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CLASHES : STRUGGLE OF SUBALTERN CLASS FOR SOCIAL RIGHTS IN SIVAKASI AND KAMUDHI , TAMIL NADU, 1899

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ABSTRACT

The socio- religious issues such social clashes on temple related issues is considered as a Subaltern Movement because it was spearheaded by an inferior rank caste and communal groups against the tyranny of the Upper Classes in the social hierarchy of the Indian Caste System, religious segregation and social seclusion to secure higher status. The Nineteenth Century Subaltern Movement headed by the Nadars in Sivakasi and Kamudhi was a voluntary Social Protest Movement organized by the Nadars (Shanars) caste to get social equality on par with caste Hindus who were considered as the elitist or superior caste groups. While some of the oppressed groups escaped the clutches of casteism through conversion to Christianity , the rest of them

stood within the Hindu society and fought for their socio-religious rights related to the temples This Social Protest Movement marked the struggle for socio-religious equality and civil liberties. This movement was revolved around the question of domination of the caste Hindus and struggle for social equality.

KEY WORDS : Subaltern, Nadars, Shanars, Maravas, Temple , Social Clashes, Rights, Kamudhi, Sivakasi, Disturbances, Deputy Magistrate, District Magistrate

The word, 'Subaltern' is a German word , gives the meaning of 'inferior rank' or of 'secondary importance'. The school of subaltern studies, which emerged in India in the early 1980s , has now gained a world wide reputation. In Tamil Nadu, the Scholarly historians like S. Manickam, B.S.Chandra Babu, L.Selvamuthu Kumarasami, and G.Gowthaman contribute regularly in this discipline which promote much interest among the scholars, highlighting the subaltern outbursts, revolts, rebellions, protests and clashes. The most important and publicized events of the year 1899 were the disturbances in Tirunelveli and Madurai, which were known as social clashes.¹ They had their origin in the conflict that existed between the lowly placed Shanars and the superior castes. It was not a conflict over a specific issue of ritual or connected with any particular Temple, but had arisen from the attempts of the Shanars to rise in the socio-religious scale. The claims of the Shanars to be treated as a high caste, not only irritated the Maravas and the higher caste, but made them determined to resist. In Tirunelveli, the antagonism was very strong.² The enmity and hatred gave rise to serious rioting and disturbances in Sivakasi in the Tinnevely District in 1899. The disturbances were not



confined to the Tirunelveli District. They also spread to Sattur, parts of Madura, Tenkasi and Travancore placing the entire area in a disturbed condition.³

Spread of the Clash to Sivakasi and Kamudhi

Sivakasi in the Sattur taluk was an important commercial centre with Shanars as the principal population. They carried out an extensive trade in the town. The weekly fair day on every Tuesdays at Sivakasi were usually attended by a large concourse of people from the town and neighbouring villages. The town was under the jurisdiction of the Deputy Magistrate of Srivilliputhur, with the stationary Sub-Magistrate of Sattur as the immediate magisterial authority, and the Inspector of Virudupatti as the police authority of the town. The population of Sivakasi in 1891 was 12,184 which consisted of about 10,000 Shanars, 1500 Musalmans, 500 Maravas and 150 Christians.

The disturbances occurred at two different places, one in Sivakasi in Tirunelveli District, and the other in Kamudhi, a village in Madura District. The immediate cause was the claim of the Shanars to enter the Hindu temples, in spite of the rules in the *Agama Shastras* that toddy - tappers were not allowed into the temples. The incidents immediately preceding the memorable outbreak of 1899 belonged rather to the history of Ramnad more than specifically to the Tinnevely district.⁴ In 1895 the Shanars of Sivakasi submitted a petition to the president of the Devasthanam Committee, for the appointment of a Shanar trustee on the managing body of the Viswanathaswami Temple of the place. But the committee rejected their request. The Shanars made such a move as a part of their plan to make Sivakasi an exclusive Shanar village.

Meanwhile another dispute was gathering momentum when the Shanars made attempt to enter the temple of Kamudhi, in 1897. They were accused of desecrating the temple and a criminal case was charged against them. In the Kamudhi Temple case in which fifteen Shanars were the plaintiffs and the Raja of Ramnad as the trustee of the temple was the defendant.⁵ They were tried but acquitted. Then the Maravar Zamindar of Ramnad, filed a civil suit against the Shanars, by which he sought to obtain a decree prohibiting the latter from entering the Siva temple and succeeded. The case was conducted with bitter feelings on both sides and it excited much bad blood between the Shanars and the rest of the Hindu community.⁶ In this suit, a perpetual injunction was granted by the Sub-Judge, Madura East, restraining the Shanars from entering the Kamudhi temple.⁷ On an appeal to the High Court of Madras, it was decided that as there was no evidence to prove that the Shanars were the descendants of a high caste, they were prohibited from using the temple. This judgment very much embittered the attitude of the Shanars, and probably become the ultimate cause of the clash of 1899.

The ill-feeling towards the Shanars had assumed an acute form since 1895 at Sivakasi in the Tirunelveli District and Kamudhi in the Madurai District on account of the Shanar attempted to attain a standing in Hindu society higher than that either to allow them by other castes.⁸ By the middle of 1898 the Shanar disputes in the Tirunelveli District reached an acute stage. In July 1898, a series of clashes broke out at Sivakasi owing to an attempt of the Shanars to enter the Siva temple there.⁹ On 14th July 1898, the house of the dancing girl of the Siva temple was burnt because she was doing service in the Siva temple. On 16th July serious damage, including damage to the outer door of the temple, was caused by the Shanars. The lock was also removed. On the same night damage was caused to a garden belonging to the smaller Shanar temple in the village. On the night of 17th July, some houses belonging to the non-Shanar community were set on fire.¹⁰ Due investigation was conducted and several persons were tried. But none was punished because of the absence of concrete evidence.

However, the Shanars immediately made another attempt to enter the Siva temple at Sivakasi. The District Magistrate accordingly sent to the Deputy Magistrate two telegrams that he had got from the Tharmakarta of the Siva temple. Complaining of a disturbance connected with the entrance of the temple by Shanars at Sivakasi on 4th August, the Deputy Magistrate reported that he had heard of fresh trouble at Sivakasi during the posting of two additional trustees to the Siva temple committee of whom one was a Marava. Trouble arose, but the Deputy Magistrate misunderstood the situation and did nothing in Sivakasi to improve the situation.¹¹

On 3rd October the District Magistrate received a petition from the trustees of the Siva temple, in which they indicated the aggressive attitude of the Shanars of Sivakasi and the inability of the Deputy Magistrate for a report on the matter. The reply of the latter was unsatisfactory, and the situation worsened. As a result the Temple of Viswanathaswamy in Sivakasi was closed on the night of 16th July and 7th September, 1898, when the Shanars were alleged to have entered the temple. The temple remained closed upto the clashes of 6th June 1899. The Deputy Magistrate realized the consequences of shutting the principal temple of Sivakasi. From 7th September to April 1899, there were no actual disturbances in Sivakasi about the temple. In spite of this the Shanars continued their efforts to get a nominee of theirs in the management of the temple. Consequently on 15th November 1898, two leading Shanars of Sivakasi submitted a petition to the District Court against the appointment of a trustee of the Sivakasi Temple and requested for his removal, which was dismissed by the latter on the ground that was purely a temple committee affair.

Events from December 1898 to the end of April 1899

The events from December 1898 can be taken as the second phase of the riot. The bitter hostility on the ground of the existing factors between the Maravas and Shanars led to five cases of arson in Sivakasi: three on 5th December 1898, one 7th December and another on 13th March 1899, in which several Shanars were suspected. On 20th April 1899, the local inspector of police apprehended a disturbance by the Maravas at a Shanar temple. Again, he reported on 25th April that there were rumours of looting and gathering of mobs, which ultimately led to a riot on the next day.

On 26th April 1899, the Shanars of Sivakasi took the initiative, which could not but lead to riots. The inefficiency and callousness of the Deputy Magistrate was very much responsible for the riot which took place on that day at Sivakasi. On 26th April 1899, the Marava quarters of Sivakasi were set on fire. Forty-five houses were destroyed, rain however prevented further destruction.¹² Around 400 Shanars attacked 200 Maravas. Sticks, knives, guns, big stones and bricks were freely used. One of the Maravas was hit with small shot and seriously injured. Although several people on both sides were engaged in the fight, only five persons were injured.¹³ The police fired into the air, but the Deputy magistrate refused to go to the Spot.¹⁴ The Maravas immediately left the place. The damage done to them was great, which that of the Shanars was very slight.

The Shanars were able to force authorities to close the Sivakasi Temple upto 26th April 1899. The Maravas and Vellalas were very much irritated but they were unprepared for an open confrontation. Because of the possibility of disturbances, the police was reinforced with three head constables and thirty constables.¹⁵ On 3rd May, the Assistant Superintendent of Police, requested the posting of a Magistrate at Sivakasi to go into the question of rumours regarding the intention of the Maravas to make a raid on the town and other connected uneasiness in the town. On 4th May the police charged thirty Shanars and fourteen Maravas under sections 148, 446 and 324, Indian Penal Code, in connection with the clash of 26th April but the Deputy Magistrate did not make earnest effort to settle the cases. On 16th and 18th May, the petitions reached the District Magistrate in which it was complained that the Maravas and Pallis were planning to loot the Shanars. As those petitions were posted they were rejected. On 27th and 28th May, he received telegrams from the Shanars stating that the Maravas had plundered the Srivilliputhur Taluk. Subsequently they also prayed for protection on the 30th, a festival day.

The Deputy Magistrate on 27th May, stated that the rift between the Shanars and non-Shanars had not subsided to any extent. Instead it had spread to neighbouring villages and had developed into a caste riot. He also requested that a strong police force be retained at Sivakasi and other places because the Shanars were soon celebrating a festival in the local Bhadrakaliamman Temple, which would draw big crowds of Shanars and Maravas and this might lead to collusion between the two. Thereupon the District Magistrate issued a proclamation under section 144 Cr.PC., which prohibited the assembly of more than fifteen persons in Sivakasi.

As regards the actions by the Christians of Sivakasi, it appears, that they knew well that the local Maravas were determined to take revenge against the Shanars. Therefore, they took timely measures to safeguard their interests. They sent a deputation to the Maravas and concluded an arrangement with them that in the coming fight

they should be treated as neutrals.¹⁶ They were entirely successful in and around Sivakasi by which their person and property were protected.

It seems that the plot to destroy Sivakasi is worked up in the northern parts of Srivilliputhur. The numerous decoities committed there were probably done by the anti-Shanars who were waiting there for the attack on Sivakasi. The Deputy Magistrate remarked that the hostility between the Shanars and Maravas were deepening day after day, and the Kallars had been committing mischief on the Shanars.¹⁷ He therefore requested that, besides strengthening the police force in Sivakasi, a party of armed constables should patrol the main Marava, Kalla and Shanar centres of Sattur and Srivilluputhur Taluks. The District Magistrate during his short stay at Sivakasi, had made a few hours of inquiries, which in all probability were of very insufficient character. Had he remained in the village two or three days and examined the police records, and shown himself in the streets, it could hardly be doubted that he would have obtained some information of value; at all events, he would have been bound to recognize that the fear of the Sivakasi Shanars was genuine.¹⁸

On 4th June, a C.M.S. Missionary reported to the District Magistrate that the Maravas were frightening the Shanars of Sivakasi. He stated that the Maravas had looted and plundered six villages, besides the burning of a church. In one village, several men were also injured. Upon this, the District Magistrate ordered the Deputy Magistrate to arrange patrols to send all policemen available from other districts to Sivakasi. Meanwhile a disturbance occurred at Karisalkulam, a village to the north of Srivilliputhur, where a crowd of 500 Maravas and Kallars had attacked Karisalkulam. As the police force was inadequate, they opened fire. It was followed by an attack on four villages near Sivakasi. By the morning of 6th June, the disturbance was over.

The most serious occurrence was the attack on Sivakasi by a body of over five thousand Maravas and others on 6th June 1899.¹⁹ The Maravas were equipped with fire arms. As no administrative protection came, the Shanars erected barricades and prepared themselves for defence. Armed men took up position on the top of buildings, while women collected chilly powder to be thrown into the eyes of the rioters. The Maravas appeared on the scene and attacked the Shanar settlements. Then there followed a savage battle for two hours.²⁰

The twenty-eight policemen, fully armed with carbines, never made the smallest effort to stop the rioting. The tension-stricken Sub-Magistrate did not order the Police to fire on the rioters. So looting and destruction followed in quick succession. As regards the amount of destruction done in Sivakasi, 886 houses were destroyed, and a considerable amount of property were stolen.²¹ The damage done to churches was also immense.

In the hand-to-hand fight all along the streets of the town, in which fire arms were used by both parties, eighteen men were killed and a large number were wounded of whom three died almost at once.²² After Sivakasi riot on 6th June, there was calm for two days. However, a general attack immediately followed on a jaggery traders who were closely associated with the Shanars of Sivakasi.²³ The attack on Chinnayapuram was as furious it was in Sivakasi. At Thenkasi several villages were burnt. Christian Shanars offered no resistance and began to leave the villages when the disturbance began. Their womenfolk were attacked mainly to loot the jewellery they had concealed in their clothes. However, the disturbance was quelled within a few days owing to the preventive measures taken by the district authorities. On 11th June, the incidence of looting was reported from Sankaranayinar Koyil Taluk and the outrange near Palayamkottai. On 14th June, the village of Samburvadagi in the Travancore region was fully burnt. The District Magistrate visited many riot-villages and did all in his power to prevent further disturbances. By 16th June all the gangs were rounded up and the tranquility was restored.²⁴ The disturbances subsided and by 22nd June all had been quiet.²⁵ The authorities had brought the district under complete control and were prepared for any emergency that might occur.

Twenty-three murders, 102 decoities and many cases of arson were registered in connection with the riots in Sivakasi, Chinnayapuram and other places.²⁶ 1958 persons were arrested of whom only a few were charged.²⁷ Special Magistrates and three Additional Session Judges were appointed for the trial of the offenders at Tirunelveli.²⁸ Of them 552 persons were convicted and seven persons sentenced to death, six persons were transported for life. During the disturbances, some of the Shanars became Muslims, women made sundry changes in their dress and boys underwent circumcision.²⁹

After the attack on Sivakasi various measures were taken by the district authorities to put an end to disturbances. Consequently, strength of the European staff in the district was increased. Sepoys from Trichinopoly were brought in to quell the disturbance. Three European officers and 378 sepoy had been employed in suppressing the clash. Extra police force from adjoining districts was also deployed at Sivakasi. For future protection three special forces of police were established at Surandai, Sivakasi and Kovilpatti, consisting of one European Inspector, two European and four native Head Constables and hundred men with an Assistant Superintendent in charge of the whole.³⁰ By a special proclamation the cost of the additional police was met by the inhabitants of the disturbed area. After some days the people of Sivakasi was reopened for worship. The rage of the Shanars gradually subsided.³¹

The clashes at Sivakasi and adjoining areas were more a consequence of the indifference, apathy and lack of proper appreciation of the Shanars on the one hand and the Vellalas and Maravas on the other. The officers of government to a great extent were responsible for the most serious state of affairs at Sivakasi. The police had failed. They were inactive and the local police misled the Superintendent of Police and failed to give any particulars to him regarding the state of affairs at Sivakasi. The Superintendent of Police had not realized in any way the gravity of the state of affairs in Sivakasi after the outbreak on 26th April. The local Magistrates were constantly changed and were not properly selected. The Deputy Magistrate failed to understand the situation, misled the Collector, avoided Sivakasi, vacillated in his action and procrastinated and neglected orders. The District Magistrate willfully permitted delays and neglected orders, delayed important cases, and was quite out of touch with the people and ignorant of what was going on.³² He had not in any way analysed the change in the situation made by the disturbance at Sivakasi on 26th April. The clashes that occurred were all due to the incompetence, thoughtlessness and misconduct of the situation and also to the neglect of the provisions of sections 107 and 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. According to Hamick, I.C.S., Special Commissioner to Tirunelveli and Madurai Districts, firmness, commonsense and care at first, would have prevented what had occurred.³³ Thus the group clashes created a critical situation in the presidency. The rise of the subaltern classes insisting their rights in southern Tamil Nadu also spread a panic situation in the Madras Presidency.

To conclude, the Social Protest Movement started by the Nadars in the tail end of the Nineteenth Century culminated in the form of social clashes between the Nadars and the Caste Hindus in Kamudhi and Sivakasi in the southern Tamil Nadu. However, it ensures a struggle against untouchability, unapproachability, social discrimination and further it represented a series of fights for socio-religious equality and for the attainment of the civil liberties. For a while, the society was virtually divided into two hostile factions like the plebeians and patricians of the Roman Empire. The caste Hindus, forgetting their superior and inferior distinctions, joined together and organized severe opposition against the subaltern Nadars. Hence the Social Protest Movement initiated by the subaltern Nadar group in Tamil Nadu did not bring any legislation as an immediate relief, to provide legitimate rights to them. This subaltern group waited for the awakening of another subaltern group, the depressed classes and thus the Nadars became a pioneer and subsequently it became a model for the social protest movement in the Twentieth Century.

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