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INDUSTRIAL MODERNITY, LOCAL ENTERPRISES AND NATIONALISM: MULTIFACETED LEGACY OF SAMUEL ARON

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Historically, Kannur is known as the "land of lores and looms". Textile workmanship had broadened its base by the first half of the 20th century, though not in an organised pattern. Artisans including weavers were in need then, while capital mobilisation and organisation of labour were at a transitional stage. Co-operative sector too, was emerging as a major social and economic force. Samuel Aron, as the innovator in the field, combined nationalist sentiments and ideas of modernisation in the local context. Industrial development, according to him, was to be shaped on community basis, but from a national perspective.

Modernisation of textile industry meant to him as one to be implemented in the local context, using the vast labour pool of Kannur. His viewpoint was that modern technologies and production systems do not by themselves direct to social progress, but only when they are synced with the existing knowledge of production. 'Adaptive modernity' was the tagline of Aron, for he know how weaving, Coir craft and small-scale businesses could be adaptive to the emerging changes in their respective fields. Artisanal skills of Kannur were only replaced by power looms, by not neglecting the expertise of weavers and other labourers. They were oriented regarding the changes to be brought into the field then, which included the use of mechanised looms, modern dyeing methods and organised forms of labour. Aron's formula was that modernity should move in tandem with human capacity.

Rostow's Modernisation Theory is apt in this context to define Samuel Aron's contributions in converting traditional economies into modern industrial frameworks, reflecting his visions in the early 20th Century. Aron's initiatives justify what Rostow refers to as "preconditions for take-off".[1] His heritage as the foremost modernizer of textile industry

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in Kannur endorses Rostow's theory and finds its practical expression by way of effective technological innovation, capital mobilisation and market expansion. Moreover, Aron's efforts have linked economic growth with political awareness and consciousness (owing to the needs of the time). Such a phenomenon was rare in this part of the globe and quite widespread in England and Europe during the early part of 20th Century.[2]

The handloom tradition of Kannur is linked with the lives of the weaving community which mastered the craft and skill handed down to them by their forefathers who had vast experience in dyeing, handling yarn, uploading it to looms and weaving. In addition to these, the weaving community had to withstand competition from textile goods produced in factories outside the state. Consequently, they had to update their skills to keep with the market demands. Co-operative societies were formed all over Kannur at micro and macro levels, ensuing artisans, workers and others allied with the craft, their livelihood and preservation of their cultural heritage. The Kerala model of co-operative weaving institutions reminded the labourers of their active participation in the production and distribution of the materials. Parallel to all these, Aron as a private entrepreneur, took the lead in introducing industrial reforms in Kannur by accommodating the traditional weavers and workers in the latest forms of technology devised then in the field.

Samuel Aron, the son of Choorikkadan Aron, a convert to Christian faith, took the cue from his father in establishing his business empire. He began his industrial career in the heart of Kannur (near Madan's Plaza Junction). His father, a weaver himself had only two hand looms, set up for local needs. The young Samuel expanded the production by raising the number of looms to 150, and by introducing silk-cotton mixed material, cotton mercerized yarn, woollen goods, apart from dress materials, towels and football jerseys. His firm employed marketing agents to cover the Indian, Burmese and Ceylonian market. It had quite many local customers as well[3]. Samuel Aron's autobiography reveals how he introduced handloom products in North India. Until then, the handloom firms in Kannur were marketing their products within the district only, and that too around 100 kilometres using bullock carts.[4]

The All India Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition held inn Kannur in 1907, marked a turning point in the growth and marketing of Kannur products. It was organised by the SNDP unit of Kannur and inaugurated by Mr. Wood, an ICS officer of Thalassery sub

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division. Quite many swadeshi products from different parts of India were displayed in the exhibition, and the public response to it was overwhelming. The participation of almost all traders and industrialists of Kannur signifies the importance of the event. For the first time in the history of Kannur, customers from other parts of India visited the stalls collectively and they got to know the indigenous products of Kannur and Mahe, their use and their value[5]. It was a boost to handloom industry as well. The other products exhibited through the event included agricultural and industrial machinery, bricks, tiles, agricultural products, handicraft, garments, jewellery, cosmetics and so on. Entrepreneurs and winners were awarded with certificate and gold medal.

The exhibition opened a new avenue to the budding entrepreneurs to start new ventures, and also to market their products. The products of Aron mills drew the attention of buyers from all over India. The exhibition lasted for more than 3 weeks and commodities were emptied by way of sale. The momentum energised by it, saw the prospects of new enterprises being discussed and opened in and around the district[6]. The pan Indian image of the event created nationalistic awareness among Kannurites alongside the economic thrust it generated. Aron's autobiography bears the mention of special trains being arranged for the exhibition. The handloom industry of Kannur mostly depended North India as its potential market, as export of indigenous products had not begun then. According to Aron's version, the exhibition helped Kannurites in getting oriented on business prospects and in having a positive view on nationalism, and personally to him, it was like being on the threshold of a new business world.[7]

The governmental support to the exhibition by way of a grant of Rs. 500 and offer of prizes for agricultural displays was highly encouraging. The wealthy agriculturists, who were also exhibitors of their produce, were advised to promote industrial field as well from the money allotted to them.[8]

As it was pre-independent period, the British government was keenly aware of the income, the textile industry brought to them. As such, the government regulated the tax pattern in a way that was conducive to the entrepreneurs to survive and grow in the field. The sector generated employment to 2.5 million weavers after the First World War. Another half a million were indirectly employed by the sector.

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The First World War itself had created a boom in textile industry due to the scarcity it created in the availability of handloom products, since it was used for military purpose. As a result, customers across state boarders, apart from those within the state, depended heavily on Kannur handloom products for their use[9]. To meet the demands, several new weaving centres sprouted up in the district, making it the national hub of handloom industry. Highly attractive price and profit enabled enterprisers, weavers and labourers alike to cater the needs of the buyers. Many in the agriculture sector abandoned farming and switched over to handloom business to reap profits.[10]

The rise and consolidation of handloom industry in Kannur had a telling impact on the economy of Kannur. Many who were submerged in poverty until then rose to become rich, making use of the boom. Kannur handloom products came to be branded as classy ones. The political unrest that prevailed globally after the First World War (in 1918) had its effect on Basel Mission as well. Basel Mission factory was brought under the control of Common Wealth Trust. The factory which was in Burnacherry was converted into a power loom unit. The small frame looms were sold out at a cheaper price. From pit looms to handlooms and then to power looms, defines the evolution of textile industry in Kannur. Still handloom remained the sensation of the time. Three yarn factories were established – Thiruveppathy Mill in Burnacherry, Kannur Spinning Mill in Kakkad and Kannur Co-operative Spinning Mill in Chovva, which indicate the prominence of the industry in Kannur.

New branches were opened by the existing ones. Alongside, new reforms were also introduced in the factories[11]. Basel Mission introduced power loom technology in Kannur in 1920s. A reference to this is made in a correspondence between T.M. Mill, the Joint Magistrate of Thalassery and the District Magistrate of Malabar over the installation of electricity in Basel Mission Factory in Kannur[12]. In 1936, Aron Mill also got electric power installed for their unit which had around 300 power looms. Thus, the scope and development of textile industry using modern methodologies played a major role in shaping the economy of Kannur.[13]

Umayal Weaving Establishment which came later in 1941, also made its mark in the industry. It had two factories, one near Sri Narayana Park and the other in Kakkad road. Both were run by one Asoka Charitable Trust in Karakudi founded by Alagappa Chettiyar,

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for the promotion of education. With a working capital of Rs. 3,60,000 and a workforce of 350 labourers, the two factories began their production. Around Rs. 1,10,000 was spent annually as wages and benefits. The raw materials used in these factories were yarn, dye, caustic soda, bleaching powder and other textile chemicals, which were supplied from Madurai and Bombay. The bedspreads, furnishing materials, Turkish materials and sports dress produced in these factories found their market mostly in North India[14]. The Kannur Spinning Mill started its operation in 1945 as a limited company. The mill had to its credit 20,000 spindles and it supplied yarn to weaving establishments[15].

Samuel Aron and his wife Gracy Aron were hardcore Congress loyalists, though they preferred formal dress to Khadi in their lifetime. The conscious efforts of the British Government to prevent Christians from being part of the nationalist movement, didn't work with the Arons. A substantial amount was raised by Aron himself as part of fund collection for Gandhian movement, and to be presented personally to Gandhiji on 19th August 1920. This angered the British authorities and they cancelled his fire arm license[16]. The Arons had a major role in organising the 4th Kerala Provincial Conference of Congress party at Payyannur from 25th to 27th May in 1928. Jawaharlal Nehru was the All-India General Secretary of the party then. Aron and his family did everything possible in their capacity to make the event a grand success. Nehru and other leaders were accommodated at Royal Lunch Home in Kannur. Aron's nationalist spirit came to the fore in 1930 during Salt Satyagraha. He gave shelter to the Satyagrahis behind K Kelappan, at his residence. This act of Aron deeply annoyed the British, and they imprisoned him on charges of conspiracy and sedition against the government. He was fined with Rs. 1,000 and sent to Kannur and Vellore jails. By then, he had become a prominent regional leader of Congress, and in 1931 he was elected Chairman of Kannur Municipal Council[17].

Samuel Aron was arrested again for presiding over the 6th Kerala Provincial Conference held in Calicut on 15th May 1932 and for defying prohibitory orders. He was imprisoned for another year and a half, and was removed from municipal chairmanship. The government order 2889/30-07-1932 bears testimony to it. On the insistence of towering leader like Rajaji, T.Prakasham and Sathyamurthy, he contested successfully in 1934 to the Central Legislative Assembly representing Malabar, South Canara and Nilagiri districts. The assembly had 192 members including the nominated ones. The members received no

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salary, but a daily allowance of Rs. 21 and a first-class berth in trains to Delhi. Aron remained a member for 3 years. He had to take a break from politics to concentrate on business affairs. Aron Spinning and Weaving Mills was registered in Kannur as a limited company in 1936. He was associated with the Bhoodan Movement of Vinoba Bhave and donated 999 acres of his land. K.Kelappan and T V Anandan took the lead in the distribution of the land to the deserving ones.[18]

Industrial entrepreneurship backed by technological innovation, provided Kannur and Kannur products, especially textiles, a prominent place in the industrial map of the nation. The products which were sent to other parts of India became much sought after products and even trend setters in quality and design. Aaron's legacy as a leading industrialist of the early 20 th century will be remembered through the entrepreneurial skills he introduced in textile industry. He was the one who played an important role in transforming traditional economy into technology backed economy, proving right Rostow's Modernization Theory. He was a genius who combined industrial growth with social growth and nationalist spirit. His skill in introducing new technology, reorganizing labour, encouraged quite many entrepreneurs in experimenting innovative ideas in their respective fields. Further, his efforts show how economic growth can strengthen social confidence and political views. His journey from traditional path to modernity remains a great example to budding enterprisers in the strict sense of the term.

Endnotes

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13. Samuel Aron, *op.cit.,* p.55
14. A. Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala District Gazetteer: Cannanore, Trivandrum,1972,* p.340

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15. *Ibid.*
16. O. Soorya Narayanan. *Reflections on Freedom Struggle in Malabar with Special Reference to Canannore from 1498 1938*,Midas,Kannur,2012, p.133
17. *Ibid.133*
18. *Ibid.134*

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