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The History of an Era: Reading *Sahsrapoornima* as the Reflections of Colonial Modernity

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Introduction

The autobiography is a reflection of the age it's represents persons' experiences, memories, emotions achievements and struggles and everything written on a self perspectives. During the Earlier period historians used only political records for writing history. Due to the advent of annals schools there had been a great change in the writing of history and the emergence of total history departure from political history to economic and social history. We can make a total history it is important to consult every documents. Autobiography has a key role to know about the person's emotional history. In government records neglect the part of emotional history and cultural aspects of the society. Autobiography provides immense information about social and cultural aspects of the society.

Autobiography began to be written towards the end of the nineteenth century. An autobiography is a self written account of one's life experiences. In the earlier period only the people from the upper sections of society used to write autobiographies. In later times, people from all sections of society, especially marginalized groups began to record their life experiences. We can see autobiography as a reflection of colonial modernity. That is, autobiographies began to be written with the advent of colonial modernity in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Autobiography emerged as an independent literary genre in Malayalam towards the end of the nineteenth century. But autobiographies existed even before that several people from the elite group wrote their biographies even before the nineteenth century. During the earlier period most of the autobiographies mainly reflected the European experiences and deal more with the

society than with the personal life. Through autobiography, each person clearly describes their life and society in which they lived; it sheds light on the images of each society, as well as the history of that period. Whether autobiographies are objective or subjective is always a question. However, through many autobiographies, we can understand the history of a period. Through autobiography ,the life of the person writing it, the generation before that person, and many memories and events that took place in it are depicted through it. Therefore autobiographies describe the period of that person's life and the period before that.

Revathiamma's autobiography *sahsrapoornima* depicts the day to day activities of the people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She shared her memories to attend the temple festivals and the customs and manners existed during that period. Through this autobiography we can find out the dressing pattern of early nineteenth century and the different types of food culture practiced in north Malabar. On the special occasions Thiyyas followed variety types of foods like *Payasam ,neichoru and chicken kari and chakkarachoru* etc. The Thiyyas of Malabar were very much fond of non vegetarian food and they provide liquor and non vegetarian items during the festive occasions.[1]Revathiamma's single life stories reveal the history of an entire community.

The renaissance movements are considered to be the results of colonial rule. Colonial modernity is related to many aspects such as English education, women's education, universality of education, liberation from superstitions and customs, spread of patrilineal system, nuclear families, humanistic consciousness and sense of freedom .The revolutionary progress in society has been due to local and foreign reforms. In the literary works before independence, the colonial period and its developments are discussed directly or indirectly. The situation of autobiographies is no different. Autobiographies written in the first half of the twentieth century have presented different facets of colonial modernity. *Sahsrapoornima* meticulously documents the pre and post independence north Malabar society. British and French dominated areas like Thalassery and Mahe are the main places depicted in the autobiography. The French colony of Mahe and the British colony of Thalassery reflect different political and

economic situations. The author describes in detail the experiences of living in these two places during the same period. She points out the greater freedom to education and job opportunities of the natives provided by the French rule than by the British rule, and the autobiography accurately reflects the political positions and reactions in both regions. Revathiamma's public life spanned in Thalassery, Mahi, Yanam, Bombay and Bangalore.Wherever she went, she gave more importance to the welfare of others than her own. She worked single-mindedly in the political and spiritual fields. Revathiamma had an inseparable bond with swami *Chinmayananda*, and he did the same. The autobiography *sashrapoornima* narrates the life that Revathiamma led as a responsible family woman, a single social worker, and a literary activist.

Thalassery was the important trading center many foreigners visited Thalassery for business puposes. Thalassery was a place full of factories and warehouses. A Gujarti named Darasett , who had come with a cargo ship for commercial purposes, met a beautiful Thiyya girl from Thaassery,fell in love with her ,and married her . Revathiamma was the great granddaughter of Darasett.[2] These circumstances have led to unique living conditions in North Malabar, especially in Thalassery, where wealthy people from various classes came and went and expanded their trade. [3]Modernity spread very strongly here. Thiyyas of Malabar maintained good relations with British, French and other business peoples, from these relations Thiyyas achieved good position in the society and they had become economically prospered.

Sashrapoornima provides the clear picture of Thiyyas of Malabar. In the caste hierarchy the positions of the Thiyyas were lower and they had been faced severe caste restrictions in the traditional period. With the introduction of colonial modernity several changes emerged in the society and caste related issues were solved and the lower communities get permission to travel everywhere and get educations and social mobility became possible and several lower communities' persons attained well position in the society.[4]

Revathiamma's autobiography, *sahsrapoornima* is the history of an era. It presents in a very precise and clear language how much colonial modernity has changed a society

and at the same time the social transformation that has taken place in the Thiyya community. Apart from being a life lesson of women, there are many factors that make sahsrapoornima remarkable. The introduction to the book *sashrapoornima* was written by moorkoth kunhappa,the most prominent person in north Malabar. He said about that this book can also be seen as a socio-cultural picture of twentieth century North Malabar.

Sahsrapoornima tells the story of a long time. It reveals the memories of Revathiamma. The story is told from when she was a little girl to the end of her life as a grown woman. Revathiamma's mother Damayanthiamma , Damayanthiamma's mother Thala ,Thala's mother Mandi and so on are the generations of Revathiamma. Revathiamma's grandmother Thala was telling the history of the generations before Thala to her grandchildren. Through this autobiography, we can see the way history is passed down orally. She has written her autobiography in a straightforward style that is relevant to the facts without any fluff or frills. Moorkoth Kumaran has written a very clear description about Revathiamma's autobiography. He said that it is an interesting, informative and intriguing chapter on the Thiyyas of north Malabar.[5]

For the writer C.K Revathiamma, who lived in the first decades of the twentieth century, writing was a crisis. Revathiamma born in to a family with good financial background and a good traditional lineage but she faced some patriarchal norms. Revathiamma mentions in her autobiography how she was criticized for writing a work when she was married and a mother .When she wrote a novel and showed it to her family, there were different reactions. Even her own mother, who was a social worker, was shocked and asked,' how did you manage to do this? She simultaneously records the joy and sadness of her daughter being able to do something that she could not do. It is a constant conflict that women do not have the time and opportunity to do this because women's time is taken up by many other things. Colonial modernity has helped to create a mindset that women should stand on their own feet to some extent. All this is reflected in this autobiography.

Western education created great changes in Thiyya communities of North Malabar. At that time there were several *Ezhthupallikoodams* emerged in Thalassery and nearby areas, several Thiyyas joined the *Ezhthupallikoodams* and achieved basic education, this helped them to achieve colonial English education. This is meticulously presented while going through this autobiography. The educational history of a period is accurately described in this. Revathiamma was first taught by Kannan Gurukkal. She taught at home with all the facilities and later she went to *Kannyamadam* for education. Although girls from many families went to study there ,female education ended at the age of 12 or 13. It was a bold vision of that time, Damayanthiamma decided to get her children married at the age of fifteen. While studying in the second forum, Revathiamma got married a few months before she turned fifteen. Thalassery and Mahe areas where the living conditions created by colonial occupation produced many educated people and high ranking officials. Revathiamma's husband Paithal was the police commissioner in the Mahe government service and his uncle was the Mayor of Mahe. Similarly ,Revathiamma's family had a rich literary tradition. Revathiamma's mother Damayanthiamma's brother Karayi Krishnan Gurukkal was a famous scholar. From this autobiography we can understand the Thiyyas of Malabar attained highest position due to colonial modernity . From toddy tapper to become a deputy collector emerged from this community was the result of colonial modernity.

The colonial modernity at the same time indigenous modernity introduced by Sreenarayana Guru had deep impacts in the Thiyya community of North Malabar. Revathiamma was a true supporter of Sree Narayana guru and his activities. Sree narayana guru tried his best to root out the several illegal customs existed in the society. He simplified the customs related to marriage and funeral. Revathiyamma who belongs to the Thiyya community, in her autobiography she mentions her community faced severe caste obstruction in the traditional period. The customs and traditions that existed in the Thiyya community are discussed in detail in the autobiography. In the early days, the groom did not tie a thali around the bride's neck during the marriage time. Sree narayana guru strongly opposed this practice. After that ,for revathiamma's wedding in

1907,this traditional customs was abolished and the groom tied a thali around the bride's neck. During that period women were not allowed to use chapels.[6] Revathiamma strongly fought against all these types of illegal system existed in the society.

The autobiography discusses the matrilineal systems followed by the Thiyyas of North Malabar. Later period this system was declined and several people get education and attained job and they settled in the different parts of the country. After that they need to go to the workplace with their own wives, and when Revathiamma's husband Paithal moved to Pondicherry for work, Paithal also took her with him .In the later part of the autobiography describes, it was only after that I knew what freedom was. The change made in the family system by colonial modernity, the change from the joint family to the nuclear family, and its positive aspects, Revathiamma accurately discusses all these in her autobiography.

Through this autobiography, we get a clear understanding of the social work of Revathiamma and Damayanthiamma centered in Thalassery and nearby areas. Damayanthiamma was an active social worker and she tried his best for the upliftment of women in Thalassery. For this purpose she established ladies club in Thalassery. At that time there were very few organization related to women development in Kerala. She mainly established the ladies club in Thalassery for the socio economic upliftment of women in Thalassery.[7]She established mobile liberary system for improving reading habits of the women in Thalassery and nearby areas. She contributed several books to liberary and aware the ladies to improve the reading habits this helped the betterment of society and family and empower the women in Tellicherry. She provided informal education for the ladies and conducted tailoring classes and she also conducted health awareness programmes for women. She had given very much importance to women education; for this she wrote several articles in Mitavadi Magazine. She forced the parents to send their children to school. She provides lunch for the poor children in school. Damayantiamma totally against the caste related issues in the society and she against child marriage. Revathiamma followed the activities of her mother. Revathiamma was a prominent social reformer from north Malabar. She followed the

footprint of Sreenarayanaguru and against all caste related issues in the society. She established 'sthreesamajam" in Thalassery for the betterment of women. Revathiamma actively participated all the public activities in Thalassery. Revathiamma was the member of Sreenarayana Dharamaparipalana Sangham. Revathiamma worked for Red Cross Society in Thalassery and National Saving Board and family Planning Board member in kannur district.

The autobiography written by C.K Revathiamma is the real life stories of Thiyyas of Malabar, but the autobiography not stick on the one particular aspect, it discussed as a total history of late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century through her memories. Actually it is an autobiography but it provided a history of an era and the transformation of the Thiyyas from the influence of colonial modernity. It discussed persons' emotions; memories and inner conflict faced by the women to survive the existing socio economic system etc. Revathiamma was the follower of colonial modernity and she tried to introduce several good western values in the society and she earnestly desired to get a freedom to work, write and everything but couldn't practice in some context because she was not ready to against the patriarchical society and she faced severe restriction to publish a books and her husband not support to do writing or actively participated the public activities. At the same time she not ready to take an independent decision or to work in their own way she satisfied her husband and she started writing when her husband go to office or his absence. She couldn't argue the freedom and equality but she had the wish to get a freedom and gender neutrality. That was the conditions of all ladies during that period. Revathiamma clearly portrayed issues faced by the ladies in their home and society. So from this autobiography we can understand due to the colonial modernity there were lot of changes in the society and Thiyyas of Malabar became improved their positions and several of them achieved well position in the society. This was the common generalization existed in the society but this argument properly not worked during that period. The changes happened only in the minute sections of the society especially the people settled in town areas like Tellicherry, Kannur, and Kozhikode etc. At the same time the conditions of women also

not better, some ladies got education and achieved well position in the society but majority of them were the dependent of men and she had no power or right to do their own way. Women were under the control of the men. The autobiography provides a clear evidence of this argument about the conditions of women in late nineteenth and twentieth century. Revathiamma was a person or a social activist who wants to make a lot of changes in the society, but she was unable to put what she thinks in to practice. These were the problems faced by the women during the late nineteenth and twentieth century. The famous writer Sukumar Azhikode noted that the autobiography *Sahsrapoornim*a provides as a "window opened for an era" .We can conclude that the autobiography written by Revathiamma is the prominent autobiography of the twentieth century North Malabar. It is a history of an era or the real life stories of the Thiyyas of Malabar and the reflections of colonial modernity.

END NOTES

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