuses considerably on the period covering the nineteenth century as a whole and a major portion of the twentieth century until caste-based movements lost influence and leftist movements gained momentum.

It was until 1956 there was no state namely Kerala. The word Kerala used in the research title and study refers to the pre-1956 Travancore princely state and the Malayalam speaking areas of Madras Presidency and the post-1956 state of Kerala.

Objectives

This study on Ezhava people has the following objectives. They are

1. To know the origin of the Ezhava people.
2. To uncover their sufferings of the Ezhavas under the domination of the Nayers.
3. To unearth the participation of the Ezhavas in the national movement.
4. To uncover the efforts made by the people of the Ezhava community to move forward from the unprivileged grassroots of the society.
5. Knowing how the Vaikom temple entry incident became a milestone in the struggle of the Ezhava people.
6. To know the role of the Tamil-speaking Ezhava people in the struggle to unite the Tamil-speaking areas with Tamil Nadu during the reorganization of the states and
7. To know the progress of the Ezhava people in politics and in power and the efforts they have made for it.

Hypothesis

The Ezhava Community people were considered as a Depressed Class but within a short period, they became the most prominent Progressive Community in Kerala as Nadars or Sanars in South Tamilnadu. How was it possible for the Depressed Class to come up quickly in the social and political arena of Kerala? What was their contribution to their progress as well as to the progress of the Kerala society as a whole? How the cultural and social developments in Kerala became widespread? What was the role of the Ezhava Community people in shaping the growth of the Kerala Society? What were the contributions of the Ezhava Society to Arts and Culture? All the above-mentioned hypotheses have been answered in the thesis.

Design of the Thesis

The thesis has been divided into Six Chapters apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. The Introduction gives a graphic account of the Geographical position of Travancore. The rich vegetation had made the people live in houses very near to the farmlands. The land has been made fertile, due to the presence of many rivers and Backwaters. These Backwaters and rivers have enriched this soil and so agricultural activities are concentrated.

The Ezhavas are associated with Hindu concepts. Their main profession was coconut and palmyra climbing. They have blind beliefs and they worship Gods in the form which they liked. They were untouchables and didn't enjoy any status in society. Their children didn't study. All the privileges of education have gone only to rich people. On the whole, the poor Ezhava Community people suffered a lot.

The Government of Travancore didn't give any support to the people. So altogether, the poor Ezhava Community people suffered. Under these pitiable circumstances of the Ezhava Community, they were taken care of by the Britishers. The Britishers came in 1806 and they began to educate the Ezhava Community people. All this information are made available in the sources.

The First Chapter deals with the Origin of the Ezhava Community with special reference to their Ceylonic and Tamil origin. Still, there is another statement that the Ezhavas were the natives of Kerala. All these different opinions have been discussed in detail.

The Second Chapter exhibits the Social Condition of the Ezhavas in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The Ezhavas were in a state of backwardness and they were not permitted to enter the temple. Education was denied to them. In 1806, the Christian Missionaries came to South Travancore and started many schools. The low Caste Community people were permitted to enter the schools. Gradually, the Ezhava Community people got themselves educated and began to demand their rights. They organized the Temple Entry Movement under the leadership of Palpu. He was assisted by T.K.Madhavan. So the Temple Agitation is continued under the headship of Sree Narayana Guru, an ascetic leader who formed an Association of the Ezhava Community known as Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. He gave directions to all the Ezhava Community people to study. Only then knowledge can be improved. The Ezhavas were awakened and in 1923, at Vaikom in Kerala, the Temple Entry Movement was organized by Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker. So the Ezhava Community people who were toddy

tappers in the earlier centuries became social, political and religious leaders at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Third Chapter highlights the Cultural Aspects of the Ezhava Community. In the early years of the Christian era, the Ezhavas were uneducated and gradually they became masters in the political arena. They had a life of Joint Family System. Special care was taken when a woman becomes pregnant. Celebrations were conducted when a girl attains puberty. Polygamy and Polyandry were not permitted among the Ezhava Community. There were different clans among the Ezhavas. But all the Ezhava clans live together without any difference. So they have a close co-existence. They are hard workers. They are farmers. At times, they became toddy-tappers. But their nomadic life was removed because of the schools started by the Missionaries. The Ezhavas became members of the Kerala State Assembly and Lok Shaba. The Ezhava Community which existed as an Unprivileged Community became a highly Progressive Community in the second half of the 20th century.

The Fourth Chapter brings out the Awakening of the Ezhava Community. The Ezhavas were fully involved in the development of Kerala. Dance programmes such as Kathakali, Koottu and Kalari Payattu were performed. They were proficient in vocal music and other instrumental music. Swathi Thirunal Maharaja realized the aptitude of the Ezhavas in the cultural programme of Kerala. So, he supported the Ezhavas in developing these cultural programmes. Government funds were allotted and an Academy of Cultural Programme was also started to encourage the cultural aspects. Under the patronage of Swathi Thirunal Maharaja, the Ezhavas of Travancore began to concentrate fully on the growth of the cultural activities of

Kerala. Ezhavas followed many superstitious customs which were responsible for their degraded status. But with educational advancement, they removed all those practices. But still, some customs are followed even today.

The Fifth Chapter throws light on the Ezhavas and politics. In the Travancore administration, the Indian National Congress played a major role. But at the same time, the Ezhavas were not given chance in Freedom Struggle. At the same time, the Tamil Nadu State Congress was organized by a Tamil leader Marshall Nesamony. The Ezhavas joined the Tamil Nadu State Congress Organization in large numbers. Because of the involvement of the Ezhava Community people in the Kerala State Congress, the Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress emerged as a powerful party. Kanyakumari district got itself separated from Travancore and joined with Tamil Nadu. The merger of Kanyakumari district with Tamil Nadu was mainly responsible because of the involvement of the Ezhava Community people in the political activities of Kerala.

The Sixth Chapter gives information regarding the contributions of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam in empowering the Ezhava Community. Sree Narayana Guru concentrated on uplifting the social, economic, political and educational status of the Ezhavas. For executing this purpose, an organization called Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was formed. Soon the Yogam became the common Organization of the Ezhavas. With the help of this Yogam, the Ezhavas fought for their denied rights and made several achievements. Government Institutions were opened to them. Political Representations were also given to them. Later, the Yogam demanded Temple Entry also. The Temple Entry Movement was

led by the Indian National Congress. Gandhiji gave his guidance indirectly. This Agitation captured nationwide attention. The Agitation gained support even from the High Caste people too. The SNDP Yogam played a major role in providing Economical Empowerment to the Community. Sree Narayana Guru uplifted the Ezhava Community as well as the other Low Castes through the Yogam. Thus, the role of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam is indispensable.

The concluding part depicts all the events in a collective form and certain observations have also been noted. The Ezhava Community was an underdeveloped one and was not considered by the High Caste Society. They were neither allowed to study nor permitted to enter the temples. They were forced to keep a distance from the High Caste people. This system of backwardness was done away within the latest stages. In 1806, they were allowed to enter the school by the British Missionaries. The Ezhavas became the elite Community and they began to question the domination of the Brahmins and Nayars. They got themselves involved in politics and became members of the Travancore Legislature. They joined the Tamil Nadu State Congress and began to fight for the union of the Tamil Speaking areas of Kerala with Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Speaking areas of Travancore, Agestheeswaram, Thovalai, Kalkulam, and Vilavancode, were merged with Tamil Nadu on 1st November 1956, mainly because of the services rendered by the Ezhava Community people to the freedom struggle of Kanniyakumari district. Thus, the Ezhava Community which exists as a primitive society for centuries began to be evolved as a mighty force in the early part of the 20th century.

Findings

The Christian missionaries were the first to open the doors to educate Ezhavas who had long been denied the right to education.

The SNDPY is proud to have taken the Ezhava people to the next level of education. The achievement of this organization was the dissemination of education to the Ezhavas and those below them.

It was only after the Ezhavas began to be educated that they were able to see a great change in the socio-cultural conditions. Education provided them with opportunities to obtain the various rights that had hitherto been denied.

The progress and success of the Ezhava people in the political arena are not seen as purely political. Instead, these political changes are seen as obvious signs of the social change they have achieved. Their voting rights in elections, their representation in the legislatures and subsequent communal representation are known to be the reflections of social change.

The Nayers, who were opposed to the Ezhavas in many of their struggles on many levels, supported them in the struggle for temple entry. Although apparently, the entry to the temple is the only reason for the temple entry struggle, the struggle is the culmination of various prolonged demands. The open doors in the temples are seen as a symbol of the opening of closed doors to the Ezhavas at various levels of society.

There is no doubt that Narayana Guru and his organization have done a great deal for the progress and development of the Ezhavas. Attempts were made to make the Ezhava people superior by their habits. The idea arose that they should follow

the customs of the Nayars and Brahmins who were considered superior in society by them. An example of this is the idea that the Ezhava people should abandon their traditional local gods and worship gods like Shiva, the god of upper caste Hindus.

When the struggles for social change of the Ezhava community are compared with the struggles for social change that took place in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, the two seem to be the same but can be seen to differ at one point. The struggle for social change in Tamil Nadu was a struggle against the Aryan culture. But in Kerala, when approached in terms of the customs emphasized by Narayana Guru, the struggle of the Ezhava people was a struggle moving towards the Aryan culture.

The claim that the British government did not incline the traditional methods of India can be deduced from its attempts to destroy the art of Kalari. The exercises carried out by the British government to destroy the traditional police system in Tamil Nadu called the 'Kaval System' and the attempts to destroy the traditional art of Kalari in Kerala are similar.

The SNDPY, which started as a community movement, also began to gain influence in the political arena. Its members went to the assembly. At one point it turned out to have the power to determine chief ministers.

But over time the organization began to lose influence not only at the political level but at all levels. The political influence of the caste system began to wane, especially since the Lefts began to gain influence in Kerala politics.

The Ezhava people were inspired by leftist policies. Thus far from the existing rightist political positions, most of them have incorporated themselves into

leftist movements. They believed that the Lefts were for their rights whereas the Rights left their demands.

Although there were many ups and downs in the society and the Ezhavas suffered so much, their role in the struggle for Indian independence was immense and unparalleled to anyone else.

The struggles for social change of the Ezhavas coincided with the struggles of the Nadar people in South Tamil Nadu. The upper jacket struggle that took place during the period when the Kanyakumari district was with the Travancore government was common to the Ezhava and Nadar peoples. Both races fought for the right to wear the upper jacket from the Travancore government. Although the Nadars' temple entry struggles in southern Tamil Nadu and the Ezhavas' temple entry struggle in the state of Travancore are different, they are one in purpose, character and consequences.

Although the entire Ezhava population struggled together for their social advancement, differences were found among the Ezhava faction in the struggle to unite the Tamil areas with the state of Chennai. While the Tamil-speaking Ezhavas felt that the above areas should be annexed to the state of Chennai, other Ezhavas had a different opinion that they should not be annexed.

The Ezhavas had excelled in various fields. They had been great doctors; they had been great artists; they had been great martial artists; they had excelled in the army of the Travancore government and had been excellent astrologers. Despite having so many specialities they were placed in the worst position in the community. They were denied many social rights. For a long time, they were

considered untouchables. Surprisingly, those who had received so many specialities had been placed in the worst social condition. Studies on the causes of this contradiction should be carried out in the future.

Suggestions

The Ezhavas have come up from the level of backwardness into a level of progress. The Government of Travancore has included the Ezhava Community in the list of Backward Classes and educational concessions and appointments based on Backward Community have also been granted to the Ezhava Community. Because of the concessions granted by the Government, the Ezhava Community people are on the verge of progress. But still, the condition of the Ezhavas should be raised. For the progress of the Ezhava community, the Government of Kerala should enhance free education to the Ezhava students and more scholarships should be provided by the State and Central Government.