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CASTE –BASED LABOUR UNREST IN THE BUCKINGHAM AND CARNATIC MILLS , PERAMBUR, MADRAS

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Abstract :

In the beginning of the Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu much of the radical social content of non-Brahminism has started showing signs of erosion in the face of increasing class and caste tensions. The increasing number of violent clashes between the so-called 'backward castes' and the Dalits and the political resurgence of the latter have raised some issues that seek to invalidate the historical claims of Dravidian nationalism. In the first place, social scientists have been forced to seriously consider the question as to whether the Dravidian movement in the early decades of Twentieth Century adequately represented the concerns of the Dalits and the other marginal groups in the society. Secondly, a question has arisen in intellectual circles as to whether the category of the 'undifferentiated non-Brahmin' impeded the untouchables' quest of a distinct identity and that of a different brand of politics. The Labour



issue in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mill created a split in the Dravidian Groups on caste lines –Non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidas which worked out well for the interests of the European Mill Management and the British rule in Madras. This paper seeks ,in this regard, the reasons for the split and the role of Adi-Dravida and Non-Brahmin leaders in this front.

Key Words: Buckingham Mill, Carnatic Mill, Binny, Weavers, labour , caste Hindua, Adi-Dravidas, Christians, Muslims,

INTRODUCTION

It was primarily due to the efforts of the British that the cotton spinning and weaving industry made its presence in South India. In 1876, Messrs Binny and Company, one of the most reputed Commercial houses in Madras established the Buckingham Mill Company for manufacturing and marketing cotton textile items. This new Mill Company since its inception was dominated by British capital and the majority of the directors and the senior administrative and technical personnel happened to be British.¹

In 1885, a sister Mill, the Carnatic Mill was established alongside the original Mill in Perambur, a suburb located on the 'outskirts' of Madras. Although the two Mills were run by the same management and were amalgamated into a single holding in 1920, each of them were staffed and run as separate units. However, such a decision on the part of the management could not prevent the workers and managerial staff employed in both the Mills from sharing a close relationship.²

By the time the First World War came to an end there had been a phenomenal expansion of the cotton textile industry in Madras. By 1918-1919 there were

about 19 Cotton Mills located in various parts of the Madras Presidency.³ The Buckingham and Carnatic Mills during this period emerged as one of the largest and financially successful textile enterprise in India. The Binny Mills earned a high reputation of being one of the world's major producers of Khaki, which specially had a great demand in the British army. Moreover, the high profits and better financial reserves enabled the Binny Mills to pay higher wages to workers and undertake a wider gamut of welfare programmes compared to the Indian managed Mills, situated in close proximity.⁴

The Binny's also took a pride in their efficient management, The British Mill Officers maintained a high standard of work and also tried to extract a high performance from their Indian subordinates. Indeed, by 1918 the Binny's achieved a special distinction for its efforts to build up an efficient workforce. But, like many other foreign Commercial enterprises operating in the colonial period, the attitude of the Binny management towards their employees was one of 'paternalistic authoritarianism'. The Binny management, therefore, regarded labour unrest as a symptom of betrayal against the trust that it had reposed on its employees, in fact, this rigid attitude on the part of the management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills often incited protests from the working classes.

In the early years of the Twentieth Century, there had been some incidents of rioting in the Buckingham Mills. In September 1902, there was rioting in the Buckingham Mills. The weavers, mainly piece workers contended that the drop in production was due to poor yam and defects in the looms. The management refused to accept such arguments and decided on pay cuts. This sparked off a fight between the weavers and the European officers in the Mill. The management called in the police and the army to evict the weavers. Workers in other departments rallied to the support of the weavers and this added to further tensions. The employers once again took the help of the police to restore law and order inside the factory premises. The labour agitations continued in the following years and the management, as on earlier occasions, used the police and the army to quell them. In most cases, these agitations displayed an element of spontaneity, rather than that of an organised protest.⁵ Incidentally, it was not until the formation of the Madras Labour Union in 1918 that elements of organised labour agitation acquired prominence in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills.⁶

The management of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills initially faced problems in recruiting and maintaining a steady supply of labour. To overcome these problems, the Binny management relied on jobbers. The jobber was an Indian worker who acted both as supervisor and as labour recruiter. He provided the vital link between men and management and saw that the decisions taken at the senior level were properly implemented at the lower levels. However, the Binny's, unlike most other managements in India, took steps to restrict the powers of jobbers. E.D. Murphy has pointed out that in their attempts to develop a rationalised industry, the Binnys took away their functions as labour recruiters. By 1918, it has been argued that most of the labour supply was drawn from the sons of employees in the mill school. Thus patron-client relationship between jobbers and ordinary workers centering around caste, communal, and familial affiliations, failed to develop in the Binny mills in the same extent as in the other textile mills of Tamil Nadu. The jobbers became more identified with the workers and did not construe the trade union as a challenge to their vested interest, as they did in other mills.⁷

The workforce of the Binny Mills was drawn mostly from the rural localities around Madras. Initially the mill hands were reluctant members of the labour force, forced into Industrial employment by poverty or lack of opportunity in the rural areas. In fact, a substantial section of them tried to earn their livelihood partly as agriculturists and partly as industrial labourers.⁸ But by 1918, the Binny management was able to build up a committed labour force that was at least in character partly proletarian.⁹

Yet the workers in the Binny Mills did not comprise a homogenous social unit. While there were a fairly large number of caste Hindus drawn from the rank of Naidus, Mudaliars and Naickers, the Adi Dravida presence was more than impressive. The Adi Dravidas or Panchamas also known as the Dalits were 'the lowest and 'most unfortunate class of people.'¹⁰ Apart from the large Dalit presence, there were also workers belonging to the backward castes, The Muslims and Indian Christians constituted a negligible fraction.

The majority of the caste Hindu workers lived in rented, tiled houses situated close to the mills. In most cases, they shared their residences with their own caste fellows and tended to cluster in groups in certain streets. Their residence and behavioural patterns reflected on overt replication of their traditional village life. However, the Lines of a demarcation between them and those belonging to other religious communities tended to be much sharper. The relations between the caste Hindu and the Adi Dravida workers were mostly based around distinctions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ and that of purity and pollution.¹¹

In Madras city, the Adi Dravidas lived as a segregated community in slums which were popularly known as *cheris*. The living conditions in these *cheris* built on lands rented from the Corporation were extremely unhealthy. In the monsoon, very often these slums were subjected to inundations.¹² The Adi Dravida inhabitants of these slums, apart from being engaged as mill hands, were also engaged in a variety of occupations, ranging from scavenging, slaughtering to tanning. These occupations were considered degrading by caste Hindus. Presumably in view of the religious and cultural differences, a sense of alienation crept into the relations between the Adi Dravidas and the caste Hindu workers in the Mill premises. The religious prejudices of the caste Hindus was largely responsible for the deployment of Adi Dravidas in departments, where ability to do hard work was a prime requisite. The Adi Dravida workers were mostly unskilled. They were employed largely in the carding and spinning departments, while the caste Hindus enjoyed a near monopoly in the weaving department.¹³ At the same time, the growing caste divide, prevented many Adi Dravida workers from taking up their residences in caste Hindu localities. Thus, in other words the Adi Dravida *cheris* (slums) was characterised by a strong community cohesiveness, born out of a shared sense of identity and belonging.

The Urdu speaking Muslims and the Indian Christians employed in the Binny Mills also shared a sense of separateness or alienation from both the caste Hindus and the Adi Dravidas, The Christians who were mainly converts from the lower castes or untouchable communities were despised by the Hindus for their previous ‘impure’ backgrounds. Similarly, the Urdu speaking Muslims were shunned by the caste Hindus on both religious and economic grounds. The relations between these two religious communities and the Adi Dravidas were also not always cordial. The growing competition between the Muslims and the Adi Dravidas over menial occupations often gave rise to communal tensions.¹⁴

Among the minorities in the mills, conditions of the Adi Dravidas remained by far the worst. The Adi Dravida labourers were exclusively dependent upon their wages for survival. In a sense, they were more proletarian compared to the other labouring groups, as they had no other option but to sell their labour power in return for wages. Moreover, since very few of them possessed lands in the villages as compared to the caste Hindus, they could not return to their native villages during the strikes and lock outs. Thus, the economic differentiation among the various communities, played an important role in the early history of labour unrest in Madras.¹⁵

Labour Unrest and the Formation of the Madras Labour Union

Although there had been no organised labour union in Madras prior to 1918, there had been sporadic strikes involving textile workers. In fact, since the establishment of the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, workers on several occasions had resorted to militancy and strikes to register their protests over pay structure and service conditions.¹⁶

However, it was not until the World War years i.e. 1914-1918, that labour unrest gathered momentum in Madras and the other textile producing centers of South India. The World War years and the immediate post-war period witnessed sky-rocketing inflation, thereby widening the gaps between real and apparent wages. The labouring classes were the worst hit, because their inelastic income made it difficult to meet the spiraling food prices. The militancy on the part of the labourers took the form of food riots throughout the urban centres of Madras Presidency. The mill hands of Madras and Madura were greatly involved in these riots. Although the Binnys tried to increase the wages of the workers, their efforts to ameliorate the economic conditions of the

former remained by far too paltry and negligible. Nevertheless, it was this all pervasive economic distress that ultimately led to the formation of the Madras Labour Union.

The Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in order to cope with the working class protests resorted to lockouts. Such decisions on the part of the management provoked the mill hands to seek the help of outsiders. They felt that outsiders who in most cases were non- workers could effectively organise them. Though some individuals among the mill hands expressed their willingness to form a Union for the redressal of the working class grievances, the outsiders were preferred fearing victimisation by the management. Initially, two men, G. Ramanujulu Naidu and C. Chelvapathi Chetti provided the leadership. Both of them had been active members of the Sri Venkatesa Gunamitra Varshani Sabha and were involved in promoting special and religious activities among the workers.¹⁷

Though both Ramanujula Naidu and Chelvapathi Chetti lacked knowledge relating to the functioning of a trade Union, they nevertheless exhibited an interest to represent the cause of the workers. At the request of the workers, whom they met at the Sabha, they drew up a list relating to their pay claims and anonymously forwarded them to the Binnys. In most cases the Binny management turned these over to the police to find out the real brains behind such moves.¹⁸

Despite the oppression unleashed by the police and the management the two social reformers continued to ally with the millhands. In order to organise the millhands in a better way, they even approached prominent politicians of Madras. But their efforts in this direction hardly succeeded, until B.P. Wadia, a prominent nationalist Parsee lawyer, showed an interest in organising labour . At their request, Wadia visited the working class settlements around the mill premises to have a first hand look into the poor economic conditions of the workers. Subsequently, Wadia became more involved with the grievances of the textile workers and addressed a series of meetings to mobilise them against the authoritarian attitude of the mill management. It was in his third meeting that Wadia finally presented plan for a trade union organisation, the Madras Labour Union.¹⁹

Almost immediately after the formation of the Madras Labour Union, the Binny management resorted to lockouts to break the solidarity of millhands. But such measures failed to check the working class protests. At this time Wadia insisted that the workers should not resort to violence, rather they should remain committed to a constructive and constitutionalist labour movement.²⁰ He also preferred the involvement of nationalist politicians in labour agitations. To cement the links between the nationalists and the working classes, Wadia convinced some influential Congress leaders to take up the cause of the Buckingham and Carnatic mill workers.

By 1920, labour unrest in Madras reached a new height. The Madras Mill Workers became increasingly restive towards the Government for its failure to redress their grievances. They also expressed their displeasure over the Union's activities, since they felt that the union leaders had not been able to effect a honourable settlement of the disputes. The restiveness on the part of the workers frequently found expression through spontaneous strikes in the shop floor.²¹

Meanwhile the Madras Labour Union was beset with factional feuds. The dominant faction comprising of B.P. Wadia and T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar and V. Chakkarai Chetti, though sympathetic to the aims of the nationalists, were reluctant to allow the union to be fully taken over by the Congress. On the other hand, trade Union leaders like Singaravelu Chetti and E.L. Iyer preferred to ally the Union with the nationalist movement of the Congress. Consequently, these differing perceptions widened the fissures between the two factions.²²

Thus an attempt is made in this paper to explicate that Tamil/Dravidian nationalism, despite being overtly anti-Brahmin and anti-Congress, failed to evolve a grand coalition between the non-Brahmins and the dalits. Indeed, it needs to be reiterated that following the Montagu-Chelmsford proposals, there was a marked deterioration in inter-community relations. In most cases, non-Brahmin Adi-Dravida (untouchables) caste conflicts revealed the contradictions that lay at the core of the newly constructed non-Brahmin or Dravidian fraternity. The inner contradictions which characterised the non-Brahmin - Adi Dravida relationship was most clearly revealed in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills strikes of 1921. The labour disputes of 1921, therefore, need to be analysed from a much deeper perspective. In fact this would bring out the failures of the politics of

Dravidianism. In this context, it needs to be argued that the failure to build up a homogenous non-Brahmin bloc resulted largely from the caste Hindu perceptions and attitudes towards the ‘untouchables.’

END NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Krishna, C.S., *Labour Movement in Tamil Nadu, 1918-1933*, Calcutta: K.R. Bagchi & Company, 1989, pp. 2-3.
4. Murphy, E.D., *loc.cit.*, pp. 293-295.
5. Veeraraghavan, D., and Thankappan, T., ‘Class Conflict and the Colonial State in Madras Presidency upto 1918’ in *South Asia Bulletin*, Vol. 2, Number 1, 1990, p. 3.
6. The Madras Labour Union was formed on 27th April 1918 by B.P. Wadia, T.V. Kalyanasundaram and several other Congress activists.(Wadia, B.P., *Labour in Madras*, 1921, p. 8.)
7. Murphy, E.D., *loc. cit.*, p. 207.
8. In the memorandum submitted by the Government of Madras to the Royal Commission on Labour in India in 1920s, it was pointed out that a clear demarcations of industrial labour and agricultural labour was still to emerge. In fact, it was argued that in the early decades of the Twentieth Century, a man enjoying permanent employment as an industrial labourer too often lived in villages alongside agriculturists and returned to it whenever he could. (‘Government of Madras Memorandum submitted to the Royal Commission on Labour’ in *Royal Commission on Labour in India Report* (hereafter R.C.L. R.) Vol. VII, Part-I, Madras, London: 1931, p. 240.)
9. Murphy, E.D., *loc. cit.*, p. 207.
10. Krishna, C.S., *op. cit.*, p. 17.
11. Murphy, E.D., *op. cit.*, p. 301.
12. *R.C.L.R.*, Vol. VII, Part-I, *op. cit.*, p. 168.
13. Murphy, E.D., *loc.cit.*, pp. 301-302.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Messrs Binny & Co. in their reply to a questionnaire of the British Royal Commission on Labour reported that strikes and lockout broke out in the mills at intervals of two years and that in the most serious strike, 400 workers were involved and another 800 were thrown out of work due to interruption of the process of manufacture. In fact, the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills had experienced a number of strikes. The first strike in Buckingham Mills took place on 26th June 1878 within a few months of its opening. The workers demanded that the mills should close on noon on Sundays and that surplus hands not required for cleaning should not be utilised elsewhere. In 1889 the workers resorted to a strike in the Carnatic Mills in demand for a weekly holiday. The workers of the Buckingham mills on this occasion went on a sympathetic strike. In September 1902 there was again rioting in the Buckingham Mills. There was a lot of violence between the weavers and the European officers over the management’s decision to order pay- cuts. In all these strikes the management utilised outside labour imported from Pondicherry and Bombay and the police to curb the militancy of the labourers. (Veeraraghvan, D., and Thankapan, T., *loc. cit.*, p. 3; Desouza, F.De., *op.cit.*, 86-92.)
17. Rakhahari Chatterji, *Working Class and the Nationalist Movement in India: The Critical Years*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Private Limited, 1984, p. 83.
18. Historians like Murphy have argued that the police invariably suspected the members of the Sabha and took punitive measures against them. Murphy, E.D., *op. cit.*, p. 304.

19. Rakhahari Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, p. 84.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Murphy, E.D., *op. cit.*, pp. 306-307.
22. *Ibid.*



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