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Peasants In Anti-Imperialist Action

'We thought', said Dalava (Minister) Velu Thampi, the leader of the anti-British revolt in Travancore, in his famous Kundara Proclamation of 1809, 'that the (English East India) Company is composed of people of integrity and loyalty to allies and that they would not cheat us. We, therefore, permitted them to erect a fort at Anjengo and settle themselves there. Believing in their loyalty and friendship we fought Tipu Sultan and made alliance with them. Subsequently, however, it was proved that friendship with them was a source of danger to us.'

Recounting how the demands of the company on the state of Travancore rose from time to time and how the Company sent its troops to enforce these demands, Velu Thampi concluded :

If resistance is not offered at this stage to what they are attempting to do, our people will be put to such sufferings as cannot be borne by human beings. If they are allowed to use their traditional methods of trickery to bring our country into their hands, they will put sentries over, and control, every place including the palace; stop all the traditional honour to our ruler as well as the traditional usages of temples and Brahmin houses; bring every article including salt into their monopoly; measure every plot of land and every house-site and levy excessive land tax, coconut tax, etc; inflict barbarous punishments for slight offences; put the Christian Cross and their flag on temples; violate the chastity of Brahmin ladies; and introduce all other customs that are contrary to our religion. In order that such misfortunes may not occur in our country, that the royal Dharma may be preserved, that our country's

traditional way of life is saved from destruction, we should do all that is humanly possible and leave the rest to the will of God. Thus have we started our resistance to the Company.

The author of the *Travancore State Manual* says regarding this proclamation :

Velu Thampi stated his case in such forcible language that the whole country seethed with the spirit of uncompromising hostility towards those who were described as enemies to the country...The country rose as one man to its battles to the utmost of its resources. Armed men came in thousands upon thousands to join Velu Thampi's standard. The Travancore army consisted of more than 30,000 men with 18 guns.

Velu Thampi, however, was not alone in this. The issue on which he raised the standard of revolt was such that the entire people of Travancore, including the ruling classes were behind him; those of them who hesitated to join did so only because they were afraid that the British were too powerful for any revolt to succeed. Furthermore,

The affairs of Cochin favoured a combination of the two states against Col. Macaulay. The Raja of Cochin was a weak prince who was content to live a quiet life at Vellarapalli while he allowed the minister Paliyath Achan to administer the state as he liked. Both states presented the same spectacle in their administrations...Both ministers (Velu Thampi and Paliyath Achan) who were already united in private friendship with each other were stirred by a common motive against Macaulay who, they believed, was not only their personal foe but also a dangerous enemy to both countries. (*Travancore State Manual*).

Thus was begun the first national revolt against the British—a revolt which, in all essentials, resembled the subsequent and far bigger revolt in another part of the country, the famous 'Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857. Persistent efforts have been made by British historians to paint Velu Thampi as a traitor and intriguer; efforts have also been made by Indian authors to paint the picture of an honest and patriotic man who tried to be

friendly, but who was ultimately forced to clash with the British rulers because of the particularly offensive tactics of the then British Resident, Col. Macaulay. Actually, however, Velu Thampi and to a lesser extent, Paliyath Achan represented the feudal ruling classes of the country who were incensed at the humiliation they had to suffer at the hands of the alien rulers and hence decided to offer a last-ditch battle.

It is this same resistance of the feudal ruling classes to British rule that we find in the struggle which the Raja of Pazhassi in North Malabar offered in the jungly regions of present-day Kottayam and Wynad taluks. The prolonged engagements in which the world-renowned Duke of Wellington was bogged down against the Raja of Pazhassi and his Kurichiars is one of the most colourful stories of heroism in our country's annals.

It is true that these representatives of our ruling classes, as their counterparts of North India in 1857, were originally loyal to the British rulers; it was through the loyal assistance rendered by them that the British strengthened themselves. But, once they found in real life that, in return for their services, the British made them absolutely subservient, their sense of honour asserted itself and they unfurled the banner of revolt. In this revolt against the alien rulers, they represented not only their own narrow class interests but the interests of the whole nation; for, as Velu Thampi made clear in his Kundara Proclamation, he was defending against the British not only the privileges of his master, Raja of Travancore, but also the land, the articles of daily use, the social and religious practices, of the entire people—all of which were threatened by the British. And it is this national character of their revolt that made them leaders of a movement which the prince was united with the peasant and in which the soldier was not a mercenary—but a real defender of the people's hearths and homes.

These revolts, however, proved futile since the enemy was too powerful for the people. Not only were the British military forces far superior but they were able politically to divide and disrupt the ranks of the rebels. A section of those who raised the banner of revolt was, from the very beginning, vacillating; e.g.

Paliyath Achan who joined Velu Thampi first, subsequently made peace with the enemy. Furthermore, there were very powerful sections of the ruling class which stoutly opposed the revolt. These political weaknesses on the part of the rebels were intensified as they had to suffer military reverses and heavy casualties. Col. Macaulay could, therefore, very easily and quickly inflict total defeat on Velu Thampi, who, to save himself from the humiliation of surrender, killed himself. Col. Macaulay wreaked his vengeance on the rebels by heaping on them unspeakable atrocities too much even for the Government of India which condemned Macaulay's conduct.

The rebellion of the Raja of Pazhassi did, of course, take a longer time to quell than that of Velu Thampi because of the terrain of Kottayam-Wynad taluks which are ideally suited for the tactics of guerrilla warfare. But that, too, was ultimately crushed as heroism, even when combined with favourable terrain, was inadequate to meet an enemy militarily far superior.

II

With this came to an end the national revolt against the British so far as the erstwhile ruling, feudal classes of Kerala are concerned; the descendants of the Rajas, Naduvazhis, Desavazhis, etc., found that the new power that rose on the ashes of the old social order, of which their predecessors were the guardians, was too strong for them. What is more, the new power was such that, if only they were prepared to submit to its domination, they stood to lose nothing and to gain everything out of its stabilization. We, therefore, find that, after the suppression of Velu Thampi's and Pazhassi Raja's revolts, the feudal classes as a whole became loyal supporters of British rule.

This, however, was not the case with the peasants and the common people who had magnificently rallied under the banner of revolt unfurled by Velu Thampi and Pazhassi Raja. For, as we have seen in the last chapter, their daily lives continued to become worse and worse; anti-imperialism was not for them (as it was for the feudal classes) a mere national sentiment but

a question of daily life. It is true that being oppressed and unenlightened, they could not organize a successful struggle against the main enemy, or even see the real enemy, i. e., imperialism. Nevertheless, they were the people who suffered daily and hourly, from the concrete results of the operations of the enemy and hence were acutely conscious of the necessity for the practical struggle against the concrete manifestations of the feudal-colonial economy set up by the British rulers. Spontaneous peasant actions therefore started developing in Malabar.

It was in 1809 that Velu Thampi's revolt was suppressed and about the same time Pazhassi Raja was captured by the British. Within a quarter of a century of the suppression of these revolts broke out the first of the series of peasant revolts commonly known as the Moplah outbreaks (the first of these took place in 1836).

The British rulers tried at first to suppress these outbreaks by employing the same tactics of terror as were found useful in suppressing the national revolt led by the erstwhile ruling feudal classes; they banished one of the leaders of the Moplah community (Syed Fazal Pookkoya Thangal) from India (1852) and enacted what is called the Moplah Outrages Act. The British adopted a policy of suppressing the Moplahs on the theory that Muslims as a community are anti-British.

But, when they found they found that this policy did not yield the desired result but that outbreak after outbreak was taking place, they decided in the year 1870 to make proper investigations into the root causes of these disturbances. The officer who was appointed to make this investigation (Logan) reported that indiscriminate evictions and enhancements of rent on the part of the *jenmis* lay at the root of the disturbances.

A similar development was taking place in Travancore, though not in the form of Moplah riots. There, too, as the *Travancore State Manual* says,

The monopoly in land and sense of insecurity on account of $\text{എന്ന} \text{jenmi's}$ right of eviction became causes of complaint by the

cultivating peasants. The steady increase of population and the absence of any other profession except agriculture led to more and more persons becoming dependent on land for their subsistence. The *jenmis* having no source of income except their lands were compelled to exact as much as they could from their tenants and this only increased their discontent. The great demand for cultivable lands helped the *jenmis* to let his lands to the highest bidder ... The increase in the value of the land gave the *jenmis* their opportunity. They began to demand from their tenants larger sums as advances and larger rents. If a tenant failed to comply with the *jenmi's* demand, he was promptly turned out of his holding. This led to serious discontent among the agricultural classes and complaints were made to the Government. (Vol. III, p. 161).

It was to allay this discontent, adds the *State Manual*, that the Maharaja of Travancore, in a communication to the Appeal Court, directed that in respect of all suits for eviction, the courts should see that the *jenmis* receive their dues and allow the tenants to remain in possession of and enjoy their property.

It was thus that the first anti-feudal mass movement began to take shape — the movement for tenancy reforms. The demand was raised that the *jenmi's* right of eviction should be curtailed and that he should not be allowed to take excessive rents from tenants. Committee after committee studied the problem, drafted bills, made recommendations, etc., with a view to solving the problem of land relations in Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. Tenants' associations were organized, deputations led, meetings held and forms of agitation resorted to by the well-to-do peasants (mostly *kanamdars*) from whose ranks are drawn the professionals and government officials.

It is true that this was not a mass movement in the full sense of the term since its demands were confined to that which affected the *kanamdars*; the large mass of peasants, the *verumpattamdars*, were kept out of the movement. It

was, however, a mass movement in a general sense, since the target of attack of the agitators — the *jenmi* — was the common oppressor of the entire peasantry. The leaders of the movement in Malabar did, of course, subsequently (after 1930) join hands with the *jenmis* against the mass of peasantry but they did the preliminary job of making the struggle against the *jenmi* a national and popular movement. Hence, though the organized peasant movement of the last five decades has had to contend with the treachery of the original leaders of the tenancy movement and evolve a new leadership, there is no doubt that it was the tenancy movement that gave our peasants the first elements of class consciousness — the consciousness that they should unite as a class and fight their enemy, the *jenmi*.

III

Having far more of a mass character than the tenancy movement but far less clear in regard to its class content was the movement of the oppressed and untouchable castes for social equality. It was towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries that the Nairs and Ezhavas began to organize themselves into caste associations, the Nair Service Society and the S.N.D.P. Yogam. The circumstances under which they organized were described by one author as follows:

It was on Edavam 2, 1708, Malayalam Era (May 16, 1903) that the S.N.D.P. Yogam was registered. The origin of the Yogam is a confluence of two streams, one spiritual, the other political. In the year 1067 Malayalam Era (1891-92 A.D.), over 10,000 people signed and submitted the famous Malayalee Memorial to the Maharaja of Travancore in which it was demanded that the political rights of the Malayalees should be protected against the attacks of outsiders. That Memorial sharply accused the Government of having refused admission of Ezhavas in government schools and doing nothing to safeguard their rights. The reply of the Government to this Memorial said that the Ezhavas were quite satisfied with their traditional occupations like agriculture; toddy-tapping, coir-making, etc., that they were not interested

in higher education or government service; and that political agitators had just included them among the signatories to the Memorial in order to increase their numerical strength.

As a matter of fact, however, one of the organizers of the Malayalee Memorial was Dr. Palpu, who had secured his I.M.S. diploma but could get no job in Travancore and hence had to seek refuge in the Mysore service. Long before the Malayalee Memorial, Dr. Palpu had been carrying on agitation by way of Memorials to the government as well as through news paper articles, demanding that Ezhavas should get at least those rights which they could get if they become Christians. Finding this agitation to have no fruit, he organized the submission of a Memorial to the Maharaja with over 13,000 signatories and seeking the redress of their grievances. Since this, too, proved of no avail, the Ezhavas of Travancore were in a demoralized stage.

It was at this time that Swami Vivekananda had returned from America and started his all-India tour with a view to the restoration of Hindu religion in all its glory. The representative of this new movement in Kerala, Sree Narayana Guruswamy, established a temple at Aruvipuram and, in 1074 Malayalam Era [A.D. 1898-99], registered a Yogam [association] to carry on the affairs of the temple. The Swami and Dr. Palpu being old friends, the spiritual brilliance of the Swami was now combined with the militant spirit of social service of the doctor, so that the organization that functioned under their joint leadership became efficient. On Dhanu 23, 1078 Malayalam Era [A.D. January 5, 1903] a special session of the Yogam was held at which it was decided to transform the Yogam into the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam [S.N.D.P.] with the aims and objects of developing the spiritual and secular education, and helping the economic advancement, of the Ezhavas.

In the meantime, Kumaran Asan had come back from Calcutta after his education in Sanskrit. The combination of the holy Swami, the efficient organizer Dr. Palpu and the hard-working Asan, made the Yogam well-known throughout Kerala; its annual sessions were held at Aruvipuram, Quilon,

Alleppey, Trivandrum [all in Travancore], Ernakulam [Cochin], Cannanore and Calicut [Malabar]. Along with the annual sessions held at Quilon and Cannanore, large-scale exhibitions were also organized. Apart from rousing the social consciousness of the Ezhava masses in and around the various venues of these conferences, these sessions also served to demonstrate the united force of, and create a sense of solidarity in the Ezhava masses from the Cape in the South to the border of Karnatak in the North.

The Ezhavas are a community which is numerically the strongest, and socially and culturally the most advanced, among the non-caste Hindus. Suffering as they do various inequalities of a non-Hindu community, including untouchability, they became the champions of the struggle against untouchability and other forms of social inequality. Being socially and culturally more advanced than the scheduled castes, they could, more easily than the latter, create forms of agitation and organization which would prove useful in the struggle for social equality. They, therefore, became the main source of inspiration to, and the virtual leaders of, all the oppressed and untouchable castes. Naturally therefore, the formation of the S. N. D. P. Yogam was followed by the formation of caste organizations of the various untouchable castes.

This tendency to form caste organizations was, however, not confined to the Ezhavas and the untouchables. In fact, at the very time when the Swami, the Doctor and the Asan were organizing the Ezhavas in their S. N. D. P. Yogam, some leaders of the Nair community were forming their caste organization. The Nairs are no doubt one of the privileged castes; but they too, suffered various inequalities in relation to castes that are above them, e. g., the Namboodiris. Furthermore, they had various social problems relating to marriage, family, inheritance, etc., which, in the eyes of the enlightened representatives of the community, were far too outmoded and required radical transformations. It was thus that various caste organizations were formed all over Kerala, though they could not be centralized under such a dynamic personality as Sri Narayana Guru of the Ezhavas.

The tendency to form caste organizations ultimately reached the highest caste, the Namboodiris. They are, of course, the most privileged in the social order. But for the same reason, their system of the family, marriage and inheritance was as outmoded as that of any other cast. It, therefore, raised various problems, the solution of which was considered by the enlightened representatives of the community as necessary for their advancement. They too, therefore, came to form their own caste organization.

Almost all castes were thus organizing themselves in their respective caste organizations. The most significant of them, however, were the organizations of the oppressed and untouchable castes; it was they that, for the first time in the history of Kerala, started mobilizing the overwhelming majority of the peasantry against the prevailing social order which was oppressive to the entire people of Kerala. The formation of the caste organizations of these sections of people, together with the tenancy movement as explained above, laid the basis for the rising peasant movement.

IV

It is easy enough to see today that these caste organizations are not the class organizations of the peasantry; they on the contrary, consolidate the caste separatism of the people in general and of the peasantry in particular, so that the grip of these caste organizations on the peasantry has to be broken if they are to be organized as a class. It is, however, a historical fact that one of the first forms in which the peasant masses rose in struggle against feudalism was in the form of caste organizations. In spite of the fact that they had no clear perspective of changing the social order, of breaking the backs of the landlords as a class, of ending the rent system and redistributing lands, the Nair peasantry rose against the Brahmin *ienmis* and the Ezhava peasantry against their caste-Hindu oppressors, including the Nairs. It was this peasant character of the caste organizations that made them part and parcel of the national politics of our country.

It has become fashionable for those who consider themselves

nationalists to denounce these caste organizations as anti-national and 'reactionary' because they sought the help of the British imperialists in getting their grievances redressed. They however, forget the main point that in spite of their illusions as to the 'progressive-democratic character' of the British an illusion which they shared with the pre-Tilak generation of nationalists—they roused and organized the masses against some aspects of the oppressive social order. The Nair and Ezhava peasants who were first roused against caste oppression and for a fairer and juster social order were sure, in course of time, to advance further along the road of struggle. When they did this, they could not but break the chain of pro-imperialist illusions that bound them in the first phase of their organization and struggle.

We will see in the following chapters that this was actually what happened in Kerala. The peasants who were roused by, and organized in, caste organizations in the early years of the twentieth century were subsequently brought into the fold of the anti-imperialist national movement in the twenties and into the class organization of the peasantry in the thirties and forties. It was this steady progress of the peasantry from a defeated and leaderless mass (which it was in the years after Velu Thampi and Pazhassi Raja) to an organized class, allied to the emerging working class, that is the main driving force of our democratic movement. But, before going into a description of this absorbing topic, we should clear up one point—the economic content and class significance of caste oppression in the conditions of our feudal-colonial economic order.

The Brahmins stand on the highest and the scheduled castes on the lowest rung of the caste ladder; the Nairs, other Hindus, Christians and Muslims stand in between the two. This system represented, in pre-British days, a system of political administration, the highest caste being so not only from a social point of view but also in the sense of being the ruling caste. It is true that this system did not continue undisturbed but had already begun to change long before the establishment of British rule. It was, however, only under the British that the administrative system was made completely independent of the caste system.

With the separation, under the British, of the caste system from the administrative machinery, caste acquired a new content; it became a rough index of the economic status of the people, the highest caste being the most prosperous and the lowest ones being economically the most oppressed. It is true that, as a result of the development of market relations and the consequent growth of new classes and strata of society, several families of high-caste people became pauperized, while several in the lower castes became prosperous. It, however, remains a fact that the comparative prosperity and poverty of an average family in each caste roughly corresponds to the position of that caste in the caste hierarchy.

For example, the 1941 Economic Survey of Travancore gives the following percentage distribution of families by caste and annual income groups:

ANNUAL INCOME GROUP

Caste	ANNUAL INCOME GROUP							Total
	Below Rs 60	Rs.61- 120	Rs 121- 180	Rs.181- 300	Rs 301- 480	Rs.481- 840	Rs.841 and above	
Brahmin	3.1	15.1	12.0	21.0	16.1	13.5	17.2	100
Nair	18.3	33.6	18.3	15.4	7.9	4.1	2.4	100
Ezhava	24.3	42.0	18.0	10.4	3.2	1.3	0.8	100
Other Hindus	16.6	34.0	21.7	15.5	7.1	3.3	1.8	100
Backward Communities	27.6	45.5	15.3	8.1	1.9	0.5	1.1	100
Christian	18.1	38.8	18.8	13.7	5.6	3.2	1.8	100
Muslim	20.3	39.1	18.1	12.8	5.2	2.7	1.8	100
All castes	20.3	39.1	18.1	12.9	5.2	2.7	1.7	100

In other words,

1. The caste that has the minimum percentage of families in the lowest income group as well as the maximum percentage in the highest income group is the Brahmins.

2. The caste that has the maximum percentage of families in the lowest income group are the backward, followed by the Ezhava. These are also the two castes that have the minimum percentage of families in the highest income group.

3. The two groups of Hindus that stand in the caste hierarchy in between the Brahmin on the one hand and the Ezhava and other backward communities on the other—Nairs and other Hindus—are below the average of all non-Brahmin castes in relation to the percentage of families in the lowest income groups (below Rs. 120); while they are above the average in respect of the percentage in the income groups higher than these two.

The same picture is seen in five typical villages of Cochin surveyed in 1936 both as regards per capita value of property of and net annual income per family.

PER CAPITA VALUE OF PROPERTY

<i>Caste</i>	<i>Anthikkad</i>	<i>Chundal</i>	<i>Vengannallur</i>	<i>Vallivattam</i>	<i>Thiruvazhiyad</i>
	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
Namboodiri	30,593	94,179	18,449	—	—
Nair	3,397	3,902	942	1,847	6,326
Other caste					
Hindus	10,848	5,250	2,772	—	24,918
Ezhava	850	521	69	887	263
Pulaya*	13	30	18	7	17
Paraya*	—	20	—	—	—
Kanakka*	—	22	—	13	—
Muslim	412	217	243	1,410	253
Christian	1,772	1,381	240	1,070	8,483

*Scheduled castes

NET ANNUAL INCOME PER FAMILY

<i>Caste</i>	<i>Anthikkad</i>	<i>Chundal</i>	<i>Venganallur</i>	<i>Vallivattam</i>	<i>Thiruvazhiyad</i>
	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
Namboodiri	496	2,887	520	—	—
Nair	179	215	134	89	278
Other caste					
Hindus	818	300	222	—	—
Ezhava	98	107	107	118	126
Pulaya*	83	112	79	112	101
Paraya*	—	94	—	—	—
Kanakka*	—	—	—	—	—
Muslim	107	113	113	99	111
Christian	134	128	109	148	98

*Scheduled castes

It should, however, be mentioned that the overwhelming majority of people of all castes are interested in the anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle, since they are all the victims of feudal-colonial exploitation. For, while it is true, as the figures given above clearly indicate, that a bigger proportion of lower caste people belong to the low income groups than higher castes, a good proportion of the latter, too, are in the low-income categories. According to the 1941 Economic Survey of Travancore, for example, 868 out of 1630 Brahmin families, i.e., over 50 per cent. have annual incomes of below Rs. 300 or monthly income of below Rs. 25 (only 117 out of 1630 or one in every nine Brahmin families have annual incomes of above Rs. 1000). That this compares favourably to the Ezhava with 93.9 per cent below Rs. 300 level, to the Christian with 85.6 per cent, to the Nair with 85.6 per cent, to other Hindus with 86.8 per cent, to the backward communities with 86.5 per cent and to the Muslims with the 90.4 per cent respectively in the same category, does not negate the fact that the incomes of over half of the families even in the highest caste are below the subsistence level.

It is in the covering up of this basic poverty of the masses of all communities, of the consequent need of the masses of all communities for the ending of the feudal-colonial economy, that the potentially reactionary character of the caste and communal organizations consisted. We shall see further on that these organizations at a subsequent stage of their evolution began to play precisely this role of preventing the development of class consciousness among the masses. But in the first stage of their development, they played a totally different role, the role of infusing the spirit of revolt among the downtrodden masses (though of particular castes), of organising them against the regime of oppression and injustice. That is why Sri Narayana Guru, the saintly leader of the Ezhavas must be considered the first inspirer and organizer of the mass democratic movement of the cultivating and landless peasant masses of Kerala. The communal organizations of lower castes are thus the first form in which the peasantry got itself organized and started its struggle for democracy.