

### **3.20 ROLE OF VILLAGE LIBRARIES IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REFORM IN KERALA**

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High degree of participation by all classes of people at various levels was the distinctive feature of National movement in Kerala. This was made possible by the village libraries that existed far and wide in the State. They were established and maintained from the second half of the last century by a people's movement. It had its growth parallel to the movements for political, economic, and social reform; supporting them and at the same time getting inspiration from them.

Congress and a few other political parties were the important vehicles that carried on the National Movement in other parts of the country. In Kerala even though their influence was significant they were not the main vehicles. There were other significant movements that came in a series which are to be considered as parts of a lengthy process of the evolution of National Movement. Most of these were geared up by groups of people connected to the local libraries and literary clubs. These movements emerged as local and regional organizations aiming at social and cultural development. At the initial stage their activities were non-distinguishable from the extension activities of the village libraries and connected cultural groups. Later they developed into or merged into elite based quasi-revolutionary organizations with political motives. These movements applied the techniques perfected through continuous discussions on how the opposition might best be expressed in the political situation in which the people were. In most places the libraries and people connected to the movement facilitated these discussions and planning.

With the libraries enabling the emergence and marshalling of people's opinion all classes of people in Kerala exhibited a high degree of political and social consciousness. They got themselves

actively involved in mass agitations against royal autocracy, bureaucratic misrule, caste tyranny and alien domination. So no account of national movement in pre 1947 Kerala can be limited merely to the growth and work of political parties. Underlying everything was the nature of the Society in which they operated and the institutions like the local libraries that blend in with the society and enable the political organizations to establish their foothold.

The situations that existed in Kerala also necessitated a people's library movement for the existence and activities of the political parties that emerged, the social reform movements that became urgent, the communal and religious organizations that came into existence, and the struggle for responsible government in the State.

Creating public opinion and spreading political ideas warranted an educated and informed public. Political workers therefore have to give more emphasis to social education activities. It necessitated the establishment in villages some centres for the communities education and information. Small reading rooms and libraries were found to be the centres that could be established and maintained by village communities with their own contributions and without any outside support.

It was the curiosity for the daily news that prompted the speedy establishment of thousands of village libraries in a very short period. As most people cannot afford a daily newspaper at their home, at every house where a paper was subscribed or persons connected to political movement lived people of nearby houses assembled. Sri P.N. Panikkar who was the leading figure in Kerala's library movement remembered the starting of one village library. Sanathana Dharma Vayanasala which originated from such house assemblies. "Only a few important wealthy persons could subscribe to newspapers in villages. Due to my thirst to know about the social and political movements that were blowing around I somehow managed to subscribe a newspaper at my house. It was 'Sreevaz humkodu National Daily'. Five to eight persons assembled daily at my house and they asked me to read the paper aloud. I felt

happy about it. I also used to read them biographies of great men on the days when we missed the paper. Sri P.N. Madhavan Pillai a friend of mine subscribed two other dailies and he had a small collection of books. Pooling together these books and newspapers in the room freely rented out for the purpose, we started a small village library". Like this houses in many of the villages of Kerala became places of reading and discussion and later got transformed into small libraries. People donated their personal collections and also subscribed newspapers and periodicals for these libraries. Educated youngsters from the villages offered their voluntary service to organize and manage these village libraries and reading rooms.

Sugunaposhini established in 1880 at Vanchiyoor, Trivandrum was the earliest notable attempt to establish a people's library. It organized a very big collection of Malayalam books. The SRMV Association Library at Karamana, Trivandrum started functioning in 1888. Janapradayini Library of Neyyattinkara, Sankara Vilasam Library of Chengannoor, and Chithira Tirunal Smaraka Granthasala of Trivandrum came into existence before 1920, due to peoples' initiative and effort. All these libraries conducted literary and cultural activities and discussions on topics of current interest. The contributions of Chithira Thirunal Smaraka Granthasala of Vanchiyoor to Kerala Culture and literature was enormous. For almost six decades it functioned in close association with the most notable political, cultural and literary figures of Kerala and spread the ideas of national movement.

The political and social activists found their natural base in these libraries, a local point from where they could spread their reform movements and activities. With this motive they infiltrated in the existing people's libraries. They used the existing libraries and also established thousands of new ones in the places where they were not already existing.

The beginning of the Twentieth Century saw libraries sprouting up throughout the length and breadth of Kerala like mushrooms. While hundreds of libraries took birth every year, hundreds withered

away. The difficulties experienced in running them and the break down and collapse of several of them necessitated a well organized library movement to support them. In 1931 the first association of libraries 'Samastha Kerala Pustakalaya Samithi' was formed by the people. Later, 'All Travancore Granthasala Sangham, was formed and it assumed the title, 'Kerala Grandhasala Sangham, when Kerala State was formed. The contribution of these associations in training Keralas' rural people in democratic form of government and in creating political and social consciousness was immense.

Like the tea shops and pan shops in villages, the libraries, reading rooms and recreation clubs also became the centres that villagers could approach without any psychological barriers. There they shared their news and views. It was in such centres that the first political organizations of Kerala were formed; movements and the ideas of national unity and even independence tentatively put forward.

The influence of western education along with the awareness created by the discussions and debates at village libraries and reading rooms initiated most of the agitations and reform movements in Kerala. The exclusion of natives from higher grades in government service was severely criticised at the discussions in the libraries by youth within the state possessing high academic qualifications. This resulted in the constitutional agitation which began with the presentation of Malayali and Ezhava memorials in the last decade of Nineteenth century. They marked the emergence of new educated middle class as a force to be reckoned within the public life of Kerala. The vigorous public, campaigning which followed the submission of the memorials was also done through the village libraries, reading rooms and groups formed at such centres. Such agitations of the educated people for getting a share in administration awakened the middle class of Kerala to a sense of their inherent rights.

The western educated and progressive minded younger generation resisted outdated customs, traditions and family

organization. They engaged themselves in many social reform activities forming groups; for which libraries served as bases.

The rural libraries extended the influence of the press and together they supported the progress and success of national movement. In early period the Malayalam press was also concerned with social and religious affairs. Later politics assumed greater importance. Curiosity of the masses for the information and daily news caused by the eventual days of the freedom struggle further developed the spirit of library movement. In 1903 Indian National Congress held a large public meeting at Calicut. In 1916 a branch of Home Rule Movement was formed in Malabar. Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-33 stirred the Kerala Society. In the forties besides "Quit India Movement" the agitation for self Government in the Princely states of Kerala gathered momentum.

The newspaper, Malayala Monarman came into existence in 1890 followed by numerous other dailies and periodicals. Between 1899 and 1910 Swadeshabhimani K. Ramakrishnan Pillai edited the papers: 'Darpanam', 'Kerala panchika', 'Malayali', and 'Swadeshabhimani'. Copies of these news papers reached every village library. The articles which he wrote under the pseudonym, 'Keralan' were highly critical of the administration. He came to be hailed everywhere as a stout champion of popular liberties. In 1910 he was deported from the state and his paper and the press were confiscated to the circar. The secret meetings organised in libraries in Travancore condemned, the highhanded action of Government. But there were no public protests. In 1923 Sri K.P. Kesava Menon who has been connected for long to political, social and religious reform movements, associating with some other leaders raised public subscriptions and started 'Mathrubhoomi' to spread the message of freedom movement among the masses. In October 1924 another newspaper named 'Al-amin' was also started from Calicut under the Editorship of Mohammad Abdur Rahiman with the object of bringing the Muslims into the stream of national movement. Like this many people connected to the freedom struggle associated

with the press. These newspapers with patronage of the libraries contributed much to spread of National Movement among the masses.

Newspaper was the only medium of communication in those days and people anxiously waited for every issue. As most people cannot afford a daily at their home the villagers established small reading rooms or libraries that subscribed newspapers. There people used to read newspapers aloud to help illiterate also to know what is happening around. This facility for spreading of news introduced to the villagers the new forms in which National Movement progressed; Swadeshi, boycott and passive resistance, Gandhian Satyagraha and constructive village work as well as revolutionary terrorism, strikes, outbursts of urban peasants and tribal violence. This influenced the initiation of such movements in Kerala also.

Using village libraries, secret journals supporting freedom movement were also printed and circulated. During the Quit India Movement a secret journal called 'Swatantra Bharatham' was regularly published to disseminate news about the events of freedom movement and sustain the morale of the people. It was a weekly and the first issue was published in 5th October 1942. The names of editors and authors were not printed. From the style of language in its articles and poems, we can assume that famous writers like M.R. Nair and N.V. Krishnavadyar were associated with this secret journal. Another journal 'Congress Bulletin' was secretly printed and widely circulated in Malabar area everyday. It is through the rural libraries and groups associated with people's library movement that these publications reached the people and achieved their objectives. The police never succeeded in finding out the sources of their publication or agency of distribution.

The Government was particularly apprehensive of the influence of village libraries and newspapers. Their actual circulation was not large. But this limited circulation cannot curtail the extent of their influence as each paper was read by hundreds of readers at the village libraries. It was not an easy task to publish a newspaper in

those days of famine and hardship caused by second world war. So a secret journal against the government required great courage and an efficient underground network. A note titled 'To the attention of Readers' in Swatantra Bharatham reads'. 'Due to the scarcity of paper we can not print sufficient copies. So we request you to circulate the copies without destroying them. Village libraries enabled such circulation. Each copy of the secret journal; circulated among most of the members of the library, transmitted how house to house remained live for days. All these directly affected the opinion of the class of people who were not sophisticated by English education in schools and who responded immediately to whatever the paper said. It is also a fact that the comments of Malayalam papers and secret journals were sharper and ranked more bitterly than those of contemporary English press. An article in Swatantra Bharatham under the heading "Even after the death of the cow" reads like this. 'What do you think about these shameless donkeys (Britishers)? They who have fed from Burma after loosing each seven of their ten soldiers and learning all the gun, spears, lorrys and tanks still shudder when they hear the words 'Japanese'. These great fools are never going to recapture Burma. But they have started a department to plan how Barma should be administered after recapture. There are some jobless white people. And there is the resource of India to feed those useless ones. Trees of the forest and gods' elephant!'. The effectiveness of the press and its influence among the people to the extent to which it became possible in Kerala was only due to the existence of rural libraries. The news and views expressed in the press reached most of the people through the village libraries and brought the people into a single community which shared common thoughts and emotions. This supported the moulding of the country into a national unity. With such involvements the libraries have played an important role in mobilising the people for freedom struggle.

The initial form of expression of patriotism of the intelligentsia was through literature in regional languages. Modern literature in

Malayalam also emerged in close association with the national movement. The regional, therefore, was also anti-autocratic and anti-British.

Writings of Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders of the National Movement exercised tremendous influence of the people. The leaders of the social and political reform movements read and translated these works into Malayalam. Later younger section of the Congress who disapproved the moderate policy of the old leaders organised Congress Socialist Party in Kerala. A chain of well knit organizations of peasants, industrial workers, teachers and students were set up in Kerala under the Congress Socialist leadership.

With the active help of these organizations and the library movement the Socialists strengthened their mass base and increased their influence. They used political and literary works, dramas and discussions to educate the public, to rouse their political and social consciousness and kindly revolution. These novels poems and essays of the progressive literary movement were circulated through the libraries in the villages. Their dramas which discussed the social, political and economic problems produced with the intention of forming public opinion and attracting and retaining more volunteers for the national movement were staged by the libraries. Folk songs and dramas like, 'Pattabakki', 'Veluthampi Dalawa' etc. deserves special mention in this regard. All these created an awareness of their rights among the peasants, workers and lower middle class and infused into them the thought of the need to rise for their rights and shake of the yoke of foreign government.

For the leaders of political and social reform movements and for those who mobilised people for the freedom struggle these rural libraries served as the venues closest to the people from where almost a natural dialogue with the common man became possible. The congress and Communist party workers organised in them study circles, evening classes, adult education programmes etc. These libraries helped the leaders to approach the people who



would normally have remained beyond their reach or that of any communication system due to illiteracy, poverty and other social barriers.

As village libraries functioned as centres for all these activities anormous quantity of reading materials discussing the political and social problems; published by the political parties, communal organisations, trade unions, youth association woman's organisations, etc. flowed into them. These libraries also got organised themselves in a democratic way at local, regional and state level and they familiarised the rural population with democratic form of government.

By all these, the libraries that functioned in most of the Kerala villages helped the political parties; to become organisations of the common people drawn largely from village population. The members so attracted included lakhs and lakhs of peasants and cultivators and industrial and field workers. Most of the leaders of the political parties were those associated with people's library movement.

All political, economic and social reform movements in Kerala that formed part of our National Movement which used the public libraries were highly fruitful. The first legislature in any Indian state was set up in Kerala. Temple entry proclamation permitted entry of lower caste people to the temples. Untouchability and many other social evils were prevented by law.

The village libraries thus helped the national movement go far beyond its original elite intellectual confines. The entry of the masses into active political life which they facilitated helped the quick elimination of princely states, and establishment of parlimentary democracy based on universal francise. The common culture, language and literature popularised through libraries helped to a great extent the dissolution of the political boundaries which separated earlier Travancore, Cochin and Malabar and paved the way for the united Kerala which joined the Indian Federation as a constituent state.

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