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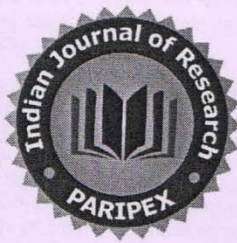
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Research Paper

History

Non-Brahmin Movement and Its Impact of Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe the Non-Brahmin movement and its impact of Tamil Nadu. Non-Brahmin movement came into being to uplift the backward and depressed classes. The first to speak against the Brahmins was C.Sankaran Nair in 1903. A non-Brahmin social worker of Triplicane, C.Natesa Mudaliar started an organisation for Non-Brahmins called Dravidian Association in 1912. On behalf of the Dravidian Association, he published two books namely, Dravidian Worthies and Non-Brahmin letters. "This association professed to work for a Dravidian State, an idea of which was little heard later on.

KEYWORDS

Non-Brahmin Movement, Justice party, Depressed Class Movement

Introduction :

Non-Brahmin movement came into being to uplift the backward and depressed classes. The first to speak against the Brahmins was C.Sankaran Nair in 1903.⁴ A non-Brahmin social worker of Triplicane, C.Natesa Mudaliar started an organisation for Non-Brahmins called Dravidian Association in 1912. On behalf of the Dravidian Association, he published two books namely, Dravidian Worthies and Non-Brahmin letters.⁵ "This association professed to work for a Dravidian State, an idea of which was little heard later on.⁶

The South Indian Liberal Federation was started by T.M.Nair and P.Theagaraya Chetti in 1916.⁷ An English Newspaper 'Justice', a Tamil paper 'Dravidian' and the 'Telugu paper' AndhraPrakasika were started. T.M.Nair was a highly respected doctor. He took an active part in the Congress. In 1916 he expected to be elected by the Madras Legislative Council to the Imperial Council in Delhi. To his disappointment two Brahmins B.N.Sharma and V.S.Srinivasa Shastry were elected. This incident gave an impetus to the formation of a non-Brahmin Political Party and resulted in the formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation, which later on was christened 'Justice Party' after its official journal Justice. The primary task of the Justices was to neutralise the Home-Rule Movement.⁸ The Hindu, the established English daily of Madras refused to give publicity to the Justice Party because it felt obliged to keep from its columns anything that smacked of communalism.⁹

The Justice Party was the only and all comprehensive party of the Non Brahmins of Madras. The first denunciation of the Non-Brahmin Manifesto was issued by P.Kesava Pillai, member of the Legislative Council. He called it as one "calculated to be harmful to the common causes and probably likely to promote the best interest of the classes, whom it sought to serve". Many Non-Brahmins were pained and surprised at the Non-Brahmin Manifesto and dissociated themselves from it.¹⁰ These public spirited men organised a 'Nationalist Meeting' at Gokhale Hall, Madras, on September 20, 1917, to show that there was a large number of Non-Brahmins in favour of Home Rule and that the south Indian People's Association represented only a minority of the Non-Brahmins.¹¹

Justice Party

The first and most important conference of the Justice Party was organised in Coimbatore on August 19, 1917. The organiser, T.A.Ramalingam Chetty who was also a Congressman demanded that all persons attending the Congress Conference should be asked to sign a statement affirming that the aim of the Congress would be to attain self government only by gradual steps and further argued that all representative bodies

in the future should contain the proper proportion of all communities and interests.¹²

The Montague Chelmsford Reforms announced the plan of increasing the participation of Indians in the governance of the country. Accordingly, the Government of India Act of 1919, introduced the system of Dyarchy in India. The reserve subjects were to be administered by the Government with the help of the Executive Council. The Transferred subjects were to be dealt with by the elected representatives. The drawback in the system was the division of powers to the effect that the important portfolios like finance, were reserved while less important portfolios like Local Self Government, Public Health, Hospitals etc. , were given to the elected Government. So the effective functioning of the Government was not possible.

The Congress was against the system of Diarchy for it rightly felt that it would not permit effective functioning of the government. Further, Gandhi was against the policy of Council entry. Their opinions in the Congress about participation in the Government were divided. Many were against Gandhi's political tactics.

The Justice Party agreed to co-operate with the Government and to assume office under the new reforms. In its opposition to Brahmin domination it was assisted by members of both the I.C.S. in Madras who also feared a Brahmin usurpation of both political and administrative power in the Madras Presidency.

In 1916 the Depressed Classes Society held a conference and requested the Government to enquire into the exact condition of the depressed classes and to make recommendation for measures which will secure freedom and justice for the depressed classes.¹³ The issue assumed political importance on the eve of Montague Chelmsford Reforms and led to a coalition between the depressed classes and the Non-Brahmins against the Brahmins and the Home Rule Movement. References were made frequently to the deplorable condition of the depressed classes in the Non-Brahmin conference and the need to improve their condition was stressed. In October 1917, T.M.Nair addressed the Panchamas at Spurtank Road, Chetpet, in Madras at their request. He made a stirring speech asking them to assert their equality with other castes, shed the past formed by long submission and social injuries. He asked them to organize themselves to establish a committee of representatives for various areas so that the 'Non-Brahmin Party' and the 'Panchama Party' could participate together in politics.¹⁴ The Political Association of the Panchama agreed broadly with the stand taken by the South Indian Liberal Federation.

Non-Brahmins and the depressed classes made several representations for reserved constituencies. Due to repeated representations made throughout India and considering the social conditions the British Government agreed to reserved constituencies. The Meston Award announced 33 (3 urban and 25 rural seats) all in the Plural member constituencies. This award enabled the Madras Government to alter the franchise arrangements for the 1920 elections. The Justice Party was elected unopposed in 63 out of the 98 seats. With the support of the nominated members it claimed a strength of eighty out of a Council numbering hundred and twenty. The Justice Party concentrated on Provincial Government, rather than those of an All India nature. This was due to the dyarchical system. The Justice Party proceeded to strengthen its position in the public life of Tamil Nadu by winning before the Legislative Council in Madras, a series of resolutions designed to give Non-Brahmins a greater proportion of Government jobs. It realised that the implementation of government orders to redistribute government appointments in favour of Non-Brahmins would fulfill some of the most articulated ideals administrative power, social and economic justice to the Non Brahmins.¹⁵ The communal Government Order to meet these objectives was issued in 1922. It directed that the main appointments in each district should be divided among the several communal groups. The G.O. was to be implemented not only at the time of appointment but at every stage of promotion. This way they achieved the purpose for which they formed a party.

The Government established the Staff Selection Board consisting of three senior civil servants and two officials appointed by the Government. Competitive examinations would be held to end caste patronage or nepotism. There was some doubt among the Justice Party members that the Staff Selection Board would not represent the interests of Non Brahmins or the policies set out in the communal G.O. Finally in December 1923, the Government agreed to establish a Communal Staff Selection Committee which would 'examine the procedure of the Staff Selection Board.

The landmark legislative measure passed during the Justice Party's rule was the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, which reformed the administration of the many temples and Mutts throughout the country side.¹⁶ The Act provided for a board of trustees to supervise the working of these endowments, to settle disputes over the use of funds of temples and to levy fees on certain temples which attract a large number of devotees, for providing sanitary other facilities for the pilgrims. The Madras Legislative Council passed a resolution in favour of women's franchise on April, 1923.

Depressed Class Movement

The depressed classes who had first welcomed the Non-Brahmin Movement for democratic liberation, later began to lose their enthusiasm. They began to feel that their condition had not improved at all, while the higher caste Non-Brahmins replaced Brahmins in power and position. The Justice Party had abolished the Labour Department and an important leader P.Thiagaraya Chettiar had re-introduced the anti-untouchability law in 1922. These led to conclude that Non-Brahmin rule would not promote the interest of the depressed classes. At a conference, the Justice Party decided "The Brahmin was driven away to make room for the Naidu, the Reddi and the Pillai. What about the interests of the depressed classes?" was raised.¹⁸ A motion of confidence was brought against the ministry by the Justice Party in 1923, but it was defeated by 65 votes against 45. In 1923, M.C. Rajah the most prominent leader of the Justice Party withdrew, taking a number of untouchable leaders with him. These untouchable leaders raised a number of charges against the Justice Party policies. The charges were that the higher castes had appropriated the posts in the British administration for themselves, the Dravidas were not represented in proportion to the population.¹⁷ Further the Justice Party had not initiated house

building schemes, they had not given Adi-Dravidas economic help, they had not implemented free education schemes or initiated land distribution schemes. The Justice Party leaders had not visited the Adi-Dravida villages to hear their grievances. It was said that the professed object of the Non-Brahmin Movement viz., the uplifting of the masses was a mere show and the intention of the high caste non-Brahmins was to keep the depressed classes forever under subjection.²⁰ In fact no member of these classes found admission into the Central Legislature or into the provincial ministry. The Adi-Dravida Mahajanasabha presented a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission of 1927, requesting the constitution of separate electorates for the depressed classes. Similar requests were made at various conferences during the period. The Simon Commission rejected the plea for separate electorates for the depressed classes but the question was opened again at the Round Table Conference by Ambedkar and R.Srinivasan, who were nominated to represent these classes.²¹

The Justice Party which came to power as a Non-Brahmin political party did not promote the concept of Non-Brahmin unity. On the contrary a feeling spread that the Justice Party politicians in office with their friends and supporters formed a class exclusively benefitting themselves by the Non-Brahmin rule. Those who remained down-trodden whose lot had not improved turned hostile.²² It was alleged that the ministry conferred power and offices on their own friends, fitted up the municipal boards, councils and local boards as they pleased and in their enjoyment of their newly won power and offices, forgot the people whom they were supposed to represent.

C.Krishnan a member of the Legislative Council wrote in *The Mail* pressing the need for revising the communal order because the Backward classes constituting one third of the total did not derive even as much benefit as the depressed classes.²³

The lower Non-Brahmin castes repeated the same charges that the forward Non-Brahmins had leveled against the Brahmins. A new grouping came up consisting of Brahmins, High caste Non-Brahmins, Backward Non-Brahmins and untouchables.

The popularity of the Justice Party slowly declined. The party was badly organised, its newspapers were no longer effective as the propaganda media. The party required a thorough overhaul and reorientation. To establish itself on a national level, the Justice Party attended the All India Non-Brahmin Congress, convened at Belgaum on 27 and 28 December 1927. The notable speech was that of A.Ramasamy Mudaliar who described the Non-Brahmin Movement as "Jobocracy". The object of the All India Non-Brahmin Congress was said to be the attainment of Swaraj or Home Rule for India as a component part of the British Empire at an early date as possible by peaceful, legitimate and constitutional means, by promoting goodwill and amity, safeguarding the interests of all communities by means of communal representation and by social amelioration and reorganisation. Further, the Non-Brahmin Congress decided to co-operate only with those political bodies which recognised the principle of communal representation.²⁴

END NOTES :

- 1 Excerpts from the Convocation Address of Sir Sankaran Nair, *New India*, 13 February, 1915.
- 2 Anaimuthu, V., *Thoughts of Periyar E.V.R.*, Vol.1, Thinkers Forum, Trichy, 1975, p.189.
- 3 Spratt, P., *D.M.K in Power*, Bombay, 1970, pp.19-20.
- 4 Excerpts from the Convocation Address of Sir Sankaran Nair, *New India*, 13 February, 1915.
- 5 Anaimuthu, V., *Thoughts of Periyar E.V.R.*, Vol.1, Thinkers Forum, Trichy, 1975, p.189.
- 6 Spratt, P., *D.M.K in Power*, Bombay, 1970, pp.19-20.
- 7 *New India*, 13th June, 1916.
- 8 *The Justice*, 9th January, 1917.
- 9 *The Hindu*, 30th December, 1917.