

# A Historic Rejection of Rejection - The Villuvandi Yathra of Mahatma Ayyankali

Dr Divya S

Guest Faculty, Department of History, Fatima Mata National College, Kollam

Ayyankali was a social revolutionary who fought for the basic freedom of the vast masses by organizing independent struggles against caste system. His struggles were intended for acquiring the right to access public places, the right to education, right of involvement in the economic processes and to secure social justice during a period when all these were inaccessible to the lowest castes in Travancore. His tussles were quite distinct from other forms of struggles in Kerala in strategies, intensity and goals. The ultimate aim of his fights was the attainment of social and political freedom, justice and unity of the oppressed castes.

The social activism of Ayyankali started with the historic journey in 1893 from *Perumkattuvila*, where his family had settled, an event famously known as *Villuvandi Yathra*<sup>1</sup> (Abhimanyu 1990, 59). There were a number of laws which adversely affected the life of the *avarnas* and they were exempted from the mainstream of society in all sense. Referring to his bold and colourful entry into the public space, Abhimanyuremarks, "Ayyankali was travelling by a new cart and he was dressed like a Nair at the time of his entry into the public road." (Abhimanyu1990,59). According to T H P Chentharassery "Ayyankali purchased a cart and a pair of white healthy bullocks, himself wore a white turban made of short cloth and in a fine morning of 1893, the cart carrying him started its journey over the forbidden public road challenging the 'Caste Laws'" (Chentharassery 2005, 18).

Ayyankali's *VilluvandiYatra*, the first struggle for freedom of travel on public roads for the oppressed and struggles for entry into the markets which were being challenged by the hegemonic power structures of caste based society. His move towards the caste- Hindu public sphere was different and important because he used such things as weapons in his struggle and it severely challenged the caste norms of the age. In the history of Dalit struggles in Kerala, *VilluvandiYathra* of Ayyankali deserves a special mention because this activism has multifaceted importance in that caste-oriented society and he used actions and ideas alike in this struggle. There are many questions and dimensions which made his struggle relevant even in the present day context. First of all why did he choose roads as the first concern of his target and why he used *Villuvandi* as an object for struggle; why he himself wore white and fine clothes when he made his entry in to the public? If we analyze all these questions in a critical manner we can reach at a suitable understanding of his importance in the freedom struggle of Dalits in Kerala.

In Ayyankali's fight for the freedom of Dalits he gave importance to get access to the public sphere and the first step towards achieving this was to attain the right to use

public roads. Roads are used as essential to the development of a society and human community and they make a cultural contribution to the economic development and growth and bring important social benefits to the society (Maxwell G Lay, James E Vance 1992, 6). But here the accesses of the varied significance of roads by the depressed were blocked by the caste rules of the society for centuries (Abhimanyu 1995, 60). So they could not enter more areas and engage in economic and social development in any sense. So naturally they couldn't become part of the infrastructural public assets in the society and because of lack of communication and freedom they could not consider the pulse of the economy. In short these people were affected by any development agenda such as by linking producers to markets, workers to jobs, students to school and the sick to hospitals etc. Movement of these people was not possible and barriers remained which blocked any betterment of living. Moreover, they were totally unaware about the social cohesion and integration by restriction of access to the power centre of the society. Ayyankali understood the importance of road as a power centre and 'being public' was the only way to liberate the people which would be the turning point in their lives.

It was Ayyankali's intention to combat the caste system and the indifference of the *avarnas* by the government and to end them and for that purpose he challenged all forms of existing caste norms. When Ayyankali entered the public sphere to confront the existing laws of the age he used images and symbols in the struggle. His chosen objects for his struggle actually revealed his intelligence and negation alike. Ayyankali used the bullock cart, which can be considered as the first vehicle of the struggle for freedom. Here it is to be noted that he selected *villuvandi* as an instrument to express his idea of freedom. As per the law and custom, in this time *Villuvandi* was used only by the King and later it became a vehicle of rich people among the upper castes proclaiming their social status. In fact it was a *savarna* vehicle and it was considered as the symbol of frippery in that period (Abhimanyu 1995, 60). Buying *villuvandi* by an outcaste was the violation of social codes and the caste Hindus did not allow the untouchables to use the same on public roads. But Ayyankali was very brave and least bothered about the consequences. In order to protest against the dominant culture of the society he used *Villuvandi* as a symbol of the struggle and made his very first heroic move in the history of Kerala. More than just passing through the forbidden path, Ayyankali nursed a firm hope that the responses to the journey in the *villuvandi* would be great, an instrument designed to transform the concept more appropriate than the dagger (Abhimanyu 1995, 61). His actions aroused two fold responses in society. The conservative society was provoked by the activity of

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Ayyankali, but the subaltern groups woke up with self awareness and confidence (CherayiRamdas 2009, 48). He challenged the caste laws and presented a democratic idea that everyone could use what he wanted to use. Here it should be remembered that Ayyankali strategically used symbols like white and healthiest bullocks because both were considered as symbols of power and prestige of the *savarna*. And moreover, by using healthiest bullock, he revealed that they were not weak but they had strength to challenge the existing system. A pair of silver bells was hung on the neck of bullock cart and when it moved this bell made a ringing sound. Once they heard the sound 'hoy hoy', they were forced to skedaddle from the scene. But it was the first time in the history of Kerala that a depressed one was proclaiming his entry in to the public space.

### Struggle for Descent Dressing

Dress code was another important symbol used by Ayyankali to counter the cultural hegemony of the *savarnas*. The choice of clothes to wear was a signal to express dominance and subordination in society and Ayyankali wanted to demonstrate that his choice of clothes was arbitrary and that it could proclaim his identity. Till the time untouchables were not allowed to wear white and fine clothes and they were only permitted to wear filthy dress or tie one piece of cloth around their waist as the symbol of subordination (Chentharassery 2005, 20). But at the same time things like long fine *dhothy*, *thalappavu* which were considered as the symbols of dominance used only by the *savarnas*. As Sanal Mohan observes, "the mode of dressing is capable of emitting messages of dominance and subordination. In the caste hierarchy it is very obvious that the mode of dressing and caste had an inverse relationship (Sanal Mohan 2005, 66). So dress patterns remained a powerful signifier of *jati* identity in that caste-based society. This was primarily to make possible the easy recognition of people belonging to the *savarna* and *avarnajatis* and to avoid physical contact. The *savarna* controlled even dress pattern of the untouchables and their values existed as the normal values of the society and at a symbolic level, the adoption of particular form of dress in defiance of feudal consumptionary rules in which the upper castes tried to prohibit untouchable from wearing fine cloths (Sanal Mohan 2005, 67). The outcastes were forced by the caste law to wear such kind of symbols of humiliation and subordination. Through the use of white dress and white object Ayyankali established their right to choose what they wanted to use. Definitely it was the realization of Ayyankali that clothing acted as a sign of identification for both men and women expressed themselves as caste markers while appearing in the public place. Ayyankali used an intellectual strategy by the wearing of white long *dhothy*, wrapped *angavasthrum* round his shoulders and tied a *thalappavu* (turban) on his head (Chentharassery 2005, 21).

It was the result of the realization of Ayyankali that clothing symbolizes important characteristics of the wearer and influences the judgment of others about them and he felt good clothing will affect one's personality. When a person has a particularly strong craving for social acceptance, for example, clothing may contribute to the poise and self confidence. The symbolic meaning of clothes and the physical experience of wearing them are very important

aspects. Understanding the psychological dynamics of why the right clothing can contribute to confidence, raise our self esteem and image about ourselves could contribute to a desire to protest against the existing restrictions on dressing patterns of the *avarnas*. Dress code was meant actually to bring and develop self-confidence, self respect, self consciousness, sensitivity, and restraint of an individual. So Ayyankali exhorted his people that good clothing and good appearance should be followed in the public place. Ayyankali insisted that dressing plays a vital role in one's physical appearance and he taught his people how to appear in society. It was his determination that his followers should not accept the privilege, power and orthodoxy of the caste-Hindus. So he intelligently used dress as a tool of social change. This irritated the caste-Hindus in the caste-ridden society because it was a total rejection of the order of hegemonic society.

V Karthikeyan Nair wrote how clothes signify a form of rebellion. Channar rebellion is a case in point. Gandhiji used clothes as forms of protest. When he was a barrister, he wore rich garments and suit befitting an upper class man. After becoming a politician he started wearing poor men's clothes which conveyed a message. Though poor Ambedkar used to wear a suit which was an open defiance of the view that poor men should not wear clothes of the rich. Before Ambedkar and Gandhiji, Ayyankali wore coat and silver headgear and rode a *villuvandi*, using the three items as signs of revolt (Karthikeyan Nair, 2015, 8). Ayyankali was a rebel who transformed the clothing that symbolized power and prestige, and used it as a tool for social change (Karthikeyan Nair 2015, 7). We can see the impact of Vaikunda Swami in this regard. By selecting all these symbols mentioned above, Ayyankali was very careful in preparing the means of protest. It was a revolutionary step by Ayyankali towards democratic process of the country. Ayyankali in every sense challenged the message of dominance of the *savarna*. With the single act of conducting a journey in a *villuvandi*, Ayyankali subverted the symbolic world of *jatimaryada*<sup>2</sup> (Nisar and Meena Kandasamy 2007, 69). Several protests and struggles took place in different parts of India long before freedom movement. But Ayyankali was the first to organize the struggle of the untouchables to travel through such new ways in Kerala. It is to be noted that leaders are the products of their milieu and their activities are impelled by their social environment and only when we take into account this general principle we can understand the greatness of Ayyankali's *Villuvandi Yathra*. K.E.N observes that the cultural icon of Kerala is not the visage emblematic of *Kathakali*, a feudal art form, but Ayyankali's *Villuvandi*. According to C.K. Karim, Ayyankali's revolution effected by *Villuvandi Yathra* is as epoch-making as Sree Narayana Guru's conse creation of the idol of Shiva at Aruvippuram. Ayyankali believed that only a social revolution would transform Kerala society (Babu 2015, 56) and he made his struggle in a culturally diverse society where the ruling class dominated and manipulated the culture of that society.

He rejected all the symbols of humiliation and suppression and claimed the freedom of the humiliated to being a part of 'civil society'. As Gopal Guru clarified, the endemic character of the concept of 'humiliation' can be explained in

terms of the social paradox of the experience of humiliation by the untouchable castes due to social exclusion and humiliating social protocols set by the socially dominant elite of a feudal society (Gopal Guru 2009, 210). Ayyankali's early struggles and the rejection of the 'social protocols of humiliation' were historical indicators of the Dalit survival.

But there was a seething criticism against the early struggles of Ayyankali that he had little support from certain sections of his own caste people and that they did not have the backing of large sections of society. It is true that when Ayyankali began his struggles, the supporters from his caste, were small in number but they had faith and a clear plan of action and moved on. In order to establish their birth rights and Ayyankali and his group continued their mission even when there were only limited followers. There is a famous saying by Fidel Castro<sup>1</sup> that "I began the revolution with 82 men. If I had to do it again, I would do it with 10 or 15 and absolute faith. It does not matter how small you are if you have faith and a plan of action". This absolutely depends on the confidence level of the leader. Ayyankali did the same.

In order to acquire the access into civil society, Ayyankali upheld such values like pride, strength and nobility throughout his struggles. As in Frederick Nietzsche's doctrine he never expressed a 'slave morality' which promotes values like kindness, humility and sympathy but he followed a 'master morality' which expressed values like pride, strength and nobility (Nietzsche 1987, 96). Master morality weighs actions on a scale of good or bad consequences (Nietzsche 1987, 26). Ayyankali had the morality of the strong willed and he championed open-mindedness, courage, trust and accurate sense of one self's worth (Nisar and Meena Kandasamy 2007, 90). Master morality begins in the noble man with a spontaneous idea of the good, and then the idea of bad develops as what is not good. The noble type of man experiences determining values; he does not approve, "what is harmful to me is harmful in itself". In the real sense the master morality is the full recognition that oneself is the measure of all moral truths. Ayyankali was a strong-willed man with courage and ability and in his concept the pride and self-confidence of the suppressed subalterns were to be aroused for instilling in them the strength to fight for justice. His struggle itself is a proof for his open mindedness, confidence and nobility. His thought and mind was always with the unprivileged. He conceptualized freedom as the soul of social justice which should itself shape through action. Once the oppressed people lacked the moral courage to take risks they could not challenge the hegemonic rejection by the socially dominant. So Ayyankali developed courage in them to provide the moral conditions to produce a 'counter rejection'. In the words of Gopal Guru the idea of 'rejection of rejection' was followed by Ayyankali to foregrounding self-respect and surviving meaningfully (Gopal Guru 2009, 210).

## Endnotes

1) Villuvandi Yathra- Villuvandi is a bullock cart, which was the symbol of prestige and power in the early modern Kerala and it was only used by the savarnas. Ayyankali made a journey on villuvandi and challenged the system.

2) Jati Maryada- It is the code of behaviour which was supposed to be followed by each caste in the society.

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