

## **Pampady John Joseph as a Social Reformer**

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### **Abstract**

*Pampady John Joseph was a reputed Dalit activist and social reformer from the erstwhile Princely state of a Travancore. Being a Dalit Christians, he fought against the all levels of ruling establishments for the community members. Pampady Joseph was an instrument in being a socio- religious movement in the state to generate the awareness about the civil rights in the minds of the people of his community.*

Keywords: Cheramar Doothan, Sabha, Daiva, Praja, Savarna, Mahajana, Dalits

### **Introduction**

Pampady John Joseph (1887-1940) was born in a Pulaya family at Manjoor, north of Kottayam. When the family settled down at Pampady (near Kottayam), they were converted to Christianity under the influence of the activists of the Church Missionary Society there. He was fortunate to receive a fair deal of education at the mission school. He had a varied life as a teacher in the mission school at Pampady, a military man during the first world war who travelled widely to different nations of the world as part of military service and a zealous missionary engaged in evangelical and other medical mission service. The turning point in the life of John Joseph was his association with Gnana Joshua-the Chief Accounts Officer of Travancore. Joshua had in his custody a rich collection of government records and from them Joseph learned that the Pulaya lineage was linked with the ancient Chera Dynasty of Kerala. The ancient name of Kerala was Cheranad and its first inhabitants were a tribe called Cheramar who were also known as Cherumar, Cherumakkal or Cherar. They were the rulers, landlords, agriculturalists, poets and educated people of the land. He even located a family called *aykara yajmanans*, then living in a village called Kunnathunadu in central Travancore, belonging to this lineage. Thus, the original inhabitants of the soil were the Cheramar and the foreign invaders subdnded them and their country by conquering and making them slaves.

The enslaved people began to be known as Pulayas. On this basis he even changed his caste's name from Pulaya to Cheramar so that his people could be filled with pride about their ancient heritage.

## Formation of Cheramar Mahajana Sabha

John Joseph was very much aware of the need of an organization to mobilise his community in tune with its newly discovered identity and established the Travancore Cheramar Mahajana Sabha in 1921 in which both Hindu and Christian Dalits enrolled as members. He and Parady Abraham Issac were elected as the general secretary and president of the Sabha respectively. His slogan was to organize through lineage and not through religion. A section of Pulayas joined the *Cheramar Sabha* attracted by this slogan. The movement established by John Joseph flourished in Thiruvalla and spread to other places viz; Changanacherry and Kottayam.

## His Activities

A good number of Pulayas of those places who were organized under SJPS also joined the new organization. It was a time when the internal feud between Ayyankali and Kesava Sastri had weakened the functioning of SJPS and this created a favourable atmosphere for the growth of Cheramar Sabha. It was the sign of an innovative organizational endeavour of the Sabha that it started a biweekly news magazine *Cheramar Doothan* in 1923 published from Kottayam. In recognition of the meritorious and dedicated services rendered by John Joseph for the emancipation of the untouchable castes, he was nominated by the government to *Sree Mulam Praja Sabha* in 1931.

Meanwhile, dissension surfaced within the ranks of *Cheramar Mahajana Sabha*. John Joseph was anguished at the discriminatory behaviour of the *savarna* Christians towards the converts of the Christian Churches. He exhorted Christian converts to desist from joining Christian Churches and wanted to form a separate new Church for *Cheramar* Christians. Consequently, *Cheramar Christian Sabha* was formed in 1923 under the leadership of Asirvadam Asan. Subsequently, such Christian Churches were established in certain other places also. Solomon Markose, an old activist of the Church Missionary Society formed a Church known as *Cheramar Daiva Sabha* at Othara near Thiruvalla. Soon the Church

established parishes at nearby places like Kumbanad, Adoor, Kollakkadavu, Mepral, Preyar. Thus the Christian and Hindu Cheramar were divided into two sects. Yet John Joseph was not anguished at this division as he counted the 'blood bond' of Dalits as more important than the religious differences and was optimistic about their reunion in future.

## Conclusion

John Joseph tried to construct a history for the polluted castes based on their ancient heritage and glorious memories of their past. It was a new attempt in constructing a Dalit identity and in instilling self confidence and pride among the subaltern sections. He also reacted against the problem of caste oppression within the Christian Churches where the Christian converts were not treated equally. But in his endeavour to address this problem, the formation of independent Churches for Christian converts resulted in the separation of Christian sect from their Hindu counterparts. But he was optimistic in forging unity among the Dalits and he viewed them always as a single community beyond its varied caste loyalties.

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