



SOCIAL IDEAS AND ACTIVITIES OF DEWAN BAHADUR RETTAIMALAI SRINIVASAN IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU.

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Abstract:

Rao Bahadur Rettaimalai Srinivasan organized the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha in Madras. He also started a journal Parayan in 1893 for the benefit of the depressed classes. From 1923-1935 he was nominated to the Madras Legislative Council member. He was the pioneer of the Dalit Movement. He also represented the depressed classes at the first and second round Table Conferences. He also the Champion of the Dalit Communities.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

The depressed classes had been called till the end of the 19th century as depressed, oppressed, suppressed, submerged, unregenerate, unprivileged, untouchables, low-caste, pariah, Panchama, out-caste Hindus, Adi-sudras, Exterior Castes, excluded castes and Neglected sections of Hindus. These names speak of their ignominious status in society. As long as the depressed classes are identified with their names, their status will remain unchanged¹. Many dalit leaders work for the welfare of their own communities. Rettaimalai srinivasan played a major role in liberation of dalits in Tamil Nadu.

Rattaimalai Srinivasan was born in 1860 in a poor parayar family in Madras Presidency. R. Srinivasan, as the first Secretary of the Adi- Dravida Mahajana Sangam in 1891 in Madras and convened a conference on 23, December 1892 in Madras. The depressed class leaders and representatives participated in this conference. At these conference, a strongly worded resolution emphasizing the need to abolish untouchability was passed². He also founded a monthly Journal called Parayan in Tamil in 1893. About seven years of its publication had helped to create an awareness among the depressed class people in Madras. The Parayan's motto was to prepare the depressed classes for a fight against untouchability and against the evils accrued to it.

As soon as Adi-Dravida Mahajana Satha was organized in 1891, education of the depressed classes seemed to have been one of the principal aims of the Organization. The British government in Madras had been undertaking some ameliorative measures for this class of people. It was in 1893, the government of Madras had announced the need of the depressed class children to study on par with other Caste- Hindus. The appeals of some of the Brahmin members of the Madras Legislative council³, the Adi-Dravida Mahajana sabha and Parayan whose editor was no other than R. Srinivasan an articulate spokesmen of the depressed classes had at last borne fruits and an official order was immediately issued to this effect. According to this order, the depressed class children could be admitted in the schools that were run with the government grants⁴ But the Caste-Hindus refused to give admission to the children of the depressed classes in Madras city. The teachers of these schools happened to be Caste-Hindus. R. Srinivasan brought this incident to the notice of the government on 21 October 1898. As a result of this, some of the schools run by the Madras Municipality were closed⁵. Wherever possible and where the children of the depressed classes were refused to admission, the government launched upon a programme of starting some schools exclusively meant for them.

By 1920, C.F. Paddison as commissioner of Labour Department was appointed and in the same

year was constituted a labour Advisory Board composed of Gilbert Slater (European), K. Ramanujachariar (Brahmin), M.C. Rajah and R. Srinivasan (Adi-Dravida), while writing in his autobiography said that the Labour department exclusively meant for the depressed classes was formed by the government of Madras, due to a strong representation given by Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha⁶. The Labour department had maintained a family good track-record in serving the cause of the depressed classes for more than a decade. Both at the all India level and the Provincial level, the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, All India Depressed classes Association and other Associations of untouchables of Madras presidency had from 1920's strongly represented their grievances with the government, besides working towards creating a socio-economic and political awareness among the depressed classes. When an injustice was done to the depressed classes by transferring their co-operative societies from Labour department to Co-operative department, M.C. Rajah, V. I. Munuswamy Pillai, R. Srinivasan and other depressed class leaders strongly believed that substantial political representation of the community from Imperial legislature down to the local bodies would alone enable this section to help make rapid strides in their social and economic spheres of life⁷.

The Madras Legislative Council members belonging to depressed classes, namely M.C. Rajah, R. Veerian, A.S. Shahajananda, R. Srinivasan and others, both inside the council and outside of it, vociferously raised the issue of changing their community's name from Pariah and Panchama to Adi-Dravida. In various districts of Tamil Nadu, meetings to this effect were held and resolutions passed⁸. This demand gained momentum, especially in the first two decades of the 20th Century. The Congress leaders like P. Varadarajulu Naidu and V. Kalyanasundaram were in full agreement with Gandhiji's concept of Swaraj followed by the abolition of untouchability, imposition of prohibition and an encouragement given to kaddhar and indigeneous industries⁹. But M.C. Rajah and R. Srinivasan, the depressed class leaders were not convinced of this stand taken by the Congress leaders. They were of the view that the Swaraj should precede to the abolition of untouchability and a change in the attitude of the caste-Hindus towards the depressed classes¹⁰.

The depressed classes felt that their rights have to be protected in the legislature and in public services. The depressed classes wanted to change the nominated members because they felt that nominated members had no representative characters and he will follow who nominated him. In order to overcome this defect the depressed classes suggested the reservation of seats in joint Electorates. Even this system had several defects. So creation of separate electorates was suggested to ensure direct election and secure an adequate representation for the depressed classes. The depressed classes demanded the introduction of separate to protect their interests. There were separate constituencies for Mohammedan, Indian Christians and Anglo Indians but this privilege was denied to depressed classes. The Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha recommended the creation of separate electorate in the Madras Presidency for the depressed classes. The Plea for separate electorate for the depressed classes were turned down by the Simon Commission. At the Round Table conference held on 1930 B.R. Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan represented the depressed classes. They demanded certain rights for equal citizenship, free enjoyment of civic rights, protection against discrimination, adequate representation in the legislature and special departmental care of the depressed classes. In 1930 in the Madras Legislative Council, representation was given to the depressed classes in proportion to their population¹².

To resolve the communal representation question the British in India had called for a Round Table conference in 1930 and another in 1931. Like the Muslims and other minorities of the depressed class leaders and the Indian National Congress represented the second Round Table Conference. At the All India level B.R. Ambedkar and others from Madras M.C. Rajah and R. Srinivasan were invited to attend these two conferences. The Indian national Congress did not like the depressed class leaders demanding separate electorate for them at the Round Table Conference¹³. The Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha and depressed class leaders had contributed a lot towards the political awakening of the depressed classes. The Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha stood for the depressed class representation in the central and provincial legislative on par with the Caste-Hindus but in proportion to their population¹⁴.

The Advent of the British in India had brought some change in their status; by a series of welfare measures the British government was able to take them into confidence. Associations, like Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, the Indian National Congress to some extent and leaders like B.R. Ambedkar, R. Srinivasan and others had played a significant role in highlighting the depressed condition of the depressed classes and were able to secure certain rights for the socio-economic and political upliftment of this class. The communal Award, the Poona Pact of 1932 and the Temple Entry Legislation of 1938 are instances in point. The Poona Pact of 1932 formed the basis for the constitution of India incorporating some guarantees for this section of society¹⁵. R. Srinivasan met Gandhiji and got assurance from him for the implementation of the Poona Pact to the satisfaction of the depressed classes¹⁶. As per the Poona Pact, out of 30 seats allotted for the depressed classes in the Madras Legislative Council 29 had gone to rural areas and one to Madras city.

This proportional representation recognized the role and contribution of the large chunk of the depressed class population living in rural areas whose people largely lived in ignorance and poverty¹⁷. But the atrocities committed on the depressed classes continued unabated in other parts of Tamil Nadu. While joining the general discussion on the budget of the Madras Presidency for the year 1936-37, R. Srinivasan had provided the members of the council with and information that at karaikudi, unable to bear with the cruel treatment of the Nattars about thirty families belonging to depressed class embraced Christianity¹⁸. He was a Dalit social activist and played a major role for the dalit upliftment in Tamil Nadu.

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