



NATIVE SOCIAL REFORMERS AND SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE 19th CENTURY TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

On the eve of the British conquest, the Tamil society was socially and economically unequal. During the British rule, the social stratification began to change, and India witnessed the era of social and religious reforms. Services of the Christian Missionaries and the British Raj affected the social life of the Tamils. Enactment of Social reform legislations, opening up of job opportunities to all, the growth of public opinion and the policy adopted by the Government caused social awakening among the masses. Contemporarily, native social reformers and new caste associations demanded their rights and privileges. They played a significant role in Tamil Nadu politics. The British rule brought western technology, institutions, knowledge, beliefs and values. Consequently, the social structure and the economic relationships of castes and groups began to change. In this research paper an attempt has been made to analyse the role of native social reformers and subsequent changes in the texture of Tamil society.

Key Words: *Reformers, Native Associations, Social Evils, Awakening, Social Change,*

Introduction

The rule of the Imperial power, western education, the touch of the western philosophy and the introduction of new technological devices awakened the Indians during the 19th Century. People of the 19th Century British India got awareness regarding their life condition. India had peculiar social institution called caste system, which has had been a graded form of social structure. In which people of India have been experiencing fixed social status from birth to death. It had associated with so many social evils like

untouchability, denial of education, restricted movement in the society, and so on. During the 19th Century, the depressed communities came to know about their social status due to the activities of native reformers. All these channeled the emergence of social reformers from various strata of the society.¹

The social reformers aimed to put an end to the unequal structure of the society. Thus wanted gradual process of changes in the social structure, radical and revolutionary changes to wipe out the inequality completely which existed among the Hindus and the glorification of Hindu and the Vedic past.²

Social Reformers of 19th Century Tamil Nadu and their Activities

During nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries, many social reformers emerged in Tamil Nadu. They were Sri Vaikunda Swamigal [1802-1851], St. Ramalinga Swamigal [1823-1874], Ayothidasa Kaviraja Pandithar [1845-1914], Rettamalai Seenivasan [1860-1945], Sir Chettur Sankaran Nair [b.1857], T. John Rathnam [1846-1942], Rev. T. B. Pandian [b.1861], R. Veeriyar [1882-1938], Subramania Bharathi [1882-1921], Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram [1883-1953] and others. Majority of the social reformers hailed from the neglected sections of the population.³ They fought for the cause of the weaker sections. They condemned the superior position of the Brahmins.⁴ They appealed for the social integration of the low caste people and advocated the principle of equality.⁵ They wanted to abolish untouchability, economic inequality, caste disparities and superstitious beliefs which were plagues of the Tamil social structure.⁶ For integrating the downtrodden sections of the population, they started associations and organisations of their own. They advocated casteless society.

Vaikunda Swamigal started an organisation called Samathuva Sangam.⁷ In 1872, St. Ramalinga Swamigal started Samarasa Suddha Sanmarga Sabhai.⁸ Through these organisations, they wanted to achieve social integration.⁹

In 1881, Ayothidasa Kaviraja Pandithar founded the Dravida Mahajana Sangam which attempts led to bring out the Colonial Census Survey. He insisted that the depressed classes should henceforth be referred to as Poorva Tamizhar (ancient Tamilians).¹⁰ On 1 December, 1881, the first Conference of the Dravida Mahajana Sangam was convened. Ten resolutions were passed in that Conference.¹¹ They were,

to severely punish those who refer to the depressed classes as 'pariahs', to start separate schools for the children of the depressed classes, and 50 p.c. concession in school fee, permission to continue their studies still graduation with stipend, employment in Government service on the basis of educational qualification and conduct, appointment of depressed class representatives to report to the Government on their grievances, section 46A of the Prison Manual should be abrogated, since it assigns only lowly jobs such as scavenging to depressed class prisoners in jail, depressed classes to collect drinking water from public wells and tanks, bar on Pariahs in offices and courts, depressed classes should be chosen for the post of village 'munsiffs' and 'maniakarars' to contact district officers directly and air their grievances and seek remedial measures.¹²

All these demands were sent to Veeraraghava Chariar, the then general secretary of the Indian National Congress [INC], but there was no response to the demands of the Ayothidasar on behalf of the Panchamas.¹³ Main objectives of these resolutions were published in 1908, in 'Tamizhan', which was a journal started by him in 1907.¹⁴

In 1892, Rettamalai Seenivasan started an association called 'Parayar Mahajana Sangam' with the main objective of uplifting the down-trodden sections of the society.¹⁵ It was later known as 'Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha'.¹⁶

Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha

It served as the first political organisation of the depressed class¹⁷ to promote the rights and liberties of the depressed classes.¹⁸ R. Veerayan, M.C. Raja, J. Sivashanmugham Pillai and others were the active members of this association. R. Seenivasan got support from the people to run this association,¹⁹ which was particular in protecting the social, economic, political and educational rights of the depressed classes.²⁰ He started a newspaper called Parayan to reveal the conditions of the depressed class people.²¹ He highlighted the position of the depressed classes through the journals and newspapers of England. The British Government appointed a senior most Civil Servant to investigate and protect the rights of the downtrodden sections of the Indian Society. Though the British Government gave a chance to the depressed classes in

the educational institutions, they were not given opportunities in the Brahmin dominated institutions.²² In 1898, the association made a complaint to the Government about the condition of the depressed class students in the schools and school fee concessions were not being implemented by several institutions.²³ Further, the association demanded educational concessions, particularly for the qualifying examinations of the subordinate medical services.²⁴

The Government issued a G.O. which provided educational facilities for the depressed classes and informed that for a school having seven students the Government was ready to pay the fund for their educational developments.²⁵ With the efforts of R.Seenivasan, the British Government ordered to build a Madras Municipal School. In the first half of the twentieth century also he worked for the political betterment of the depressed classes.²⁶

Sir C. Sankaran Nair was the President of the Madras branch of the Depressed class Mission Society, which was established in 1909.²⁷ The main objectives of the society were to elevate the depressed classes in education, public employments, imparting higher ideals of religion, morality, personal character and good citizenship.²⁸

In 1885, T. John Rathnam started a magazine called 'Dravida Pandian' through which he expressed the sufferings of the depressed classes. In 1882, he established an association called Dravida Kazhagam in order to promote the conditions of the downtrodden people.²⁹

In 1892, T. B. Pandian exposed the grievances of the depressed classes by submitting a memorial to Beily Baron Wenlock, the Governor of Madras and he gave suggestions for their betterment.³⁰ He stressed the importance of the Government role in uplifting the depressed masses even in England. In many public meetings, he revealed the conditions of the low class people. As a result, the Society for the Elevation of the Pariahs, and British Women's Pariah Emancipation Society were established. Many British people associated themselves with these associations and their services.³¹

In the nineteenth century, R. Veeraiyan served as a cause for the social awakening among the masses.³² As a member of the depressed class community, he exposed their difficulties and sufferings in the Madras Legislative Council and in other public meetings.³³

He condemned the Government in the Council for keeping the depressed class people outside the court of Pollachi and the Government to accept the term Adi-Dravida in the place of Panchamas in the official records. Consequently, the term Adi-Dravida was adopted in the official records.³⁴ Subramania Bharathi, the poet inspired the feelings of the people and awakened them³⁵ and he was a social reformer.³⁶

Succeeding Bharathi, Thiru. V. Kalyanasundaram was against the practice of caste system, advocated inter-caste marriages³⁷ and fought for women uplift and rights of labourers.

Conclusion

The heterogeneous population of Tamil country graded in the vertical form, had undergone some efforts for social changes by certain social reformers in 19th Century. Contemporarily, new caste associations which demanded their rights and privileges played a significant role in Tamil Nadu politics. It is obvious that the social awakening in Tamil Nadu took place due to various disparities on caste grounds. Contemporarily, new caste associations which demanded their rights and privileges played a significant role in Tamil Nadu politics. Native social reformers of 19th Century Tamil Nadu took efforts to educate the people to know about their rights and privileges. Even though the native social reformers played a vital role, there were no fruitful results. But their activities paved the way for the genesis of an organised form of non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu.

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