



Social and Religious Reforms of Ayya Vaikundar: Transforming the Caste System and Uplifting Marginalized Communities in Kanyakumari

¹Regi and S. ²Pushparaj G.

¹Department of History, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 629 004

²Department of History, Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode - 629 174

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli - 627 012

ABSTRACT

Ayya Vaikundar was an influential social and religious leader in the Kanyakumari region. This research paper examines his transformative impact on the lower castes. Born in Thamaraiikulam, a village in Nanchil Nadu, Vaikundar is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. His divine transformation led to the founding of Ayyavazhi, a new religion that aimed to uplift marginalized communities and challenge caste-based oppression. Vaikundar's reforms addressed social, religious, and political issues faced by the lower castes, including unfair taxes, untouchability, and limited access to education and religious practices. Through his teachings, Vaikundar advocated for equality and social justice. He introduced several reforms such as Samapanthibhojan (equal dining), Munthirikinaru (a well for all castes), and Thottu Namam Chathuthal (a practice to allow lower castes to enter temples), promoting unity and breaking caste barriers. His call for self-respect led to the abolition of discriminatory practices such as the prohibition on lower castes wearing turbans or participating in religious ceremonies. Vaikundar also emphasized the importance of regional language, preaching in Tamil to ensure his teachings were accessible to all. His efforts led to significant changes, such as the end of animal sacrifices in temples and the introduction of Annadharmam, which provided food to worshippers, addressing both spiritual and material needs. Vaikundar's influence extended beyond religious reform, helping to shape the socio-political landscape of South Travancore, and fostering a sense of dignity and unity among the oppressed. This paper delves into his life and reforms, highlighting his contributions to social equality, religious transformation, and the empowerment of the lower castes.

Keywords: Ayya Vaikundar, Caste System, Ayyavazhi Faith, Religious Reforms, Social Justice, Untouchability, Marginalized Communities

Introduction

Kanyakumari district, which was part of the Travancore state until 1956 [1] has a rich cultural and social history, shaped by the struggles of marginalized communities against oppressive caste systems and discriminatory practices. One of the most influential figures in the region's socio-religious landscape was Ayya Vaikundar, believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He led a transformative movement for social reform in the 19th century. Born in

the village of Thamaraiikulam, Vaikundar's life and teachings had a profound impact, particularly on the lower castes in South Travancore. His mission was to uplift the oppressed and challenge the caste-based discrimination that existed at the time.

This paper explores the life, reforms, and legacy of Ayya Vaikundar, focusing on his contributions to the social, religious, and political empowerment of the oppressed. By founding the Ayyavazhi faith and introducing radical changes to religious practices, Vaikundar broke the traditional norms that kept the lower castes marginalized. He enabled them to enjoy equal rights, access to temples, and the ability to live with dignity. His reforms addressed the deeply entrenched casteism of the time, promoting equality, self-respect, and social justice. Besides, Vaikundar's teachings had a lasting impact on religious practices in the region, as he introduced Tamil as the medium for spiritual instruction, making religious rituals and practices accessible to everyone, regardless of caste. It examines the key reforms introduced by Vaikundar, such as Samapanthibhojan (equal dining), Munthirikinaru (a well for all castes), and the elimination of untouchability through his religious actions. His teachings and practices, which challenged both religious and social norms, have had a lasting influence and continue to resonate today [2]. By analyzing Vaikundar's role in shaping the social fabric of Kanyakumari district, this research highlights his significant contributions to the broader movements for social justice and religious reform in India.

His Early Days

A hardworking and poor couple, Ponnu Nadar and Veiyelal, lived in a hut in the Palmyra and coconut grove owned by a landlord. In 1809, they were blessed with a baby boy. They named him Mudisoodum Perumal, meaning "the Lord with a crown" [3]. However, the name faced opposition, and the parents were forced to change it. They renamed him Muthukutty. Muthukutty grew up helping his parents. Eventually, he got married and lived a happy life. He had a son named Podhukutty. At the age of 22, Muthukutty fell ill with an incurable disease and was bedridden for a year. One night, his mother prayed earnestly to Lord Vishnu for her son's recovery before falling asleep. In her dream, Lord Vishnu appeared and instructed her to take Muthukutty to Tiruchendur for the Masi Festival. He promised that Muthukutty would recover and lead a holy life. The next morning, she shared the dream with her relatives, and they decided to take him to Tiruchendur [4].

At that time, there were no motor vehicles, and the family could not afford a bullock cart. Since Muthukutty was too weak to walk, they decided to carry him in a cloth cradle. Early one morning, they began their journey to Tiruchendur. By midday, they reached a river called Thottavazhi Aru. After having their meals, they rested for a while. To everyone's

surprise, Muthukutty, who could not walk even a step before, suddenly got out of the cradle and ran toward Tiruchendur. Everyone followed him in astonishment [5].

Incarnation as Lord Vishnu

At Thiruchendur, he walked through the four streets, surprising his followers who watched him in awe. Then, he walked into the sea and disappeared. His followers searched for him for two days but could not find him. Although they tried to comfort his mother, she remained unconvinced and believed her son would return. She waited by the seashore for three days. On the third day, March 3, 1833 (Twentieth of Masi, Kollam Era 1008), he emerged from the sea. When his mother saw him, she ran to embrace him, but he stopped her, saying he was no longer her son. He declared himself as Vaikundar, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He explained that in the sea, Lord Vishnu had transformed him into Vaikundar and given him divine instructions (Vinchais). Lord Vishnu commanded him to go to Swamithoppu, perform penance for six years, and establish a new religion. Obeying this, he left Thiruchendur on foot and reached Swamithoppu, a holy village. From there, he performed many miracles, which drew people to him. They called him "Ayya Vaikundar," and he went on to found the new religion known as "Ayyavazhi" [6].

Society in Travancore

In the early 19th century, the princely state of Travancore was ruled by kings with the support of the East India Company. During this time, the Diwans, who were the executive heads of the state, worked hard to ensure the English received their share of income from the state. The king had to pay a large amount to the East India Company to maintain the English Residential Force stationed in Travancore. As a result, heavy taxes were imposed on the lower castes such as Nadars, Shanars, and Ezhavas. Further, caste discrimination was strictly practiced during this period. The lower castes, referred to as avarnas, were treated as untouchables and faced severe punishments. The rulers favored the upper castes, including Nambudiris, Nairs, and Vellalas, while the lower castes suffered greatly. They were not allowed to enter temples and were subjected to numerous restrictions, making their lives extremely difficult [7].

Reforms of Ayya Vaikundar

In this situation, Vaikundar worked to uplift the poor and downtrodden lower castes of South Travancore. His goal was to improve their living standards and bring them on par with the privileged castes. His mission aimed at bringing about social, cultural, and religious reform among the people. To achieve this, he became involved in politics to protect the lower castes from the severe atrocities committed against them by the ruling king of Travancore [8].

Samapanthibhojan

Untouchability is a social evil that has almost disappeared today. However, in the past, it created a distorted mindset in society. This harmful practice, deeply rooted in casteism, led to many atrocities against the downtrodden. The lower castes were labeled as untouchables, their presence was despised, and they were even forbidden from entering temples. Vaikundar aimed to eliminate this practice from society. He organized Samapanthibhojan (equal dining) in every place of worship under the concept of Annadharmam. People, regardless of their caste, sat together and shared meals prepared in the temples. At that time, it was unthinkable for people to eat food cooked by the lower castes. Vaikundar sent his disciples to different villages, encouraging them to share meals with the lower castes to break the barriers of untouchability [9].

Munthiri Kinaru

In those days, casteism was so rigid that each caste had its own separate well, and people from other castes were not allowed to draw water from it. To eliminate this caste-based discrimination, Vaikundar established a well called Munthiri Kinaru. This was the first well in the region where people from all castes could come together and use the water. Through this initiative, he helped liberate the lower castes from the grip of casteism [10].

Thottu Namam Chathuthal

In those days, the lower castes were not allowed to enter even the temple premises. In response, Vaikundar introduced a significant practice called Thottu Namam Chathuthal. This involved applying a sacred Namam on the foreheads of low-caste devotees in the shape of a Jyothi. Unlike the traditional practice of temple priests throwing sacred ash or sandal paste at devotees, Vaikundar applied it reverently himself. Through this act, he opened the way for the lower castes to enter temples and participate in worship [11].

Democratic Siddhantha

In those days, the lower castes in Travancore were not allowed to wear turbans or dress like the higher castes. Vaikundar sought to eliminate this discrimination and promote self-respect among the lower castes. He encouraged those who came to him to wear turbans and dhotis that reached down to their toes. By doing this, he practiced and upheld the principle of equality, bringing dignity and unity between the downtrodden and the upper castes.

Thuvayal Panthy

Before establishing the new religion Ayyavazhi, Vaikundar wanted to train the lower castes and those willing to join this new faith, similar to how governments and organizations

provide training before launching a project. His unique method of training was called Thuvayal Panthy, which means integration and purification of a group. Vaikundar aimed to bring social reform among the lower castes, as cleanliness was often neglected in those days. Through Thuvayal Panthy, he instilled habits of discipline, such as bathing daily, washing clothes three times a day, and maintaining overall cleanliness. This initiative not only improved their hygiene but also freed them from dirt and disease, uplifting their lives significantly [12].

Anbu Kodi and Love

Vaikundar wanted to establish a new religion and designed a flag to represent it. This flag, known as Anbukodi, means "Love." It is saffron in color with a single Namam in the shape of a Jyothi in white on both sides. He taught the lower castes that love was the key to uniting society and fostering better development. Through his teachings, he encouraged them to love and support one another, leading meaningful lives by helping each other. As a result, the lower castes developed a deep faith and devotion to their Lord [13].

Nizhal Thangal as Basic Schools

Vaikundar established temples called Nizhal Thangals to bring people together and spread his teachings to the masses. These Nizhal Thangals attracted many followers and became the primary centers for learning about his teachings. In some villages, they also served as basic schools, providing education to the community. Through these efforts, Vaikundar played a significant role in the socio-religious revolution [14].

Pari Tax

In those days, the lower castes had to pay heavy penalty taxes, and the higher castes imposed additional taxes on them in the name of Pari. The lower castes were also forced to work for the state without wages. Vaikundar appealed to the king to stop collecting these penalty taxes and other charges, but the king refused his request. In response, Vaikundar urged the lower castes, especially the Nadars, to refuse to pay the penalty taxes and other fees, and not to work without wages. They followed Vaikundar's advice and disobeyed the king's orders. As a result, the king was forced to cancel all the taxes and the requirement for unpaid labor.

Regional Language in religion

During that time, the Hindu religion was controlled by the Brahmins. They performed daily rituals in temples using Sanskrit, and even marriages were conducted with mantras in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was dominant in Hinduism, and the Brahmins considered it the language of the gods, forbidding other castes from learning it. However, Vaikundar strongly opposed this

practice. He preached in Tamil, the regional language, so everyone could understand. At that time, the temples were managed by kings and their supporters. The religious texts, like the Vedas and Upanishads, were mostly in Sanskrit. The Upanishads contained little information about individuals, while the Vedas focused mainly on philosophy. The Puranas, which were also important, came after the Vedas and Upanishads. Since these texts were in Sanskrit, the lower castes could not learn them or follow the teachings. Vaikundar, however, wrote his own books in Tamil to make them accessible to all [13].

Unique Marriage Ritual

Vaikundar created a unique marriage ritual that is conducted in the regional language, Tamil. He described this marriage as the marriage of Lord Kantha, with Lord Shiva acting as the guru, and the ceremony taking place in the presence of Lord Vishnu. In this ritual, the bride and groom sit facing south, and an elderly man from the village, who serves as the guru, performs the marriage rites. Through this, Vaikundar introduced reforms to marriage, eliminating the need for Brahmins and Sanskrit. He also used Tamil in the Nizhal Thangals to ensure that everyone, including common people, could understand the teachings and follow proper behavior [6].

Simplifying the religions

Vaikundar wanted to make his religion accessible to the common people, so he decided to simplify it. He built small structures called Nizhal Thangals, where worship was kept simple. There were no idols, no priests, no rituals like poojas, no camphor, no incense, and no donation boxes. People could worship in their own way and at their own convenience. Anyone, regardless of caste or creed, could perform panividai, which means decorating the sanctum sanctorum of the Nizhal Thangal [15].

Annadharman

Every religion has its own objectives, but in general, all religions guide people on the right path. However, despite this, many atrocities are committed in the name of religion. Vaikundar believed that people who came to places of worship should be provided with food after praying. He thought that only when people's hunger was satisfied would they be able to focus on God and righteousness. To address this, he started Annadharman in places of worship and worked to eliminate the wrongs done in the name of religion [16].

Preaching against Animal Sacrifice

Today, social organizations condemn the practice of animal sacrifice in temples. However, Vaikundar spoke out against this practice 150 years ago. At that time, people

sacrificed animals in temples as an offering to God. Vaikundar preached against this practice and put an end to it [17].

Conclusion

Ayya Vaikundar's life and reforms represent a significant turning point in the social, religious, and political history of the Kanyakumari region, particularly for the lower castes. His teachings and practices not only challenged the deeply entrenched caste discrimination but also promoted a vision of equality, unity, and social justice. Vaikundar's creation of the Ayyavazhi faith and his emphasis on regional language, Tamil, in religious practices made his teachings accessible to a broader section of society, ensuring that the marginalized could participate fully in spiritual and social life. His innovative reforms, such as Samapanthibhojan, the establishment of Munthirikinaru, and Thottu Namam Chathuthal, served as direct responses to the rigid caste system and oppressive social norms of the time. By advocating for practices like the equal sharing of food and allowing all castes to access public resources like wells and temples, Vaikundar laid the groundwork for a more inclusive society. Additionally, his efforts to combat social evils such as untouchability and the discriminatory practices enforced by the ruling elite reflected his deep commitment to justice and human dignity.

Vaikundar's advocacy against animal sacrifice, his focus on simplifying religious rituals, and his encouragement of self-respect among the lower castes through democratic principles like the wearing of turbans were instrumental in transforming not only the religious landscape but also the socio-political fabric of South Travancore. His teachings empowered the oppressed, gave them a voice, and restored their sense of identity and self-worth. Ultimately, Ayya Vaikundar's contributions to social reform were not merely a reaction to the injustices of his time but a forward-thinking vision of a society where every individual, regardless of caste, could live with dignity and equality. His legacy continues to inspire and influence movements for social justice and religious reform in contemporary times, making his work an important milestone in the history of social change in India.

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