



FORMATION OF MADRAS NATIVE ASSOCIATION - A STUDY

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ABSTRACT.

After the Vellore Mutiny, the Madras Presidency, especially the Tamil Country, became relatively peaceful. The Marathas, Sikhs and others resisted the British at different times. The 1857 revolt was a major event but this did not affect the Madras Presidency. The growth of Madras during the Nineteenth Century was remarkable and it dwarfed all other towns, eclipsing ancient dynastic capitals like Madurai, Kanclii, Tanjore and supplanting more recent and commercial centres like Calicut. The growth of the Metropolis created a new middle class and an elitist group. The elite took the first step in introducing the modern political party system and caused the emergence of a new political consciousness in the Madras Presidency.¹

Keywords: *Literary society, Association, Madras Native Association*

INTRODUCTION:

Urban life in Madras, by its very complexity and competitiveness, was compelling many Hindus to redefine their relationship with each other. When the Hindus first migrated to the City, caste bodies emerged to regulate the activities of their members and protect their traditional rights from encroachment by rival groups. However, the rapid changes that overtook Madras, following the establishment of British power in the area, coupled with the slow erosion of certain traditional institutions and habits, called for relationships other than those based upon kinship and caste.²

Hindu Literary Society

An early example of this new kind of relationship was the Hindu Literary Society. Founded during the 1830s, this body admitted members from different Hindu castes and occupations. Within its ranks were found Brahmins as well as Non-Brahmins, Hindu pundits as well as Merchants. This Society organized periodic meetings and lectures to review the country's issues. It was the nearest to a modern Association, to be found in Madras during the first half of the Nineteenth Century.

The Hindu Literary Society became somewhat inactive during the 1840s, at a time when the anti-missionary agitation was reaching new heights. This agitation, among other things, had resulted in a heightened sense of Hindu communal solidarity in Madras. There were appeals for a voluntary association to give effective direction to this new born Hindu Consciousness. Some Hindu leaders, notably Srinivasa Pillay and Lakshminarasu Chetty, however, favored the idea of reviving the Hindu Literary Society, hoping thereby to instill new vigor and purpose into its activities.³ In March 1864, a meeting was held in Madras to revive the Society. Srinivasa Pillay, while calling for unity among the Hindus, argued that failure to achieve it would be a great impediment to their political advancement. This attempt to breathe new life into the Society failed but failure only underlined the need for a new political association which would give expression to the growing

Hindu solidarity in Madras.

Formation of Madras Native Association

The initiative to form a political organization did not come, however, from Madras but from Bengal where the British Indian Association was launched in October 1851.⁴ Formed for “a period of not less than - three years,” the Association’s immediate aim was to voice India's grievances during the coming enquiry into the affairs of the English East India Company. Believing that its representations would carry great weight if they were made simultaneously by the natives of every part of British India, or by a Society to represent them, the British Indian Association solicited the collaboration of other Indian centres. Madras was among those invited to co-operate, either by forming a branch body affiliated to the British Indian Association or by having an independent association with broadly similar objectives. This invitation was discussed in February 1852 at a large meeting of the native Inhabitants of the Presidency and it was then decided to form a Madras Branch of the British Indian Association. The constitution of the parent body was adopted and a Committee of Management was elected to discharge the routine matters of the Branch Association.⁵

It is apparent that this Association was largely the product of the Hindu Caucus which had spearheaded the opposition to the Missionaries during the preceding decade. The Caucus consisted mainly of Merchants belonging to the Tamil and Telugu Non-Brahmin Castes. The dominant figure was undoubtedly Lakshminarasu Chetty.⁶ His popularity among the Hindus of Madras stemmed partly from his courageous fight against official involvement in missionary operations and partly from his readiness to sacrifice his wealth towards the Hindu Cause. The *Crescent*, for example, was known to be ran at considerable loss to Lakshminarasu Chetty. He brought into the Committee of Management a number of Hindu Merchants, notably Appasamy Pillay, a senior partner of the agency firm, P.Appasamy Pillay, P.Veeraperumal Pillay, a partner in the same firm and A.AIwar Chetty, proprietor of a large provision firm in the Black Town.⁷

Relations between the British Indian Association and the Madras Branch ran into difficulties from the start. The Madras leaders found their freedom of action “unexpectedly impeded by the union of the Madras Association with that of Calcutta”.⁸ There were also differences over the question of reform proposals to be submitted to the British Parliament. These differences became evident when Bengal drafted a petition, which according to Lakshminarasu Chetty, related almost wholly to the plans and recommendations of the change of Government and for the exaltation of the higher classes of Hindus while ignoring the grand object for which the Association was founded. What precipitated the matter was the decision of Bengali leaders to circulate the petition in England without securing prior approval of Madras.⁹ The leaders of Madras resented this arbitrary action of Calcutta Association and decided to form an independent organization to serve the interests of South India. The new body was called the Madras Native Association (hereafter referred to as MNA) and it was inaugurated at a meeting in July 1852.¹⁰

The immediate task before this Association was to present its case in a formal petition to the British Parliament. Data were painstakingly collected and an appeal was launched for funds to cover expenses, estimated at Rs. 50,000. By December 1852, the document was completed, with Harley putting the finishing touches and a public meeting was convened to seek endorsement before dispatching it to England. The MNA summarized the main grievances of South India as follows:

The MNA was sharply critical of the Company's Rule and dealt with in detail the shortcomings of the revenue and judicial system in the Madras Presidency. Some of its harsh criticisms, however, were reserved for the religious policies of the Indian authorities. The MNA objected strongly to the Caste Disabilities Removal Act and charged that in its implementation, the Act had been stretched even beyond the principle on which it was professedly framed. It also took exception to the diversion of state funds to missionary schools under the Grants-in-Aid System, contending that such a policy would tend to distinctly identify the State with missionary work. The British Parliament was also asked to legislate to disallow the Indian authorities from enacting laws which insult and outrage the Indians and their religion.¹¹

This criticism of the British authorities, particularly the strictures on their religious policies, created a

split within the ranks of the MNA. One faction, led by Srinivasa Pillay, was aggrieved at the tone and much of the content of the petition and decided to secede.¹² It must, however, be pointed out that there had always been an element of friction between Srinivasa Pillay and Lakshminarasu Chetty, stemming principally from their perception of the role that the British Raj should play in effecting social change in India.¹³ Srinivasa Pillay, who visualized an India free from the shackles of caste, superstition and poverty, believed that the British Rulers had a part to play in bringing about this transformation. He wanted the Indians to give whole-hearted support to their Rulers in achieving this grand design. Srinivasa Pillay had a long record of service in various charities and other organization, including the Monegar Choultry, the Pachaiyappa Charities and the Madras Literary Society. In these bodies, he had endeavored to cultivate cordial ties with the Europeans, be they officials, merchants or missionaries. He believed that such ties would strengthen the bond of goodwill between India and the West and elicit European help in the regeneration of the Indian people.¹⁴

Lakshminarasu Chetty, on the other hand, did not share much of Srinivasa Pillay's zeal for rapid westernization or for seeking British aid to bring about social change in India. He was not opposed to social change per se but he believed that change must come from within the community rather than from without. He was strongly opposed to the Missionaries and the State, being an alien one, meddling in the religious and social affairs of the Indian people. Religious Neutrality, Lakshminarasu Chetty believed, was the correct policy for the British Rulers to adopt. Where they departed from this policy of Neutrality, he wanted the Indians to declare their opposition and appeal to the Court of Directors and the British Parliament for corrective measures.

After the break with the MNA, Srinivasa Pillay and his supporters formed the Hindu Progressive Improvement Society in November 1852.¹⁵ The objectives of this body included the promotion of widow remarriage, the encouragement of female education and the uplifting of depressed castes. Many of Srinivasa Pillay's coadjutors in this venture were his Hindu friends who were associated with him in the management of charitable organizations, like the Monegar Choultry and Pachaiyappa Charities.

His closest ally was M. Venkataraylu Naidu, a Pleader in the Sadar Court, who shared many of Srinivasa Pillay's ideas on the regeneration of India. Venkataraylu Naidu was born into a poor family and his education was largely financed by charitable friends and relatives. When he entered Government Service, promotions came rapidly but he was summarily dismissed by the Tweed Dale Administration for allegedly transmitting official papers to the *Crescent*. He resorted to the court to prove his innocence but he never regained his post and he decided to enter the legal profession. Despite these misfortunes, Venkataraylu Naidu harbored no hostility towards the British. He fervently believed that Indians could only advance by approaching closer and closer to their Rulers and called for complete identification with European interests to bring about the regeneration of India. For many years, he had been a vigorous advocate of widow remarriage and wrote often in the columns of the local newspaper urging some action.

In July 1853, Venkataraylu Naidu started his own paper, the '*Rising Sun*' mainly to focus discussion on the social problems affecting the Hindu Community.¹⁶ In the same year, with the death of Srinivasa Pillay, he assumed charge of the Hindu Progressive Improvement Society and continued to support the causes his predecessor had championed. Schools were established for children of depressed castes, scholarships were given to needy students and support was obtained for social legislations like the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Venkataraylu Naidu was also anxious to provide the youth of Madras with the opportunity to read widely and acquire the facility of public speaking. Two Societies called, the Hindu Reading Room and the Hindu Debating Society, were founded and they attracted students from various educational institutions in Madras. Government support was welcomed mainly to acquire official publications free of charge and prominent Europeans were invited to deliver lectures or conduct discussion groups. Through such means, Venkataraylu Naidu hoped to stimulate the spirit of inquiry which, he believed, would trigger a mighty revolution in India. But such grandiose hopes were rather misplaced in the conservative world of mid-nineteenth century Madras. Hindu opinion was hardly prepared to accept the radical ideas emanating from the leaders of the Hindu Progressive Improvement Society. Venkataraylu Naidu died in 1863, and with him died many of his projects,

including the *Rising Sun*.¹⁷

The MNA was not adversely affected by the secession of Srinivasa Pillay and his friends. If anything, their withdrawal strengthened the hands of the faction led by Lakshminarasu Chetty, which then pressed ahead for political and economic reform of South India. Throughout the 1850s, the period of its active existence, the MNA remained a vigilant and unsparing critic of the Government's policies and actions. In 1852, it had called for a full scale inquiry into Indian affairs before the Charter of the Company be renewed. This demand was supported by similar Associations in India as well as the India Reform Society which had been formed in London in March 1853. But the British Government rejected their request.¹⁸ The MNA was not despondent. In October 1853, when Danby Seymour, Chairman of the Indian Reform Society, visited India to make an on the spot investigation, the MNA nominated two of its leading members to accompany him on a tour of the Mofussil. The party visited a number of centers, including Cuddalore, Tiruchirappalli, Kumbakonam, Salem, Tirunelveli, Calicut and Mangalore.¹⁹ From the evidence he gathered, Seymour was convinced of the validity of the general complaints which the MNA had listed in its petition to the British Parliament. On his return to England, Seymour called for an inquiry into the land tenure system in South India and alleged that excessive land tax had led to many abuses in its collection, including the use of torture by officials. The Madras Authorities agreed to investigate these charges and appointed a Torture Commission which found evidence of torture perpetrated by Indian revenue and police officials.²⁰

One of the problems with which the MNA had to contend with stemmed directly from its relationship with the local officials. Until the formation of MNA, the Madras Authorities had been able to discharge their responsibilities largely immune to public scrutiny or sustained criticism. The advent of MNA altered the situation and officials soon found out that they had to face a small but active band of Hindu leaders, determined to probe into Governmental affairs and criticize policies and expose official misdemeanors. What irked officials even more was the MNA method of securing redressal of its grievances not by directing them to the local authorities but by appealing directly to the British. Such tactics, the officials lamented, encouraged unwarranted Parliamentary interference in Indian affairs. Moreover, they bemoaned that the Civil Service in India was being attacked from all sides, including by such respectable organs as '*The Time*'.

Official antagonism towards the MNA increased after Seymour's visit to South India. Seymour's inquiries into revenue collection, especially his efforts to gather evidence of torture, annoyed local officials. Also irritating was the two leaders of MNA who accompanied Seymour to enquiries in the Mofussil. Local leaders in Cuddalore, Tiruchirappalli, Salem and Tirunelveli were persuaded to start branches as a means of helping the MNA with funds and information.²¹ In South Arcot, the Collector intervened to put an end to what was called "This Extortion". In 1854, a more effective way was found to undermine political activity in the Mofussil. Following the discovery in the Guntur District of a case where certain agents, claiming to represent the MNA, had raised subscriptions on a promise of securing tax remission, the Madras Government issued a proclamation throughout the Districts, warning agents and subscribers that such actions were liable to criminal prosecution. The MNA protested its innocence and the Torture Commission absolved it of any connection with the Guntur agents. But the Madras Authorities steadfastly refused to withdraw the proclamation and the effect of which was to frighten the branch association into abandoning their ties with the parent body in the Metropolis.

Despite this clash with the local authorities, the MNA showed no perceptible signs of abdicating its role as the watchdog of Hindu interests in South India. Petitions were regularly sent to the British Parliament. Public meetings were held from time to time to discuss local grievances. Memoranda were presented to important dignitaries, enumerating the demands of the Association for acknowledging their services to the Country.

One such address was presented to Lord Canning in February 1856 on his assumption of Governor - Generalship.²²

A continuous watch was maintained on the activities of local officials and their misdemeanors and highhanded behavior were promptly exposed. One such incident involved a Tahsildar who was accused of

torturing some weavers in Chingleput District to realize arrears in Loom Tax. The MNA claimed, in a petition to Parliament in January 1856, that the Tahsildar had acted on the strength of an order issued by the Collector. The incident was discussed in the House of Lords while the Madras Board of Revenue initiated its own inquiry which ultimately led to the dismissal of the Tahsildar and the censure of the Collector. This, however, was not the kind of justice which the MNA was seeking. The MNA only wanted to demonstrate that contrary to what the Torture Commission reported, Indian officials resorted to practices of this nature only under instructions or covert encouragement of their European Superiors.

One subject, which continued to generate controversy throughout the fifties in the Nineteenth Century, was the question of Christian proselytization. Hindu suspicions about official Collusion with the Missionaries were never completely allayed and from time to time, Hindu leaders alleged a pro-missionary bias in the actions of local authorities.²³ This underlying mistrust of the Executive was best illustrated during the riots in Tirunelveli in December 1853. Against the background of rising religious tension in South India as a result of renewed missionary pressure against the policy of religious neutrality, the decision of the European Magistrate in Tiiuneveli to allow a Christian burial party to use a street occupied by the higher castes led to a violent clash in which ten Hindus were killed and nineteen wounded. The Madras Government approved the action of district officials and ordered the rigorous prosecution of those suspected of rioting.

The MNA was unhappy with this order and convened a public meeting in April 1859 to discuss this and other related issues. The meeting attracted many Muslims from the Metropolis and some Hindu leaders from the Mofussil. The meeting approved a Memorial to the Secretary of State for India which attributed the Tirunelveli Disturbance to the machinations of Missionaries. It was claimed that the Magistrate's decision to reverse the old ruling which disallowed Christians the use of the street occupied by higher castes, was the result of the Missionary Pressure. The MNA was equally critical of the way in which the Tirunelveli investigations had been handled. It complained that instead of appointing an imperial commission, the Madras Government had entrusted the task to persons "implicated in the unhappy affair".

Sir Charles Travclyan, who had just assumed the Governorship of the Presidency, accepted the Memorial as "a genuine expression of the native mind" and regarded it as creditable that "the faithful people of the South have had recourse to the legal and constitutional mode of petition" in airing their grievances. Though not always agreeing with the sentiments expressed in the Memorial, he nevertheless felt that Missionary agitation in England has created widespread fear among the inhabitants of South India that the existing policy might be changed and of the "tremendous machine of the Government being brought into the field against them". Trevelyan believed that a firm and authoritative declaration upholding the policy of religious neutrality would put an end to these fears. The Tirunelveli Riots of 1858 provided the last occasion when the MNA held a mass meeting in Madras. During the next three years, the MNA functioned in a very sporadic fashion. In April 1860, it appealed to the British Parliament, calling for the restoration of the Tanjore Raj and in the same month, petitioned the Indian Legislative Council protesting against the proposed License Duty and Income Tax. In March 1862, a deputation from the Association called on the Governor of Madras to plead the case of the Mirasdars in respect of the right over wasteland. Four months later, the MNA was said to be "practically defunct", and moves were afoot for the formation of a new "Native Association". Thus, after a decade of active life, the MNA had faded into oblivion.²⁴

Though the reasons for its demise are not clear from available evidence, the MNA was the first real attempt at organizing a political association along Western lines in South India. Although founded by the Hindu commercial elite in Madras, which felt that its established traditions were threatened by the actions of the Christian Missions, this Association cannot be regarded as the mere mouthpiece of the narrow interests of the group nor was it the platform for the ventilation of specifically religious grievances. In fact, its signal contribution lay in its elaborate criticisms of the excessive public taxation in South India and its graphic portrayal of the corrupt machinery through which revenue was being collected. The Madras Government responded to these criticisms and it was reflected, for instance, in its decision to reduce the Land Tax in 1855.

This is a testimony to the organizing skill of the leaders of MNA in harnessing the instruments of modern political protest to secure redressal of their grievances.²⁵

The dissolution of MNA symbolized the decline of the importance of the Hindu commercial elite in the civic life of Madras. Propelled into prominence in the 1840's on the crest of the anti-missionary sentiment then prevailing in South India, these elite had given institutional expression to its power by organizing the MNA. However, as anti-missionary feelings slowly subsided during the 1860s, the influence of the elite also waned and a rival group emerged to provide an alternative focus of leadership in the Madras Presidency. Members of the later group were products of the Madras High Schools, who had achieved distinction in the services of the British Indian Administration.²⁶

The need for a voluntary association had been felt in South India ever since the Madras Native Association became defunct during the early 1860s. The absence of a recognized vehicle of political expression in South India and the disadvantages that stemmed from its absence, were sharply emphasized during the 1870s when the Indian Association in Calcutta was beginning to make an impact on the Indian political scene by its determined opposition to unpopular policies associated with Lord Lytton's Regime. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha rendered timely service during the famine in Deccan. When there was a famine in the South in 1876-1878, the need for such a provincial association for the Madras Presidency was very much felt. The need for an active and respectable association which would agitate incessantly against official iniquities and seek redressal from the highest British Authorities, including the Parliament, was progressively felt in Madras.

Conclusion:

Attempts were made to revive the Madras Native Association. These attempts started in 1877 and succeeded only in 1881. C.V. Renganata Sastri was elected as the President of the revived MNA but he died in July 1881. Subsequently, V. Bhashyam Iyengar assumed the Presidentship. The MNA functioned upto 1883. Attempts to revive MNA failed because of the failure to keep pace with the changing political situation in South India.

End Notes

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