The Emergence of Public Spirit and Civil Society Formation in Malabar: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

In modern times, the development of society and the state have been understood more in terms of historical or evolutionary theory. The state is neither the handiwork of God nor the result of a superior physical force, nor the creation of a resolution or convention nor a mere expansion of family(Garner) It has now been generally believed that the state is the outcome of a slow and gradual evolution of society and civilization. The state is also perceived as a growth, an evolution, the result of a gradual process, running throughout all the known history of man and reaching into remote and unknown past (Leacock).Thus factors like kinship, religion, property, force and political consciousness played a crucial role in the origin and subsequent development of the state, and correspondingly they also impinge on the evolution of society. The interrelationship of these factors reinforces the Aristotelian dictum that man is a social and political animal. According to Gettell the state arose through a gradual voluntary process and developed over centuries to the stage of a highly complex political organization. An understanding of the above 'crises' would in turn equip one in analyzing the dynamics involved in the formative processes of civil society precisely because of the inherent reciprocity of the social and political phenomena. However, civil society is currently understood as the "aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interest and the will of citizens". It includes the family and the private sphere, referred to as the "third sector of society" as distinct from government and business. It is also taken up as the individuals and organizations in a society which are independent of the government. An attempt is made in this paper to analyze the role of the Servants of India Society and the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust movements in the development of civil society formation in Malabar, in the wake of the Malabar rebellion, from a theoretical and empirical perspective.

Keywords: Malabar Rebellion, social change, political consciousness, organizations, social cohesion, SIS and DMRT.

The Idea of Civil Society—A Theoretical Perspective

The relationship between the governing authority and the governed was generally of contractual in nature from ancient times. In Kautilya's *Arthasastra* the king took upon himself the responsibility of maintaining the safety and wellbeing of their subjects when the people were faced with anarchy. For this they allotted one-sixth of the grains grown and one-tenth of their merchandise as the sovereign's due[1]. In his works *Creto* and *The*

Republic Plato also discusses the contract theory. However Aristotle did not support this theory. For him a social condition which prevailed under the Greek City states commonly referred to as *polis* characterized by a set of shared norms and ethos in which free citizens on any footing lived under the rule of law was "Koinonia Polite" a political community, in which men are defined as "political" and "social"[2].The Roman law approved this theory and held that all the positive rules which were obeyed by men were treated by contract[3]. In the 17th and 18th centuries Hobbs, Locke[4] and Rousseau expanded the theory in great detail in a logical way Rousseau, however, was not in agreement with either Hobbes or Locke in his analysis of human nature. According to him though men are basically good, it is the particular environment which is responsible for the degeneration of man. Rousseau also recognized a contract between human nature and the state of nature. He regarded the state of nature better than the civil society[5].

The two theories of family, viz., the patriarchal and the matriarchal, tried to clarify the forces of development in the human society right from the beginning and established that the family as a social unit had contributed to the formation of the state[6].In the modern times, the development of society and the state have been understood more in terms of historical or evolutionary theory. As Garner pointed out, "the state is neither the handiwork of God nor the result of a superior physical force, nor the creation of a resolution or convention nor a mere expansion of family"[7].It has now been generally believed that the state is the outcome of a slow and gradual evolution of society and the civilization. As Leacock says, "the state is a growth, an evolution, the result of a gradual process, running throughout all the known history of man and reaching into remote and unknown past"[8].Thus factors like kinship, religion, property, force and political consciousness played a crucial role in the origin and subsequent development of the state, and correspondingly they also impinge on the evolution of society. The interrelationship of these factors reinforces the Aristotelian dictum that man is a social and political animal. The Greek City States very closely approximated the modern sense of the state because they had political, economic, intellectual and moral life. People who were "citizens" directly participated in the affairs of the state, though the working and producing classes were not given citizenship. To be a citizen was to actively participate in all the functions of the civil and military life of the state. According to Gettell the state arose through a gradual voluntary process and developed over centuries to the stage of a highly complex political organization[9].

An important development in the course of the state formation was the establishment of the Nation State following the decline of feudalism and the remarkable changes in the social, political, economic, industrial and technological fields which occurred in Western Europe, consequent on movements like the Renaissance and the

Reformation. Thus it was in the 16th century that nationally integrated states came into existence in England, France and Spain.In the 17th century the basis of the nation state was broader in England after the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. The nation states started as absolute monarchies but finally gave way to the emergence of democratic states. As an offshoot from the nation states there also developed the colonial empires set up by old European powers. In the wake of the World War II, almost all the empires collapsed, paving way for the development of democratic systems and societies. With the rise of such a political condition people became more and more enlightened and began to desire for more political/social rights and privileges[10].

Political scientists have accepted that historically man's political and social orders were largely preordained by the particular histories of each community. In his long historical process there were two levels of change: the first being "modernization"(also called Westernization or 'advancement and progress')-a diffusion of a world culture, based on advanced technology, and the spirit of science a rational and secular approach to social relations, a feeling for justice in public affairs, and a strong belief that the prime unit of the polity should be the nation state. The second level of change is the historical development of a system of International Relations in which again the nation state is the prime unit. The development and maintenance of the nation state system has been instrumental in diffusing the elements of modernization throughout the world[11].

Social theorists have suggested that it is possible to conceive of all societies as being divided into two general grouping, wherein each such designation emphasizes different elements of the typologies: traditional and rational, rural and urban, agricultural and industrial, primitive and civilized, static and dynamic, secret and secular, folk and urban, society and civitas, Gemeinschaft (community) and Geselschaft (society), communal and associational, traditional and modern[12]. Sir Henry Maine argues that the development of societies involving a movement from the "status" type to the "contract' type is in fact a transition from tradition bound, status oriented relationships to rationally calculated and contractually negotiate relationships.[13] Ferdinand Toennies made a further advance in his study of societies by pointing out that human relationship is determined either by the "natural will" of man as expressed in kinship, comradeship, and neighborliness or by the "rational capacity" of man by which he is able to set goals of action, that is the former being emotion based communal society and the latter goal based modern society[14].For Max Weber, the social, economic and political realms are no more than different aspects of basic human acts, all conditioned and given coherence by the psychological make- up of man[15]. Talcott Parsons noted that in traditional society status rested upon *ascriptive* considerations while in the modern society achievement standards predominate. In the traditional system role relationships tended to be functionally diffuse while in the modern system relationship tend to be functionally specific. Similarly, in the

traditional system the normative basis of relationships was particularistic considerations and not the universalistic ones of modern society[16].

The above social theorists, however, focused on the differences in type of societies and not on the dynamics of change or transition from one stage or character to another. For purposes of political analysis it was necessary to go beyond their dichotomous scheme. In his attempt to conceptualize the process of political development, Lucien W. Pye identifies that six 'crises' are involved in a society's transition to a modern state: 1) Identity crisis, which pertains to achieving a common sense of identity in terms of national territory as home land.2) Legitimacy crisis, which is related to the authority and responsibilities of the government and so has to do with constitution.3) Penetration crises, which involve the problems of government in reaching downinto the society and effecting basic policies. 4) Participation crisis, occurs when there is uncertainty over rates of expansion and when new participants make claims on exiting institutions -- ie., borne out of the emergence of interest groups and the formation of party system.5) Integration crises, which are relate to the extent to the organizational system of the entire polity and the interaction among the offices and agencies of government and various groups and interests.6) Distribution crises, which pertain to the use of governmental powers for the distribution of goods, services and values throughout the society. Lucien W. Pye argues that the particular pattern of development in any country depends largely upon the sequence in which these crises arise and the ways in which they are resolved[17]. An understanding of the above 'crises' would in turn equip one in analyzing the dynamics involved in the formative processes of civil society precisely because of the inherent reciprocity of the social and political phenomena.

As suggested earlier, the concept of civil society in its pre-modern classical republican understanding has been usually connected to the early modern thought of the age of Enlightenment, the 18th century. The atrocities of the Thirty Years War and the consequent confrontation with the Divine Right theory of monarchy during this period influenced political philosophers to think that social relations should be ordered in a way different from the conditions of natural law. Thus both Hobbes and Locke set forth a social system in which peaceful coexistence among human beings could be ensured through social pacts or contracts, underscoring, however, the coexistence of the state and the civil society. However, civil society is currently understood as the "aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that manifest interest and the will of citizens". It includes the family and the private sphere, referred to as the "third sector of society" as distinct from government and business. It is also taken up as the individuals and organizations in a society which are independent of the

government. It comprises "the elements such as freedom of speech, an independent judiciary etc., that make up a democratic society"(Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon).

In the modern period Hegel defined the civil society (his term was "civilian society") as "a system of needs", a form of market society, as the realm of economic relationships as it existed in the modern industrial capitalist society which intervenes between the family and the state. Following the Hegelian concept of civil society, Marx argued that civil society was the 'base' where productive forces and social relations were taking place and the political society was the 'super structure', which under capitalism represents the interests of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie[18]. Taking a position different from Marx, Antonio Gramsci located civil society in the political superstructure -- not as coterminous with the socio-economic base of the state—but at the same time as a crucial contributor to the cultural and ideological capital required for the hegemony of capitalism[19].

As Sunil Khilnani points out current understanding of civil society invariably sees it as essentially a category of domestic political space. The term is used to identify and privilege agencies-markets, social movements, cultures- whose political causality is heavily local. It is viewed as vital to develop and sustain civil human relations in developing societies[20](32). As regards the functions of civil society, there are differing views- pessimistic and optimistic, with reference to its connection with stability, economic growth and political participation. Rousseau, for example thought that civil society engenders both "the best and the worst ... both our virtues and our vices"[21]. However it has been argued that the civil society has three types of functions: 1)economic functions- norms and networks of civic engagement fostering economic growth[22], 2)stabilizing functions- fostering a culture of trust and cooperation, as essential to the successful functioning of democratic institutions[23] and, 3)democratic functions- being competent, active, and open with opinions[24]

The SIS/DMRT as Agency for Civil Society Formation

The functions of the Servants of India Society in Kerala can well be understood against the above theoretical backdrop. Till the early decades of the Twentieth century the Kerala society continued to be feudal both in structure and function. It was caste-oriented, and naturally dominated by the upper castes, who were least bothered of the other sections. Consequently there was a deep chasm, which separated the high castes from the low castes[25].So far as the administration of law and justice was concerned, they were not egalitarian and rational. The upper castes enjoyed all privileges such as exemption from payment of land tax and immunity from death penalty. The penal code was extremely severe as far as the lower castes were concerned. Death penalty was imposed even for ordinary offences like theft, killing of cows etc. The members of the backward classes were

subjected to the worst form of tyranny by the king's officials or persons in authority. The tenant-landlord relations were also extremely tense owing to its exploitative thrust[26]. In Malabar society the different sections had to suffer several disabilities in the matter of their right over land and their social position. In the pyramidal structure of the society the intensity of the disabilities increased in the descending order. The untouchables were the lowest and the lowliest and their suffering was the most acute.

The Servants of India Society was conceived by Gokhale as a corrective to the Indian politics of the early 20th century, which was not catering to the needs of the people at large. The avowed objective of the Society was "to train men, prepared to devote their lives to the cause of the country in a religious spirit, for the work of political education and agitation, and will seek to promote, by all constitutional means, the national interest of the Indian people"[27].   The branches of the Society established in far-flung areas of India had served the people in their hours of need. The Society's services during the time of epidemics, floods and famines were highly commendable. In addition to that, the Society's work in empowering the poor and the destitute by providing them with means of livelihood, education and by instilling in them civic consciousness had no parallel then or since then. The activities of the Society were distinct by virtue of the occasion and the durability of the work rendered. Unlike in other places, the Society had to work in Kerala in a trouble torn and hostile situation, which followed the Malabar Rebellion of 1921[28]. It was an interface of diverse experiences and eventualities including abject poverty, diseases, communal violence, police brutality, natural calamities and rampant ignorance and illiteracy. The people of Malabar had been immensely benefited by the painstaking though timely work undertaken by the Society through its feeder organization, DMRT (Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust).

The rebellion was a bitter experience for both the Mappilas and the Hindu communities. Great atrocities were meted out on to the people, like burning of houses, molesting of women and widespread arrests[29]. It is estimated that nearly 2337 were killed and 1652 wounded while 45404 surrendered or were captured[30]. According to Conrad Wood, there were certain related problems, which culminated the rebellion of 1921, such as the role of religion, the unrest of the rural population, the impact of imperialism on rural society and, the inspiration of the nationalist movement[31].Whatever be the cause and character of the rebellion it had very serious consequences in Kerala both in social relations as well as in politics. The rebellion attracted not only British antagonism but also seriously affected the national movement[32]. It was felt difficult to conduct the smooth and peaceful functioning of the Indian National Congress in South Malabar[33].The rebellion created untold miseries to the people of Malabar belonging to both the communities. The scenario presented two pictures of acute suffering.

On the one side, there was the huge mass of refugees estimated about 26,000, ranging from high caste Namboodiris to lower caste groups. They were in fact uprooted from their home villages and came to relief camps set up in distant places like Kozhikode. It was a mixed assortment of men and women whose houses were burnt, their wealth and earnings looted and women molested. They comprised also destitute women and children whose protectors were killed by the rebels. Rebels had even injured their minds as their religious faith was dishonored by the rebels through destruction and desecration of temples and forced conversions[34]. Equally pathetic was the condition of Mappilas. Though a considerable number of them including the rich and the educated did not support the rebellion, they were punished by the rebels for the very same reason. The British army and the police were quite ruthless and indiscriminate in quelling the rebellion. Thus a combination of factors and features of the a revolt against the alien rule, a violent uprising against oppressive land relations, and a struggle for the establishment of a political power based on religious(Islamic) tenets made it a complex upheaval sufficient to create untold miseries to the people and deep fissures in the cultural fabric of the area[35].

Of the various agencies who conducted relief work in Malabar, special mention must be made of the work done by the Servants of India Society. A delegation of the Society from its headquarters at Poona visited Malabar immediately after the rebellion. The delegation led by G.K. Devadhar met important personalities of the area and tried to get first hand information about the rebellion[36]. Moved by the gruesome situation of Malabar and the agonizing condition of the victims of the rebellion, both Mappilas and Hindus, Devadhar issued statements seeking help from the public especially from the Northern provinces[37]. He was able to procure a huge amount of money from such far off places as Madras, Bangalore, Bombay, Allahabad, Delhi, Lahore as well as from benevolent people of Malabar. In Bombay a Malabar Relief Fund was set up and they sent money and materials to Ma1abar. In Madras a Sheriffs meeting was convened and a committee was appointed to collect funds from the whole of the Presidency. In due course a centre of the Servants of India Society was established at Calicut[38]. The workers of the Society who were highly inspired by the ideals and teaching of its master Gokhale lost no time in organizing relief work. Initially they associated themselves with the Mappila Aid Committee formed at Calicut, which was converted into a Central Relief Committee for looking after the administration of relief in Calicut and other centres.[39]

The Servants of India Society rendered commendable services in the activities of the Malabar Central Relief Committee. After their initial work in this direction a trust was started under the aegis of the SIS in honor of the great services rendered by G.K. Devadhar, namely the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust (DMRT) in 1923. Thereafter the trust undertook massive scale rehabilitation work in the areas of 1. Relief Operations 2.

Educational Activities 3. Rural Reconstruction, 4. Educational Activities and 5. Social Reform. The SIS opened 21 relief camps in various parts of Malabar where thousands of victims and refugees were given shelter[40]. Through these variety of activities the SIS/DMRT under the leadership of men like G.K. Devadhar, V.S. Sreenivasa Sastri, A.V. Thakkar, Sooryanarayana Rao, V.R. Nayanar, Mrs. V.R Nayanar was able to bring about large scale social change and a spirit of self reliance through a host of constructive activities in the field of education, cooperative ventures, housing, agriculture, khadi and cottage industries, rural development, health and sanitation, library and literacy work, live stock and animal husbandry, as well as cultural activities. In fact through these activities there developed the idea of a public sphere and a sense of common welfare as distinct from the traditional rigidities in terms of community and religion.

Conclusion

The SIS/DMRT movement was able to foster a spirit of communal harmony and secular coexistence as essential condition for general well being of the society in Malabar. The fissures caused by the Malabar rebellion in these respects and the feeling of mutual fear and hatred gradually began to wane for the realization of better social cohesion. A remarkable consequence of these developments was the emergence of a distinct civil society consciousness in place of the conventional hierarchies in terms of castes, communities, faith and social status. Men ranging from the royal households to the lowest ranks of the social layers began to work hand in hand for the common cause of establishing peace and harmony, fighting against injustices, social inequalities, and all kinds of discriminations. Several venues such as schools, libraries and reading rooms, recreation centers, adult education centers, were set up for the fostering of these ideals with active public support.   The SIS/DMRT worked as active agencies in mobilizing people for voluntary activities (they were called DMRT Workers) in times of famine, flood and epidemics in the 1920s, 30s and 40s in different parts of Malabar. It was this selfless involvement in social service and reconstruction activities conducted in the wake of the Malabar rebellion which became instrumental in creating a strong civil society in Malabar.

The leaders of the Servants of India Society played a vital role in creating civil society consciousness in Malabar in the wake of the rebellion. Men like G.K. Devadhar, V.S. Sreenivasa Sastri, A.V. Thakkar, Sooryanarayana Rao, V.R. Nayanar, Mrs. V.R Nayanar all did tireless work to inspire the people to selfless and voluntary service for the cause of the society. They tried to align their relief and reconstruction activities with the nationalist movement. As part of that, untouchability eradication campaigns, mixed dining campaigns, temple entry campaigns for the lower castes, campaigns for the eradication of superstitions and evil practices such as animal sacrifices in temples, prohibition of liquors, teaching of Hindi, Harijan Sevak Sangh activities, distress

relief during natural calamities and epidemics were all undertaken with true missionary spirit as envisioned by their master Gokhale.   As a result of these activities large number of people got involved in public programs irrespective of their community and status barriers. Public spirit which was once perceived at a low ebb was gradually gaining momentum and several civil society organizations like libraries, reading rooms, arts and sports clubs with a focus on social and cultural rejuvenation of the area sprang up, shaping a firm secular and harmonious coexistence on the principles of public welfare. The role of the Servants of India Society and the DMRT movement under its aegis was pivotal in this process both as a healing touch in the post-rebellion period and as a dynamic force in mobilizing the people for the common good.

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