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## **GRT** PROHIBITION POLICY ON LIQUOR IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY FROM 1937 TO 1939

**S. Srinivasan**

Ph.D. Research Scholar ,Department of History , Annamalai University .

**Abstract:-**Prohibition is a law against making and selling of alcoholic liquors. The law pertaining to prohibition on liquor introduced on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1937 during the administration of C. Rajagopalachari produced results of far-reaching importance. Addiction to toddy, and alcoholic drinks, were considered as social and spiritual maladies. Social reformers and religious leaders of the time exhorted the people to keep away from these evils, C. Rajagopalachari waged a relentless struggle against the evils of drink.1 No doubt that intoxicants have been there through all ages and in all countries. But in a country like India where many people live below the poverty line, misery caused by addiction to drink is heart rending.

**Keywords:**Prohibition, preaching, alcoholic, liquor, Intelligence Bureau, ex-toddy tappers, Vigilance Committees, enforcement, compensation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Prohibition is a law against making and selling of alcoholic liquors. The law pertaining to prohibition on liquor introduced on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1937 during the administration of C. Rajagopalachari produced results of far-reaching importance. Addiction to toddy, and alcoholic drinks, were considered as social and spiritual maladies. Social reformers and religious leaders of the time exhorted the people to keep away from these evils, C. Rajagopalachari waged a relentless struggle against the evils of drink.1 No doubt that intoxicants have been there through all ages and in all countries. But in a country like India where many people live below the poverty line, misery caused by addiction to drink is heart rending.

### **EARLY ATTEMPTS**

To curb the habit of drinking and the use of other intoxicants, the British introduced a series of measures in the 19th century. In 1866, the House of commons passed a resolution which condemned the excise administration in India. Temperance leaders like Hall Caine recommended total prohibition and wanted an end to the sale of toddy and other alcohols.

The struggle for freedom in India, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, was not a mere political struggle but it also aimed at the socio-economic regeneration of the country. Mahatma Gandhi was very much concerned about the moral re-generation of the Indian people. As a result, the Prohibition Policy became the corner stone of the Congress party's political programme, In 1927, R.N. Arogyaswami Mudalier, the Minister of Excise and Public Health in Dr. T Subbarayan Ministry, passed the Prohibition Bill. Subsequently Rajaji a close follower of Gandhiji issued a pamphlet called Indian Prohibition. Manual under the auspices of the Congress Prohibition Committee in 1931. Public was very much impressed by the prohibition policy of the Congress and voted the party to power in July 1937.1 Mahatma Gandhi's appeal to the nation gave the much needed momentum to the implementation of prohibition. There was thus no doubt the scheme of prohibition would succeed even on its first introduction in the Legislature on 1st October 1937.2 Prohibition of intoxicating drinks was of vital importance to the well-being of thousands of poor families. No doubt the immediate consequence of prohibition was the loss of revenue to the government as a result of closing of the liquor shops. In Salem district alone the loss amounted to twenty six lakhs. But the government was not weighed down by the consideration of loss of revenue.3 Instead, it

wanted to bring cheer and happiness to thousands of poor families as the wage earners those families were daily wasting their hard earned money on drinks. Hence, the government decided to extend prohibition to the whole of the Madras Presidency.

### **The Madras Prohibition Bill**

On 27<sup>th</sup> September 1937, the Prohibition Bill was passed. The prohibition bill was introduced to extend the prohibition of the manufacture, sale and consumption of Intoxicating liquors in the province of Madras. The bill received mixed reaction from the members of the Madras Legislative Assembly. Some of them supported it whereas few others opposed the same. William Wright, the member of the Select Committee observed during the course of the debate that "Prohibition is not a suitable policy to be adopted in any country in the world including India".

To substantiate his argument he cited the example of United States of America where the policy of prohibition proved to be a fiasco. A. Appadurai Pillai, a member of the opposition criticized the prohibition policy of Rajaji. He also cited the example of U.S.A. where the prohibition policy failed miserably. The ruler of the State of Bhopal tried to introduce prohibition in 1924 but within a couple of years it proved to be impracticable. As a result, it was withdrawn in Bhopal. Rajaji did not pay any heed to these criticisms and introduced prohibition in the Madras Presidency.<sup>4</sup> In order to make up the loss in the revenue, the government enhanced the taxes. The annual budgetary revenue of the Government in 1937 was rupees 1.71 crores. But after the introduction of prohibition it was raised to rupees 4.5 crores by enhanced additional taxes. It brought severe hardship to the tax-payers and resulted in vehement opposition from the merchant community.<sup>5</sup>

The members of the Madras Legislative Assembly like Mutiah Chettiar criticised the prohibition policy of Rajaji. He contended that the policy curtailed the freedom of the individuals and pointed out that in Western countries "drink is not an evil but drunkenness is an evil."<sup>6</sup> R.M. Palat wanted the Congress Party to persuade the people to give up drinking on moral rather than force prohibition on them. Consuming of wine in the mass as a symbol and memory of Jesus Christ for preaching was considered as holy duty of the Christians. The Christians under A.T. Paneerselvam stressed the need for the exemption of mass wine from the prohibition policy. In short, it compelled the government to give up the move.<sup>7</sup>

The members who supported the prohibition policy advanced their own reasons. N. Ranga Reddi, a member of the Legislative Assembly pointed out that in Cuddapah there was a steep increase in the crime rate due to the influence of drink. He exhorted the workers to keep away from the evil and requested the government to extend prohibition to more districts.<sup>8</sup> Rajaji who piloted the bill contended that the reactions in the newspapers were in favour of prohibition. The main intention of the Congress Ministry was to persuade the readers of newspapers to Co-operate with the government regarding the prohibition policy. In the course of the debate, more members extended their support to the implementation of prohibition.<sup>9</sup>

V.I. Muniswami Pillai, a member of the Select Committee pointed out that avoiding the drinking of alcohol resulted in the improvement in the social and economic life of the people. After much deliberation the bill was passed on 27th September 1937 into Law.<sup>10</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION OF PROHIBITION**

The election Manifesto of the Congress Party issued on the eve of the 1937 elections advocated total prohibition. When the Congress Party formed the Ministry on 14th July 1937, it decided to implement its ideal and passed the prohibition bill. To start with, the government decided to introduce the prohibition policy in Salem district from

1<sup>st</sup> October 1937 onwards, on an experimental basis. The principal aim of the Government was to put an end to the sale and consumption of liquor in and around the district. The implementation of prohibition in Salem district was entrusted in the beginning to the Police. Subsequently Special Prohibition Committees were formed to assist the police. Marking of the trees in the Salem district for the tapping of fermented toddy for neighbouring districts was given up. All liquor shops in Salem district were closed from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1937. The collector and the prohibition officer in-charge of the district constituted prohibition committees in every taluk. The members of the Prohibition Committee were required to furnish information to the police. The Prohibition Officer or Magistrate had the power to arrest the suspects.

### **The Working of Prohibition in Salem District**

The introduction of prohibition became an accepted reality when Rajaji formed the Congress Ministry. A.F.W. Dixon, the Collector of Salem<sup>9</sup> extended his full co-operation to the prohibition policy of the Rajaji's Congress Ministry. As a result, the government prohibited the sale of bottled liquor in certain specified areas. However, the bonafide travellers were allowed to possess bottled liquor upto three units for their personal use, in the

prohibited area. The authorities granted permit to bishop and priests to buy wine for religious purposes.<sup>11</sup>

In Salem district a special watch was kept on buses plying in the towns to detect the transport of contraband liquor. Steps were also taken to check the buses carrying people from Salem district to prevent the smuggling of liquor. Due to the implementation of Prohibition in Salem district a District Intelligence Bureau was created. The Forest Department officials were empowered to handle offences connected, with prohibition committed in forest areas. The Government sought the help of the village officers for enforcing the provisions of the Act. Taluk and Village Prohibition Committees appealed to the Government to extend its co-operation in this regard. Due to the introduction of prohibition in Salem district 726 toddy shops, were closed.<sup>12</sup>

#### **The Working of Prohibition between October 1937 and October 1939 in the Madras Presidency**

The implementation part of the prohibition policy called for utmost tact and 'doggedness' on the part of the administration since they had to deal with the unlettered and illiterate masses of the country-side who were ignorant about the material, moral and ethical values involved. Police had to strictly enforce the law, the social workers to educate the ignorant masses by setting good examples. The political leadership had to remain committed to the policy. The introduction of Prohibition from 1<sup>st</sup> October 1937 in Salem district was the first step adopted by Rajaji's Congress Ministry against the social evil. A District Superintendent of Police was appointed in order to enforce the policy. To assist him, Sub-Inspectors, Prohibition Police, the District Intelligence Bureau and Taluk Prohibition Committees were created. The District Superintendent of Police, submitted a monthly report to the Collector regarding the working of prohibition. To divert the attention of the Public, the 'Tea Cess Committee' recommended consumption of tea.

Examining the palmyrah and coconut trees and checking the buses were the primary duties of the police department. In the month of March 1938 the police examined 20,651 trees for detecting cases which violated the provisions of the Act, In May 1938, in Salem district alone the police checked 20,956 trees as a result of which thirteen cases were registered.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in the same month in North Arcot District belt area the police officials paid ninety four visits to toddy and arrack shops and conducted fifty three road-checks. They visited 232 villages of the North Arcot District to detect illicit manufacture of liquor. Intelligence with frontier police officers on six occasions and met 110 Village Vigilance Committees. The Village Vigilance Committee members extended their full co-operation to avoid the illicit manufacture of arrack and toddy throughout Salem district and in the belt areas.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Results of the Working of Prohibition Policy between 1937 and 1939**

The enforcement of the prohibition was the foremost among the policies of the Congress. It resulted in profound changes in the lives of the people, but at the same time the Government found it very difficult to tide over the economic loss. Between 1937 and 1939 prohibition policy was introduced in stages in Salem, Chittoor, Cuddapah and North Arcot districts. In Salem District the loss amounted to sixteen lakhs of rupees per year. The total loss of revenue for the years 1938-39 was estimated to be rupees 25,22,000. As a result, prohibition was opposed not only on the ground that it reduced the Government's revenue but also it necessitated fresh taxation which proved to be a heavy burden on the people.<sup>15</sup>

Further, the enforcement of the Prohibition Act Saldm created strains in the interstate relation between Madras and Mysore. The Madras Government introduced a total prohibition from 1st October 1937 onwards in Salem district. But the renters of Mysore were not willing to stop the tapping till the expiry of their licences. The Madras Government instructed the officials of the Mysore State to immediately stop the tapping of trees in the district. The Government of Mysore pointed out that the programme would result in great loss to their revenue. Therefore, they demanded adequate compensation to the renters for the loss in the cancellation of the arrangement. The Madras Government agreed to pay compensation for renters and requested them to give up toddy tapping and the Mysore renters obliged. They suspended the tapping work in Salem district.<sup>16</sup> The same problem occurred when prohibition was introduced in Chittoor and Cuddapah districts on 1st October 1938. The Hyderabad Government failed to co-operate with the Madras Government. Therefore, illicit distillation was widespread in the northern parts of Madras Presidency and spread to Vizagapatnam, Kurnool, Anantapur, Bellary, Coimbatore and Malabar districts.<sup>17</sup> In order to put an end to illicit distillation the Congress volunteers, prohibition intelligence Bureau and the village vigilance committees extended their full support for the enforcement of the Prohibition Act.

A.F.W, Dixon, the Collector of Salem who endorsed the view of the officers connected with enforcement stated that prohibition resulted in the general improvement in the standard of living and reduced indebtedness on the part of the poor. Socially it resulted "in better home life, a better out look on life, steadier and more stable character."<sup>18</sup> After the implementation of prohibition the relation between the capitalist and the workers improved considerably. No doubt the abolition of toddy shops resulted in unemployment from the point of view of the toddy tappers. However, the Act allowed tapping of sweet juice from the trees and tried to minimise the extent of unemployment. This, however, provided only a partial solution. As per the statistics available as on 1st October 1937, 2,699 adults

remained without employment. About 23,109 took to agricultural occupations and 1,717 adults migrated to other districts in search of employment.<sup>19</sup>

In order to find a solution to the unemployment problem among the ex-toddy tappers, co-operative societies and Land Development Banks were started. This benefited the rural population to a considerable extent. Among them the three co-operative sales societies at Salem, Rasipuram and Tiruchengode together sold cotton and groundnuts to the tune of six lakhs of rupees per year. This benefited the agriculturalists of the district. In the meantime three more co-operative societies were started in Krishnagiri, Dharmapuri and Kelamangalam all in the Salem district. These societies rendered meritorious service for the welfare of the people.<sup>20</sup>

The Government also ordered the formation of some co-operative societies and jaggery manufacturing sales societies.

The Development departments of the Government conducted demonstrations and taught the agriculturalists the method of making superior quality of palrayrah jaggery, coconut and palm jaggery.<sup>21</sup> It should also be admitted that the income of the tappers fell from rupees fifteen per mensem to a mere rupees nine per mensem. Tapping of sweet juice was also unprofitable. The people of Chittoor, Cuddapah and North Arcot districts extended their whole hearted support to the prohibition policy.<sup>22</sup> The success of the policy drew the attention of other states. The Congress Ministries soon introduced prohibition in Bombay, Uttar Pradesh, Central provinces and North West Frontier provinces.

Thus the dream, of introducing prohibition on liquor in Madras Presidency materialised only during the administration of C. Rajagopalachari. It brought about profound changes in the socio-economic condition of the common man. Thefts, murders, rapes, cheating and other anti social activities also gradually decreased. Finding the outcome beneficial to the downtrodden the Congress Government extended the scheme to other districts of Tamil Nadu. Unfortunately the resignation of Rajaji's Ministry on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1939 dealt a blow to the policy of prohibition on liquor. The period between 1939 and 1946 came to be known as the dark age of prohibition policy. In April 1946, T. Prakasam formed the Congress Ministry. He re-introduced the prohibition policy on liquor and extended the same to the whole of Madras Presidency.

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