



Kasturiranga Iyengar - A Versatile National Leader

K.MURUGIAH

Associate Professor of History
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Tirunelveli-627 012

ABSTRACT:

The year 1920 was a year of ceaseless activity in the national cause for S.Kasturiranga Iyengar. Although his health was none too good at the time, he presided over conferences; participated in Congress meetings and engaged himself in organizational work. All this was, of course, in addition to his exacting editorial work. He was a fearless freedom fighter, labour sympathizer and social reformer and an extremist turned moderate. He was well associated with the National leaders like Tilak, Gandhi and Malaviya. In Tamil Nadu, he had close friends like S.Satyamurthi, Salem C.Vijayaraghavachariar, V.O.Chidambaram Pillai and Thiru. Vi.Kalayanarasundaramudaliar.

APPRECIATION FROM ALL RELIGIOUS MINDED PEOPLE

The year opened with a personal event of some importance to Kasturiranga Iyengar. On January 9, 1920, he completed sixty years according to the Hindu Calendar. This was an occasion for religious ceremonies and for felicitations from friends. Several admirers of his arranged a public meeting to celebrate the occasion. It was a representative gathering, attended by Hindus, Muslims and Christians, Brahmins and non-Brahmins, caste Hindus and Adi-Dravidas. Everyone had praise for S.Kasturiranga Iyengar's services to the country, especially through The Hindu. On behalf of the Indian Christian community, a speaker thanked Kasturiranga Iyengar for his support to the efforts to kindle national feelings amongst them. A Muslim speaker appealed to him to take up the cause of the Muslims and give them a lead. A Tamil scholar and editor, T. V. Kalyanasundaramudaliar, said that Kasturiranga Iyengar "was a Hindu, but not a hater of other religions; a Brahmin, but not a hater of other castes." The address of felicitations read on the occasion told him that "it has been the service which The Hindu has rendered to the general and political progress of South India under your inspiration and initiative that has endeared your name to the people."

Acknowledging the felicitations, Kasturiranga Iyengar recalled that it would be fifteen years to a

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day at the end of March since he took charge of The Hindu. "The last fifteen years," he said, "have been in many ways a momentous and eventful period in the history of the country. Southern India has thrown off the lethargy usually attributed to it and in its social and political activity, it stands unsurpassed by any portion or Province of India. The Hindu has been a bark sailing in troubled waters, and it may be fairly claimed for it, without undue self-ostentation, that it has breasted with steadiness and success the waves of reaction and repression which are the invariable concomitants of its bureaucratic Government. Purity of character, freedom from corruption and earnestness of purpose are by no means sure passports to the goodwill or even tolerance of the powers that be in the existing system of Government. We are constantly reminded by the happenings in the country of the observation of Charles James Fox that 'civil liberty can have no security without political power'."

KHILAFAT QUESTION

The political situation in the country was moving, however, towards a fresh crisis. Hot on the heels of the Punjab tragedy came what Gandhiji described as the Khilafat wrong. As a first step in organizing Muslim opinion, Khilafat conferences were held all over the country and Congressmen actively participated in them. In Madras, Kasturiranga Iyengar was Vice-President of the Madras Presidency Khilafat Committee and took part in the Madras Presidency Khilafat Conference held in the city on April 21.² The Conference was held under the presidentship of Maulana Shaukat Ali. Over six thousand delegates and visitors from the entire province gathered at the Conference. A number of prominent Hindu leaders were present to mark their sympathy with the Khilafat cause.

The main resolution of the Conference called upon all Indians "to resort to progressive abstention from co-operation with Government in the following manner: first, to renounce all honorary posts, titles, and membership of Legislative Councils; secondly, to give up all remunerative posts under Government service; thirdly, to give up all appointments in the Police and Military forces; and, fourthly, to refuse to pay taxes to Government."³ Seconding the resolution, which was moved by a Muslim leader, Kasturiranga Iyengar said that the resolution marked the stage at which words gave place to deeds. They all hoped that that stage would not be reached, and that the present agitation would not prove futile and ineffective. S. Satyamurti, C. Rajagopalachari and A. Rangaswami Iyengar were among other Congress leaders who spoke in support of the resolution. The resolution was passed unanimously.

EDITORIAL ON TILAK

On August 1, the day fixed for the start of the non-co-operation movement, Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak passed away. It was a stunning national loss. To Kasturiranga Iyengar, who had known Tilak intimately over many years as a comrade-in-arms in the national struggle, the loss was personal. He wrote in The Hindu: "Mr. Tilak is dead. The sorrowful news must cause consternation and cast a gloom all over the country. In all Indian hearts which contain a spark of patriotism and a glimmering of the truth in regard to the fallen fortunes of India, the death of its most valiant champion in whom was symbolized all that was best and greatest of India's past culture and greatness and the rich fulfilment of its glorious future, must cause a heart-wrench of no common kind. A mourning country will find some consolation in the fact that if there is any truth in the existence of a kindly destiny, it will not suffer that a life like that of Mr. Tilak should have been lived in vain."⁴ Speaking at a condolence meeting held at Triplicane, Kasturiranga Iyengar described Tilak as "my beloved friend and illustrious leader" and recalled his services and sacrifices in the cause of the country.⁵

NON-CO-OPERATION PROGRAMME

It was while Gandhiji was touring the country to propagate his non-co-operation programme that Kasturi Iyengar resigned his membership of the provincial Prince of Wales's Entertainment Committee, an official body with the Governor, Lord Willingdon, as its President.⁶

In the second week of August 1920, Gandhiji visited Madras and addressed a public meeting explaining his plan for non-co-operation to the public and the leaders of Madras.⁷ S. Kasturiranga Iyengar, a critic of the council boycott programme, criticized Mahatma Gandhi for not consulting the other political

leaders of the country, while drawing the council boycott programme.⁸

Three days later, the Madras Provincial Congress Committee met to consider the non-co-operation question. Kasturiranga Iyengar, as President of the Committee, was looked up to for guidance and advice by the members. He spoke at length, detailing where he agreed and where he disagreed with Mahatma Gandhi. "I agree with Gandhiji in the principle behind non-co-operation", he said, "but disagree with him in details."⁹

Kasturiranga Iyengar further explained that he disagreed with Gandhiji about asking lawyers to give up practice and asking students to come out of schools and colleges. Asking lawyers to stop practice was, in his view, "both impractical and undesirable" since lawyers were not helping the Government but helping the people to secure justice. Asking students to come out of schools was "not a practical proposition", and he did not think "that the end which Mr. Gandhi had in view would be achieved by this."

One important activity Kasturiranga Iyengar wanted to be added to Gandhiji's programme. He urged the importance of the boycott of foreign goods as part of the non-co-operation programme. "It is not necessary", he said, "that we should practise the principle of non co-operation only with the persons who are employed in the service of the Government. It appears to me it is more important that in the interests of the country we should employ all means to see that indigenous industries are promoted and that foreign goods and foreign capital and enterprise are kept out."¹⁰

After hearing Kasturiranga Iyengar and a number of other speakers, the Madras Provincial Congress Committee approved a policy of non-co-operation but voted against Gandhiji's programme. Within less than a month of this vote, the Special Congress session convened to decide on the non-co-operation programme met at Calcutta on 4-8th September, 1920, under the presidentship of Lala Lajpat Rai. The question of participation or otherwise in the elections under the new Reforms provoked a sharp difference of opinion between Gandhiji and the Madras Nationalists like S.Satyamurthy, S.Srinivasa Iyengar, A.Rangaswami Iyengar, V.O.Chidambaram Pillai and Kasturiranga Iyengar.¹¹ There was a heated debate in the Subjects Committee on the non-co-operation resolution to be placed before the open session. C. R. Das moved the main resolution which opposed any boycott of the elections and which favoured Council-entry. Kasturiranga Iyengar supported this view. Mahatma Gandhi, through an amendment, sought to include boycott of Councils as one of the active proposals of his non-co-operation programme. He argued that if the country followed his programme, it would get Swaraj within a year.¹²

Gandhiji's reply placed the burden entirely on the individual member to act according to his conscience. Kasturi Iyengar felt it his duty to resign from executive positions in the Congress as he held the view that Congressmen should seek election to Councils to prevent unpatriotic elements getting in and also to use the Council Chamber as an arena for non-co-operation.¹³ Accordingly, soon after returning to Madras from the Congress session, he sent in his resignation of his position as President of the Madras Provincial Congress Committee. Two Secretaries A.Rangaswami Iyengar and S.Satyamurti¹⁴ and two members of the Executive Committee of the M.P.C.C including V.O.Chidambaram Pillai, also resigned with him.¹⁵ The resignations were, however, not accepted by the Committee which asked them to reconsider their decision and withdraw their resignations.

In view of the Madras Provincial Congress Committee's request, Kasturiranga Iyengar did not press for the acceptance of his resignation. There was another potent reason for his decision. His close friend, Salem C. Vijiaraghavachariar, had set an example for other Congressmen by loyally adhering to the resolution of the Special Congress. Vijiaraghavachariar held the same views as Kasturiranga Iyengar on Council-entry. He firmly and actively opposed Mahatma Gandhi's plan for the boycott of Council elections. However, when the Special Congress accepted Gandhiji's programme of action, Vijiaraghavachariar felt it his duty to abide by the decision of the Congress if only to prevent further splitting up of the great national institution. He accordingly withdrew his candidature for election to the Madras Legislative Council. Nor would he seek election to a seat in the Indian Legislative Assembly. This demonstration of disciplined loyalty appealed to Kasturiranga Iyengar.

NON-CO-OPERATOR

The nation's response to the Congress call for non-co-operation was beyond all expectations. Young and old joined the National Volunteer Corps in their thousands and went about the country preaching the philosophy of non-violent non-co-operation with the Government, as advised by Gandhiji. They

addressed public meetings, picketed schools and liquor shops peacefully. As the preaching of non-co-operation with the Government was considered seditious, many of the local leaders were arrested and sentenced. Thousands of lawyers all over the country suspended practice and threw themselves heart and soul into the non-co-operation movement.

Panchayats were set up in large numbers to settle disputes without recourse to the British courts. There was an immediate and sharp fall in the revenue to the Government from court fees and stamps. Lakhs of students were withdrawn from Government run or Government aided educational institutions. Simultaneously, National Colleges, National Universities and National Schools were organized everywhere. The Jamia Millia of Delhi, the Gujarat Vidyapith, the Kashi Vidyapith, and numerous colleges and schools came into being within a few months.

Mahatma Gandhi had emphasized the positive aspects of national reconstruction as an essential counterpart of the non-cooperation movement. Along with the boycott of foreign cloth, there was the campaign to revive the charkha and popularize hand spinning and hand-weaving. Khadi became the symbol of national revolt and resurgence. Spinning wheels were produced in large numbers and distributed to enthusiastic workers in towns and villages. The hum of the charkha was heard in thousands of homes, in the mansions of the rich and the cottages of the poor, in towns and in villages. Children took to the takli and learnt to produce yarn from it.¹⁶

Another important programme approved by the Nagpur Congress of 1920, the collection of one crore of rupees for a fund to be called the Tilak Memorial Swaraj Fund, for financing a band of national workers throughout the country, was also taken up in right earnest by Congressmen everywhere.¹⁷ The Congress organization was also activated, Congress committees being established at the village, taluk and district levels under the Provincial Congress Committees.

Kasturiranga Iyengar, on his return to Madras from Nagpur, plunged into the non-co-operation movement. The Hindu's columns were liberally devoted to covering the new outburst of national activity in every part of the country and spreading the message of non-cooperation and constructive work. Kasturiranga Iyengar was elected Treasurer of the Madras Tilak Swaraj Fund and he engaged himself vigorously in collecting money for the national cause. The Madras collections very soon exceeded a lakh of rupees. For the country, as a whole, the target of one crore of rupees, fixed for the Swaraj Fund, was exceeded by July 1, 1921.

PARTICIPATION IN LABOUR UNION

The Nagpur Congress had commended close co-operation between Congressmen and the workers and the Depressed Classes. Kasturiranga Iyengar actively interested himself in this work. Even as early as March 1920, he had helped to organize the South Indian Railway Employees' Association at Tiruchi. The inaugural meeting was held under his presidentship and he was elected the Association's first President.

Labour leaders like B. Shiva Rao, V. Chakkarai Chetty, B. P. Wadia and T. V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar sought his advice and help on the problems facing them. V. Chakkarai Chetty, one of the founders of the Labour movement in Madras, recalling Kasturi Iyengar's services to the labour movement, wrote in 1923 : "Labour ought to be grateful to his memory for the support he gave their cause in Madras".¹⁸ In the year 1921, the Pulianthope trouble took place when 10,000 labourers were locked out of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, in the City. Choolai, Purasawalkam and Vepery at that time, were, as it were, under martial law administration. At that time, in those places the police bayonets were gleaming. The leaders of labour were threatened by the Governor with deportation.¹⁹ Then it was The Hindu under the editorship of Kasturiranga Iyengar that came forward and defended their cause.

During this strike Kasturiranga Iyengar attended a public meeting of the citizens at the Triplicane beach to express sympathy with the cause of the workers of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills. The meeting resolved "to help the workmen in their fight against capitalists to express their resolve to sustain them during the continuation of the dispute, and to condemn the attitude of the Government who, attributed the labour troubles to political causes. Kasturiranga Iyengar donated five hundred rupees for the strikers' relief and was elected a member of the Committee that was formed to render help to the strikers. He was also elected a member of another committee "for protecting mill workers against violence and other troubles".²⁰

At one of the labour meetings during this period, Kasturiranga Iyengar extended support to the idea of establishing a Labour Workshop in Madras City. He also favoured the establishment of a Service Bureau where applications of workmen in quest of work might be received and information about available jobs given to them.

The Kerosene Oil Workers' Union, the Madras Labour Union and many other labour organizations found in Kasturiranga Iyengar a sympathetic leader, a generous patron and an influential champion of their interests.²¹

CHAMPION OF THE DEPRESSED CLASSES

Kasturiranga Iyengar had been interested in the uplift of the Depressed Classes even before the Congress advised its members to take up their cause. During the years 1915 to 1920, there was in Madras only one organization interested in the elevation of the Depressed Classes. It was the Depressed Classes Mission Society of India which had a branch in Madras. Sir C. Sankaran Nair was President and Kasturiranga Iyengar, Vice-President of the Society. The Society started a number of day and night schools. It proposed to erect a building of its own for locating a school at Vyasarpady in the city. Appeals to the public to contribute funds did not produce enough response. It was then suggested to Kasturiranga Iyengar that the work of the building should not be delayed for any reason; the contractor was willing to complete the construction of the building if some one was found to guarantee the payment of the money. Kasturiranga Iyengar readily volunteered to stand guarantee. The building was constructed and the school opened at Vyasarpady, the first private school for the Depressed Classes to be started in Madras.²²

END NOTES

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