

Narayana Guru, Left and Chitralkha

Joe MS

The recent controversy associated with the brutal persecution of a Dalit working woman, Chitralkha at the hands of hoodlums of a 'leftist' union has gained wide attention, bringing into limelight the plight of Dalits in Kerala. The men folks who participated in this 'festival of masses', as per reports, predominantly belong to backward caste Ezhava / Theeya community. Anybody with a bit of social concern would have definitely condemned the incident. They would even have expressed their regrets at the deviation of the people belonging to Ezhava caste, the disciples of Srinarayana guru, the famous social reformer, from the avowed policies advocated by him. But here lies a problem. A re-look at the social history of Kerala is needed to understand whether the Chitralkha incident is a deviation from the pronounced objectives of the Srinarayana movement as such, as it is popularly understood, or the roots for such a development was inherent in the trajectory of the Narayana movement itself. This does not belittle the genuine intentions Guru had for social emancipation, at a personal level.

In spite of the cultural specificities of northern Kerala where these atrocities were perpetrated on Chitralkha, a general study of the impact of Srinaraynism on the whole of Kerala may be of some help to analyse the increasing backward caste arrogance on Dalits. This is particularly so as the discourse on the assumed efficacy of SriNarayana Guru's metier is invoked constantly by the civil society of Kerala, eternalising his importance in all spheres. So a glance at the impact of his life and efforts can shed light on the constitution or construction of modern Ezhava identity and the problems associated with it.

Srinarayanism made it advent as a practice to break the stranglehold of Sanathana dharma to carve a breathing space for the Ezhavas, the oppressed backward caste, at the beginning of the 20th century. According to common perception the movement was to an extent successful in alleviating the naked practice of caste discrimination against them, which to some extent is true too. His 'prathista' of mirror as Lord in Aruvippuram, had been hailed as a glorious incident in the making of modern Kerala. But, one has to admit that, his socio-religious programme as a whole was limited to a kind of reformism with its impact felt chiefly only on the periphery. His whole philosophy of social upheaval was based on a certain jaded reworking of the Sanathana-dharma, a reactionary ideology to the hilt. His programme of social action was pitched on a sanskritised terrain of spirituality, howsoever democratic it appeared to be. The organically malicious cultural tools and props, tainted as it is by mystic tone, on which he relied in propagating his message, belied himself by creating sometimes an opposite effect on his followers. The receptivity of the movement was even beyond and contrary to his personal convictions and motives. It made a progression of its own fulfilling the goals of its inherent discriminative philosophy, embedded as it is in the cultural unconscious of masses through thousands of years of oppression. The limited and impossible attempt to reform and redeem the irredeemable, attempted by Sri Narayana, ended up, in a way, as a futile exercise.

In other words, the 'revolt' of Narayana guru was infuriating only the extremely orthodox, but accommodative for the mainstream. As a result his programme was appropriated into the Hindu fold easily. In fact the workings of a bourgeois democracy allows the space for such minimal adjustments or dilutions necessitated by the dynamics of capitalism. It never attempted a violent denial/de-construction of the idealistic philosophic core of the Brahmanic caste system, either in practice or in theory. The totalitarian structure of Brahmanic system remained untouched. In a way it was like the project of the savarna Hindu's marginal social reform advocated by the Aryasamaj-Vivekananda platform, at least even in the realm of ideology, but of course emanating from the lower strata. As a result Srinarayanism naturally drifted towards assisting the project of making of mainstream (Vaidik) Malayalee identity.

All socio-religious reforms in India were intended to and resulted in reconstituting a new Hindu subject with a whiff of democratic breathing space. It never settled score with the core of Brahmanic philosophic apparatus, militantly. Thus unlike the ferocious ideology of Ambedkar or Periyar which addressed the crux of Hindu mythology, all reformist ideas stand appropriated even by the right wing.

The history of social reform in Kerala was not always driven in the direction of religious reform. There was a brief but turbulent period in the early part of 20th century when Narayana Guru's own disciple Sahodaran Ayyappan and the movement he initiated, like Periyar's self respect movement, radically broke with the soft Hindu philosophy of his master and championed blasphemous cultural rationalism in their critique of the whole social-philosophical structure of Aryavarta. Sahodaran Ayyappan was in fact ridiculed as 'Pulayan' Ayappan by the gentry among Ezhava caste for his association with Dalits. Despite the mutual admiration he shared with Narayana guru at a personal level, his praxis was a negation of his mystique idealism, a kind of radical rupture, at the philosophical level, potent enough to reconstruct a society radically in all its dimensions.

His social praxis, was an ideological site, which had huge potential to inaugurate a programme aimed at absolute cultural liberation, with a pronounced penchant for Dravidian de-sanskritisation. If properly taken up and nurtured by the progressive forces, it would have resulted genuinely in constitution of a Malayalee identity completely contrary to the contemporary canonical one. This fact is testified by an incident which occurred in Kottayam in the 1930's. The people assembled there to listen to Madanmohan Malavia, did not allow his extolling of Brahmanic Pan Indianism, in a Sanskritised and alien Hindi. It was a glorious epoch in the history of Kerala reflective of the impact of Ayyappan's cultural radicalism. The possibility of such a revolutionary drift in social critique aimed at liberation from mental colonialism was hijacked and neutralised by the advent of capitalist roaders disguised as mainstream leftism on the scene.

The avatar of the parliamentary left was marked with a tendency to deliberately complicate its engagements with political economy in jargonised exhibitionism, to command intellectual authority. This provided the necessary space within which the neo-Brahmin patriarchy regained its absolute authority through its manoeuvres . The infallible authority as regards knowledge thus

bestowed on them, to issue even ultimate decrees on all queries of social phenomena, resulted in a kind of new Marxian Vedanta, demoralising and debilitating all potential future subaltern social engagements, creating a kind of neo division of labour. (It is not an exaggeration! See the unparalleled intellectual stature given to the mediocre theoretical outpourings of an EMS Namboodiripad by the Kerala civil society. In this process, they even sidelined original scholastic attempts of Marxist scholars like K Damodaran, for being born in backward caste). Thus left with its higher caste leadership, relegated religio-cultural questions to the individual domain, denying its social implications. This had far reaching impact, especially in the specificity of Indian context, where the social function of religion is peculiar.

In a way, it was a retreat to a pretentious and detached neutrality to avoid critical engagement with socially complex mores. For this they put forth arguments which portrayed religion only as an alienated self of the toiling masses, not to be tampered with. Moreover, it was projected purely as an individual subject bound to wither away on the completion of the economic revolution! All radical engagement with the ideological apparatus of semi-feudal state was stigmatised as unintellectual. This position gained credence in all main academic streams even at the national level doing incalculable harm to all progressive movements. The receptivity of this theory planted by the left helped these revisionists to preserve social orthodoxy in an Indian society where caste based racism is a living reality. Surprisingly, despite seeming contradictions, in basic thrust, the said attempts shared an unconscious affinity with the Gandhian ideology, which was nothing but the internalisation of 'othering' born of western orientalist discourse by the 'other'.

The possibility for the cultural radicalism of the type of a Periyar or an Ayappan was thus scuttled by the direct intervention of the official left. They limited rationality to an instrumental technocracy. EMS directly intervened to malign the remnants of cultural rationalism, even in the 1980's, for its scepticism on caste based and patriarchic Indian religiosity. He successfully branded it as bourgeois for not being vocal advocates of economic determinism. This was nothing but a blind Eurocentric appropriation of historical materialism. In their evangelical adherence to their 'scriptures', resulting in a ridiculous parroting of the base-superstructure dichotomy, the question of hegemonic culture was procrastinated to eternity-despite occasional intellectual musings of a paid 'comrade' on the readings of Gramsci on culture (again used only to threaten the subaltern to reclaim their intellectual authority). Thus a unique brand of secularism was cultivated by official left detached from social praxis and limited only to economism. The guise of secularism of the mainstream left was a dubious but successful ploy of the Vaidiks. The apparently scientific brand of CPM Marxism, was the cultural space in which the pro-upper casteist Malayalee identity was nurtured. They absolved the real potential of Marxism for liberation by ghettoising landless dalits and 'othering' Adivasis, and vagrants.

The evidences to buttress the implications of the developments mentioned above can be had by taking a cursory comparison of two time periods in the cultural-literary scenario of Kerala. The literary and social scene of Kerala in the early 20th century was marked by the anti-Brahmin radicalism of Ezhava

intellectual stalwarts like C Keshavan and C V Kunjuraman, both inspired by Ayyappan, fearlessly carving an anti-Brahmanic milieu. Compare that with the celebrated literary-cultural scene from the 1970's onwards, when the predominant figures in the intellectual class produced by the Ezhava community, were the likes of O V Vijayan, O V Usha and M Mukundan. They were in the forefront of the import of literary modernism, smuggling in and reinforcing in the attempt the un-broken current of patriarchal Savarna male-chauvinism, mistaken for revolutionary/existential angst of the violent 1970's. They even brought to fashion a literary nostalgia for Vedic culture and lores. Such developments were evidential of the metamorphosis of the Ezhava movement informed by a left, and the solidarity the said nexus provided in cementing existing social structure. The currency for the upper casteist idea of creamy layer within reservation package hard sold by CPM without even a murmur of protest by their predominantly backwards caste cadres is another reflection for the level of ideological brainwashing and emaciation it achieved.

The making of the mainstream Kerala society, especially from the time of its linguistic reorganisation was facilitated through the cultural conspiracy of Brahmanism, which made a tactical retreat, and anointed in the social personae/construct of Nair a site for celebration of nostalgic feudal yore and preservation of balance of social forces. He became the alter ego and repository of modern educated Malayalee male's quint essence. He was elevated as a role model through 'secular' literary interventions and cultural productions, whom all should aspire to. Such a perspective was imbibed by even an Ezhava educated male in his upward mobility. This also cunningly preserved the Brahmanic cultural system intact. The participation of the mainstream left in this process is obvious in their selective application of their cultural authority for intellectual sanctifications and imprimaturs for certain causes. The inevitable limited dilation of the democratic space made possible by modernity uplifted the status of backward castes as storm troopers of the parliamentary left, denied as they were of any sort of cultural exorcism supposedly bound to have unleashed by the social forces of modernity.

For a brief period of settlement in the 1950's, an apparent hostility to Srinaraynism was pronounced in the Marxist circles-again characteristic of an economic detachment from the question of engaging caste. But, indirectly the political policy of CPM was to some extent helpful by default, in the deification of Srinarayana Guru into the Hindu pantheon, of course with a subordinate status, a process in which Ezhavas, the backbone of the cadre base of the left party, too lent support willingly. This is also because the Srinarayana philosophy and cultural premises in which Marxism was launched in Kerala shared many things in common. In Narayana Guru's philosophy as such and ritualistic practices, save for the celebrated radicalism in some of his deeds, there was no rational questioning of the whole edifice and structure of the scripturally sanctioned spiritual exploitation inherent in the Hindu belief system. Or in a way it was only an attempt to correct a belief system gone astray, thereby defeating the potential possibility to deconstruct the philosophical basis of Hindu metaphysics as such. The impact of this approach has informed /influenced the making of the identity of a modern Malayalee, among whom Ezhavas play a dominant role. Despite the

existence of intra class disparities amongst such a caste, the CPM only cemented that exclusivist caste structure. It would be interesting to make a survey of the rate of exogamy not only among the CPM cadres but even among the leadership, an agenda raised by the likes of Sahodaran to annihilate caste system and ridiculed by the left by their defence in economic determinism. This process substituted militant social reconstruction with a patronising reformist discourse embedded in philanthropy. The resultant social space of truncated modernity facilitated smooth penetration of dependant capitalism.

The anointing of Srinarayana Guru as the sole and unquestionable embodiment of whole progressive history of Kerala, was in fact authored by such a mainstream culture. It marginalised the contributions of a Vaikundaswami, Ayyavu, Poykayil Yohannan, Ayyankali or Sahodaran Ayappan. This was because of the relative ease in appropriacy of his social philosophy. It is even possible that in his personality or his works on the spirituality the Savarna philosophy found a new anchoring to refurbish itself as palatable in accordance with modern times, and therefore served the powers that be.

So there is nothing surprising in the blatant casteist narrow-mindedness of Ezhava outfits more in vogue from the 90's, sometimes even extending to social ostracism of couples who dared for inter-caste marriages, defying their diktat. This has to be read simultaneously with the popularisation of props of modern finance capital like micro financing by such outfits. In fact their social exclusivism was not a contrast but a logical culmination from its cultural genesis in a hierarchical social philosophy which proved irredeemable by tricksiness. Thus the double timing of Ezhavayouth as the storm troopers of the left as well as a fierce protectors of their caste structure, was not symptomatic of some psychological split personae.

So in a way one can say that the backward caste arrogance on Dalits, is the real facet of the cultural logic of a Brahmanic caste system, which creates a leftist space for 'secular' detachment from social engagement, yet can bask in the glamour of radical positioning by their pretence. A Malayalee identity was thus constructed by the revisionists which upgraded it as loyal subjects of Brahmanic pan Indian discourse. The rights deduced/appropriated by this Brahmin left patriarchy, situated as they are in their gentlemanly havens, absolved of sins, gave them the audacity to even condemn the barbarism of the 'other'. A manual class has already been readied to bear the tag of sinners; an innovative division of labour.

Srinarayana Guru, through a Sanskritised religious reform programme, indirectly perpetuated the social adoration for the basic cultural codes of Hindu metaphysics in the unconscious, which in turn allowed for the regrouping of Brahmin centric intellectual leadership in the social scenario. This provided the left ample tools for preserving the status quo-neglecting all social contradictions. This resulted in a kind of brutal solidification of caste system, especially in the rank and file of the parliamentary left, the effect of which was the like of what happened to Chitralkha. □□□