



THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS IN THE NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT IN MADRAS

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Abstract

The advent and emergence of Mahathma Gandhi on the national scene marked a determined bid to broad-base the nationalist movement and mobilization of the workers and the peasants for the nationalist cause. The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi that was vested in the ideas of Non-violence and Satyagraha was introduced before the Non-Cooperation movement. It was felt that the workers should be organized into a national trade union and drawn into the vortex of the struggle for Indian independence. The first formal trade union was organised in India, the Madras Labour Union, by activists like G. Selvapathy Chetty and Thiru Vi Ka (V. Kalyanasundaram), with the blessings of Singaravelar and others of his ilk. A significant aspect of the Non-Cooperation movement was the major Labour upsurge in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras city.

Keywords: Russian Revolution - Mahathma Gandhi - Non-Cooperation movement – Singaravelar - Madras Labour Union - May Day

Introduction

The advent and emergence of Mahathma Gandhi on the national scene marked a determined bid to broad-base the nationalist movement and mobilization of the workers and the peasants for the nationalist cause. The Gandhian Era, which was estimated after the First World War had seen the uniformity of all sections of the society, communities, and the profession. The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi that was vested in the ideas of

Non-violence and Satyagraha was introduced before the Non-Cooperation movement in the Champaran, Kheda, and Ahmedabad. It was felt that the workers should be organized into a national trade union and drawn into the vortex of the struggle for Indian independence. At almost the same time the October revolution in Russia and the formation of the Comintern (Communist International) was an open call to the working class of the world to unite for disposal of the capitalist system by the proletariat revolution.

The Indian trade union movement should be viewed with this larger background of the international and the national struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. In the history of the working class movement in India, Madras came to occupy an important place when, within six months of the Russian Revolution, the first formal trade union was organised in India, the Madras Labour Union, by labour activists like G. Selvapathy Chetty and Thiru Vi Ka (V. Kalyanasundaram), with the blessings of Singaravelar and others of his ilk. Then followed unions such as the M.S.M. Workers' Union, and the Electricity Workers' Union, the Tramway Workers' Union, the Petroleum Employees' Union, the Printing Workers' Union, the Aluminium Workers' Union, the Railway Employees' Union, the Coimbatore Weavers' Union and the Madurai Weavers' Union. A significant aspect of the Non-Cooperation movement was the major Labour upsurge in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras city.

Emergence of Gandhiji

Some of the events of the year 1919 greatly disillusioned Mahatma Gandhi and turned him from the position of cooperation to non-cooperation. The passing of the Rowlatt Acts, the Jallian Walla Bagh massacre, and the Khilafat was given a new turn to Gandhiji and Indian nationalist politics.

The Anit-Rowlatt satyagraha of 1919 politicised every section of the population of India. Public meetings, rallies became the order of every day especially in the month of March and April 1919. Meanwhile, Gandhiji visited several places in Tamil Nadu and addressed the mass meetings.

The intensification of the national liberation struggle began with new actions on the part of the working class of India. From 1918 onwards series of strikes on a fairly large scale, took place in Bombay, Kanpur, and Ahmadabad and especially in the madras presidency. These were strikes of spontaneous character. As the strike

campaign gathered momentum trade unions began to emerge. They had been organized by nationalist leaders and philanthropists.

The factory workers did not organised struggle for economic demands alone and they did not remain isolated from the rest of the society. They were slowly brought into the vortex of nationalist politics and struggles practiced by the congress activists.

Non-Cooperation Movement

The non-cooperation program was outlined by the Calcutta session and reaffirmed at the Nagpur session in December 1920. Gandhiji was begun slowly drawn into the khilafat movement from which platform he was soon to declare non-cooperation against the British government. To support the khilafat movement Gandhi inaugurated the non-cooperation movement on the first day of August 1920. The khilafat alliance made Hind-Muslim unity powerful.¹

The truly all-India nature of the non-cooperation-khilafat upsurge is best indicated by its penetration of the south. Of the four linguistic regions of south India, only Karnataka remained largely unaffected-its political awaking would come in the 1930s. As elsewhere, the initial appeal to upper and middle-class professional groups had only limited success in Madras presidency, with only 6 out of 682 title-holders surrendering their honors, 36 Tamil and 103 Andhra layers giving up their practice, and only 92 national schools were established with some 5000 pupils. The highlight of the Madras city movement was rather a labour upsurge culminating in a four-month-long strike at the white-owned Buckingham and Carnatic textile mills from July to October 1921 which received the full support of local non-cooperation leaders like Thiru.Vi.Ka. The government (which after the 1921 elections included anti-brahmin justice party ministers tried to break the strike by egging on untouchable Anti-Dravidians against caste-Hindu strikers, while the nationalist leadership made a somewhat unrealistic bid to link the labour movement with Gandhian strategy by distributing charkhas in place of strike funds. The experience of trying to combine nationalism with a labour movement set an elderly madras lawyer and volunteer organizer, Singaravelu Chettiar, on the road to becoming the first communist in south India.²

Gandhi and Shaukat Ali arrived at madras on 12 august 1920. Just before the train arrived at 9.30. am. A very big crowd numbering about 10,000 greeted them. Labour unions were represented by madras electric tramway men's union, kerosene oil workers union, Simpson and co's employees, union, and the government

press employees' union. Muslims' processions were brought in with flags and inscriptions from different parts of the madras city like Triplicane, Perambur Barracks, and George Town. A large meeting attended by 20,000 people was held on the beach on the evening of 12th august 1920.³ Gandhi made a long speech explaining his ideas on non-cooperation.⁴ Gandhi and Shaukatali addressed a meeting of laboureres in the madras city on the evening of 15 august 1920 in the beach opposite the high court.

The visit of Gandhi and Shaukat Ali enthused the people of Tamil Nadu. The madras provincial congress committee in the meeting on 15th august 1920 accepted non-cooperation in principle. The Indian National Congress session at Nagpur at the end of 1920 confirmed the Gandhian programme of non-cooperation.⁵

As an organization, the Indian national congress began to take an active interest in the cause of labour from 1919 onwards. Its efforts found concrete expression in the following resolution passed at the thirty-fifth session held at Amritsar in 1919: “the congress urges its provincial committees and their affiliated associations to promote labour unions throughout the country with the view of improving social, economic and political conditions of the laboring class and securing for them a fair standard of living and a proper place in the politics of India”.⁶ And this was further strengthened by the following resolution passed by the congress at its Nagpur session in 1920:

“this congress at its fullest sympathy with the workers of India in their struggle for securing their legitimate rights through the organisation of trade unions, and places on record its condemnation of the brutal policy of treating the lives of Indian workers as of no account under the false pretext of preserving law and order”.⁷

When Gandhi launched his non-cooperation movement in September 1920, Singaravelar accepted his leadership and became one of the influential leaders of the Congress party in the Madras Presidency. He set fire to his lawyer's gown at a public meeting in May 1921 as a symbol of boycotting the British courts. Singaravelar wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi explaining his action. “I have given up my profession as a lawyer today. I shall follow you as you strive for the people of this country.”

An important event of the period was the visit of Prince of Wales and his consort to India. When they came to Madras, Singaravelar organised a boycott of the visit through an unprecedented *hartal*, which closed down the town. The shutdown was complete, but there were instances of compulsion.

Gandhi in an article in *Young India* criticised the *hartal* and Singaravelar for not imbibing the true spirit of the non-cooperation movement as follows;

“Just two days ago, Mr. Singaravelu Chettiar, President Madras District Congress Council, held a public meeting on the Madras beach. The first resolution congratulated the citizens of Madras on their successful hartal and the second resolution condemned the excesses committed that day. Mr. Prakasam did not agree with your criticism of my letter to you and said in his speech that my letter did not give you sufficient data to draw the conclusions you have drawn. I wired to Mr. Singaravelu not to have this ugly meeting but evidently no notice seems to have been taken of it. It is indeed a great pity that I am not strong enough to induce our non-cooperators to see their mistakes, while they are gloating over their success that the public of Madras have redeemed the pledge given to you regarding the hartal. Yet the grim fact remains that violence and undue coercion have made the hartal a failure for non-violent non-co-operation.”⁸

When the Indian National Congress met in Gaya in 1922, Singaravelar participated, seeing himself as a representative of workers. He spoke in favour of labour legislation and felt that the labour movement in India must be a part of the Congress movement.

Following his speech, the Gaya meeting adopted the Labour Resolution that said,

“It is the opinion of this conference that all Indian labourers should be united, to safeguard their rights and prevent their exploitation and for equal distribution of wealth among all, the various labour and kisan unions should be united and for this purpose, a committee of six has been constituted.”

Singaravelar, however, broke with Congress and on May 1, 1923 founded the Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan (a party of workers and peasants) in Madras. The inauguration was purposely kept for May Day and for the first time in India, under the auspices of the newly formed party, the day was observed as International Workers' Day. On that occasion, again for the first time, the red flag was used in India. Singaravelar made

arrangements to celebrate May Day in two places. One meeting was held on the beach opposite the Madras High Court; the other was held at Triplicane beach.⁹

The Hindu reported the event, “The Labour Kisan Party has introduced May Day celebrations in Madras. Comrade Singaravelar presided over the meeting. A resolution was passed stating that the government should declare May Day as a holiday. The president of the party explained the non-violent principles of the party. There was a request for financial aid. It was emphasised that workers of the world must unite to achieve independence.”¹⁰

Participation of Labourers

The leading labour leaders - Thiru.Vi.Ka., M.Singaravelu, V.Chakkarai Chetti, V.V.Giri, M.S.Ramaswami Ayyangar were all active congressmen. Though details are lacking, it is on record that the 1920s witnessed the establishment of Labour unions by workers of almost every kind in Tamilnadu. The office-bearers of several of these were well-known political activists.

A significant aspect of the Non-Cooperation movement was the major Labour upsurge in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras city. The strike began in the carding department of the Carnatic Mills on 20 May 1921 over the question of wages.¹¹ Thiru.Vi.Ka. intervened and guided the workers. Soon the strike spread to other departments and the mill authorities closed down the mills. The mill management announced that they were withholding the bonus due to all workers and that they should return to work without expecting a bonus.¹² (Thiru. Vi. Kalyana Sundaranar, Thiru.ve.ka. Vazhkkai Kurippugal, Madras. 1944, p.460) The Madras Labour Union condemned the attitude of the mill management and appealed to the Madras Government but in vain. Meanwhile, the workers of the Buckingham Mill joined together on 3rd June 1921 and decided to go on a sympathetic strike unless justice was rendered to the Carnatic Mill workers before 11th June 1921.⁹ No positive reply came from the mill management. So the workers of the Buckingham Mill struck work in the morning of 20th June 1921 in sympathy with the workers of the Carnatic Mills who did not obtain redress of their legitimate grievances.¹³

The M.L.U. was facing a severe financial crisis. The Justice party leader, P.Thyagaraja Chettiyar persuaded the labourers to go back to work. he told them that the black legs could be made permanent unless

the striking workers returned to work immediately. He assured them that there would be allowed to function normally so the workers returned to work in September 1921.¹⁴ the strike lasted for nearly five months.

The failure of the strike did not kill altogether workers' enthusiasm for the nationalist cause. The work of the Non-Cooperation movement developed the spirit of fearlessness and sacrifice among the people. They lost their regard for the British Government.

It may therefore be suggested that workers contributed their role to the successful transformation of the Indian Nationalist Movement especially the non-cooperation movement into a mass movement in the 1920s.

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