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PULIANTHOPPU AND PERAMBUR – MADRAS LABOUR RIOTS, 1921

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Abstract:

A Roit is a spontaneous outburst of the people on some casual issues. It is obvious that major riots were not planned or organized, and they often lacked leadership. They were in the nature of disputes between two parties, or they were the violent activities of a party of the people on some fortuitous issues. Major riots occurred after a period of time during which tensions mounted to such an extent that only a small incident was needed to let loose the pent-up furies. Riots took place in the form of communal strife, caste conflict, sectarian clash, labour unrest, student disturbance, religious trouble, political discontent. Several factors contributed for the development of a riotous situation in Madras in 1921. Even though it was a labour riot, the existing caste system also played an important role in the riots. It was a collective violence leveled against the Adi-Dravida Labourers. It was an unlawful exercise of physical force so as to injure the Adi-Dravida workers and damage their huts and properties. Other words used in connection with these Madras Riots were, 'unnatural', 'undue', 'extreme' and 'vehement'. The formation of Madras Labour Union in 1918 in Madras intensified labour strikes against the authority of Buckingham and Carnatic Mills (B & C Mills). Adopting divide and rule policy, the Government induced the Adi-Dravida Labourers not to join the Labour strikes organized by the Madras Labour Union which led to Labour Riots in Pulianthoppu and Perambur in Madras, called 'Madras Riots'

KEYWORDS:

Labour, Riots, Caste Hindus, Union, Mill, Non-Co-operation, Justicites

INTRODUCTION

A series of violent incidents took place between the Caste Hindus and Depressed Class Labourers during the Rule of Justice Party. The Justice Party- Adi- Dravidas Relationship was strained over the issue of Buckingham and Carnatic Mills (B & C Mills) Strike which took place in Madras City in 1921, the first year of the Justice Ministry's term in office. The B & C Mills Strike began as a simple enough affair. A lock out was declared at the Mills in December 1920 and it was lifted after the Madras Labour Union President, B. P. Wadia, a Home Ruler and friend of Annie Besant, entered into a negotiated settlement with the Management. Wadia resigned his post as Union President thereafter, leaving V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, the Union's Vice-President, to pursue pending matters of discord with the Director of the Binny Mills. The latter refused to grant Kalyanasundara Mudaliar an interview, and it soon dawned on the Union Leadership that Wadia had duped them. M. A. Jalilkhan, another Vice-President of the Union, wrote as much in a letter released to the Press in April 1921. "If he [Wadia] had made known his determination to give up the office we would certainly have settled the lock-out and strike ourselves much better than what he had done. He, in fact, duped us and did not disclose the terms of the settlement agreed to by him. . . . Having concealed the

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important facts from us, he ruined many a honest worker.”¹

In this restive atmosphere, seething with discontent, Mill workers at the Carnatic Mills, organized by the Madras Labour Union, then under the political and ideological influence of Congress Non-Cooperators, struck work in May 1921, following the unwarranted dismissal of an Adi -Dravida employee in the carding section of the Mill. The workers of Binny Mills too joined them in a gesture of sympathy. The strikers were predominantly Caste Hindus and Muslims, since the Adi- Dravidas had consciously refrained from joining the strike, in spite of the fact that a majority of workers at the Carnatic Mills were Adi -Dravidas.

Describing the sequence of events that followed, Jalil Khan noted that it was only after the Binny Mill workers struck work, that Government decided to intervene and alter to their advantage a fairly incendiary situation. As long as the workers of Carnatic Mills alone were on strike, there was no question of the workers splitting along caste lines; that is, the Government did not, at that stage, seek to separate Adi-Dravida Labourers from Caste- Hindu Labourers and convert them into 'blacklegs.' But once the Binny workers joined the strike, Government and Management acted decisively. Thus, a few blacklegs among Adi-Dravida Labourers came to be created and their leaders had taken up the work of strike-breaking, resulting in scuffles, disturbances and burning of huts and houses.²

M. C. Rajah, one of those Labour leaders referred to by Jalil Khan, noted later that the Adi Dravidas had exercised their right to give or withhold their labour as they thought best in their own interests. Previous experience had taught the Adi- Dravida Labourers that participation in strikes proved detrimental to their interests and they had often been forced to sell their property and pledge their jewels in the past.³

M.C.Rajah's decision to keep Adi-Dravida Labourers away from the strike provoked interesting responses. On the one hand, a significant number of Adi -Dravida workers resented his intervening in a matter they considered theirs and theirs alone. Jalil Khan went so far as to claim that this section of the Adi-Dravida Labourers clashed with M.C. Rajah's supporters and, in all probability, were responsible for those acts of arson that took place in Adi Dravida neighbourhoods in August 1921.⁴ The Government welcomed M.C. Rajah's decision not to join the strike and a Government Spokesman-no less a person than the economist, Gilbert Slater claimed that a labourer was free to give or exchange his labour power.⁵

The Adi- Dravida Labourers were drawn into the politics of the strike as violence erupted in 'Pulianthope' in North Madras, between Adi -Dravida Workers and the Strikers. Arson, looting and destruction of property ensued and three men were knifed to death in the course of the rioting. Finally, police intervened to arrest the situation from further deterioration. This, however, made things worse, because six men (all Caste Hindus) died when police opened fire in Perambur, also in North Madras, in August 1921.⁶ To ease matters, Adi- Dravida workers were asked to leave their homes, many of which had been burnt down. They were lodged, at Government expense, at camps in Vyasarpadi, north of Perambur.

The Pulianthope Riots evoked protest and concern from all quarters. Justice, Congress and Adi-Dravida Leaders flung recriminations at each other and at the Government. The Government exercised its discretionary executive powers and even disallowed a motion in the Madras Legislative Council that called for a debate on the troubles in the City.⁷ The Government's move angered all parties to the debate, and the Justice Ministers as well as the Congress Notables and Annie Besant, were equally annoyed by this reluctance on the Government's part to throw the matter open to discussion.

Annie Besant observed that the Government's unwillingness was particularly inappropriate since the Justice Party as well as the Congress accused it of being partial to Adi-Dravida workers and the Government, of necessity, ought to try and clear its name. The Congress resented the fact that the Government and Justices alike considered the strike as an instance of Non Cooperation Militancy and Congress was particularly incensed at what it thought were government-inspired attempts to alienate the Adi- Dravida workers from the rest of the workers. Justice Leaders, for their part, while blaming the politics of Non Cooperation for the effect it had ostensibly produced on the striking workers, were also inclined to blame the Government for its alleged partiality to Adi-Dravida Workers.⁸

The Government, in its turn, vehemently denied allegations of partiality-both with respect to weaning away Adi- Dravida workers from the strikes and to its conciliatory and friendly attitudes to those amongst the latter who were purportedly involved in the Pulianthope Riot. A press communique issued from Fort St. George observed: “Since disturbances commenced, their (the government's) constant endeavour has been to order and as far as it lay in their power to enable all without distinction to pursue their occupations without fear of molestation and to ensure to all peaceful citizens, protection in their homes and streets. . . . Police and the military have been employed to avert collisions and protect property and ensure, if possible, general tranquility. Persuasions and warnings have been impartially applied and wherever the use of force had been necessitated, it has been directed against all delinquents to whatever community they may belong.”⁹

The Government claimed that if it had attended to Adi-Dravida workers immediately, this was because 3000 of these people had been rendered homeless in the course of the riots and they had to be lodged in special camps. Arguing that 'no civilized Government could possibly stand aside and simply leave these sufferers to their fate', the Government insisted that it had to resort to making rice available to Adi Dravida workers since the latter had been refused supplies in the bazaar. But the Government had not abdicated its responsibilities to other communities and assistance had been rendered wherever necessary.¹⁰

Theagaraya Chetty, O. Thanikachalam Chetty, V. Shanmughan Mudaliar and S. V. Ramasamy Mudaliar and others of the Justice Party were unimpressed with this statement of intentions. They undertook a visit to the site of the riots on their own and, based on their impressions, made a representation to the Government. They noted: (i) Caste Hindus and Mohammedans have lost all faith in the impartiality of the Police; (ii) they distrust Inspector Hankinson, particularly; (iii) they believe that Sundaracharulu, the Assistant Labour Commissioner, has through the agency of Swami Desikananda and of some others, set up the Depressed Class workers against the Caste Hindus and Mohammedans; (iv) The Depressed Class workers are far more restive than any other party.

The Justice Party Memorandum alleged that Depressed Class had armed themselves with swords and knives; that they had inflicted false wounds on themselves to implicate Caste Hindus in acts of willful violence and that they had set fire to their own houses, so as to draw governmental attention and acquire free houses. More specifically, the Justice Memorandum demanded that free feeding of Depressed Class at Government Camps should be stopped; that a proclamation should be issued announcing wrong-doers of all castes should be punished; that the Depressed Class people should not be kept together in one camp or near each other in the affected areas. The camps should be removed outside the limits of Madras-distributed over half a dozen centres but all on the railway line-so that Depressed Class workers may be brought by train to the Mills. In fact they should be carried to the Mill Premises in trains. Justicites demanded that Sundaracharulu, Assistant Commissioner of Labour, and Inspector Hankinson, responsible for the police action, and his men be transferred. The Memorandum also condemned the imposition of a Punitive Tax on house owners of Perambur and Pulianthope and noted that this was an unfair measure that would cause discontent to spread, rather than arrest it. The Memorandum concluded with the observation thus : "We think the final solution to all these troubles is to influence the mill authorities to take back the large number of labourers now without employment. Even if they are taken back the strained feelings between the Adi-Dravidas on the one side and the Caste- Hindus and Mohammedans on the other are such that for some time to come, goodwill and amity cannot prevail. It is absolutely necessary to separate the two sections from living near each other for some time to come".¹¹

Similar recommendations were made at a Special Meeting of the Madras Corporation. The Councillors recommended that the Commissioner of Police and his subordinates be transferred; that the Commissioner of Labour be directed not to take interest in one section of labourers only and provide labourers to the Mills. The Corporation Councillors also hinted that Depressed Class workers had been instigated into violence.¹²

Depressed Class workers challenged these demands and also the Congress which characterized them as 'blacklegs'.¹³ In the course of a debate in the Madras Council on this matter, M. C. Rajah presented the case of the Depressed Class. He noted that unlike the Justicite Non-Brahmins and the Congress Brahmins, his Community possessed no newspapers to ventilate its grievances. The fact was that his people were being frightened and subjected to violence. He himself had been driven away from his house in Royapettah while several hundreds of Depressed Class workers had been rendered homeless. As for the Labour Department, which was also in charge of the welfare of the Depressed Class, it had only done its duty to his Community. As for the strike itself, Depressed Class workers had held a meeting in his presence on 19th June 1921 and had resolved not to join it. Subsequently, they had informed the Labour Union of their decision. Hence, there could be no question of treachery or premeditated violence, as the Congress seemed to imagine or as even the Justice Party seemed to believe. M.C. Rajah was particularly resentful over the Justice Memorandum to the Government and observed that this campaign to excite public feeling against my community deprived Non-Brahmins of their right to stand for the oppressed and the depressed'.¹⁴

Congressmen, responding to M.C. Rajah, continued to abuse the Government. S. Srinivasa Iyengar, participating in the debates in the Madras Council, opined that the Government ought to have been neutral. Like the Justicites, he was also inclined to blame the Commissioner for Labour for his partiality, and demanded that the Office of the Commissioner of Labour be detached from that of the welfare of the Depressed Class. Speaking on behalf of the Government, K. Srinivasa Iyengar, Law Member, argued that the Labour Commissioner was well within his rights to persuade the Depressed Class not to strike work and noted that the strike was initiated by unyielding workers who desired to voluntarily deny themselves food

and drink.¹⁵

These arguments and counter arguments did not facilitate the emergence of a consensus as to what had really transpired and what ought to be everybody's imminent concerns. Each participant in the debate stuck to his position with tenacity and each allegation brought forth a fresh response and newer and different allegations. The Government, for instance, refused to submit its actions to critical scrutiny. A press communique issued by the Government on 6th September 1921 described the Justice Memorandum as reproducing the 'fears and anxieties expressed to the signatories by members of the caste community in the Mill Area.¹⁶ The Government noted that anxiety and terror were present amongst the Depressed Class as well and one could not blame them entirely for what had happened. While it was true, as was pointed out in the Justice Memorandum, that Depressed Class were seen with crude swords and the like, so too were Mohammedans and Caste- Hindus in possession of such implements. As for the Justicites' actual recommendations, all that the Government could say was that it was determined to punish wrongdoers of all classes. The Government rejected the plea that Depressed Class be transferred to distant camps for that was clearly impractical. The Government also dismissed the charges against Swami Desikananda and the veiled charge that M.C. Rajah was actively instigating Depressed Class into violence. The Government also refused to condemn its police and executive officers, 'merely because they do not appear to have been able to please all parties in the discharge of their duties'. The Government decided to set up a committee of enquiry under Justice Ayling to go into the details and results of the troubles.¹⁷

The Congress was critical of this move and held that the Ayling Committee did not really take into account or seek to bring within its scope of enquiry the nature and content of the B & C Mills dispute and as such would not merit its attention. V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar declined to appear before the Committee on behalf of the Madras Labour Union and noted that "the inquiry into the disturbances that took place in the Perambur Division on and after the 29th of June 1921 is a matter of concern to the general public and not the members of the Labour Union as such as it affects peace and order in the northern part of the city. The Labour Union repudiates any manner of connection with such disturbances as have taken place."¹⁸ The Congress was concerned only with the accusations of the strike being instigated by Non Cooperators and with the machinations of the Government which, it held, sought to divide workers along caste lines. When the Government decided to focus chiefly on the Pulianthope Riots and not on the strike and strikers, Congressmen lost interest in the entire affair. The Madras Riots permanently created a split in the relations between the Justicites and the Adi-Dravidas. It also made the Adi-Dravidas to distance them from the political activities of the Congress in Tamil Nadu for a long years.

END NOTES

1. Swadharna, 1921, p.237.
2. Ibid., 1921, pp.216-217.
3. New India, 13 October 1921.
4. Swadharna, 1921, p.217.
5. Ibid., 1921, p. 396.
6. Ibid., 1921, p. 329.
7. New India, 2 September 1921.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. New India, 6 September 1921; Swadharna, 1921, pp.332-334.
12. Swadharna, 1921, pp. 379-380.
13. New India, 13 September 1921.
14. New India, 13 October 1921.
15. Ibid.
16. Swadharna, 1921, p. 335.
17. Ibid., 1921, pp. 334-335.
18. New India, 14 October 1921.

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