



FROM MISSION TO MOVEMENT: NAIR SERVICE SOCIETY

R. Venugopalan Nair*

Abstract

The paper is a study of transformation that the Nair society underwent in Travancore in the state of Kerala in India, in the latter part of nineteenth century under the impact of education, a cash economy, increase in social assertiveness and political aspirations among the educated class in Travancore. The spatial distribution of the Nair community was altered around Travancore state with the advent of Colonialism. In short, Colonialism was responsible not just for the emergence of a particular group but also for altering and shaping the landscape of people in the political system, in which the Nair community operated. The paper concludes with the role of the Nair Service Society (NSS) in unifying the Nair community, irrespective of the numerous regional and group differences within it, its role in the freedom struggle after the formation of an independent state of Kerala

Introduction

In 1729, Martanda Varma assumed power with the help of the Marava mercenaries from the Tamil kingdom and curtailed the Nair dominance in the administrative set up in Travancore. He appointed people from outside the state

* R.Venugopalan Nair is Lecturer in History, Goa University. E-mail: venupreetu@yahoo.com

of Travancore as Diwans, which led to the development of a new elite, as a sizable number of people from other places settled in Travancore. In 1778, successors of Martanda Varma signed a treaty with the English East India Company,¹ which subsequently paved the way for the creation of an interventionist state with the Travancore royal family allowing the British to set up their residency in Travancore. This also to some extent resulted in the breakdown of Nair dominance in the state.

A 'dominant caste'², the Nairs had a fairly high ritual status, which gave them great advantages over low-caste people and non-Hindus in a traditional Hindu kingdom. But with the British setting up their residency in Travancore, the Christian missionaries increased their activities. They opened schools associated with the mission stations and small churches (*Pallikudam*) in which students belonging to other communities were also granted admission. The prominent missionaries belonged to London Missionary Service and Catholic Missionary Service.

Till the late eighteenth century, the Nairs were the chief landholders in most of the Travancore *desams* (villages). More than half of the agricultural population were peasant proprietors, who had the security of the land and their customary rights were undisturbed.³ The state was distinctly rural in nature and the villages were not 'cluster villages' (the place of habitation pattern extended not just along the roads and tracks but through the fields and were dotted by families holding to large tracts of agricultural land) at times referred to as ribbon pattern of settlement. The villages were more of an administrative concept than a physical fact. Joan Mencher in her argument said that this peculiar settlement pattern facilitated the growth of feudal relationship unique to Kerala in the Indian subcontinent.

The social rank of the Nairs has been below the Nambudiri, as has been characterised by the *Kara* organisation in Travancore. Ceremonies of marriage and death brought the Nair community belonging to a *Kara* together. The *Kara* also comprised of the service class like the washerman, coconut climber etc. who held a role in the rituals associated with the Nair *tharavadu*. The *tharavadu* was the focus where the Nair joint family lived in dwellings distinct as the *Nalukettu* or *Ettukettu*.

The prominent Nair families of the *Kara* used to collect taxes due to the government and exercise judicial and police functions within the *Kara* limits. The importance of *Kara* gradually declined in the course of the nineteenth century. Till then the administration of Travancore was dominated by the Nair community as it held more than sixty percent of the posts and also had a fairly high ritual status, which gave them great advantage over the non-Hindus and low-caste people whom

they held as slaves in a traditional Hindu kingdom, where economy was primarily based on agriculture.

Formative period

The first quarter of the twentieth century was a remarkable period in the history of social process in Travancore. The precepts of Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda, apart from the influence of English education and science, gave rise to a 'new spirit' – wherein individuals of each community, notably the Hindus, Christians and Muslims, who were living in an agreeable atmosphere at the advent of twentieth century began to struggle for their social rights

They felt that the superstitions and obnoxious customary restrictions that were dominant in the society were great impediments to their progress. Due to this, each one struggled hard to break the shackles that bound it to tradition and emerge into the sunshine of social freedom.⁴

With the advent of European missionaries in the state, social reforms started taking place. The British administration pressurised the ruler of Travancore to start social, administrative and commercial reforms in the state.⁵ The economic pressures, changing values and rigorous legal system, which were the concomitant of the new resources, had an adverse effect on the 'hypergamous, matrilineal and matrilocal' Nair family. With the spread of education in the state, many educated members of various castes and religions began to compete for positions in government services. Yet many of the important posts were still reserved for the Nairs much to the dismay of others. The other groups organised themselves into associations and started a campaign for inclusion of their respective group in the government service.

Against this background, the Nairs lost out their prominence that was loosely based on the rights of feudalism and the joint family, succession and customs, where large amount of money was spent. This added economic burden on the Nair family against the background of a new economy that based itself on 'cash crop' cultivation. Further, the breaking up of the joint family system in Central Travancore added more pressure to the land rights in Travancore. As the Nair matrilineal family loosened, they lost hold on the land and fell into bad times financially. Many old Nair families (*Tharavads*) declined and faced disintegration.

It was during this time that many younger members of Nairs increasingly took on to education and some of the young Nair men who went for higher English

education felt that the Nairs wasted much money over traditional customs and ceremonies like the puberty ceremony and *Talickettu Kalyanam*.⁶ They were also sensitive to certain charges on the customary relations like *Sambandham*, as the children of a Nambudiri through a Nair woman, had no legal title to paternal property and posed a serious social problem. The "ignorance of paternity" became another social problem in which the Nair community came under attack with the spread of English education. They felt that even the *Marumakkathayam* system of succession was more of a destructive rather than a cohesive force, as the selfish administration of a Nair *tharavad* by its eldest male member led to fraternal disputes and economic ruin.

The Nairs were property owners who in the early twentieth century instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth. Thus, wealth remained with the community. Wealth, when it becomes capital has the multiplier effect and without the process of accumulation, wealth would disintegrate through use and consumption.

Thus, in 1886 a few far-sighted educated leaders got together to form the *Malayali Sabha*, which aimed to eradicate the prevalent social evils and free the Nairs from their state of dismay and despair. But soon this organization declined and in 1905 the *Keraleeya Nair Sangham* was formed in Trivandrum. The *Sangha* was registered under the Travancore Company regulation on 1912. The main aim of the organization was:

- To unify the Nair community, irrespective of the numerous regional and group difference within it.
- To put an end to the expensive, superstitious ceremonies and endless litigations. It also tried to regulate the marital status of the Nair women and abolish the uneconomic *Marumakkathayam* system.
- To unite the Nairs of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar.
- To ensure social progress.
- They adopted a resolution to the effect that Nairs were not *Sudras*, as they were referred in the Census carried out by the British under Nagam Aiyar, who was a Brahmin from Tamil Country.

As a result of the *Sangha's* early efforts, the Nair community became conscious of its ruinous customary practices.⁷ But the feeling that the *Keraleeya Nair Samajam* was not rendering any effective service to the Nairs without causing

offence to other communities slowly led to its disintegration. This led to the origin of the *Nair Samudaya Bhrithua Jana Sangham*. Organised on the pattern of the ideals of the Servants of India Society, the *Sangham* aimed at intercommunal harmony, educational advancement and economic uplift. These activities grew wider and soon embraced Kuttanad, the rice bowl of Travancore, Neyyatinkara and Padmanabhapuram. Under the able leadership of its president K Kelappan Nair, the *Sangha* was renamed as *Nair Service Society (NSS)* in July 1915.

Foundation of the nair service society: Pre-independence period

On Kellapan Nair's resignation, Changanaserry K Parameshwaran Pillai took over as *Nair Service Society* president on January 1, 1916. The new president advocated total eradication of untouchability and visualised a Hindu society free of caste differentiation. It was on his initiative that the *NSS* passed a resolution in favour of temple entry for the depressed classes.

But the life and breath of *NSS* was Mannath Padmanbhan Pillai, who with his missionary zeal and unique organisational skills worked hard for the regeneration and solidarity of the Nair community. He dealt with a number of communal problems, including misadministration of property on the part of *Karnavar* in a Nair joint family, quarrels and litigation among the members of the community, education and maintenance of the children of poor Nair widows.

Pillai concentrated on education since he knew that other groups present in the Travancore region had been able to move forward because of education. He pleaded with the Diwan to allow the *NSS* to establish colleges and schools and also to set up mission hospitals modelled after the competing group of the Christians. Mannath Padmanabhan for this purpose undertook extensive tours to different parts of Travancore to collect funds to organise and co-ordinate the activities of the *Karayogam*, which was to be established in the villages. The primary aim of these *Karayogams* was not to succumb to the influence of orthodox priesthood but to cultivate self-reliance and self-respect and develop a spirit of social service. He desired a Hindu society, unified and free from caste distinctions. Under his leadership, the *NSS* members worked for the uplift of the depressed classes and the eradication of untouchability.

About the same time, with the freedom struggle gradually gaining momentum, many socio-religious organisations like the *NSS* and *Sree Narayanan Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP)*, working among the Ezhavas, upset with Diwan Sir C

P Ramaswamy Aiyer of Travancore began to organise themselves and agitate for their future welfare. Their growing social consciousness posed a serious threat to the ambitious Diwan, who till then had a major say in the affairs of the state overruling the Royalty. In order to prevent any major rebellion that would threaten his power and ultimately lead to a nationalist movement, the Diwan created 'communal tension' in the state.⁸ Further, to suppress people's demand for democratic rights he took refuge under the British. Police firing and *lathi* charge became a common phenomenon. Senior state Congress leaders were beaten up, their public meetings interrupted by anti-social elements and the state machinery publicly humiliated the lady leaders.

To an extent, the Diwan succeeded in spreading communal strife in the region when a prominent Nair, Changanessery Parmeshwaran Pillai contested against a Christian landlord, E. J. John in an election in 1922.⁹ The communal tension and skirmishes between the two prominent communities continued up to 1933 and this animosity guided the politics of Travancore for a long time.

Around the same time, A Narayan Pillai wrote two articles: '*Communal Representation in Public Service*' in the *Malayala Rajyam* and '*Irregularities in Assembly Proceedings*' in the *Malayali*. In these articles, he argued for a responsive government, for which he was prosecuted and sentenced to eighteen months in jail.¹⁰ The consequences of Pillai's trial were widely felt, as the party used this as an opportunity to expose what they termed as "the subservience of the judiciary to the ends of the executive" and to draw the attention of other Indian states and provinces to the arbitrary methods employed by the Diwan.

Following this case, the State Congress was formed and it started an agitation for a responsible government. Dominated as it was by the Ezhavas and Christians, Nairs hardly had any role to play in the Congress. The Diwan used this to his advantage. He propagated that the State Congress was an anti-Nair movement, though some of its leaders were prominent Nairs. Later, he passed a proclamation giving permission to the underprivileged classes to enter the temple. All this was done to obstruct the National Movement by lining up the Nairs and lower castes against the Christians and Ezhavas.

In order to win the support of the prominent Nairs, the Diwan gave them many benefits. To the Diwan's advantage, Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai, one of the founder members of the NSS was his staunch supporter and considered the State Congress as his declared enemy. But by 1945, Padmanabhan Pillai changed his views to suit the changing circumstances, as he realised that democratic rule was a clear possibility in the state in the near future. Further, the Diwan was

going back on several promises like the establishment of colleges under NSS management. These factors led to a rift between the NSS and Diwan.¹¹

However, unlike the SNDP, NSS didn't entangle itself directly with the administrative set-up of the state. They worked among the community and started introspection into the ill effects in the Nair family system and ceremonies. Consequently, the Director Board discussed about the attitude to be adopted by the Nair community in general and the NSS in particular about political issues. They appointed a committee comprising of KN Sankunni Pillai, P Balakrishna Thampi, BG Sankaranarayana Pillai, TP Velayudhan Pillai and Vellapan Nair to study this aspect. Their report was unanimously approved by the Board on March 11, 1946.

Though the NSS movement initially sought to empower and build the identity of a social group and question the institutional assumption of traditional political action, the movement developed a new identity to become an important part of the freedom struggle and at the same time dealt with issues of the community. Thus, NSS slowly developed a notion of politics, though it originally claimed itself as a "non-state agent". Due to this, the NSS at a later phase was torn between the concern with cultural identity and the need to compromise with the more progressive political forces and traditions of the society they criticized.

The NSS members then took a resolution to refrain itself as an institution from indulging in any political activity, as it was not in the interest of the Society as well as many of its members who were government servants. But they called upon the claims to join State Congress in large number to strengthen the organisation. Mannath Padmanabhan himself resigned as president of the NSS on May 1947 to join the State Congress.

The rift between NSS and the Diwan widened when the NSS Director Board on 13 April, 1947 refused to nominate two of its member to franchise committee, on the plea that the NSS has already adopted a non-involvement attitude in political activities. Annoyed, on June 12 1947, the Diwan ordered inspection and audit of the books and accounts of the NSS. But before the report could be submitted the Diwan had to leave the state. But not before he succeeded in creating a split in the NSS by winning the support of six members of the Director Board. These members lured by position and money adopted a resolution supporting independent Travancore. But this notion was ruled out by the NSS board on July 25, 1947.

In the same year, on 27 December, Diwan CP Ramaswamy Aiyer declared the formation of an independent Travancore state, modelled on the one prevailing before 1795, making it free to deal with other nations and provinces.¹² The

Maharaja of Travancore signed the declaration on April 12, 1948. The government issued proclamation appointing franchise and delimitation committee.

Soon after, the Diwan resigned after an attack carried out on him at the Senate hall, the Maharaja issued a proclamation for a responsible government on September 24, 1947. As a result of the confabulation between the State Congress leadership and government a 15-member administrative reforms committee was formed, of which Mannath Padmanbhan Pillai was a member. In the report, the government in token accepted the elections recommended by the Committee, thereby transferring power to the people.

Nair service society: Post-independence period

After the successful culmination of the agitation for a responsible government, the State Congress supported by NSS aimed at capturing power through election to the constitution committee. On March 24, 1948, Pattom Thanu Pillai was elected as the Prime minister with T.M. Varghese and C. Kesavan as ministers. But the role of ministry as a democratic government did not meet with the expectations of the public because:

- Of the rising groupism within the Congress, dictatorial tendencies of the prime minister and lack of trust among the ministers.
- A rift within the Congress on communal lines, with Catholic members on one side and Non-Catholic on the other. The issue that induced the fall of ministry was the agitation of private school teachers demanding equal remuneration as the government school teachers. The Christian community owned most of the private schools and they employed Christians as teachers. Hence a demand for a grant of around Rs 81.36 lakh for payment of the salary, which was accepted by the government, was considered by the NSS as giving undue favour to the Christian Community.¹³ About the same time, Kumbalathu Sanku Pillai started a movement for allocating land within the Secretariat complex for a memorial of Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai.¹⁴
- The Prime Minister's opponents raised an issue that the same person should not hold both the post of the Prime Minister and Congress president. Thus, Pillai was forced to resign from the Congress presidentship. But his opponents started a signature campaign against him with the support of some Nair leaders. A no-confidence resolution, signed by the 64 members, was submitted during a Congress party meeting on October 10, 1948, thereby forcing Pillai to resign even from the post of Prime Minister. After him, Paravur T.K. Narayana Pillai became the Prime Minister.

On July 1, 1949, Travancore and Cochin states were merged to form the unified state, despite some legal and religious objections by the Cochin Royal family. The Maharaja of Travancore was made the '*Raja Pramukh*' Of Travancore-Cochin.¹⁵ This brought about many changes in the State Congress, as even the Muslim League, which till then had remained a separate group within the legislature, merged with the Congress.

Dismayed by the increasing dominance of Christians in State Congress, NSS leader Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai at a political meeting on November 1949 at Kottayam declared that all Hindus from the lowest (*Nayadi*) to the highest (*Nambudiri*) caste should be unified under the NSS. Members of SNDP also supported the formation of *Hindu Mandalam* in their meeting on December 15, 1949. Ten days later, a joint meeting of members of both the groups was convened at Quilon, which was attended by 57 members (of the total 75) of the SNDP board and 18 members (of the total 21) of NSS board. A new *Devaswom Bill* was adopted by the legislature, despite opposition by certain members who called the Bill 'unconstitutional'.

In order to create a casteless Hindu society, Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai and NSS general secretary Manmadhan Nair decided not to append their surname of 'Pillai' and 'Nair' respectively as it identified their caste at a meeting of Hindu representatives at Changanessery on January 23, 1950. The *Hindu Mandalam* encouraged establishment of educational institutes, hospitals and orphanages. They aimed at removing the caste system within the Hindus and ensuring re-conversion of Hindus.

But the aim of organising the Hindus was short-lived due to lack of interest among the leaders. During this period, the SNDP leadership demanded that the government enforce in the state the benefits provided under the Indian Constitution to the socially and educationally backward sections. Acting on their demand, the government reserved 20 out of 60 seats in the medical college for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Backward Classes (BC). The Government also appointed a committee to identify the sections that have to be given 'reservation benefits' in government services under 16(4) of the Constitution. This action taken by the SNDP in advancing the sectarian interests of the Ezhavas caused mistrust in the NSS leadership.

Around the same time there was the growing demand for a united Kerala extending from Kasargod in the North to Kanyakumari in the South, including the pre-dominant Tamil speaking area of the Southern Travancore. Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai wrote an article in support of united Kerala in *Mathrubhumi*

and president of United Kerala Committee VK Kellapan canvassed this idea to the Government of India. The Government of India appointed a commission headed by Syed Fazal Ali as Chairman and Sardar K.M.Pannickar and Pandit Hridayanath Kunzrow as members with P.C.Chaudhury as the Secretary .The Nair leadership was against the separation of the Tamil speaking areas of South Travancore to Tamil Nadu as the royal family of Travancore originated and had there capital in the early times in Padmanabhapuram. Another issue, which rocked simultaneously, was the move of the government to enact a law, which protected land lease owners. Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai appealed to the Chief Minister to desist from enacting this law as he felt that it would adversely affect the middle class owners.¹⁶ Six members of the Congress party rebelled against the government and abstained from voting on the budget. The budget was subsequently passed but Chief Minister Pannampally Govindan Menon resigned and the state was brought under President's rule. In the next general election the first democratically elected communist ministry under E.M.S Namboodiripad was formed on April 5, 1957. The communist introduced land reforms, which gathered on its own trajectory in chalking out the future of Kerala.

Endnotes

(The important source material for this paper is the unpublished diary of Kadapara Sadasivan Pillai who was the ex-Secretary of the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee and a close associate of Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai, the founder of Nair Service Society.)

- ¹ K. Saradmoni, *Matriline Transformed*, Delhi, 1999, pp. 43.
- ² Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, Delhi, 1994, pp. xix (introduction)
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp.15.
- ⁴ P.K.K. Menon, *The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, Vol-II, 1938, pp. 454.
- ⁵ William Logan, *Malabar*, Vol-I, Madras, 1887, pp. 221-4.
- ⁶ Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance*, Delhi, 1994, pp. 81.
- ⁷ P.K.K. Menon, *The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, Vol-II, 1938, pp. 474- 8.
- ⁸ Kadapara Sadasivan Pillai, Personal diary, (unpublished)
- ⁹ *Ibid.*.

- ¹⁰ Narayana Pillai C, *Tiruvithamcur Swantantriya Samaram* (Malayalam), Trivandrum, 1972, pp. 200-3.
- ¹¹ Hareedranath Kurup, *History of NSS* (Malayalam), Trivandrum, pp. 86-87.
- ¹² Government press note, 11 June 1947. D Dis268/1947/CS
- ¹³ Hareedranath Kurup, *History of NSS* (Malayalam), Trivandrum, Vol-II, pp.430-2.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.438-9.
- ¹⁵ V P Menon, *Integration of the Indian States*, Hyderabad, 1985, pp.275.
- ¹⁶ Hareedranath Kurup, *History of NSS* (Malayalam), Trivandrum, pp. 174-5.