CHAPTER SEVEN
GEORGE JOSEPH’S ROLE IN THE TRAVANCORE POLITICS AND THE THANGASSERRY ISSUE

One of the important events that had taken place in South India in the 1930s was the struggle for responsible Government. This struggle was fought for getting political democracy established. Indian National Congress had adopted a policy of non-interference in the problems of the princely states. In Travancore this agitation was known as Nivarthana agitation or Abstention movement which was fought mainly on the model of the non-cooperation movement. In Travancore society the upper caste Hindus, like the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Nairs enjoyed political power in the public services, and in the legislature. The lower castes were denied all these powers and privileges. The Ezhavas and the other lower castes were the majority in the population but they did not get any fair representation in the public services of Travancore\(^1\). The Christians and Muslims too had no representation. No member from these communities was elected to the Travancore legislature. They were denied of any higher posts in the government departments of Travancore. So they demanded more representation in the public services.

The Ezhavas were considered as a depressed community. They were suffering from much exploitation from the hands of the
upper castes. Though the *Ezhavas* were considered as backward community, there were several educated and qualified persons suitable for government service. But they were not able to get good jobs in the Government services. It was dominated by the higher caste Hindus. Even though the number of the educated members was very low among the higher castes, they dominated all higher posts in the public services. Earlier in 1896 a mass memorial (*Ezhava*) was presented to the Maharaja Sri Moolam Tirunal (1885-1924). It was given under the leadership of Dr.Palpu, who was the first Medical licentiate from the *Ezhava* community. He was not allowed to enter into the medical department of Travancore due to his caste identity. So he joined Mysore medical service. This memorial unfortunately failed to meet its demands and it was ignored by the Government.

The Government was not ready to grant them any further opportunity in the public services. The *Ezhavas* became so disappointed over the stand taken by the Government, that in the year 1900, they presented another *Ezhava* Memorial. But it did not secure any major result. But the lower castes in Kerala were not ready to stop their fight for better job opportunities in the Government services and also for a responsible Government in Travancore. The condition of the Christians and Muslims were also not different from that of the lower caste Hindus. They too were denied of any better job opportunities in the public services.
After the Vaikom Satyagraha, society of Travancore turned its attention towards an agitation for a responsible government in Travancore. The legislative assemblies of Mysore and Pudukottai were enjoying certain powers. At the same time the Travancore Popular Assembly was weak and it consisted of only members from the higher castes. Numerically the higher castes were lower than the real lower caste Hindus. In 1931 Sree Chithira Tirunal became the Maharaja of Travancore and Sir C.P.Ramaswami Iyer (1931-36) was appointed as the Legal and Constitutional advisor to the Maharaja. In 1932 a Legislative Reforms Act was introduced by Sree Chithira Thirunal, but this Act could not solve the problems of the lower castes. Under this Act, the Ezhavas, the Muslims and the Christians could not get the seats in the legislature which they deserved based on population. But the Nairs would be able to get more seats than they really deserved. The Act of 1932, had completely avoided the interests of the Ezhavas, the Christians and the Muslims\(^3\).

All three communities expressed their dissatisfaction over the reforms. They decided to join together and demanded for more radical reforms. Thus the representatives of the Ezhava, Christian and Muslim communities met on December 17, 1932 in Trivandrum and formed the All Travancore Political Conference (Samyuktha Rashtriya Samithi) to fight for their demands. They sent a memorial to the Diwan in 1933. This memorial contained various demands raised by the Samyuktha Rashtriya Samithi. But this memorial failed
to get any reforms from the hands of the Government. The attitude taken by the Government was not favourable to them.  

The stand taken by the Government regarding the issue of political reforms compelled the leaders of the All Travancore Political Conference to adopt a new method of agitation. So they met in Trivandrum on 25th January 1933 under the presidency of E.J. John and passed a resolution that the members of the Christian, Ezhava and Muslim communities “should abstain from taking part either by voting or by standing as candidates in the elections or by accepting nominations to the reformed legislative bodies as long as Government do not make provision for the representation of all affected communities proportionate to their population in the legislature.”  

It was known as the ‘Abstention Movement’ or ‘Nivarthana agitation’. The word ‘abstention’ was the contribution of I.C. Chacko, who was a famous literary giant. The word ‘abstention’ means ‘to stand apart’. This movement was led by C.Kesavan, N.V. Joseph, P.K. Kunju, C.V. Kunjuraman, T.M. Varghese and Abdul Rehman Saheb. The Abstention Movement was started in 1932 and it came to an end only in 1938.

The leaders started their campaign with full vigour and dedication. They organized meetings and agitations all over the state. They aimed to attain the support of the people. At this time C.Kesavan, one of the prominent leaders of the Nivarthana agitation, delivered the famous speech at a meeting organized by the Joint
Political Congress, in Kozhencherry, on 20th May 1935 and this meeting was presided over by Barrister George Joseph. In that speech C.Kesavan strongly criticized the policies of the Travancore Government. He pointed out the irregularities in the elections to the legislature. In that meeting a request was sent to the Maharaja for the removal of Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer as his legal and constitutional advisor. C.Kesavan’s speech was treated as seditious. He was arrested and sentenced to two years imprisonment. 7

George Joseph was appointed as the Chief Defence Counsel for C.Kesavan. He was following each phase of the Nivarthana agitation even though he was staying outside Kerala. He was greatly attracted by this new agitation which emerged in Travancore. George Joseph stood always for the welfare of the downtrodden sections in the society. Problems of the depressed classes were always stood as a great obsession for George Joseph. Thus the agitation started by the lower caste Hindus and the non Hindus made great impact on George Joseph. He welcomed the role as a defence counsel for C.Kesavan for his Kozhencherry speech with a full heart. For that case George Joseph had to travel from Madurai and after finishing that he would go back in the evening. At that time major discussions were held on this issue at the Railway Station of Kottarakkara because this station was a British territory. So there would not be any attack from the Travancore authorities. There was a chance for the arrest of George Joseph too. He had made a great attempt to propagate the chief issues of the Nivarthana agitation.
outside Kerala. He tried to get the support of the people who lived outside the geographical border of Kerala.

In this issue George Joseph got the chance to meet his personal friend Lord Thomas Willington, who was the Viceroy of India. In that meeting he sued for natural justice.\textsuperscript{9}

The arrest of C.Kesavan had made the Ezhava community so depressed. They were fed up with the attitude of the Government towards their problem. So a large section of the community wished to convert themselves towards Christianity. They informed their wish to George Joseph. He became a little confused regarding this particular issue. He could not give his full support for this mass conversion mainly because it was not for a religious cause. This wish had emerged only from a political cause. George Joseph advised the Christian organizations, who had taken active interest in this conversion that they should not take any sudden action for the conversion.\textsuperscript{10} At the same time, at a certain point George Joseph thought that this mass conversion would be a good opportunity to provide a better condition to the untouchables in the Indian society. For a suggestion in this matter, George Joseph had corresponded with Dr.B.R. Ambedkar. Finally after the temple entry proclamation by the Travancore Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal on 12th November 1936, the Ezhavas changed their plan for a mass conversion.
George Joseph also interfered in the Thangassery issue, in which, he had a key role. Thangassery was a small village in the Municpality of Kollam. Thangassery was ceded to the Portuguese in the 16th century. Later it came to the hands of the Dutch. Finally the British took over this village from the hands of the Dutch and by 1815 the full control of Thangassery went to the British. From that period onwards it was known as a British territory.\textsuperscript{11} The population of this village was 2000, most of them were Christians. The inhabitants of this village never intended to become a part of Travancore. The residents of this village had an advantage of having jobs in various departments of the British Government. They were working in different parts of British India. If Thangassery was made a part of Travancore, its people would loose their jobs. Thus the people of Thangassery preferred to be a part of British India.\textsuperscript{12} As Thangassery was a British territory some of the leaders of the abstention movement found it as an asylum to escape from the arrest of the Travancore police.

Sir C.P. Ramaswami lyer attempted to annex Thangassery into Travancore. It raised a threat to the people of this village. They never intended to merge with Travancore. They feared that if Thangassery would merge with Travancore, all the advantages enjoyed by them would be over and they too would be affected by the consequences of the Nivarthana agitation. The Christians of Thangassery did not want to be trapped by the Travancore authorities\textsuperscript{13}. They were aware of the attitude of the Travancore
Government towards the Christians. They never wanted the plight of the Travancore Christians. So they strongly protested the attempt proposed by C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. On 18th May 1934, a memorial was sent to the Viceroy.

A public meeting was held in June, in which a resolution was passed. Through that resolution, the inhabitants of Thangassery informed the Viceroy about their non-willingness to be merged with Travancore. But they did not receive any favourable response from the side of the British Government. Sending only petitions could not bring any good results. The Viceroy’s interference in the problem of a small village seemed difficult. The petition should be handed personally to the Viceroy. It was felt that this would be a proper idea. That was the only better way to make the Viceroy to understand how much serious the issue was.

Some leaders took keen interest in this issue. K.C. Mammen Mappilai was one among them. He was one of the most eminent leaders in Travancore who had dedicated his life for the social causes. K.C. Mammen Mappilai had played a crucial role in reforming the society of Travancore. He used his newspaper ‘Malayala Manorama’ as a weapon to reform the society. The Malayala Manorama stood as a medium to educate the people of Kerala. K.C. Mammen Mappilai had played the role of a journalist, a writer, and a social activist. He was also an agriculturist, an industrialist, a banker and a planter. He had great sympathy towards
the problems of the downtrodden sections in the society. Mammen Mappilai’s role in the struggle for responsible government was really outstanding. He received threats from the government to stop giving support to any movement against the government. But Mammen Mappilai was not ready to obey the Government’s order. He extended his whole hearted support to the freedom fighters.

Mammen Mappilai had actively participated in the Nivarthana agitation. As a result the Government cancelled the licence of The Malayala Manorama in 1938.

Throughout the Nivarthana agitation Mammen Mappilai stood as a strong opponent of the Government and Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer. Through his paper Malayala Manorama, Mammen Mappilai fought against the Travancore Government.

In the Thangasserry issue Mammen Mappilai took a serious role. He along with some other leaders felt the need to hand over a petition personally to the Viceroy. Then only he would take serious action to solve the problems of Thangasserry. They had to find a fine personality for that mission. There was only one person Mammen Mappilai could choose to canvas the British Government to take a serious action in the matter of the Thangasserry, and it was none other than Barrister George Joseph.
Mammen Mappilai suggested to M.M. Varkey to meet George Joseph at Madurai. He met George Joseph and gave a fine picture of the real problem. George Joseph was not ready to interfere in the issue of the people of Thangasserry. He expressed the view that as he was not residing in Travancore his leadership would not suit for the present issue in Thangasserry. But later he took up the mission of meeting the Viceroy as a representative for the cause of the people of Thangasserry.

As a first step along with M.M. Varkey, George Joseph reached Madras to meet the Governor. They submitted a memorial to the governor and explained the actual problem in Thangasserry. After this meeting they reached the offices of the *Hindu* and the *Madras Mail*. George Joseph gave a detailed interview to the editors of these newspapers. He wanted to give maximum publicity to the Thangasserry issue. He knew well that these two newspapers had great influence upon the people of the Madras Presidency. These newspapers would enable the people to get a clear idea of what was happening in Thangasserry.

George Joseph tried to get people’s support for this issue. As a native of Mylapore, a place in the city of Madras, C.P. Ramaswamy lyer tried to influence these newspapers but everything went in vain. It was mainly due to the interference of a top personality like George Joseph that the newspapers gave their support to the Thangasserry issue.
Another event took place by this time. Local Congress Committee had arranged a meeting on prohibition in Madras. Prohibition had become a major concern of Congress at that time. Congress men were conducting meetings all over India to propagate the idea of prohibition. When the local Congressmen in Madras heard that George Joseph was in town they requested him to deliver a speech and George Joseph agreed to it. At the meeting many leaders spoke about the importance of prohibition and also pointed out the evil sides of liquor addiction. When it came to George Joseph’s turn he surprised everyone by giving a speech against the prohibition Act. He said that the prohibition was unnecessary and it never could be implemented successfully. The prohibition of liquor resulted in huge financial loss and for its implementation; large amount of money was needed\(^2\).

Another bad consequence of prohibition would be the loss of moral standards of the people. Illicit distillation would become a cottage industry. That would be so harmful to the health of the people. Instead of prohibition, George Joseph put a suggestion that high taxes should be introduced to foreign liquor, that would make the purchase of the liquor very difficult. George Joseph’s speech made the audience so surprised. The Congressmen were stunned. This speech delivered by George Joseph got wide popularity. He was surrounded by the press. He talked to them about the situation in Thangasserry and the attitude of the Travancore
Government towards the people of Thangasserry. He explained to them about the purpose of his trip to Delhi. This meeting gave much publicity to the Thangasserry issue. The next day’s newspapers contained reports of George Joseph’s opinion regarding the prohibition and also the details of the Thangasserry problem and abstention movement. 22

On the way to Delhi, George Joseph was surrounded by reporters of various newspapers. They wanted to know more details about what was happening in Travancore. George Joseph made them aware of the actual situation. He became very much satisfied with all these happenings. He was able to give more popularity to the concerned issue than he had expected. Attaining that much popularity for an issue like Thangasserry was really a great achievement. It was only due to the interference of a prominent personality like George Joseph that the Thangasserry issue attained country wide publicity.

In Delhi, George Joseph could meet the Viceroy without any difficulty. George Joseph entered into the room of the Viceroy by saying “Oh Good Morning, our Excellency.” George Joseph’s courage and confidence might have impressed the Viceroy. 23 He welcomed George Joseph and his companion M.M. Varkey with a warm smile. George Joseph explained the problems in Thangasserry in a very proper manner. He could easily influence the Viceroy, Lord Willington and also make him more sympathetic
towards the people of Thangasserry. George Joseph presented the memorial to the Viceroy and made a non-stop speech before the Viceroy. He spoke about the abstention movement which was going on in Travancore for getting a responsible government with more representation for the lower caste sections like the Ezhavas, Christians, Muslims and other downtrodden castes. He also explained about the autocratic rule of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer and his attempt to annex Thangassery towards Travancore. George Joseph sought the protection of British Government for the people of Thangassery from the hands of the Travancore authorities.

Viceroy Lord Willington was keenly listening to the words of George Joseph. He got a clear picture of the plight of the people of Thangassery. At last Viceroy gave his promise to George Joseph that he would do all arrangements for protecting the people of Thangassery from its annexation towards the Travancore Government. The mission became successful.²⁴ It was the presence of George Joseph that made the issue so easier to solve. He took all efforts to find a solution to the Thangassery problem. George Joseph’s strong personality, his dedication and sincerity saved the people of Thangassery from the attack of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer.

After meeting the Viceroy, George Joseph went to the telegram office and sent a telegram to C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, informing him that he should leave his attempt to annex Thangassery towards Travancore and informed the decision of the
George Joseph was closely associated with the abstention movement that was going on in Travancore. He was against any kind of oppression against the common people. George Joseph provided his active support for the struggle for the responsible government in Travancore. He presided over the joint political conference held in 1935. In 1935 he presided over another political conference held in Punalur on his birthday. There he was taken in a large procession with decorated elephants. It was really a big gathering. During this time as a part of his political activities, George Joseph sent a message to Kerala Kaumudi, a Malayalam newspaper. “The specific work of this year of the Kerala Kaumudi should be to press for responsible government in Travancore. The legislative council is in process of reformation and you can have a
State Government only by constitutional responsibility. In other words power must pass from the palace to the Legislative Council”.28

Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer had then become the Diwan of Travancore (1936-1947). The article written by George Joseph in the Kerala Kaumudi irritated Ramaswami Iyer. As a result he cut the license of this newspaper. But this action could never stop the leaders of the abstention movement from continuing their agitation.29The Nivarthana Agitation at last carried good results from the side of the Travancore Government. It curtailed the monopoly of the high caste Hindus in Travancore politics. This movement led the people of Travancore towards an agitation for a responsible Government. George Joseph had been a part of this movement till his death (5-3-1938).

Endnotes:

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
8. NAI, Memorandum of the conversation between Sir Bertrand Glancy, The Private Secretary to the Viceroy and George Joseph dated 23rd March 1935.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.