

SURYANARAYANA RAO: A FORGOTTEN REFORMER OF KERALA RENAISSANCE

By

Jyothirmani Vatakkayil

Head, Department of History, Sri Vyasa NSS College, Wadakkanchery, Thrissur, Kerala, India.

Abstract

Suryanarayana Rao was a dedicated reformer who played a crucial role in rehabilitating Mappila prisoners following the rebellion in Malabar. As an Honorary Joint Secretary of the Mappila Aid Committee in Calicut, he actively sought financial support from various sources, including the Viceroy, the Governor, and Prince Nizam. His deep commitment to the cause is evident in his persistent efforts to engage both government officials and the Mappila community despite their initial reluctance. Beyond his humanitarian work, Rao was a key figure in the activities of the Depressed Classes Mission (DMRT), inspiring people from different social backgrounds, including royal figures, to support marginalized communities. His influence led to the establishment of the Thrithala Adidravida Colony in Valluvanad with the patronage of Vallabha Raja, who donated land and pledged further assistance. Through his relentless advocacy and persuasive leadership, Rao significantly contributed to Kerala's social renaissance, making him an unsung reformer of his time.

Keywords: *social reforms, kerala, malabar rebellion 1921, DMRT, servants of india society, suryanarayana rao, refugee rehabilitation, caste system, peasant movement, superstition, social service.*

Introduction

Kerala had a spate of social reforms in the early 20th century. These were initiated mainly by religious and spiritual leaders. A few communal organizations also arose during this period, seeking to cure the ills from which the particular community suffered.¹ Besides religious zeal, they

were motivated by progressive views.² They fought against superstitious practices as well as caste-based social discrimination.³ Many of these reformers possessed extraordinary revolutionary spirit because they had to fight both against the conventions and traditions of their own society as well as against authorities. Eventually, their movements had to be aligned

with political developments. Vagbhadananda for example strongly supported the peasant movements of North Malabar, because he believed that the caste system and relative social evils were in the past responsible for the slavery of the peasants. However, it is quite surprising that the Earanad taluk of Malabar was rather untouched by these progressive developments. However, the longest of the Taluk in Malabar, Eranad was quite backward educationally. Extremely fertile and beautiful in landscape Eranad was typical for its ignorance, superstitions, social evils, poverty, and fanaticism. There had been about fifty riots by the peasants.⁴

The objective of this study is to examine the role of Suryanarayana Rao in the social reform movements of early 20th-century Kerala, particularly in the context of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. It aims to explore his contributions to relief and rehabilitation efforts for Mappila and Hindu communities, his leadership in the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust (DMRT), and his engagement with organizations like the Servants of India Society. The study also seeks to

analyze his efforts in promoting education, rural reconstruction, and social upliftment while addressing caste discrimination, superstitions, and poverty. Additionally, it aims to highlight the broader impact of his work on Kerala's social and political landscape during this period.

This study adopts a historical and analytical approach to examine the contributions of Suryanarayana Rao to Kerala's social reform movements. It relies on primary and secondary sources, including archival documents, government reports, and contemporary newspaper articles, to reconstruct his role in relief and rehabilitation efforts post-Malabar Rebellion. Secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and research papers on Kerala's social reform movements and the activities of the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust (DMRT) provide contextual insights. The study also employs qualitative analysis to interpret Rao's impact on education, rural reconstruction, and caste reform. Where available, letters, memoirs, and organizational records are analyzed to understand his strategies, motivations, and challenges. This multi-faceted

approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of his role in shaping Kerala's socio-political landscape.

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 was a bitter experience for the Mappilas and Hindu communities. Great atrocities were marked out on the people, like the burning of houses, the molesting of women, and widespread arrests⁵. It is estimated that nearly 2337 were killed and 1652 wounded, while 45404 surrendered or were captured. A combination of teachers of a revolt against Alien rule, a violent apprising against oppressive land relations, and a struggle for the establishment of political power based on religious tenets made it a complex upheaval.⁶

As the rebellion created widespread misery and havoc, several organizations came forward to undertake relief operations. These include organizations like the YMCA, Aryasamaj, Sevasadan Society (Poona), and Servants of India Society (Poona). Of the various agencies who conducted relief work in Malabar, special mention must be made of the work done by the servants of Indian society. This paper deals with the services rendered by one of the early workers, the servants

of Indian society in Malabar, namely R Suryanarayana Rao. He was an active worker of the DMRT (Devadhar Malabar Reconstructions Trust), formed to undertake relief and reconstruction work in Malabar.⁷

The task of bringing up the DMRT from its early stages of handicaps goes with a young man of deep commitment and high caliber, Suryanarayana Rao. But not much is known about his personal history. He was a South Indian Brahman. A blend of sharp intelligence and a passion for service, Suryanarayana Rao was the Honorary Secretary of DMRT for several years.⁸ Previously, he was a member of the servants of India society with his office at Royapettah, Madras. He was also the Joint Secretary for two organizations, The Social Service League and the Tenants Association.⁹

He was deeply involved in the activities of the Malabar reformation. He took charge as Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of SIS (Calicut) and DMRT in 1927 in place of MS Madhava Rao. Suryanarayana Rao was also one of the honorary Joint Secretaries of the Mappila aid committee. The rehabilitation and relief of the refugees

of Malabar was a matter of particular concern to him. The Government of Madras decided to release the prisoners of the Mappila Rebellion in 1925.

Rao knew well that education and rural reconstruction were interrelated he gave particular emphasis in eradicating the illiteracy of the rural population. In his report on DMRT work, he underscored the point that the spread of education was essential to free the villages from poverty, superstition, and unhygienic living.¹⁰ In this matter, he always sought the help of Government departments such as agriculture, health, cooperation, and education. He always urged the people to get involved in the work of the trust and reminded them that only by embarking on a joint action would it be possible to alleviate the sorrows and suffering of the rural people.

Suryanarayana Rao was one of the Honorary joint Secretaries of the Mappila Aid committee formed in Calicut to rehabilitate the Mappila prisoners of the rebellion. He was making every attempt to raise funds from various quarters. He suggested that appeals should be made in this

regard to the Viceroy, the Governor, and even Prince Nizam. His sense of commitment to such a sympathetic cause was so great that he could bear no excuse for passivity. In his letter to Wood, he wrote: "Our Mappila friends are very slow to move even in matters where the interest of their community was concerned. Still we must get on with them and do what we can".¹¹ He wrote to the Sub Collectors of Palaghat, Malappuram, and Telecherry in this connection and persuaded Wood to ask them to arrange for sub-committees,

The noble ideals and humble but unassuming work of the servants of Indian society were always a source of inspiration for Suryanarayana Rao. He was able to attract a wide variety of people ranging from laymen to royal personalities to the DMRT programs. In 1933, participated in the anniversary celebrations of Gokhale School at the *Adi Dravida* Colony, Gopala Puram at Moodadi, the Valluvanad Raja, MC. Vallabharaja expressed his desire to begin a similar colony in the Valluvanad taluk. And there, he declared his decision to donate about 13 acres of land for the purpose. The Thrithala Abidravida colony came into existence thus. In

admiration of the work of the DMRT, Vallabha Raja further promised all support for the upliftment of the depressed classes. Such instances of attracting humanitarian and benevolent souls to the DMRT activities, amply illustrate the persuasive and altruistic nature of Suryanarayana Rao.¹²

During his secretaryship, Rao was able to enlist a great amount of public sympathy for the DMRT work. He was able to extend the programs of DMRT in the field of education, rural reconstruction, eradication of social evils like untouchability and unhygienic living, and also in making the rural population self-reliant. At this point, it is suffice to say that Rao was a man of great concern for the welfare of the people and an embodiment of service. His reformist zeal went to the extent of casting aspersions on nationalist programs like non -non-cooperation. Nor was he concerned with academic discussion whether reforms are adequate or inadequate. When he describes political workers as 'mischief makers, it is not the voice of an anti-nationalist that we hear, but statements of a genuine social worker.¹³ Several senior citizens of

Malabar acknowledged in glowing words that the people of Malabar were the beneficiaries of the services rendered by him. His achievements were remarkable, for he had to perform his tasks amidst uncongenial circumstances. He was a stranger to this place, being a man from outside Kerala. The problem of language was another hurdle for him.

As a true "Servant of India," Rao inherited Gokhale's secular spirit. In a caste-ridden society, he embodied true egalitarianism. He remained too humble to be conspicuous. The poor people of the DMRT centers could recognize his simplicity and sincerity. He had shown an exemplary model in the running of public institutions. For him, service was its reward.¹⁴ He was very strict and punctual in the conduct of affairs. In addition to DMRT work, he was also in charge of the depressed class Mission of Mangalore Rao, who spent his youthful years for the service of Malabar in his capacity as honorary Secretary of DMRT till November 1934 had to resign from the post on grounds of ill health ever since he changed his long years of stay at Calicut and moved to Coimbatore as advised by his doctor.¹⁵ On 27th November, 1934, he

resigned his post, and in his place, V.R.Nayanar was elected as the Honorary Secretary of DMRT.

Conclusion

Suryanarayana Rao's contributions to the social reform movement in Kerala, particularly through the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust (DMRT), were remarkable despite the numerous challenges he faced. As a committed reformer, he played a crucial role in rehabilitating Mappila prisoners, mobilizing funds, and advancing education and rural development. His ability to attract influential personalities and garner public support highlights his persuasive leadership and deep

commitment to social service. Despite linguistic and cultural barriers, he worked tirelessly for the upliftment of marginalized communities, embodying the ideals of egalitarianism and selfless service. His reformist zeal often placed him at odds with contemporary nationalist movements, yet his focus remained unwavering on practical social change rather than ideological debates. Even after stepping down due to ill health, his legacy endured through the institutions he nurtured and the lives he transformed. Suryanarayana Rao stands as an unsung hero of Kerala's social reform movement, a true "Servant of India" whose impact deserves greater recognition in historical narratives.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jyothirmani Vatakkayil is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of History at the Sree Vyasa NSS College, Wadakkanchery, Thrissur, Kerala. She holds an M.A. in History and received her Ph.D. from the University of Calicut in 2007. She has published research articles and presented papers at seminars and conferences. Furthermore, she has contributed articles to national and international journals.
