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NATIONALISM FROM BELOW: THE SUPPRESSED CLASS UPRISING IN TAMIL NADU



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Abstract: In Tamil Nadu the suppressed /oppressed caste movements included both informative and alternative in nature. They tried to reform the social system to solve the problem of untouchability. The depressed caste movements were also called as protest movement started with the aim of establishing a classless society which was pre-condition for true nationalism. They also tried to create an alternative socio-cultural structure by conversion to some other religion or by acquiring education, economic status and political power. The expectation of net result of their protest was the social change, which involved a transformation in social, political and economic organizations.

Key words: Nationalism, suppressed class, untouchables, caste system, dalits, Brahmanism, social reformers, non-brahmin movements, anti-caste movements.

INTRODUCTION:

The concern for social reform at the beginning of the Indian nationalist movements was given a back seat with the emergence of militant Hindu nationalism. Upper caste Hindus identified 'nation' and 'nation culture' as basically Hindu, as deriving from Vedic times, and as fundamentally a creation of the Aryan people. And with this they tended to accept as an inherent part of their culture some form of the Varnashram-dharma and downgrade other Indian culture traditions to a secondary and inferior position. They not only made use of high-caste religious symbols in their mass organizing; they also made use of the 'Aryan theory of race' in interpreting cultural traditions. It is in the context of what constitutes Indian national culture that we should examine the alternative vision of prominent non-Aryan or non-Brahminic leaders within India.

The system of caste hierarchy is speaks of higher Varna and lower Varna. Each Varna has a dharma, the Sanskrit word for 'duty' or 'religion'. The Brahmins are believed to be in top of the social hierarchy were mostly priests and teachers; the Kshatriyas are rulers, warriors, and landowners; the Vaisyas are merchants and commercial people; the Sudras are farmers, artisans, and servants and they had to serve as slaves to the other upper three Varna. Those who were considered as an outcaste or the untouchables, they were called as avarnas (outsider of the four Varnas). The function of the avarnas within the system is to do work that no other respectable persons would do such as cleaning up the human waste, disposing of dead animals, particularly cows and making leather. Historically, no other castes were supposed to interact with the untouchable communities and most certainly not come in physical conduct with them.

Early Struggles against the Suppression:

In colonial period many changes took place in the political, social and economical aspects. Most significant changes in the social history of India are the emergence of social reform movements. These social class movements initiated against the dominance, suppression and for the identity based. Even in the early history of India we can also see the struggles against the dominance. The first revolution of the oppressed people against dominance started in Buddha period. Lord Buddha of the 6th century B.C. started the tradition of struggle against the suppression and for the identity based politics. "In the days of the Vedas, Buddha with his followers started a social struggle for the liberation of the oppressed people in society. This movement was given the name Sangam and it was started on a full moon day, in Vaikasi of Tamil month, in 589 B.C. on the banks of the Ganges at Isiyadhanam in the city of Kasi. This was the first movement for the liberation of the oppressed people against the orthodox Brahmanic religion that shaped into a dominant institution through its four Varnas based on the caste injustice. The Buddha was the first to oppose this. The Buddhist Sangam emerged as the opposing force against the Aryan-Brahmanic principle of born of capitalism; and Buddhism emerged as the camp for humanist social liberation".¹

We have references to revolt against caste discrimination in the medieval period of Tamil history also. The study of Nandanar or Thirunalaipovar, a Pulaiya by birth in a village of Adanur, as expounded in Sekkilar's Periyapuranam, is a classical example of a silent revolt of a suppressed man against the stratified feudal society in medieval Tamil country. Nandanar was not allowed to enter into the temple but he was allowed to worship Lord Siva only

by standing at the entrance of the temple. It is said in the Periyapuranam, that Nandanar, when he went to worship Lord Nataraja at Tillai (Chidambaram), was afraid, because of his low caste, even to enter to city.² The Lord took pity on him and asked the Brahmin priest at Tillai to allow Nandanar to worship inside the temple after a purification ceremony by undergoing an test by fire. Nandanar accordingly underwent the ablution ceremony and then entered the temple to worship of Lord. Nandanar, was also destined to live a life of an 'independent slave' exploited and discriminated at every level and stage in life. The segregated life, miserable living conditions and hand to hand mouth subsistence levels, had not provoked Nandanar to fight against the perpetrators of the morbid system.³ These are the some few examples in the way of discrimination on the basis of birth.

Throughout history, only the marginalized people in the mould of oppressed Buddhists, Chakyas and Nagas continue to fight for the human society. This struggle is personified by Dr.Ambedkar, who said that “for, it is important that everyone was able to understand the history of India must know that it is nothing but the history of the struggle for supremacy between Brahmanism and Buddhism”.⁴ The umbilical relationship and the struggling tradition among the Depressed class movements were born out of this understanding.

Depressed Class Movements:

A significant feature of the social history of India during the 19th century A.D. is the emergence of social reform and religious revivalist movements in different parts of the country. The Brahma Samaj, Prathana Samaj and Arya Samaj in north India deserve special mention. A significant feature of the social history of south India of the same period, however, is the emergence of social reform movements which were essentially social justice and social emancipation movements which initiated by the depressed castes of society.⁵ These depressed caste movements were social justice movements and therefore tended to be social conflict movements also for any attempt at forward mobility and economic prejudicing those of upper castes.⁶ As a result of their conflict with the Aryans invaders, the ancestors of the Scheduled Castes became the first casualty. Falling a victim to the cultural imperialism, political dominations and superior technology of the invaders, these pre-Aryan people were reduced to a servile groups. They inherited only untouchability, poverty, oppression and dehumanization.⁷

The depressed caste movements were also called as protest movement started with the aim of establishing a classless society which was pre-condition for true nationalism. But the Backward Class movements can be described as protest movements against discrimination of various kinds of gain self respect, honour and status, to establish caste unity and caste welfare.⁸ The lower section of the society realized that only through self identification they could resist their exclusion from social justice practiced through unwritten laws. The depressed castes suffered from relative deprivation in the field of religion, education, economics and politics. They accepted their lot till certain external influences provided favourable conditions to create an awakening among them. These marginalized

communities took an open anti-Brahmanic slant and restored to mass mobilization and protest ideology was the rejection of Brahmanical religion and culture.

G.Aloysius in his book “Nationalism without Nation in India” states that the marginalized section of the society in Tamilnadu were struggling in essence for the principle of egalitarianism as a new norm for social relationships and could not identify in the perceived diversity a single and significant articulation against Varnashrama-Dharma, much less a willingness to join hands on equal terms with themselves to struggle for such an ideal as a vital part of nationalism. Concern for the depressed and deprived was at first sporadically expressed and later in a more depoliticized, religionized form as anti-untouchability, included with the cultural – nationalist programme.⁹

Ideology of the Movements:

During the colonial period factors such as the establishment of British rule in India, spread of liberal and revolutionary ideas such as individual freedom, social justice, equality before law and equality of opportunity, humanitarianism, dignity of human person, respect for labour, etc., and the increasing awareness among the depressed castes mainly due to the missionary activities and education, created a conducive atmosphere for these movements to spring up. The domination of the Brahmanical values and caste rigidities also account for the birth of the depressed castes and non-Brahmin movements in different part of south India.¹⁰

S.Manickam well known historian of south India argues that leadership, ideology and organization are these three things essential factors for any movements. Every movement should have a leader as the standard-bearer and as the focal points. He serves as a source of inspiration, providing a sense of direction and a commitment to a common cause. Similarly a movement should have an ideology. If a movement is based on a sound ideological promise, it will survive and forge ahead even after the death of the founder leader. Thirdly a movement should have an organization as a common forum to articulate the ideas of the movement. People ought to be organized to function as a cadre, sharing a common ideology under a recognized leadership.¹¹

The writing and speeches of the leaders of the social movements such as Jotiba Phule, Sri Narayana Guru, Ayothidas, E.V.Ramasamy Naicker, and of course D.R. Ambedkar and host of lesser luminaries express and embody the above delineated perceptions and posture towards the cultural nationalists and their ideology. Since articulation, and much less ideological expression was not the forte of subaltern people¹², the writings and speeches of their spokesmen are not to be taken as the sole source from which to interpret the subaltern ideology.¹³

The ideology of social and political nationalism in the sub-continents excepts for a handful of non-Brahmin leaders of Madras Presidency was articulated uniformly by the hitherto excluded exterior communities, whether described as depressed, untouchable or not. Thus many social and political nationalists and others were spokespersons among the numerous others. The general

location of these social and political nationalists at the lower levels of social structure and a large extent of their relationship with the masses and the nature of their articulation.¹⁴ Since they did not belong to the traditionally literate communities, most of them were vernacular, first generation educated and some of the like Ayyankali of Kerala were not literate at all.

Pioneers in the Depressed Caste Movements:

In the pre-independence period the anti-caste movements comprised strong non-Brahmin movements in Tamilnadu. Gail Omvedt states that “the Dalit and non-Brahmin anti-caste movements can be classified as anti-systemic movements in the frame work of such Marxist theorists and value-oriented movements in the language of functionalist sociological theory. That is, they challenged and sought to transform the basic structure of the Indian social system, replacing caste and accompanying social oppression, economic exploitation and political domination by an egalitarian society”.¹⁵

Writings of the suppressed/oppressed/depressed people originated in the 19th century A.D. from Maharashtra by Dalit reformer Jotiba Phule. In early 20th century the movements have spread all across India. These have also acquired a global dimension and have been successful in enlisting the support of the overseas social activists and non-Indian sympathisers. Over the years marginalised groups have been vocal against their economic exploitation and marginalised political participation of the erstwhile untouchable communities in post-Colonial India.¹⁶

The leaders of the marginalised groups since the 19th and early years of the 20th century had strongly complained about the oppression meted out to these communities by the dominant rural groups. The leaders of the suppressed people opined that illiteracy and ignorance of the poor people had enabled the oppressive sections of the society to hold them in a position of subordination. They requested the colonial government to introduce special concessions for the socio-economic improvement of these classes.¹⁷

The leaders of Indian nationalism like Rajaram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayananda Saraswathy and others stood against the social evils. Their idea was to reform Hindu religion. But Jotiba Phule, Dr.Ambedkar, Sri Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Vaikunda Swamigal, Ayothidas Pandithar, Rettamalai Srinivasan, E.V.Ramasamy and other social reformers belong to another layer on level. The caste and communal consciousness among the suppressed caste aimed at the maintenance of their superior status where as among the non-privileged and less privileged it was for their emancipation and recognition as true citizens.

Jotiba Phule (1827-1890):

Jotiba Phule is hailed as the father of the depressed castes and non-Brahmins movements in south India, for he was the first Indian leader to start a movement for the removal of the social and economic ills of the lower castes suffered for ages. Phule endeavoured to secure social equality and social justice for the depressed castes of Maharashtra such as the Mahar, Mang, Dhed and Chamar

who occupied the lowest social status in the Hindu social hierarchy. Gail Omvedt notes that “Phule is today taken as a founding figure in Maharashtra not simply by the anti-caste but also by the farmers, women's and rural-based environmental movements. He questioned the Aryan race theory which was prominent during the time and greatly influenced some of the Dalit leaders of the 1920s who framed their movements according to race or ethnicity”.¹⁸

Jotiba Phule, the 19th century social revolutionary and main founder of the anti-caste movement in India, the national unification of the masses of the people in India required an attack on Brahmin domination and Hinduism itself.¹⁹ In many ways, dharma and caste are at the centre of Phule's thought. His opposition to Brahmanism did not relate only to the Varna system. It also related to almost everything within the Hindu system. In his view Hinduism as we know it originates in the Shrutis (the Vedas) and the Smrities. He was convinced that these books were a part of the Brahmanical attempt at creating texts which would nationalize and perpetuate their dominance. The Brahmanical position claimed the Chaturvarna system to be god-given and eternal, and therefore unassailable. As such Brahmin superiority had divine origins. He rejected the supremacy of the Brahmins and useless Vedic rituals.²⁰ For Phule, Brahmanism was historical, constructed over time, and since it was ideology of oppression and dominance, it had to be opposes and ultimately smashed. Further he states that there was nothing sacred or divine about it. But because it presented itself as divinely ordained; it was necessary to oppose this system in it's entirety. The bulk of Phule's writings on religion therefore consist of a severe polemic against Brahmanism, and discrimination on the basis of castes.²¹

He struggled hard for the restoration of the dignity of human person and human rights as he considered all Indians are equal. It was Jotiba Phule who first opened a school for the depressed castes children in his own house as early as 1848. In 1873 he also founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj (society for seeking truth), which is the first well known Dalit organization and which took over the amelioration of the condition of the untouchables.²² The vision of the Phule was opened schools and organized the organization to save mainly “lower castes from the hypocritical Brahmins and their opportunities scriptures”.²³ Dr. Ambedkar (1891-1956):

Like Phule, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar also laid great stress on the elevation of the depressed castes through the education. Dr.Ambedkar awakened his people to their age-old disabilities and instigated them to fight for their removal. He exhorted the untouchables to fight for self elevation. Dr.Ambedkar saw education as human rights and as a fundamental civic right. He launched his social movement for the uplift of the suppressed people in March, 1924. In June 1924, he founded the 'Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha' as a central institute for removing difficulties of the untouchables and placing their grievances before government. The founding principle of the Sabha was 'Education, Agitation, and Organization'. Through the Sabha he worked for the poor people to promote education, culture and economic development of the depressed classes. He founded the People's Education Society which established institutions of

higher education such as the Siddhartha College at Bombay in 1946 and the college of arts, science and commerce in 1950 at Aurangabad to promote higher education among the Scheduled Castes.²⁴

Dr. Ambedkar, after returning to India sometimes in the early 1920s from earning a law degree in the United States, quickly became involved in politics and the plight of Dalits. In 1936 Ambedkar created the Independent Labour Party (ILP) as a way to fight for the Dalit cause from inside the political sphere. It was a worker-peasant party with goals that included ridding caste discrimination, but also focused on problems with capitalism, wealth distribution and equal access to resources. Ambedkar remained involved in both sides of the movements; the political process and the grassroots organization.²⁵ He focused his intellectual energies on the task of economic liberation of the Dalits.

Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928):

Sri Narayana Guru was a great social reformer. He fought against caste and untouchability. He resented all meaningless customs and practices which stood very much in the way of economic and moral progress of the Ilavas of south India. He uncompromising stand against casteism, and the bold messages he gave to his followers, resulted in a social transformation of long-standing effect, particularly in the state of Kerala.²⁶

Sri Narayana Guru used his Vedanda to demolish the foundation of Varnashrama system. His activities were a war cry against all kinds of slavery and it was against a stagnant society. It produced material effects than spiritual consequences.²⁷ The important messages of Narayana Guru are monotheism and equality of all men and his establishment of Vedic schools for all castes, particularly the most despised Ilavas. He was the founder of the Ilava movement and the Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam). Unity and mankind, oneness of god and equality and justice were his prime teachings. Within a period of less than 50 years, Narayana Guru metamorphosed the Ilava community from dust into men who could stand on their own legs as self-respecting human beings.²⁸

Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalana Yogam, which is not only for the reform but also for the structural change in the caste system, modernization, rejection of the traditional occupation, accessibility to the education, employment, industry, commerce and spiritual life and alternative religion. The Yogam took place against the Hindu upper caste system and for the protection of the denied human rights. Basically the Yogam is initiated for the upliftment of the untouchable community i.e., the Ilava, who had been practicing the socially degrading traditional occupation of toddy tapping.²⁹ Since the traditional occupation is linked with caste, he appealed the Ilavas to give up toddy tapping. He also discouraged the drinking and production of toddy and encouraged to enter into trade and commerce and industry. He preached the ideology for the social reform in Hindu religion to liberate the common man and for social change. He advocated that faith in one god. There is one religion and one caste. He directly attacked the base of Brahmanical domination, i.e. caste system.

Ayyankali (1863-1941):

Ayyankali emerged as a remembered leader from the Pulaya community, who struggled for the upliftment of the marginalised people. He was uneducated Pulaya, went about setting up schools for Pualya girls and advocated education and occupational diversification through technical training for all. He is credited with the first ever agricultural workers strike in the country around 1914 and it was not for any economic demand but for the right of Pulaya girls to enter educational institutions. The other issues raised in the Ayyankali struggle were the right to walk on main roads, at entry of market place, the right to own land, etc.³⁰

He started a social reform movement which is popularly called as Ayyankali movement. It was the movement against the both feudalism and casteism. It aimed at transforming the suppressed people from their status as untouchable-subjects, slaves into citizens by creating a new people self and identity.³¹ To achieve this, he chartered a course of action consisting of challenging religious taboos and demeaning customs; mass mobilisation and institutionalising it through caste organisation; and resorting to direct action like striking work.

In 1907 Ayyankali organised the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham. The function of the Sangam became a grand success. In 1939, Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham was changed as Pulaya Maha Sabha and Ayyankali became its first General Secretary. In recognition of his merits, Ayyankali was nominated to the Sree Mualm Praja Sabha in 1912 and he continued as a member for 25 years. All the activities of Ayyankali were profoundly influenced by Sri Narayana Guru. However, unlike Guru he never coined any slogan, nor did he manipulate religion to negate the inhuman code. Similarly unlike Ambedkar, Ayyankali never advocated disengagement with Hinduism. But the same time his initial concern was to establish the right of his people to use public roads and appear in public places; subsequently drifted towards their right to education; and finally towards right to political representation.³²

Movements in Tamilnadu:

Awareness of the changing power relations seems to have dawned first upon the lower rungs of the hierarchy. At the beginning of the 19th century the Ilavas of Kerala, an agricultural caste of the state of Travancore, rose in a collective attempt to challenge the monopoly of the Brahmins in ritual matters. The next, the Shanars of Madras Presidency and the state of Travancore initiated their century-long struggle against the degrading custom of partial nakedness of women in difference to the Savarna castes, known as the 'breast-cloth controversy' and started 'upper-cloth movement', the struggle of the toddy-tapping community during the first quarter of the 19th century, demonstrated the emerging political consciousness of the changing order.³³

These two communities Ilavas and Shanars though subsequently excluded from the Scheduled lists of castes were originally treated as untouchables and unapproachable communities. Both of them had profited marginally from the new order; Ilavas through the breaking up of the Nayar Tarwad (matrilineal joint family system) and

the Shanar through the expansion of trade and business, and gained through education also. The Shanar developed a non-Brahmanic religion around the person of Vaikunda Swamikal. The religion known as Ayya Vazhy- the path of the elder. The Ilavas of Travancore also made headway by developing a non-Brahmanical Hindu religion under the leadership of an Ilava, Sri Narayana Guru.³⁴

Sri Vaikunda Swamikal (1809-1851):

Long before Ayyankali and Sri Narayana Guru, there appeared a depressed class reformer and a Hindu revivalist by name Sri Vaikunda Swamikal (otherwise known as Muthukutty Swamikal), a self-styled saint reformer in Tamil Nadu from the Nadar community. He was very critical of the oppressive and exploitative tax system of the Travancore government for which he suffered even rigorous imprisonment. He fought against the economic exploitation of the upper caste-Hindus and firmly warned them of its evil consequences. Sri Vaikunda Swamikal condemned in explicit terms of social evil such as untouchability, caste distinctions based on birth, devil worship, animal sacrifices and drinking. Vaikunda Swamikal was opposed to Brahmanism and Brahmanical form of Hinduism which he considered to be the prime cause for the over-all decadence of the depressed castes.³⁵

Vaikunda Swamikal founded the society namely Samathuva Sangam to get equality among the all without any caste discriminations. He claimed himself as the incarnation of Vishnu carried on a crusade against the distinctions imposed upon the society by the caste-Hindus.³⁶ He built small temples called Nilalthangal, which were built in different parts of south Travancore, Tirunelveli, Madurai, through which he propagated his ideas to other parts of the states. The Nilalthangal promoted peace and equality and it was accepted by the all communities.³⁷ The depressed class people were not allowed to take water from the well of the caste-Hindus. He dug separate well known as 'sacred well' for the depressed class people, which brought unity among the castes people. He believed in self-respect and aroused his people to fight against social disabilities and restrictions even on dressing. So it can be said that in a way Vaikunda Swamikal became fore runner leader of depressed class movement in Tamilnadu. The life and mission of Vaikundar constitute an important landmark in the history of the depressed class movement in Tamilnadu.

Besides the struggles of Ilavas and Shanars for social emergence from the southern districts of the Madras Presidency, the Paraiyas of the northern districts of the presidency opened up several fronts for negotiating the power structure.

Ayothidas (1854-1914):

Pandit C. Ayothidas better known as Iyothee Das was one of the leaders of the depressed class and worked for their upliftment. He was a Tamil Siddha physician, the pioneers of the Tamil Dalit movement. He was a great scholar and his writings reveal that he was a person well acquainted with Sanskrit, Pali, English, and of course Tamil.³⁸ Most of his writings extensively about Aryans and Dravidians. He argues that Aryan came from outside and so

they are foreigner's and Dravidian are son of soils. He was in fact very similar to Jotiba Phule not only in his interpretation of Aryan conquests, and the origin of the caste system, but in his critique of Brahmin nationalism and his insistence on education, openness. Ayothidas was a fierce critic of the Swadeshi movement, which took on a strong organized form in agitations in the early 20th century. According to him the inner spirit of Swadeshi and Swaraj was based on four sorts of pride namely caste pride, religious pride, knowledge pride and wealth pride. His primary objection to Swadeshi and Swaraj was directed against the conduct of the Brahmin proponents of nationalism. He identified the movement as the Brahmanical core of Swadeshi ideology.³⁹ He preceded the idea of 'boycott' not to the boycott of foreign cloth but caste hatred. He was among the earliest Dalit scholar who presented a systematic and sharp critique of Brahmanical power, the role of the Brahmins in the modern society and polity, and above all, the Brahmins adoption of the problematic nationalism.⁴⁰

He founded the Adaitana Sabha in 1870 in Nilgris, the Dravida Mahajan Sabha in 1881 and Shakya Buddhist Sangam also known as the South Indian Buddhist Association in 1898 in Madras. He argues that Tamil Dalits were originally Buddhist. He established a weekly magazine called 'oru paisa Tamizhan' (one rupee Tamilian) in Chennai in 1907, which served as a newsletter linking all the new branches of the Sakya Buddhist Society. The magazine discussed traditions and practices of Tamil Buddhism, new developments of Buddhist world and the India subcontinents history from the Buddhist point of view.⁴¹ The ideas and activities of Ayothidas were far ahead of his time and appear strikingly modern even today.

Ayothidas did much for the reconstruction of the history and culture of the Adi-Dravidas through intensive research and study. His research findings made him convinced that the Paraiyas of Tamilnadu were the original inhabitants of this region and that their ancestral religion was the 'compassionate, rational and egalitarian creed of the Buddha', and that the historical defeat of Buddhism had created the society of Paraiyas.⁴² Ayothidas shared the belief that the Paraiyas were the original Tamilian, whose religion had been Buddhism. The Aryan invaders, it was argued, systematically destroyed the religious beliefs of the Paraiyas and reduced them to a degraded status.⁴³ He believed that Buddhism alone could restore the untouchables to their former glory and status. Subsequently, it was opined that the untouchables or Panchamas should not depend upon nationalist reformers advocating depressed class upliftment and instead they needed to sincerely involve themselves in efforts aimed at resurrecting their glorious past and original identity.⁴⁴

Ayothidas moved with Blavatsky, Annie Besant and Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical society. He worked in a school at Adaiyar and had a good knowledge of Saiva Siddhanta and Vaishnavism and in 1902 he embraced Buddhism in Sri Lanka.⁴⁵ He did much for the reconstruction of the history and culture of the Adi-Dravidas through intensive research and study. He was more convinced that the problems of the depressed could not be resolved without

constructing a counter tradition, which alone could explain the history and culture of the ordinary people. He also felt the imperative need for condemning the Brahmanical attitude that was basically responsible for the degradation of Dalits.⁴⁶

Ayothidas noble example was emulated by a host of equally eminent Dalit leaders like G.Appaduraiar, Rettamalai Srinivasan, M.C.Raja and others. They worked tirelessly for the promotion of their self respect and self-consciousness long before the establishment of Justice Party and self-respect movement. Several other intellectuals from the marginalised groups supported Ayothidas criticism of caste and Brahmanism. Periyasamy Pulavar, an Adi-Dravida intellectual, utilised mouth pieces like *Tamilan* to explore the past centuries of Paraiyas history. At the same time T.C.Narayanasamy Pillay, a member of a Paraiya community wrote several articles in the '*Tamilan*' in support of the arguments that had been put forth by Ayothidas and Masillamani, a prominent neo- Buddhist intellectual.⁴⁷ Masillamani pointed out that Aryan-Brahmin supremacy had resulted in the political and cultural subjugation of the conquered people. He stated that the Aryans had deliberately erased the histories of the pre-Aryan ruling groups to strengthen their hold over the society and polity. It was also pointed out that the four-fold division of caste was unjust and arbitrary.⁴⁸

Rettamalai Srinivasan (1860–1945):

Diwan Bahadur R. Srinivasan, also known as Rettamalai Srinivasan was a Dalit and social activist, politician and freedom fighter from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He is a Dalit icon and Mahatma Gandhi's close associate, remembered today as one of the pioneers of the Dalit movement in India. In 1923, he was appointed as a Legislative Assembly member and performed excellent service. For his services, he was given the titles of Rao Sahib, Rao Bahadur and Diwan Bahadur. He was a Legislative Assembly member for 15 years. Upon this occasion, the Chengelpet Collector the honourable P. Seetharamaiah Panthalakaru spoke as is given below:-

“The one who has the blessing of receiving this honour next is Sri Rettaimalai Srinivasan, who currently resides in Poonamallee. He is now a great elderly man of 65 years of age. A hero who struggled for the Adi Dravidar. He received education at the school of arts in Coimbatore and acquired great skill in keeping accounts. It was his principal ideal to perform as much service as he was able to the people of the clan into which he was born. In 1891, he entered public service and established the Chennai (Parayar Mahajana Sabha) Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha . In 1893, he took 'Paraiyan', that hated name that had put many generations to great hardship, and with the aim to develop people of his caste, he began to publish a magazine called 'Paraiyan’”.⁴⁹

Until Rettamalai Srinivasan went to England in 1900, the magazine 'Paraiyan' was run. He then went to South Africa and started working with the Union Government in 1904. After sixteen years of working faithfully for them, he spent two years in East Africa and left his job. In 1921, he returned to his country, India. He believed that his people would not develop unless they develop the virtues of self-confidence, abstinence from alcohol and economic

expenditure. He had thought and arrived at the realization that unless the Adi Dravida works with belief in the King, they would lose the sympathy of their governing officers. By being a wise man, a guide and a friend to those of his community, he has gained their respect.⁵⁰

Two years after returning to his motherland, he laboured with great care and dedication for the welfare of the Adi Dravida as a member of the Legislative Assembly. Working with tireless motivation and enthusiasm for the progress of the clan into which he was born for some 35 years, he has reached his old age. As the fruit of such dedicated and unpretentious service, he has received the trust and respect of his community. For his virtue of not indulging in caste-based stirs, he has been felicitated by public servants from various communities.⁵¹

The Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu:

Another important notable movement in Tamil Nadu was the non-Brahmin movement which is named as self-respect movement. The non-Brahmin movement of the 1910s and 1920s and much more violent radical Dravidian or anti-Aryan movement launched by E.V.Ramasamy Periyar in the 1930s are the important phases in the history of the Tamil Nadu backward class movement. One of the Periyar's main targets was the temple and he mobilized a militantly anti-Hindu campaign, apparently in the name of atheism, to smash the temples and destroy the gods.⁵² Religion occupied a significant position in Periyar's political discourse as an instrument of power in the hands of the dominant upper castes, which supposedly sought to delay in the arrival of the 'Dravidian Nation'. It was to be done away with since it was a source of oppression of the lower castes and women. Hence Periyar propagated atheism. According to Periyar, if religion is a hindrance in the path of cultural, social and peaceful progress of the masses, then the very religion should be abolished.⁵³

The self-respect movement of Periyar was intended to restore to Dravidians their self-respect, which the caste system had denied them. It was also intended to enable Dravidians to get equal opportunities to participate in civic and public life. Periyar energetically propagated the concept of *Suyamariyathai* or self-respect- the foremost thing that a marginalised community needed was the realization of his/her self-worth.

The suppressed class of Tamilnadu are one of the earliest groups to start their own organisations for their uplift, also to organise an autonomous vibrant social movement led by suppressed groups outside the sphere of any political outfits, and to absorb Ambedkar's ideology. Though Dr.Ambedkar realised the lacunae in his struggles of post-colonial India and brought the states and minorities as an economic agenda.⁵⁴ Given the sprinkling Dalit organic intellectuals of the suppressed group and their activism remained as agitation politics for survival, majority of them not taken up long-lasting goals, economic issues, including the fast emerging privatisation under the guise of globalisation and liberalisation. By denying this basic hidden agenda of the state and its upper caste rulers at the helm, the Scheduled Castes are excluded and alienated from the mainstream development.⁵⁵

The debate on the upliftment of the marginalised section in the last two decades of the 19th century, nevertheless, resulted in some developments that were the later reshape the contours of the identity of the suppressed people, as well as lower caste consciousness in Tamilnadu. The government's policy of assigning lands to the depressed classes' families, as well as, to the Christian Missionaries for setting up 'Panchama' settlements, inspired the leaders of the marginalised groups to raise their grievances before the government.⁵⁶ The leaders also requested the government to undertake legislation for fixing hours of work, as well as, wage rates for depressed class labourer eking out their livelihood. These leaders by organising the depressed class conferences, establishing the institutions and organisations, writing their ideology tried to make the depressed class conscious of their low social standing, as well as, the economic exploitation perpetrated reached more sharply to the unjust socio-economic order, as they felt the superior castes had been refusing them to treat equally with the other people.

Gail Omvedt rightly argues that “the leaders of the depressed class challenged the 'Hindu-Nationalism' which was emerging as a consequence of the elite organizing from 19th century onwards to define Indian society. They asserted that the Hinduism had not been the religion and culture of the majority but rather was an imposed religion; and that escaping exploitation today required the low castes to reject this imposition to define themselves an 'non-Hindu' and take a new religious identity”.⁵⁷ Jotiba Phule tried to formulate a new, theistic religion; Periyar promoted atheism ; Dr. Ambedkar turned to Buddhism; others in the Tamilnadu non-Brahmin movement tried to claim Saivism as an independent religion; Narayana Guru formulated “one religion, one caste, one god” while his more radical follower Ayyappan proclaimed “no religion, no caste and no-god to mankind”. Whatever the specialties, the rejection of Hinduism remained a feature differentiating the anti-caste radicals from the reformers.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION:

The study of the suppressed/depressed class movements in the Tamilnadu during the colonial and post-colonial period raises a lot of issues, which are directly or indirectly related to nationalism. It has often been argued that an important source of ambiguity regarding nationalism has been extreme difficult principles is entitled to govern itself. This anti-caste movement, which its depressed class leading section, was the part of the broader revolutionary democratic movement in India, along with the national movement and communist and socialist –led working class and peasant movements. The depressed class movements in India began concurrently with the rise of the both nationalism and Marxism.

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