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DIVIDED PRESS OPINION ON NATIONALIST AND DRAVIDIAN CAUSE IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

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Abstract :

A noticeable inclusion to the Tamil press in the wake of the Home Rule movement was the *Dravidan*, an organ of the Justice Party which was born of a communal antagonism between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. For some years past, certain public men belonging to non-Brahmin communities watched with anxiety the predominance of the Brahmins in government services, educational institutions and public bodies.

Key Words: Home Rule, Political Justice, Political Liberation, *Swadesamitran*, *Desabhaktan* , *Dravidan*, Non-Brahmins, Brahmins, Justice Party.

INTRODUCTION :

From the middle of the Nineteenth Century, the Brahmins who constituted only three percent of the total population rose to high positions by virtue of



their learning and Western education. The Brahmins were also occupying important positions in the provincial Congress organisation for many years. As such; the agitation for Home Rule by Annie Besant and her Theosophist friends who were mostly Brahmins caused anxiety in the minds of some non-Brahmin leaders that the Brahmins alone would enjoy all the benefits if India was Home Rule. Therefore, within three months after the formation of Besant's Home Rule League, prominent non-Brahmin leaders like

P.Theagaraya Chetty and T.M. Nair met on 20th November, 1916 and formed a joint stock company by name, the South Indian People's Association (S.I.P.A.), to publish newspapers for promoting the welfare of non-Brahmin communities.

Demand for Political Justice or Home Rule

When Annie Besant launched the movement there was not much support forthcoming from the Madras Press. Her English daily *New India* began an independent campaign for Home Rule , which meant political justice, when proposal for an agitation for the above cause was turned down by the Congress at its Bombay session in December 1915. The *Madras Mail* and the *Madras Times*, the two leading Anglo-Indian dailies fiercely opposed the movement. The *Indian Patriot* of C. Karunakara Menon was sceptical about Besant's leadership. The *Hindu*, the leading Indian-owned English newspaper in the Madras Presidency, after some initial hesitation, gave support to the Home Rule Movement.¹

Among the Tamil newspapers, the *Hindunesan* which had been limping for the past ten years had by this time become a daily under the editorship of S. Srinivasa Venkatachari. It commanded circulation of 1500 and was then approaching the Madras Government for

patronage. As such the paper suggested that the cause of Home Rule might be entrusted to the Indian spokesmen in England and pleaded against a serious agitation about it in India when Britain was engaged in a global war.² The new weekly *Prapanchamitran* of Subramania Siva, an Extremist leader of Tamil Nadu, gave only a qualified support to Annie Besant. While referring to the ban on Besant's entry into the Bombay Presidency it said: 'We have no admiration for Mrs. Besant or her 'Mahatmas' personally: but no one can deny that for the last two years she has been working hard for the benefit of India'.³ But the *Prapanchamitran*, in course of time, gave full support to the movement in view of Tilak's involvement. Since September 1916 a column of the paper by Subramania Siva under the pseudonym 'Narada', the celestial message-bearer, created stir amongst its readers by carrying humorous and pungent criticism against the British Government.⁴

The *Swadesamitran* was the only influential Tamil daily when the Home Rule Movement began. Ever since its prosecution in 1908, it had chosen a moderate course in politics. Though its popularity suffered for a while, it had re-established itself as the leading Tamil newspaper. The hunger for news during the world war further added to its popularity. It enjoyed the confidence of the people by publishing accurate and detailed information about the World War. Its ailing editor G. Subramania Iyer officially handed over the paper to his only son T.S.Viswanatha Iyer aged 27 on 8th April 1915 and sold the *Swadesarnitran*, in August 1915 to A. Rangaswami Iyengar, the nephew of S.Kasturiranga Iyengar of the *Hindu*. This event marked the beginning of more or less an unbroken association between the *Hindu* and the *Swadesamitran*. Kasturiranga Iyengar's family and close relatives continued to be the owners of both the papers since then.⁵

A. Rangaswami Iyengar (1877-1934), a lawyer of repute at Tanjore, came to Madras in 1905 to take up the managerial responsibilities of the *Hindu* which his maternal uncle Kasturiranga Iyengar had purchased from M. Veeraraghavachari.⁶ He also officiated as its assistant editor. His deep interest in and his masterly wrings on matters economic and political pertaining to the Presidency made him popular. The Madras Mahajana Sabha selected him as one of the witnesses for the Royal Commission on Public Services in 1912. While Annie Besant was advocating the idea of an agitation for Home Rule, Rangaswami Iyengar left the *Hindu* and purchased *Swadesamitran* in August 1915. The separation of the nephew and uncle was a surprise in the political circles of Madras. The reason for Rangaswami Iyengar's exit from the *Hindu* is not clearly known. Probably, he desired an independent career in politics and journalism. Having taken over the *Swadesamitran*, Rangaswami Iyengar reorganised its financial set-up and gave stability to the paper.⁷

Annie Besant was fortunate to be supported by such an influential paper like the *Swadesamitran* many months before the beginning of the Home Rule Movement. As early as December 1915, it wrote that the Indians instead of diverting their energies on matters of caste, language and religion could do no better than help Besant's Home Rule propaganda.⁸ The views of *Swadesamitran* on self-rule became more pronounced early 1916. It took exception to the view of some British statesmen that popular education, should precede representative government in India. It argued that in countries like England, France, Germany and America, literacy had not spread to industrial labourers and villagers at the time when parliamentary form of government was introduced and hence it questioned why in India alone education should be a precondition to self-government. In India, the educated, the landed nobility and the rich merchants might first be made eligible for self-rule who in turn, the paper hoped, would expand and impart the benefit to others.⁹

The *Swadesamitran* gradually propagated the benefits of self-government and by its masterly and dignified editorials provided leadership in the formation of public opinion in Madras. *Prapanchamitran* and the *Lokopakari*, concealing their dislike for Besant's leadership, joined the *Swadesamitran* and continuously published matter to the effect that the realisation of self-rule was the panacea for all evils which Indian was subjected to.¹⁰

Tamizhan and Non-Brahmin against Political Justice

The nationalist press in Tamil Nadu did not have much opposition to overcome with regard to Home Rule until the rise of the Justice Party. Till then the only Tamil journal that emphatically opposed Home Rule was the *Tamizhan*. This Madras weekly edited by a C.I. Pattabiraman, son of Iyothee Thass propagated Buddhism among the depressed classes.¹¹ In an editorial 'the Indian Buddhists and Home Rule', the *Tamizhan* gave a theory that they ethnically belonged to the Dravidian race and were distinct from the Aryans. It identified the Brahmins as Aryans, praised the rule of Asoka and of the British as having put an end to the high-handed acts of the Aryans. Recalling the peace and benefits conferred by the British on these untouchables, the *Tamizhan* dissuaded them from lending their ears to the cry of Home Rule. The *Tamizhan* protested against the granting of Home Rule to India on the ground that it would lead to Brahmin domination over other classes, especially the Panchamas.¹²

Being the voice of a minority community, the protest of *Tamizhan* against Home Rule went unnoticed. But when such anti-Brahmin and anti-Home Rule sentiments found better expression in the systematic propaganda of the *Non-Brahman* the English journal, started in early November 1916, it drew the attention of the political elite. The *Non-Brahman* warned that the non-Brahmins as a class should think twice before lending support to the 'political theatricalities' of the Brahmins.¹³ Days before the official Non-Brahmin Manifesto was issued, the *Non-Brahman* clearly stated thus : "We do not want Home Rule , for it will bring about the condition of ancient India, when the Sudra was kept suppressed. Our goal is the goal of self-government, but we want to be led there by the British." ¹⁴

The attack on Home Rule by the *Non-Brahmin* was increased by two other papers of the Justice Party. Their Telugu weekly, the *Andhra Prakasika* joined the anti-Brahmin propaganda campaign in January 1917.¹⁵ Their English daily the *Justice* came out on 26th February 1917 to stem the Home Rule propaganda of the *New India* and the *Hindu*.

Swadesamitran for Political Liberation

Instead of giving prominence to the Non-Brahman movement, the *Swadesamitran* concentrated on Home Rule propaganda. It increased the spirit of the campaign by continuous references to public meetings in support of self-rule. It encouraged the activities Madras and Poona Home Rule Leagues and often reported in full the opinions of national leaders on the movement. Banner headlines, decorated box columns and photos were new features that the *Swadesamitran* adopted in the Home Rule campaign. It held Annie Besant in high esteem and hailed her the 'Loka Matha', (The Mother of the people). It severely condemned the Madras Government for resorting to unwarranted repression and invoked the people to hold meetings of protest against the internment of Annie Besant. The response from the mofussil was impressive. Besides, many big towns, a number of small villages like Abhinavam in Salem district and Kaniyur in Coimbatore district held meetings to condemn the British Government.¹⁶

It was the singular achievement of the *Swadesamitran* to articulate the demand for Home Rule among the literates of smaller towns and villages. The task of *Swadesamitran* was made more difficult when the Justice Party published their Tamil daily *Dravidan* which directed its attack against the Brahmans in two ways. One was to argue the case of the non-Brahmins for government posts held by the Brahmans. The other was to systematically vilify the Brahmins as Aryans and aliens enjoying social superiority at the cost of the non-Brahmins by means of Hindu religious scriptures. The *Swadesamitran* hardly replied to these accusations of the *Dravidan*. Being a Brahman owned paper, if it countered the arguments of the *Dravidan*, it ran the risk of offending the sentiments of a bulk of its non-Brahmin readers. However, the *Swadesamitran* pursued a different course and played a crucial role in setting political forces against the Non-Brahman movement.¹⁷

A move to wean the non-Brahmins away from the Justice Party was already started. At a private meeting held at the office of the *Hindu* on 4th April 1917 the question of devising means to show the support of the non-Brahmins to the Congress cause was discussed. The policy announcement of the Secretary of State on

constitutional reforms followed immediately by Justice Party's claim that they alone, who opposed Home Rule, represented all the non-Brahmins of the Presidency made the task an urgent necessity. On 7th September 1917 the *Swadesamitran*, the *Hindu* and the *New India* published in their columns a letter by one Sabapathi Pillal and Ramulu Naidu on the need for another association for the non-Brahmins as a rival to the Justice Party. The authors of the letter were employees in the office of the *New India* and were personally known to Rangaswami Iyengar, the editor of the *Swadesamitran* who soon after Besant's internment temporarily managed the *New India*.¹⁸

The *Swadesamitran* strengthened this demand by immediately giving editorial blessing to the need for a rival association and observed thus: "We respected the formation on of a non-Brahman Federation some months ago with the belief that it would improve their educational prospects. On the contrary their press is attacking the Brahmins and creates hatred against them. Many non-Brahmins and some Brahmins have written us angry letters for publication in our paper. But we have refrained from that course. We publish only few letters and a memorial by a number of non-Brahmins denouncing the claims of and disassociating from the party of Dr. T.M.Nair and Theagaraya Chetty. According to their memorial, they want communal representation proportionate to their population in the legislative councils of the anticipated constitutional reform. We hope the Brahmins will not oppose their demand as they have already agreed for the allotment of separate seats for the Muslims. Let the non Brahmins discuss amongst themselves and arrive at a uniform decision. We (the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins) should not behave like the two cats that fought for a cake."¹⁹

Following this editorial, the *Swadesamitran* gave in its columns prominence to the letters of non-Brahmin leaders like Varadarajulu Naidu, Nanjunda Rao and Dandapani Pillai which emphasized the need for checking communalism in the interest of national objectives.²⁰

Further, the *Swadesamitran* published a new feature, rather unusual to its tradition, an imaginary conversation among three high caste non- Brahmins, highlighting the fact that the Congress was not a Brahmin body. It pointed out that Naoroji, Besant, B.C. Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh, Lajpat Rai and V.O.Chidambaram Pillai were not Brahmins. It also drew the attention of the non-Brahmin public that the Brahmins had been poor since the age of the Vedas; that if Home Rule was granted the Brahmins could have only few seats in the Legislature, and that the Justice Party, instigated by foreigners, had determined to destroy the Hindu Dharma .²¹

Through editorials, correspondence columns and other features, the *Swadesamitran* created a schism within the non- Brahman community and induced a large section of them to join the new organisation against the Justice Party. Its propaganda immediately bore fruit. Important non-Brahman communities of Tamil Nadu like the Nadars, the Nattukottai Chetties and Padaiyachis held meetings condemning the Justice Party supporting the agitation for Home Rule. Similarly non-Brahmin merchants and Mirasdars of Tanjore and officers in private companies and in Railways came forward to support the demand for Home Rule and the need for a new non-Brahmin organisation.²² The *Swadesamitran* thus acted as a major vehicle in the formation of a new non-Brahman organisation called, 'Madras Presidency Association' on 20th September 1917 which supported the Congress demand for Home Rule. Thus *Swadesamitran* did not play a neutral role which was evident from fact that not a single correspondence appeared in the columns in support of the Justice Party's claim.

The propaganda warfare of the *Swadesamitran* for Home redoubled when the visit of the Secretary of State to Madras nearing. It showed extraordinary interest in gathering the support of all classes to the Congress cause. It issued a special supplement bearing a lengthy article by one Mukkaimaehari, the promoter and president of the Viswakarma Community Conference, in which the Justice Party was severely condemned and the benefits of self- government with the interests of the non-Brahman community protected were emphasized.²³ Another article in which the Padaiyatchi community claimed martial ancestry and drew evidence for the same from Tamil literature, government and manuals, was published under the caption, 'Padiayatchis should ask Self-Rule'.²⁴ The Pariahs, a section of the dalits who tended to join anti-Brahman forces were promised better

conditions under Home Rule in an article by Subramania Bharathi.²⁵ The thesis that the Brahmins were aliens and immigrants from North India was also refuted by Bharathi.²⁶ All along, dozens of letters signed by hundreds of members of caste associations, merchants and landlords expressing sympathy to the demand for Home Rule were published regularly in the *Swadesamitran*.

Non-Brahmins' Cause but for Political Liberation

Following the lead of the *Swadesamitran* many Tamil papers gave unanimous support to the Home Rule Movement. They considered the Non-Brahmin Movement as an obstacle to national advancement. Of the three non-Brahmin-edited weeklies, the *Lokopakari* almost venerated the Brahmins as the cultured people and were able in the art of administration. It said that 'to be jealous of the cultured was mark of low breeding'. It appealed that other castes should learn much from the Brahmins.²⁷

The *Prapanchamitran* which had just passed from the hands of the Brahmin editor Subramania Siva to that of P. Vardarajulu Naidu was considerate to the Non-Brahmin cause but was emphatic in its demand for Home Rule. It accused the Brahmins for thinking and speaking of the non-Brahmins as 'Sudras' and as racially inferior, and blamed the Brahmins for reviving the *Vamashrama Dharma*. It encouraged the non-Brahmins to become educated and attain an equal position with the Brahmins. The *Prapanchamitran* regretted that caste dispute had impeded the progress of the struggle for political liberation and called it 'traitorous traitorous on the part of some gentlemen to set up a venomous agitation through the Justice'.²⁸

The *Naradan* of N. Duraiswami Pillai appealed to the non-Brahmins to emulate the Brahmins and improve their position without obstructing the Home Rule Movement. As for the argument that the Brahmins feather their nest first and then look into others advancement, the paper justified this tendency as in consonance with human nature. It urged the non-Brahmins to 'bow down before Mother India, singing the *Vandemataram* song, adopt Swadeshism and be persistent in their demand for Home Rule'.²⁹

Stand of Desabhaktan

The activities of the Justice Party were criticized in biting taste by *Desabhaktan*, the organ of the Madras Presidency Association.³⁰ All the above non-Brahmin papers were small weeklies and could hardly counteract the social liberation ideology propaganda of the *Dravidan*. Their anti-Justice advocacy was not a force to reckon with. In these circumstances it was in the rise of *Desabhaktan* under the editorship of Thin. Vi. Ka. in December 1917 that a strong barrage was raised against the communal representation propaganda of the Justice Party.³¹

The *Desabhaktan* surpassed the *Swadesamitran* in upholding and giving right expression to the cultural, religious and political nationalism in a literary style that was at once emotional, eloquent and chaste, and in a violent tone that breathed intense patriotism. In the words of the editor: 'I became Rudra, my pen became Pasupatha, my colleagues became Velaythas, Kothandapanis and Kandeepas'

The *Desabhaktan* came out in its first issue with a three part editorial that declared, like Besant's *New India* its devotion to God, the King and the Nation. The editorial praised the British and expressed the paper's utmost loyalty to the King. At the same time it asserted its determination to fight for Home Rule and fight again caste feuds.³²

In fulfillment of these objectives, the *Desabhaktan* took up as its first task, the prevention of the non-Brahmins from flocking under Justice Banner. It argued that the Tamil Country was the homeland of the Brahmins as well, and that hating them for the evils heaped on the society by their ancestors was useless. It accused the British Government as doing penance for a schism in the Indian society and added that communal antagonism prevailing in Tamil Nadu was the greatest impediment for attaining Home Rule.³³ The *Desabhaktan* further accused the Justices as suffering from Anglo-mania and branded them as enemies of Tamil culture. It held out the hope that Home Rule alone would infuse new blood into 'Mother Tamil'.³⁴ Further it observed thus: "those non-Brahmin brethren (members of the Justice Party) are now deceiving the people by holding small

conferences here and there under the presidency of a few Zamindars who have no experience whatever of political work and passing certain resolutions".³⁵

The *Desabhaktan* was a champion of liberty and gave a philosophic interpretation to the demand for Home Rule thus : "Salvation which is the bliss of soul depended on liberty which is the bliss of the body. Liberty is absent in India. We are unable to speak and write what we think . The Press law constrains our liberty. The present administration is not conducive for liberty. Fear and tenor surround us. *Desabhaktan* desires liberty, demands Home Rule and creates fraternity between India and England."³⁶

The *Desabhaktan* gave inspiration and encouragement to various sections of the Tamil society that lay beyond the usual nationalistic activities. To the women of Tamil Nadu, the *Desabhaktan* held out Annie Besant as the embodiment of great virtues. It almost worshipped her and always addressed her as 'annai' Besant, meaning 'Mother Besant', instead of Annie Besant. It appealed to the women of Tamil Nadu to emulate her example and partake in public life for attaining swaraj. Dwelling upon the heroic exploits of Indian women in the past, the *Desabhaktan* beseeched the women of South India to follow those of Bengal in rendering national service.³⁷ It called upon the city politicians to address the untouchables in Tamil to cultivate close relationship and save them from joining hands with anti-Home Rulers.³⁸ Praising the Maharaja of Darbhanga and the Zamindars of North India, it appealed to the local Zamindars to give up their feasts and revelry, to get rid of the influence of the British and to join the Home Rule Movement.³⁹

To conclude, the press played a remarkable role to awaken the people to the political realities and to combat forces that cause impediments to the progress of the people. The Tamil press of the Home Rule years fittingly responded to the emerging identities. The Home Rule ideal was debated only at the elitist political clubs in early 1916. Now the *Swadesamitran* and *Desabhaktan*, together with other smaller papers, uttered the same to the general public of the metropolis, mofussil towns and the villages of Tamil Nadu. Especially when Justice Party which was in a vantage political position and had wide opportunities to politicise the grievances of the non-Brahmin bulk of the population, the contribution of these Tamil newspapers to movement was significant. The nationalist press emphasised the need for emotional integration of the people belonging to various castes and creeds and impressed upon them that under swaraj alone social inequality could easily be put an end. The *Swadesamitran* and the *Desabhaktan* thus outweighed the effects of social liberation and communal representation propaganda indulged in by the Justice Party. The position of the *Dravidan* was seriously affected. In 1919 the paper sunk into a weekly and its editorship was given to Somasundaram Pillai. Its circulation also fell from 2000 to 1200 copies.⁴⁰ There was a visible change in the political and social atmosphere of the Tamil Nadu. A number of public meetings in support of Home Rule and immediate political liberation of the nation were held all Tamil Nadu. Mill workers and students in the city and caste associations in many mofussil centres expressed sympathy to the struggle for political liberation. The *Swadesamitran* and the *Desabhaktan* continued their mission of the political liberation and played still a greater role when Gandhian era of the political liberation struggle began. For a while since 1920s, the mantle of the press struggle for the social liberation came into the hands of Periyar E.V.Ramasamy Naicker.

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