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SATYAGRAHAS AND SOCIAL WORKS AS LIBERATION FORCES IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE

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Abstract:

Protest Movements are essentially Social Movements. They are the vibrant expression of widespread popular discontent, dissent, protest and above all an ardent desire for social change and for social justice. Disillusioned over the existing state of affairs and practices, social minded leaders mobilized the people and provided necessary lead, attempted to bring about some changes in the direction they wanted. Pitted against the hegemonies of dominant castes and classes, the leaders sincerely worked for some structural changes in the caste ridden Hindu Society. Social Justice Movements are thus organized efforts of some social minded leaders “ to bring about either partial or total change in society through collective mobilization of the disadvantaged people based on a social ideology” .In this context, there took place remarkable political and social changes in South Travancore during the first half of the twentieth Century. The society of South Travancore was dominated by caste system. The lower caste people suffered in the hands of the high caste. The lower caste people wanted the eradication of untouchability and the right of entry into temples.

KEY WORDS:

Satyagraha, Untouchability, Temple Entry, Caste, Depressed Classes, Harijans.

INTRODUCTION

The subaltern and submerged Tamil people in South Travancore were neither allowed to enter into the temples nor to use the roads around it in South Travancore which was then under the rule of the Princely State of Travancore.¹ The Brahmins initiated the caste system which placed them at the top and gave them the privilege of declaring the duties of other castes including the kings.² The peculiar social structure in South Travancore engaged the attention of all sections of population in the middle and lower rung of social ladder. The caste system with all its attendant evils speeded up the process of social regeneration among them, whereas the burden of customs and traditional practices needed a thorough change for their own growth and existence. In the meanwhile, with the establishment of the British Rule, the Brahmins compromised with British colonial policy and joined the bureaucratic service of the aliens. When the spiritual leaders of the society readily agreed to serve the cause of the colonial authority, the British encountered no hindrance in the consolidation of their power and influence.³

The freedom fighters of the nation fought not only for independence but also for the social justice. The Congress ignored the sentiments and interests of the lower class until 1920 when Gandhi proclaimed new constructive programmes and objectives. In that year the Indian National Congress adopted a distinct and unequivocal political resolution for the admission of the depressed classes into the Hindu temples.

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Through the Bardoli Resolutions of 1922, Gandhiji gave a new social content of the Congress Programme regarding the removal of untouchability. This became a promise of future Social reform activity and attracted the depressed classes of Hindu Society for the cause of the National struggle.⁴ At the Congress session in Kakkinada in 1923, a Resolution was passed due to the initiative of T.K. Madhavan that proper steps should be taken for the eradication of untouchability in the country. K.Velayudha Menon, K. Kelappan Nair, T.K. Madavan, V. Sankaran Nambuthiripad and others were specially authorised to tackle the problem in Kerala as an urgent issue.⁵ The National Volunteers tried to convince the people in general that the denial of elementary rights of citizenship to them amounted to a great social injustice. They decided that 'temple entry' was one of the means of the removal of untouchability.⁶ The Role of the people of South Travancore in the struggle against the social ills was a remarkable trend.

VAIKOM SATYAGRAHA

The great Satyagraha put Vaikom on the map of struggle for social equality. Vaikom Temple Satyagraha grew out of the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the Hindu Social order rooted in the caste system. It stood for the mounting demand for social and civic equality, and for extending social justice to the large majority of the Hindu population⁷ who were treated as outcastes in South Travancore.

South Travancore was ridden by castes and subcastes and a large part of the population were untouchables. Hence the cry for social equality was particularly strong. This was the background of the famous Satyagraha at the Vaikom Temple.⁸

However, the Vaikom Satyagraha was not the work of Gandhiji. In fact it was T.K. Madhavan, the Ezhava leader of Travancore, K.P.Kesava Menon and K.M.Panikkar who drew the attention of Gandhiji to the Vaikom Satyagraha. But once it was decided upon, Gandhiji thought of the non-violent passive resistance as the modus operandi.⁹

In accordance with their programme already chalked out, the freedom fighters K.P. Kesava Menon, A.K. Pillai and others undertook a propaganda tour to several places in Travancore. They also visited Nagercoil and started anti-untouchability committees in the nearby villages.¹⁰ The town of Vaikom in North Travancore has a famous Shiva temple with four square walls along the outer sides of which run the temple roads used for processions and other ceremonies. The outcastes were not allowed to use these temple roads although non-Hindus could use it.

Under such circumstances it was decided to stage a satyagraha in front of the temple gates from 30th March 1924. K.P.Kesava Menon, secretary of the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee, T.K. Madavan, A.K. Pillai, K. Kelappan Nair and other leaders of the Satyagraha were arrested and sent to the Central Jail at Trivandrum.¹¹ The imprisonment of the leaders made George Joseph -as the commander-in-Chief of the Vaikkam campaign.¹²

According to reports the roads in question were opened to non-Hindus- and that it was certainly an anomaly and a negation of civic liberty that the Avarnas like the Ezhavas were denied access to them.¹³

E.V.Ramasamy Naicker of Erode participated with a band of volunteers in the Satyagraha and was arrested.¹⁴ At that time a Jatha was organised at Suchindrum, some 8 kms away from Kanyakumari under of leadership of M.E. Naidu, M. Sivathanu Pillai, S. Manakavala Perumal Pillai, A. Gandhi Raman Pillai and a number of volunteers marched in military order to Trivandrum where they submitted a memorandum to the Royal Authority.¹⁵

The arrest of the volunteers in the Vaikom Satyagraha echoed all over India. As a result of the Vaikom Satyagraha, due to the blessings of Gandhiji, a compromise was effected and certain roads were thrown open, others remaining closed.¹⁶

SUCHINDRAM SATYAGRAHA

In the erstwhile southern tip of South Travancore, there was a temple called Tanumalayan at Suchindrum. In Suchindrum the low class people as they have been variously called as Parayas, Pulayas, Pallars, Kuluvas and the Nadars were not allowed to enter even the streets of Suchindrum.¹⁷

The so called forward class among the nonBrahmins like Vellalar, Nayars and Chettis, were admitted into the temple to offer worship.¹⁸ This inhuman method was represented in the Travancore Assembly by Kumaran Asan, who drew the attention of the Government to this evil and referred to the roads in Suchindrum and demanded the removal of the prohibition boards placed near the temple.¹⁹ Also he insisted that the Assembly should pass orders for the removal of the Bamboo screens.

The road leading from the side of eastern Suchindrum village to Kakkad covering a distance of about a furlong and a half was maintained out of public funds for public benefit. Even then it was not

accessible to the Parayas of Kakkad on account of its proximity to the temple.²⁰ The Parayas of Kakkad were not even permitted to drive their bullock carts through the road. If they wanted to do so., they had to leave their carts in the hands of the caste Hindus for driving them of a payment of mamool of four annas.²¹

Eventually, all the National Volunteers of South Travancore Planned for a Temple entry Satyagraha. A meeting was convened at the residence of M.E. Naidu on 19th January 1926 and they decided to begin the Temple Entry Satyagraha at Suchindrum and 19th February 1926 was fixed as the day of agitation.²² A working committee with M. Subramania Pillai as President was formed for this purpose. M.E. Naidu, Perumal Panikkar, P.C.Thanumalaya Perumal and Gandhi Das were elected Secretary, Treasurer, Publicity Officer and Captain respectively.²³ The Satyagraha started at day-break on 19th February 1926.²⁴ V.Neelakanda Pillai of Akkarai and K.P. Manickam of Ganesapuram actively participated in the Satyagraha with M.E. Naidu. They were arrested and put in the Central Jail.²⁵ In this critical situation, Gandhiji visited Nagercoil and encouraged the Satyagrahis.

The Travancore Government encouraged the caste Hindus indirectly to oppose the Satyagraha.²⁶ It was therefore decided on 12th May 1926 to start the Satyagraha with renewed vigour once again at Suchindrum and this time the Government itself opposed the Satyagrahis directly. Gandhi Raman Pillai of Eraviputhur, who already participated the first Satyagraha at Suchindrum was the leader of the agitation.²⁷ He was arrested along with the volunteers and was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for one year. An appeal was made to the High Court, and it was ordered as a basic right, the streets of Suchindrum should be made accessible to all public pathways, irrespective of caste, colour and creed.²⁸

Again the low class people were not allowed to enter into the streets of Suchindrum. Opposing the policy of the Travancore Government a public meeting was organized under the leadership of M.E. Naidu, M. Sivathanu Pillai and Shiek Tambi Pavalar in the Nagercoil Municipal Maidan. But the meeting was dispersed by the Reserve Police brought from Trivandrum.²⁹ Again the low class people were not allowed to enter into the streets of Suchindrum.

Gandhi Raman Pillai of Eraviputhur decided to start the Satyagraha on 9th February 1931. Due to the pressure from several quarters, the Government of Travancore announced on 8th November, 1932, their decision to appoint a committee to enquire into and report on the question of temple entry. The committee submitted its Report on 11th February, 1934.³⁰ Advised by C.P.Ramasamy Iyer, the then Diwan of Travancore. His Highness Sri Chitrai Thirunal Maharaja³¹ of Travancore issued the historic famous Temple Entry Proclamation on 12th November 1936.³²

The Travancore Temple Entry Proclamation by the sublimity of its conception, the loftiness of its ideals and the magnitude of its effects, occupies a unique place in the History of Social and Religious Reforms in India.³³

The Temple Entry Proclamation can be designated as the spiritual Magna Carta of Travancore. All the lower class people were permitted to enter into the temple for worship with the caste Hindus.³⁴ The proclamation brought about a silent and bloodless Revolution in the Hindu Society. Definitely it was a great success to the concept of universal Brotherhood.

M.E.Naidu

Upto 1920, nobody was ready to work for the upliftment of the Harijans. When Gandhiji came to the political scene in India, he saw the pitiable condition of the so called people. When he started the Non-Co-operation movement in 1920, he purposely divided the agitation into two constructive and non-co-operative.³⁵ Keeping the welfare of the depressed classes in mind Gandhiji advised the Congress volunteers to start Harijan Sevak Sangams throughout the country.

In South Travancore, M.E. Naidu, started the Harijan Sevak Sangam and became its president. He involved himself deeply in the organisation and tried for the uplift of the Depressed Classes.³⁶ Thirumalai Ammal, wife of M.E. Naidu was one among the volunteers, who actively participated in the Vaikom Satyagraha. She went to the Harijan Villages, discussed with them and worked for their upliftment.³⁷

In 1924, M.E. Naidu started the Untouchability Association.³⁸ Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, A.C.Sundaram Pillai devoted his time for the cause of the untouchables. He started the Pothu Jana Seva Sangam³⁹ in 1928, which worked for social equality. Inter-caste dinner and inter caste marriages were the important programmes of this organisation. He established Youth Sangams which also worked for promoting the same causes.⁴⁰

P.Jeevanandam

P. Jeevanandham of Boothapandy from his early days fought against untouchability. In the temple

at Boothapandy during the festival period, usually the Depressed Classes i.e., the so called Harijans were not allowed to walk in the temple streets. This was opposed by Jeevanandham and he walked with some Depressed Classe boys on those prohibited streets.⁴¹

Unsung Leaders

A.C. Sundaram Pillai concentrated his work in Sabayarkulam Cheri, a Harijan village near Nagercoil where he formed a village committee among the Harijans of Sabarkulam, and advised them not to drink.⁴² In 1921, P. Tirukuda Sundaram Pillai headed the Harijan movement and spread it very quickly. His associates were Karkad Devadas, Gandhi Raman Pillai of Eraviputhur, Neelakandan of Akarai etc. They conducted meetings, processions, conferences and took decisions with M.E. Naidu. N. Subramania Pillai of Vadiveeswaram worked hard for the uplift of Depressed Classes in South Trvancore.⁴³

Services of Christian Missionaries

The Hindu Mutts in Tamil Nadu ignored the welfare of the Depressed Classes. In contrary the Christian Missionaries did a lot of yeomen services for the elevation of the Depressed Classes and they started educational and medical institutions and treated the Depressed Classes decently. As a leader for Depressed Classes welfare, M.E. Naidu opposed the step - motherly attitude of the Hindu Mutts. He started elementary schools, night schools, libraries and young men's associations in the Depressed Class villages and induced them to work in the organisations.⁴⁴ He established a hostel for Depressed Class students at Suchindrum.⁴⁵ In his hospital, M.E. Naidu used a seal "H.F" which meant Harijan Free, it was put in the Medical chit and Depressed Classes got free treatment.⁴⁶

The consolidation of the British Rule as well as the various political and social agitations launched by the Indian National Congress, created some changes in the tradition- bound Indian Society. The British Rule brought out new vision which led to a new occupational structure where caste free society was aimed at.⁴⁷ In addition, several social reforms and political concessions were obtained only through organized political activities and pressure tactics such as the Satyagrahas. In reality, no one in power came forward voluntarily to recognize long felt needs and rights of the people of South Travancore.

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