



## VILLUVANDI YATRA: A MILESTONE IN KERALA'S SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Ayyankali was a social reformer who worked for the advancement of deprived untouchable people of Travancore. His efforts influenced many changes that improved the social wellbeing of those people, who are today often referred to as Dalits. The history of Ayyankali, as a revolutionary begins with the Villuvandi Strike. He ordered and volunteered to fight against injustice. The purpose of Ayyankali and his group was to publicly defy the social barriers to travel with them and others on public roads. For that purpose, he bought a villuvandi (a special type of bullock cart) which have paintings, from Tamilnadu. During that time, these types of Villuvandi was only used by the Brahmins and the Nairs. Ayyankali used the bullock cart, which can be considered as the first vehicle of the struggle for freedom. Ayyankali's Villuvandi Yatra, 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.

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#### Introduction

Ayyankali was a social reformer who worked for the advancement of deprived untouchable people of Travancore. His efforts influenced many changes that improved the social wellbeing of those people, who are today often referred to as Dalits. He recognized that education is an investment in resolving social inequalities and to improve the social status of the depressed classes. His aim was to provide better living amenities and dignity to the Dalits. Ayyankali worked tirelessly to make the Dalits a part of modern and civilized society. Ayyankali thus stands at the forefront of the history of the revolutionaries in Kerala. Despite his good athleticism and intelligence, Ayyankali and other were thrust into the margins of society because of caste. Do not see, Do not talk, Do not hear, this is the law against the marginalized. It is this social condition that has prompted Ayyankali to rise up to the path of freedom and light and to lead the people's struggles.

The history of Ayyankali, as a revolutionary begins with the Villuvandi Strike. He ordered and volunteered to fight against injustice. The Savarnas were impatient and anxious about such activities of Ayyankali. They called Ayyankali as a rebel, because of his actions against the traditions. Ayyankali did not shy away from his endeavor because of this attribute. Ayyankali's associates at that time had witnessed a marked change in his attitude since the formation of the Sangham and against the social injustices. The Sangham was initially engaged in basic and constructive inquiries and awareness. Ayyankali and his group visited the huts of the poor people to hear their grief's and sorrow and suggested ways. Ayyankali was fond of the sophisticated justice that did not allow the poor to walk through the public roads, where the cat and dog could walk. Ayyankali, along with his volunteer team, pledged that the system would end at any cost. (Kunnukuzhi S Mani, P S Anirudhan 2013,36).

The journey through the muddy field using the thumbs of the foot, were all very difficult for the poor seeing the tragic life of the poor people Ayyankali set out for the freedom of travel. (Thodiyoor Kuttappan 2016,85) He was like a twinkling star in the life of the untouchables. Perhaps the Savarnas denied the public way to the common poor with the intention of never giving it to the poor. They thought that if they were give the means to use them, even the roads would be polluted. There were no laws or law enforcement officers to the untouchable. And they were forbidden anywhere. The Savarnas can only walk in their own way and they didn't even know the trajectory of the poor. The Savarnas used to ride was the Villuvandi, as a mark of their favor. There is another problem too there were bells tied around the necks of the bills, the intention was to change the way of the poor that they are coming upon hearing the bell. In this context it is best to know what happened in Travancore in the country before the birth of Ayyankali. In September 1783, a foreign missionary named Bartolomeo came to Padmanabhapuram to visit the Dharma Raja (the King of Dharma) called Rama Varma, but the palanquin carriers escaped from there. Because, it was a time where the

foreign missionary was considered as an untouchable that is why the palanquin carriers escaped from the scene. At last, Bartolomeo walked 12 miles and reached Padmanabhapuram. He also pointed out that only the Brahmans were allowed to walk through the Royal path and no others were ready to use this path. Bartolomeo pointed this matter very carefully. Rama Varma had arranged his secretary's house to meet with Bartolomeo, hoping that he would pollute the Padmanabhapuram palace. Through all there we can imagine that the situations confronts by the untouchable people. It was after a century of Bartolomeo's visit that Ayyankali drove Villuvandi through Travancore. (Jose N K 1982, 36) Travel freedom is one of the most important rights of man. Ayyankali said that for the untouchables to regain their freedom, the right to guide should first be obtained. Dalits were excluded from public places. The majority of the underprivileged have been denied, even the free travel rights were allowed to the cattle during that time. (P K Anilkumar 2018,13). Ayyankali shared the idea that a strong resisting would drive out against the upper class people. Ayyankali also had the determination to uplift the self-esteem of his community

The purpose of Ayyankali and his group was to publicly defy the social barriers to travel with them and others on public roads. For that purpose, he bought a villuvandi (a special type of bullock cart) which have paintings, from Tamilnadu. During that time, these types of Villuvandi was only used by the Brahmans and the Nairs. 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). Actually the Villuvandi was the modified version of the Bullock cart. Ayyankali proved that the Villuvandi could buy and drive also by the untouchables, even though it was supposed to be used only by the upper caste like Brahmans and Nairs. Ayyankali was 28 years old when the legendary Villuvandi strike took place. He bought two huge attractive and fattened white bulls and he tied bell on their horns and necks. Ayyankali entered into this beautiful Villuvandi, by wearing half sleeve banyan, turban and the most prominent dhoti during that time known as '703'. Ayyankali drove the Villuvandi through the public place. His volunteer group was also with him. Ayyankali was holding a whip in his hand. The Savarnas of Venganoor were wondering at first when they saw that RamaVarma Villuvandi was passing in front of the some Savarnas throw stone to break his journey but Ayyankali escaped from them all. ( Velayudhan Panikkassery 2003,11) After that, Ayyankali take the large and shiny knife from his waist, but no one dared to come near him. Thus, the Savarnas stand and became unable to move forward or backward. This news spread not only in Venganoor but also in whole of Travancore and all Dalits accepted Ayyankali as their leader. Ayyankali knew to consequences of this journey would be enormous. There were also a group of young people was ready to sacrifice whatever it takes to achieve travel freedom. This volunteer group were made to travel through the neighborhood places and educate the youth. The untouchables found their rescuer in Ayyankali.

But when Ayyankali and his group reached the junction of Kalliyoor, the mob strength increased and the Nairs blocked the Villuvandi and launched an attack on Ayyankali and his companions. Though Ayyankali and Kochappi fought against them, but the number of people was less in Ayyankali's side. However, Ayyankali continued his campaign to defeat the invaders. At a place called Vellayani Mukalloor Moovara, Nair men came forward, stopped the Villuvandi and again chased the bulls. But Ayyankali was not ready to back down from his efforts with great care and determinations; he started his journey with the bulls. The sound of bulls and hooves sounded off the streets of Venganoor. The Nair group gathered more power and strength and attacked the Villuvandi at the Punnamoodu junction. This time Ayyankali was even angrier. The most powerful and determined Ayyankali was roaring like a wounded lion. (M R Renukumar 2017,37). The Nairs were also very angry and this incident paved way for an open conflict.

With the Villuvandi journey, Ayyankali's popularity through the countryside began to reach the neighbouring places also. He became a hero in the neighbouring villages as well. The untouchables approached Ayyankali with the complaints. Ayyankali consoled all those who sought help to him. He intervened in the affairs of the untouchables with no discrimination Ayyankali and his companions travelled through the villages. The untouchables were summoned and held meetings to try to convince them of human rights and freedoms. It gave them confidence, sense of belonging and responsiveness. Ayyankali speech style in Tamil and Malayalam excited them. The untouchables loved their own leader, they accepted him as one person among them and the fighting spirit was increasing day by day.

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 1990, 60). The first Villuvandi journey made Ayyankali as a well-known leader among the untouchables. Later Ayyankali searched someone, who could drive his Villuvandi. And finally he choosed Kochappi from Venganoor Chavadi Nada Puthuvalvilaakathu house. People have called Kochappi as Chandi Kochappi. Now we can take a look at Kochappi's bravest and adventurous deeds. When a Nair leader hailing from Venganoor, brought him with sacked oil, there occurred a dispute with Chandi Kochappi. When the arguments between them broke out much seriously, Kochappi garbled the jar of oil from Nair leader's hand and slapped in on his face. Due to the effect of his beat, one of his eyes fell out. Kochappi was a good athlete and he has a fit body. Kochappi refused advises and words of any people except Ayyankali. Chandi Kochappi was a pivotal figure in the History of Ayyankali's Villuvandi journey. Payarumood Kochappi, Indri Aashan, Charlie, Kedibhanu and Chandi Kochappi were always present at the Villuvandi as Ayyankali's bodyguard. Balakrishnan, the son of his brother in law in Chudukandamvila had pointed out that the Ayyankali's painted Villuvandi had specialities. When the Villuvandi came, you could hear its bells singings a kilometre away itself. At the apex of which the two bulls are locked, there was a painted golden coloured plate, with three jingling bells in the

centre. Three jingling bells are attached to the ends of the brass bars on either side of the wheelbarrow. (Kunnukuzhi S Mani, P S Anirudhan 2013, 39) And both sides are adorned with exquisite craftsmanship. The roof of the Villuvandi was mined with the colours like orange and gold. The horns of the two white bulls have been painted. And in the neck of each bull, there was a special type of bell and at each side of the bell there were 3 jingling bells. The exotic sound of the jingling bells and the bells was distinctive, when the Villuvandi was driving. A hanging lamp was also attached to the Villuvandi for the night travel.

Ayyankali's adventurous agitation to gain the freedom of travel made the untouchables feel that they had a very powerful leader. Ayyankali became a hero also in the neighbouring villages. The people expressed their sorrows to their leader. Ayyankali comforted them all with this, Ayyankali and his team became more and more willing to enter into their field. Ayyankali and his friends entered to the Aralumoodu market in Balaramapuram. In the market place, a half naked Pulaya woman who had come to buy goods, a Muslim aristocrat a non Savarna attacked the woman. 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). This right was disobeyed by these Pulaya women, so the Muslim aristocrat with the help of Chakkiliars began to attack this women. During the reign of Maharaja Marthanda Varma, the weavers called Chakkiliars community were settled in the vicinity of Balaramapuram. Though they did not need to be angry with the Pulayas, Chakkiliars, at the behest of the Savarnas, along with the Muslim aristocrat attacked and tortured the women. This is the reason why Ayyankali went to the Aralumoodu market. Naturally, Ayyankali and his team had to intervene in this incident. Ayyankali and his group who had come there by foot on the Chaliyar Street of Balaramapuram were confronted by the Muslims and Chakkiliars who had already settled there. The upper caste Hindus came to support the Muslims and Chakkiliars. The dispute between the two factions escalated into confrontation and subsequent clashes people on both sides were wounded many suffered deep wounds. Ayyankali's group, which was less in number than its more organized and armed opponents, could not hold out for long, then they tactfully stopped this struggle. (Sanal Mohan 2005,68) At the same time, the Chaliyar agitation convinced the group that even when they were experiencing caste discrimination, the caste hierarchy did not favor the freedom of the untouchables.

Never about the Chaliyar street strike spread like wildfire. The work and preparations for the freedom of travel in the nook and corner were intensified. In many places there were small and large conflicts between the untouchables and the upper castes. In the excitement of the brave deeds of the pulaya women, who came to buy good at Chaliyar street, the women of the untouchables came to fight. There have been struggles and encounters in the areas like Parashala, Parashuvakkal, Amaravila, Neyyattinkkara, Perumbazhuthoor, Aralumoodu, Nemam, Kazhakootam, Kaniyapuram etc. Naturally the law enforcement and various sections of the government favoured the upper classes. The upper classes unleashed brutal attacks on untouchables, their huts were burned and women were raped. Ayyankali directly involved in all these excises of his people. Ayyankali was able to see the remarkable success in these struggles, though not completely, despite the constant clashes with the ruling party. (Kunnukuzhi S Mani, P S Anirudhan 2013, 39)

The practice of feeding the untouchables was quite brutal. First put a small pit on the soil. Then the banana leaf is pounded and put in the pit. And food is served in this pit. That's what to eat. In the tea shop, the tea is poured into a coconut shell which is placed at the back of the shop. Even if you go to the Savarna's house, you will stop at sixty four feet away and give water in the coconut shell. Ayyankali decided to put an end to this evil. A meeting of the panchamars was covered in front of his residence in Venganoor. This meeting was attended by several panchamars, both male and female. Ayyankali opined that: "we are human beings, just like landlords and administrators. We have rights like them. So don't drink tea or coffee on the coconut shell. (Thulasi Kottukkal 2008,44). If necessary, containers should be kept in our hands for coffee and tea. Have tea and coffee in your own houses, as long as you can." The untouchables refused to went to the tea shops. With that, the arrival of the untouchables to the shops comes down considerably. The Savarna shopkeepers made a decision. That is, they will not serve tea in the coconut shell and a special vessel will be provided to them. They must have to keep it clean. Even at that time, this type of change was of great concern.

Ayyankali's Villuvandi Yatra, 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, Villuvandi Yathra 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.

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