

Reforms In Modern Travancore : Contributions Of Regent Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai

Chinthu I B

Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Kerala, Ph: 9446409444

Email: mailmechintu@rediffmail.com

Abstract

Travancore a distinguished Native or Princely State in India was a Hindu feudal state (1729-1949) formerly, under control of powerful Travancore Royal family. They were one of the oldest ruling Dynasties in India, including sovereign kings and even women regents. They ruled from the capital city of Padmanabhapuram and later from Thiruvananthapuram one of the oldest and earliest cities in India which was shifted during the time of Dharma raja. It had a long tradition as a royal centre with its prosperity besides which it was also a great Centre of education. The periods of Gouri Lakshmi Bai (1810-1814) deals with the four years of Travancore history which constituted a silent reformation in Travancore. Gouri Lakshmi Bai was the first women ruler of Travancore and showed great resourcefulness in the administration of the state. Taking into account the great strides made by the state during her time. By a Royal Proclamation in 1812 5th November, Her Highness Maharani Gouri Lakshmi Bai, abolished the purchase and sale of all slaves and granted them independence excepting those attached to the soil for agricultural purposes. Her period witnessed many reforms and progress.

Keywords

Proverticars (village officers), Kariakkars (Taluk officers), Valiya Sarvadhikaryakar (an officer), Devaswom (a department).

Introduction

Travancore was a former Hindu feudal Kingdom and Indian princely state that had been ruled by the Travancore Royal Family from the capital at Padmanabhapuram or Thiruvananthapuram. The Kingdom of Travancore at its zenith comprised most of modern day southern Kerala, Kanyakumari district, and the southernmost parts of Tamil Nadu

Gouri Lakshmi Bai was one of Travancore's most popular Queens and introduced several reforms in the state ruled from 1810 till 1813 and Regent from 1813 till her death in 1815 for her son Swathi Thirunal Rama Varma. She was the only Queen of Travancore to have reigned in her own right for two years before becoming a regent.[1] The unpopular Maharajah Bala Rama Varma, during whose reign Travancore faced a number of internal and external problems, revolts and unnecessary battles and conspiracies, including the most important revolt of Velu Thampi Dalawa, died in 1811. There were no eligible male members in the family which meant she would have to take over Travancore and rule it as regent till such an heir would be born to her. However her accession was not easy because a member from the Mavelikara branch of Royal family, a distant cousin, Prince Kerala Varma, who was the pet of the previous ruler, staked a

claim on the throne which was anything but substantiated.

Methodology

Both analytical and interpretative methods are applied for the study. The study is depends upon both the primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are collected from Kerala State Archives. A number of secondary sources related to the topic is also consulted for the completion of this study.

Findings and Analysis

- The Regency of lekshmi bai in Travancore played a vital role in the socio-economic transformation of the State .
- During the regency of Gouri Lakshmi Bai, tremendous changes in various aspects of the society, they laid the foundation of the making of modern Travancore.

The Princess placed in the hands of the British Resident Col. John Munro, one of Travancore's most loved British Residents, a document asserting her claim and proving the claim of Kerala Varma untenable. The Resident sided with Gouri Lakshmi Bai and she was made the Regent Maharani of Travancore in 1811. Kerala Varma was permitted to reside at Trivandrum, the capital; but when he tried to create further troubles, he was imprisoned and banished from Travancore.

Though young, Gouri Lakshmi Bai possessed a cultivated mind gifted with Sound Judgment.[2] She had sagacity to discern what was good for her Kingdom and to adopt such measures as wore calculated for its improvement.[3] She commenced her

glorious reign in a manner quite different from that of her predecessor.[4] She placed full confidence in the English government and its representatives at her court. In her opening address at the Durbar said: ". . . I cannot do better than to place myself under the guidance and support of the Honorable East India Company, whose bosom had been *an* asylum for the protection of an infant like Travancore since the time Sri Padmanabha Swami had effected on alliance with a respectable Company of the European nation. To you, Colonel (Munro), I entrust everything connected with my country, and from this day I look upon you as my own elder brother. . ."[5]

This marked the complete Surrender of Sovereign power to, and the fullest reliance on the protection of the British Government. This self-abnegation of Gouri Lakshmi Bai made her regime a happy and prosperous period progress without any hitch with the paramount power. Even though she was young her special merit consisted in resisting the influence of evil counselors, flatterers and sycophants. She also placed full confidence in Colonel Munro and the British government, which changed the course of the history of Travancore.

One of the earliest acts of Regent Gouri Lakshmi Bai was to dismiss the existing Dewan , Ummi Thampi. He was accused of squandering money and acquiring all the property of the vanquished rebel freedom fighter Velu Thampi Dalawa and others. The Maharani was now asked to nominate some individual for the post of Dewan, to which she stated that she found no eligible individual and would like to appoint the Resident Colonel John Munro as her Dewan. Accordingly, Munro became Dewan of Travancore in 1811.

While her benevolent administration under the efficient Dewanship of Munro was going on, Her Highness the Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai was blessed with a son in 16th April 1813 A.D. Colonel Munro was so hearteous that he was so anxious as, if no more than, the Rani herself when she was blessed with a male issue for the perpetuation of the ruling line.[6] The infant prince Swati Tirunal Rama Varma was proclaimed Maharaja on the 29th July of 1813. Gouri Lakshmi Bai introduced Prince Rama Vama to the audience at the Darbar held on his accession so that "As the Honourable East India Company has been acting with justice, it pleased Sri Padmanabha Swami to accomplish everything agreeable to their desire. At the instance of my household Deity, I have placed this child of mine on the bosom of the Company and the responsibility for the future support and respectable treatment of this royal seion shall now rest with the Honorable Company"[7]

Eventhough Swati Thirunal was proclaimed as Maharajah, the Queen-mother continued to rule the land in the name of her son. Thus from July 1813 onwards she became the Regent of Travancore. The administration was continued with the same effect under the able leadership of Munro. He became a shining example of justice and fairness. The Resident-Dewan's endeavors to introduce order regularity in the administration and to extinguish the rapacity, corruption and injustice which formerly prevailed were regarded by some historians as preparatory steps to the complete assumption of the State.[8]

But from the details of his administrative measures it is evident that he attended more to general arrangements for

the improvement of the country and the happiness of the people. Colonel Munro was in charge of the administration of Travancore till 1814. In 1814 he was relieved of his duties as Dewan. The continuance of the post of Resident Dewan was regarded in course of time as a very inconvenient arrangement both by Gouri Lakshmi Bai and Colonel Munro.[9]

Munro did not advance the fortunes of his own dependents to the prejudice of the permanent interests of the country. He had a better sense of justice and common sense. From his contact with the native officers he realized that it was desirable to entrust the administration of affairs to the natives of Travancore. He decided to entrust to the sons of the soil particularly the administration of treasury, finance, revenue and justice. He also hoped that it would reconcile the people more to control.[10] The popular feeling was also in favour of appointing as Dewan a son of Travancore. All these considerations induced him to resign his Dewanship. Moreover he was satisfied by the effects of his efficient reforms. After Munro's resignation Padmanabhan, a native of Trivandrum who has risen by his character and proved ability to the high office of the Resident of the Appeal Court.[11] is appointed as Dewan. Colonel Munro himself recommended the appointment of Dewan Padmanabhan. He informed the Madras Government of his qualifications. Padmanabhan was the Valiya Sarvadhikaryakar of the Northern Division of Travancore at first. He was appointed as Valiya Sarvadhikaryakar by Ummini Thampi the former Dewan of Travancore.

Padmanabhan was a man of plain sound understanding, of much application to business; of acknowledged integrity; and

of a moderate sober and unassuming temper of mind.[12] Padmanabhan was therefore found a well-qualified person to adorn the office of Dewan in Travancore. In the field of the administration of Travancore as its Dewan he was eminently successful. He introduced certain reforms in the administration of the land revenue. He corrected a variety of mistakes of the previous settlement. In the administration of justice and in the selection of proper men for office he was successful.

Though he manifested resourcefulness, his opinion on these points betrayed a great want of discrimination. He depended much more on the judgment of other persons than taking his own decision. This was but his serious defect in his policy. Despite this defect he succeeded in making a rational adjustment of public income and revenue. The State got no mere chance to experience his measures as an administrator. Within five months of his assumption of office he was cut off by Small-pox. Travancore was not destined to get the benefits of his talents.[13]

She was an able ruler like her predecessor. She conducted herself remarkably well as Regent with the help and advice of Col. Munro and earned for herself a name as imperishable as that of her sister Gouri Lakshmi Bai.[14] Though short the regency of Lakshmi Bai was a period of steady progress, for which she abundantly received the administration of her people and also of the British. The Dewan Col. Munro informed the Maharani of the widespread corruption in her Government owing to the practice of giving all power, administrative and judicial, to a single officer right from village level to district level. To end this

the Proverticars (village officers), Kariakkars (Taluk officers) and the district officials were all deprived of their judicial powers and instead a Court of Appeal and five District Courts, at Trivandrum, Vaikam and Alwaye were established and modern judicial system was introduced in Travancore. The Courts had each two judges and a Brahmin Sastri. The judges were chosen only from the Brahmin and Nair castes and the Christian community of Travancore. For the trial of Government servants another court known as the *Huzhur* court was also established.

The Police system was reorganized in Travancore during the reign of Maharani Gouri Lakshmi Bai at the suggestion of Col. John Munro Dewan. Deprived of magisterial and judicial power, the district and village officials now could concentrate their attention on the collection of revenue alone, curtailing their power greatly and making them subject to judicial trial in case of misconduct. The revenue department was cleaned of corruption and revenue collection became smoother and organized.

Social Reforms under Regency

She had introduced some social reforms also. All male members except of the Brahmin and Nair castes and some from the Christian and Islamic religions had to pay a certain capitation tax, taxes on festivals, taxes on inheritance of property was abolished. Travancore contained a large number of Devaswoms that held vast areas of land and controlled most of the important and wealthy temples in the country. These corporations had fallen prey to corruption and mismanagement and they next engaged

the Dewans attention. More than three hundred of the biggest temples of Travancore were appropriated by the Government under a Devaswom Board and cleared of corruption and mismanagement.

By a Royal Proclamation in 1812 5th November, Her Highness Maharani Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, abolished the purchase and sale of all slaves and granted them independence excepting those attached to the soil for agricultural purposes. Syrian Christians were freed from their attachment to temples and castes like the Ezhavas, Kaniyans etc. were given independence from their Lords. A vaccination department was started in Travancore in 1813 under her regency. Finding orthodox reservations amongst her subjects with regard to vaccination, the Queen first vaccinated herself and other members of the Royal family to reassure her people.

CONCLUSION

The periods of Gouri Lakshmi Bai (1810-1814) deals with the four years of Travancore history which constituted a silent reformation in Travancore. Gouri Lakshmi Bai was the first women ruler of Travancore and showed great resourcefulness in the

administration of the state. Taking into account the great strides made by the state during her time.

Reference

- [1] Gouri Lakshmi Bai, Aswathi Thirunal Sree Padmanabha Swamy Kshetram, Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages, 1998, p. 202.
- [2] T.k. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II, Trivandrum, 1940, p.503.
- [3] R.N. Yesudas, *Col. John Munro in Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1977, p.11.
- [4] P. Shangoonny Menon, *A History of Travancore*, Madras, 1878, p.363.
- [5] V. Nagam Aiya, *op.cit*, p.457.
- [6] *Kerala Society Papers Vol. II, Series 7*, p.57.
- [7] V. Nagam Aiya, *op.cit*, p.466.
- [8] V. Nagam Aiya, *op.cit*.
- [9] Regional Records Survey Committee, *History of Freedom Movement in Kerala, Vol. I*, p.44.
- [10] *Ibid*.
- [11] T.K. Velu Pillai, *op.cit*, p.524.
- [12] V. Nagam Aiya, *op.cit*, p.525.
- [13] T.K. Velu Pillai, *A History of Travancore, Trivandrum*, p.66.
- [14] *Kerala Society Papers, op.cit*, p.62.