

J. HEMACHANDRAN AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT - A STUDY

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In 1960 Hemachandran was elected as a general secretary of the plantation workers union. After that he paid his full attention to the plantation workers union.

Prominent Struggles of plantation workers

In 1960 **Mukkampala Estate** belonged to **AV Thomas and company** was sold by them to **Arch Bishop of Malankara Church at Trivandrum**. The new management denied to employ old workers of the estate and the workers under the leadership of the union waged three month old strike and that was referred to Labour court. **Hemachandran** had played an important part in that struggle.¹

Struggle of the plantation workers for wage increase

Another important struggle was struggle for wage increase. That struggle was organised in 1979 & 80. The strike was an important one because the management refused to pay the Dearness allowance to the workers as per the wage settlement. But the union contented that even after the date of the period of settlement is over and till the date of a new settlement for wage DA is arrived at the old settlement will continue in force and DA has to be paid. But the management was stubborn and refused to pay DA hike. The workers had gone for a strike which was prolonged for 135 days when the strike was going on the 135th day Government of Tamilnadu referred the DA issue to industrial Tribunal and passed an order for the continuance of the DA as per the old settlement till the Tribunal passed an order in the matter. But the managements of the plantations went to the High court for staying the government order. But the High court order directed the employers to pay 60% of the due DA to the workers. The issue of the Dearness allowance was raised by Hemachandran in the Tamilnadu legislative Assembly and also organised the struggle by taking leading part in solving the problem. After continuous agitation the management was constrained to pay full DA atlast. Even now workers of the plantations in Kanyakumari District are getting DA linked with the cost of price & hikes.²

Struggle for plantation workers and the people of Hill areas

In 1964 December, the rural people of Kanyakumari District has to face a big crisis for food materials. Plantation workers union took up this issue and organised a march of the plantation workers and the people of the Hill areas to Nagercoil by walking. The March for food started on Saturday evening reached Nagercoil on Sunday evening and met the District collector of Kanyakumari District and urged to introduce Ration supply of rice to the plantation workers and people of the Hilly area. The government of Tamilnadu accepted that demand and introduced supply of Rice etc through ration shops which is still followed in Vilvancode & Kalkulam Taluks. Hemachandran took a leading part in this struggle along with com. **Perumal, Ali, G.S. Mony, D. Mony** and other trade union leaders.³

This made the government to detain Hemachandran on 29th Dec. 1964 along with MM Ali, G.S. Mony and P. Perumal from Kanyakumari District when the government of India launched an attack against CPM leaders throughout India.

This made Hemachandran and other comrades to remain in jail at **Cuddalore** during the year 1965 and till April 1966. During this Jail life, Hemachandra completed his Law course and obtained Law degree by writing B.L. degree examination during the detention period.⁴

As a General Secretary of the Conductor union

After released from central jail at Cuddalore in 1966 April, Hemachandran was elected as the general secretary of the conductors union of the Government Transport Department in Kanyakumari District. Later the conductors union was developed as the Tamilnadu Transport workers union. This union has organised many activities for ensuring the rights of the transport workers. Among that activities they had organised many strikes. Hemachandran had played a leading role in this transport workers were not paid Bonus till 1970. The workers demanded bonus and organised a strike in 1973. In that strike the entire workers of Kuzhithurai Depot joined strike and as a result the Depot was paralysed from functioning. But since the workmen of Nagercoil Depot had not given sufficient support the strike, was smashed by the Government.

However that strike caused to be the eye opener of the government and from 1974 onward transport workers were also paid Bonus by forming transport corporations.⁵

In 1975 the government decided to abolish transport department and introduced a project which had made workmen as corporation employees by taking away them from the rolls as government, employees. This was known as '**Japan Thittam**' for transport workers. The transport workers throughout Tamilnadu had opposed that

system and organised a strike demanding to give up this system. About 2000 and odd workers under the leadership of **Com V.P. Chinthan** were jailed by the government in Chennai and Kanyakumari Districts. **Comrade Hemachandran** along with **Com. Chanthiran** played an important role in conducting this struggle and also in the negotiations on this. He along with comrades **D. Mony** and **P. Perumal** were jailed at **Palayamkottai** along with thousands and odd transport workers belonged to all trade unions, including CITU.

He had played an important role in organising many strikes and conducting many negotiations to attain various rights of the transport workers as the general secretary of that union in Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli Districts. The importance of his action among the transport workers caused to elect him as the president of the State transport workers federation in 1985 and remained as the president of the federation till 2004.

He has also taken many of the issues of the transport workers in the floor of the Tamilnadu Legislative Assembly when he was MLA of the Tiruvattar Assembly constituency and functioned to ensure that the workers are attaining many benefits.

He had also functioned as the Vice President of All India Road Transport workers federation for many years. In order to insist certain rights of the transport workers from snatching away by the government, Hemachandran observed seven days Hunger fast before the office of the Joint Director of Transport at Nagercoil. He was arrested by the police and removed to hospital.⁶

Role of Hemachandran in the problem of Textile mills in Kanyakumari District

As office bearer of the textile mills workers Association in Kanyakumari District both **Nagammal Mills** at Nagercoil and Kanyakumari District co-operative spin mills at **Aralvoimozhi**. In both mills he had assisted comrade **Nallasivam** in the beginning to resolve the wage issues and work load issues of both mills.

The management of Nagammal mills had launched many measures to suppress the rights of the workers of that mills. They were very eager to exploit workers without paying proper wages and Bonus etc to workers. The workers had also waged stiff fight in all those occasions.

At one stage the management of Nagammal mills declared a lock out in 1975-76. The workers organised an agitation to make the Lock out lifted. In that agitation workmen went throughout the District and mobilised support in fighting out the Lockout. As a result of that fight, management was made to pay wages for the Lockout period illegally imposed on the head of the workers.

The Management of Kanyakumari District Co-operative spinning mills has been extracting higher work load from the workmen but paying lesser wages. Many times the workers had organised strikes against this. As a result of these struggles in which Hemachandran took a leading part, the workmen were able to get many benefits and resolved this demands.⁷

Struggle for mineral workers

Another organisation in which J. Hemachandran had taken a leading part was that of the mineral workers at **Manavalakurichi Indian Rare Earths**. The factory in its process of mechanisation, retrenched a lot of workers. In that fight, due to the attempts of Hemachandran, an order was obtained from the High court of Madras, which set aside the retrenchment order of the IRE Management. But since the management succeeded in making the workmen receiving compensation for retrenchment the order became infractus. Attempts were made during the BJP rule in India & ADMK rule by certain private persons with the support of these governments to make IRE paralysed without allowing it to mine Rawsand, was fought out by CITU and thus protected IRE. Hemachandran played an important role so that the public sector undertaking was protected and functioning continuously.⁸

He had functioned as an office bear and otherwise among Handloom workers, Electricity workers, Temple employees and various other workers such as workmen working in shops and establishments, saw mills etc.

Struggle for cashew nut workers

Cashewnut factory Managements of Kerala had started cashew nut factories in the border areas of Kanyakumari District and deprived dearness allowance and wage hike to the cashew factory workers. An agitation was organised in Vilavancode and Kalkulam Taluk in 1975 by **comrade G.S. Mony** and other leaders of communist (Marxist) party. Cashew factory workers were organised and **Tamilnadu Mundireparuppu Thozhilalar Sangham** was organised and hundreds of workers were paid very low wages and other protective facilities were also not implemented. Hence through this union in which **Hemachandran** was in the forefront, the benefits due to the workmen were fought and obtained. Due to various agitations launched for more than last ten years the workers were able to achieve dearness allowance linked to price rise, gratuity provident fund, etc which were denied to workmen besides permanency to workmen.⁹

Hemachandran had raised the problems of cashew industry and its workmen in the Legislative Assembly many times and was able to speak half an hour in the discussion in the Assembly on the issues of cashew factory industry and their workmen in 1985.

Struggle for Southern Railway workers

Thousands of workmen were employed by Southern Railways Management, for the execution of the Tirunelveli - Trivandrum Railway lines. These workers were organised under the banner of CITU and many movements were organised for the permanency and monetary benefits entitled to Railway workers. In these movements Hemachandran was in the forefront and by his attempts along with other co-leaders and functionaries. Hundreds of Railway workers engaged for the construction of the Railway lines were absorbed by the Railway Managements for regular service and had become permanent staffs.

Struggle for Electricity Board workers

In 1966 construction workers employed for the **Kodayar Hydro electric scheme** were organised to form an union and many of them were absorbed to the regular service of Electricity board and working continuously in various Division of maintenance & Distribution of Electricity.¹⁰

Role of Hemachandran during the time of Tsunami

Hemachandran functioned among the fishing workers of Kanyakumari District from the days they were affected by the Tsunami. As a result of that he was elected as the president of the fishing workers Association of Tamilnadu. He had functioned for the protection and betterment of those workers.

As a result of the activities among workmen engaging in fishing industry, Hemachandran was nominated by the government of Tamilnadu in the fishing workers Welfare Board when it was formed.¹¹

As CITU Leader

Centre of Indian Trade union (CITU) was formed as a new central organ of Trade unions in 1970 at Calcutta. Hemachandran was elected as a member of the general council of CITU in its first conference itself. In 1972 he was elected in the state conference as one of the state joint secretaries. He has been functioning in the CITU from 1970 onwards. He had functioned in the CITU as state secretary, State Vice President and functioned as the District Secretary of Kanyakumari District. He has been functioning as President of the CITU, Tamilnadu State Committee from 1993 onwards and as a All India working committee member he visited many foreign countries.¹²

Hemachandran had visited **Russia** and **Denmark** as a representative of the CITU Delegation to the world peace conference in 1986. He had visited **China** in 1984 as a member of the Delegation of All India Lawyers union which was headed by the retired judge of the Supreme Court **Mr. H.R. Khanna**. In that trip he had visited **Canton, Hongkong, Shanghai** and **Beijing** at that time.¹³

As a lawyer

He had passed his Law degree while in detention and enrolled as an Advocate in 1966 after his release from Jail. After a few months practice he confined his practice only in labour matters.

He had been conducting cases related to workmen especially in Labour courts, Industrial tribunals. He had won many cases by thrashing out the Dismissal orders from service of workmen such as Harris of Kanyaspin, Raghuvaran of transport, Krishnan of plantations and many others. In industrial tribunal and Labour courts he had won many cases for workmen in wage, service etc.

Industrial Trepartite committees

He had functioned and fought for many of the issues of the workmen in plantation Labour Advisory committee of the government of Tamilnadu and Industrial committee on plantations.

As a communist party worker

In the year 1950 while studying in the college, he got acquaintance with communist party leaders at Trivandrum. During vacation when he came home for vacation, he got acquaintance with local communist party leaders such as **G.S. Mony, M.K. Krishnan** etc. With this acquaintance he used to go often to the plantation workers union. This acquaintance and visit had developed in course of time and allied with the activities of the communist party. In 1950 he became a member of the group formed in **Arunkkarai** used to participate in the activities of plantation workers movements.

In 1951-52 general elections, J.H. participated and worked for the candidate of communist party supported by peoples front in Thiruvattar constituency **Mr. Kulandaiswamy**. After that elections he went to study at Trivandrum. There J.H. came into contact with party leadership at Trivandrum and functioned for some time as president of **SFI** (Students Federation of India) Trivandrum city committee.

Late JH worked in the Karamanai branch of the Trivandrum party committee for some time. Later JH became a Member of the Trivandrum city committee of the party. Till 1962 he worked as the city committee Member of the party.

In 1960-1961 JH joined in the activities of the party in Kanyakumari District. In 1962 beginning onwards he started functioning with the communist party of Kanyakumari District. In the meanwhile he has elected as the general secretary of the plantation workers union and hence concentrated in the party's work of organising the workers of the plantation and their union affairs. He was elected to the District committee of the party in 1964 and later to the Tamilnadu state committee of the

party in 1978. Since then JH was continuing in the state committee and elected to the state secretariat in 2005.¹⁴

As a party District committee member JH participated various struggles organised by the party JH such as rehabilitating the landless peasants of Pechiparai village in the forest disputed land and about 300 peasants got dwelling houses in that colony. Like wise in the agitation of landless peasants of Theroor near Suchindrum in putting dwelling houses in the grassing land at Theroor. The landless peasants of Vazhayat Vayal was able to get house patta to their houses due to the agitation of the communist party.¹⁵

Struggle for plantation workers in 1973

An important struggle of the plantation workers which was done against the illegal lock out of New Ambadi Estate in Kulasekharam in the year 1973. The Management refused to make the casual workers employed in the estate for field work retaliated, against the agitation of the workers and declared a lock out which prolonged for six months.¹⁶ As part of the workers struggle to lift the lock out. Hemachandran made a hunger fast before the R.D.O. Office Padmanabhapuram for seven days. At last the workers of the estate, hundreds in number took part in Road Roko struggle were arrested and sent to jail. Few women workers also took part in that agitation and went to jail. As a result of this powerful struggle, the management was compelled to lift the lock out and made a good majority of the workmen in the field operations as permanent workers.¹⁷

Agitation of the government Rubber plantation workers for Bonus in 1982

The government of Tamilnadu response to the demand of the plantation worker's union ordered to plant rubber under government control in the western ghat hilly areas of Kanyakumari District. About 4750 hectares of land was planted with rubber. This was called government Rubber plantations from Kiriparai to Maruthamparai. About 3000 load workers are employed in the plantations. Eventhough same wages of private plantations were given but refused to pay bonus to workers as alone in private plantations.¹⁸ Since the workload and trees tapped are same in private sector, the workmen of the government Rubber plantation organised a strike lasted for 134 days for bonus. In the starting period, government took shield under bonus act and refused to pay bonus. However Hemachandran raised the issue in the floor of the Assembly and spoke there. Hearing the speech made out by Hemachandran in the Assembly the Hon. Chief Minister Thiru M.G. Ramachandran intervened in the matter and formed a corporation for rubber plantation and paved the way to pay bonus for the workers. Now the corporation of Rubber Plantation Employers are also getting Bonus.

END NOTES

1. Personal Interview with **C. Padhmanaban**, Plantation worker on 3.5.2019, New Ambadi Estate.
2. Personal Interview with **K. Vellappan**, Plantation worker on 14.4.19, New Ambadi Estate.
3. Personal Interview with **N. Thankappan**, Plantation worker on 20.3.19, Newambadi Estate.
4. Personal Interview with **V. Kesavan**, Plantation worker on 20.3.19, Newambadi estate.
5. Personal Interview with **K. Babu**, Plantation worker on 18.05.19, Newambadi estate.
6. Personal Interview with **V. Divakaran**, Plantation worker on 18.05.19, Newambadi estate.
7. Personal Interview with **K. Sasitharan**, Plantation worker on 18.05.19, Newambadi estate.
8. Personal Interview with **Gopinathan**, Plantation worker on 17.04.19, A.B.C. Estate.
9. Personal Interview with **K. Sasi**, Plantation worker on 17.04.19, A.B.C. Estate.
10. Personal Interview with **M. Krishnan**, Plantation worker on 17.04.19, A.B.C. Estate.
11. Personal Interview with **S. Joseph**, Ex-Labourer, Omena plantation.
12. Personal Interview with **K. Thankappan**, Plantation worker, Newambadi estate.
13. Personal Interview with **G. Iyappan**, Plantation worker on 18.04.19, Newambadi estate.
14. Personal Interview with **J. Hemachandran**, on 18.04.19, Nagercoil.
15. Personal Interview with **C. Raman Pillai**, on 18.04.19, Plantation worker, Newambadi estate.
16. Personal Interview with **V.K. Sasidharan**, on 20.04.19, Ex-Labourer, Omenapuram estate.
17. Personal Interview with **C. Chandiran**, on 20.04.19, Kamathenu estate.
18. Personal Interview with **P. Nadarajan**, on 23.05.19, Govt. Rubber Plantation, Mayelar.