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Socio- Economic Upliftment of Peasants in Thanjavur

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Abstract:

The Communists started a labour organization under the name Tholilali and through that they tried to unite all classes of labour into an immense organization. When once completely organized under the guidance of the communists, they wanted it to be easily converted as the vanguard of the revolution. He wanted a few communists to organize until the organization became complete. They were expected to run the organization within the limits of legality Tholilali. Till the whole labours is effectively organized this organized was to pay its attention mainly to the economic problem of the workers, their education, their health and other immediate requirements, arranged strikes of small groups and called upon several strikes, etc. The communist activities were to begin among them while the slogery of socialism was maintained. The Communists in Tamil Nadu gave importance not only to the labourers but, also to the peasants and tried to organize them. Singaravelu was the first Communist leader to think in terms of organizing and uniting both the labourers and the kisans farmers of Tamil Nadu. He considered the peasants as the ally of the working class. His efforts in this direction were unique and pioneering in Tamil Nadu. The kisans had, all through the years, tried to exhibit a tendency to organize them to fight for their social upliftment. The first organized effort on the part of the peasants was attempted by the communists and the Socialists and a definite platform was created by them to ventilate their grievances. Efforts were started by the communists to mobilize the kisans. Singaravelu brought the labourers and the kisans under a single party. The work started by Singaravelu was strengthened by Amir Hyder Khan's concrete programme to organize the kisans. To this member of eminent leaders like Kandasamy, Annaji, M. V. Sundaram, Jambunath Kaushik and others contributed a lot.

1. Introduction

The Madras Presidency of those days consisted of Tamil Nadu Malabar District and parts of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. It was one of the most extensive provinces of British India. The Government in this region under the control of the Governor and his Council of three members. The members held office for five years. During the British rule of India all the high posts were held by the British people. The Government of India Act 1919 provided for diarchy in the provinces and it introduced limited responsible government. Elections were held under this Act, and the Justice Party and the congress Party thus came into existence in Tamalnadu.¹ They believed that others would in course of time join them and help them in their labours. It would be appropriate to mention here how Kalyanasundara Mudaliars emerged as a great personality in Tamil Nadu politics. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar became the General Secretary of the South Indian Labour Union Golden Rock, and he was considered to be one of the underground Communist organizers of Tiruchirapalli.²

1.1. Communists Started a Labour Organization

The Communists started a labour organization under the name Tholilali and through that they tried to unite all classes of labour into an immense organization. When once completely organized under the guidance of the communists, they wanted it to be easily converted as the vanguard of the revolution. He wanted a few communists to organize until the organization became complete. They were expected to run the organization within the limits of legality Tholilali.³ Till the whole labours is effectively organized this organized was to pay its attention mainly to the economic problem of the workers, their education, their health and other immediate requirements, arranged strikes of small groups and called upon several strikes, etc. The communist activities were to begin among them while the slogery of socialism was maintained.⁴

2. Impact of Communism in Thanjavur

In 1918, people influenced by the Russian Revolution were organizing labour units in Madras, Coimbatore and Nagapattinam in Thanjavur district. In 1919 Pakkiriswamy Pillai, a retired Station Master became the President of the Nagapattinam Railway Workers Union. When the British Government shifted the railway work shop to Golden Rock at Trichirappalli and discharged 4500 Railway employees, about 10,000 workers. The workers went on strike in protest against this action. The strike takes for ten days. On 20

March 1923 Singaravelu and the two Bolshevik deputies invited Kalyanasundra Mudaliar, E.L. Ayyar, Chakkarai Chettiar, Dandapani Pillai, Natesa Naicker and Adikesavalu Naicker to discuss the issue of starting the Communist Movement in Tamil Nadu⁵. Singaravelu's Dandapani Pillai, Ganga Prasad and Guru Samayya met at Singaravelu's house and resolved to start the movement and work strenuously among the poor and the working class.

2.1. Communist Movement in Tamil Nadu

Singaravelu was the pioneer of the Communist Movement in Tamil Nadu. He started the Communist Party in Tamil Nadu in the year 1925 and devoted himself for the growth of the Party. He gave up his practice as a lawyer and chose the path of Communism. In the early days he came into contact with Ganga Prasad, a native of Gaya and a young Buddhist priest, Guru Samaya, a resident of Bangalore city⁶. Both were friends of Manilal of Gaya and they all together worked for the organization of labour all over India on Soviet principles. Ganga Prasad and Guru Samayya were deputed to Madras to work with Singaravelu and to establish labour organizations in the Madras Presidency on Bolshevik lines.⁷ The twelfth annual confederation of the Justice Party was organized at Tanjore on 10 and 11 October 1932. The Raja of Bobbili was chosen to preside over it. The proceedings of the confederation presented a battle scene between the followers of Muniswami Naidu and those of Rajah to Bobbili reminding the 'Surat imbroglio' of the Indian National Congress. Furniture were thrown in fierce hatred, shoes were hurled out with shrieks and imprecations and mud and stones were strewn with menial in jury and wrath, the confederation became a bear-garden of confusion.⁸ Thus, the Tanjore confederation deposed Muniswami Naidu, the peasant lender and enthroned the youthful Bobbili, a landed aristocrat of Padmanayak Velama family of northern circars. By 1935, thirty-six branches of South Indian Railway Union were established at Thanjavur, Mayavaram, Thiruvavur and Podukottai and in the unions were founded in various cities among weavers, scavengers, steel rolling mill workers, small merchants and motor workers. Jana Sakthi, the first communist newspaper in Tamil appeared in Thanjavur in 1937.⁹ The Communists began organizing among poor tenants and agricultural labourers held a conference at Nagapattinam in east Thanjavur in 1938. He took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement of Gandhiji and was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment of eighteen months in 1940 and was kept in Vellore. At all times he spoke in favour of the Communist ways of achieving the aspirations of the labourers.¹⁰ Since 1940 the peasants and agricultural labourers in Thanjavur district had been organized by Communists to fight against issues such as economic exploitation, practice of untouchability and private and barbaric punishments such as eating and forcing the slaves to drink cow dung, etc. Under such a context that the Communist Party started its activities among the labourers. Most of the labourers belonged to the lower castes. Their response to all for organization was always encouraging.¹¹

2.2. Agricultural Workers Union was Established

In March 1943. Agricultural Workers Union was established among poor tenants on the estate of the *Uttirapadimutt* in Thenbarai village near Mannargudi.¹² Despite the opposition from the Government and the mutt authorities 400 men and 150 women organized a procession in Mannargudi demanding reduction of rent and security of tenure.¹³ The Union sent delegates to the government of Madras. After this the Thanjavur Deputy Collector arbitrated the case. The Union members were granted a reduction in the rent of wet lands, cancellation of rent arrears, the re-installment of recently dismissed tenants and compensation for future eviction.

2.3. Conflicts of Landowner and Tenants

The influence of communists over the student population in Thanjavur district appeared to be increasing. As many as then students' federations had sprung up in 1943.¹⁴ In 1944 Communists were very busy in increasing their hold over labourers. In Mannargudi of Thanjavur district there were troubles between land owners and their tenants on the question of wages. Subsequently in Mannargudi the labourers under the leadership of the Communist Party started agitation for the increase in wages to two Marakkals of Paddy.¹⁵ This agitation ended with the signing of a pact between the representatives of labourers and farmers at Mannargudi in 1944. It raised the wages to two Marakkals of Paddy. Following this victory, the Communist Party's Tamil Nadu Agricultural Committee was formed in 1944.¹⁶ In the same year the first large scale struggle of agricultural labourers took place in the 6000 acres' estate of the Brahmin land lord of Kunniyur in Mannargudi taluk. The Pannaiyals on this estate joined the communist agriculturists union. Twenty-three persons were arrested for unlawful assembly. This struggle ended with no immediate result. In 1945 an injunction was passed forbidding Communists meeting in Mannargudi taluk; but, the movement continued to spread.¹⁷ By the harvest of 1945, the agitation had spread to cover most of two taluks in the east of Thanjavur district. In 1945 started and disputes between the kisans and the landlords of Tiruturaipundi and Mannargudi taluk in Tanjore district and that culminated in an affray between the two parties in the village of Painkattur. Kissan another strike at Thanjavur took place in 1946¹⁸. Agrarian trouble gained strength particularly in Tanjore district where the kisan movement took a firm root in all the villages of Tiruturaipoondi circle.

2.4. Pallan, Paraiyan Katchi

In 1946 again there was a labourers agitation for the increase of wages. This time the Government appointed the District and Sessions Judge, Thanjavur to decide on the wages rate. During the course of the case he offered seats for the Harijan labourers and for the farmers.¹⁹ In the Court it was said that this action alone gave a lift to the labourers as it made both parties equal before the judge. This judge decided on a higher wage rate for the labourers. So, it was stamped as *Pallan, Paraiyan katchi* (Party of Pallan and Paraiyan) although it had support from some non-Brahmin poor tenants and urban trade unions. In 1947 peasant strikes started in Thanjavur by the communists²⁰. At Alathur in Mannargudi taluk of Tanjore district, a major clash occurred between the communist controlled *Adi-*

Dravidas and caste Hindu labourers. Two caste Hindu watchmen were killed and cattle shed and paddy were set fire. The Communists continued to be active in setting up peasants against landlords.

Thanjavur Pannaiyal Protection Act in 1952

The first formal District conference of the Communist Party members in Thanjavur was held in December 1947.²¹ As a result of the planning at this conference, the year 1948 became a period of intense class struggle between landlords on the one hand and cultivating tenants and agricultural labourers on the other in Thanjavur. The increase in wage had some repercussions. The cultivators found it difficult to maintain labourers at a higher rate and so many permanent labourers were retrenched. Though the labourers had received higher wages, they lost continuous employment.²² During 1950-52 there were agitation by agricultural labourers in several parts of East Thanjavur demanding permanent employment, and the proper regulation of their work. So, the Government passed the Thanjavur Pannaiyal Protection Act in 1952.

3. Labour and Kisan Formers

The Communists in Tamil Nadu gave importance not only to the labourers but, also to the peasants and tried to organize them. Singaravelu was the first Communist leader to think in terms of organizing and uniting both the labourers and the kisans farmers of Tamil Nadu. He considered the peasants as the ally of the working class. His efforts in this direction were unique and pioneering in Tamil Nadu. He started the labour and kisan Party of Hindustan in 1923²³. The kisans had, all through the years, tried to exhibit a tendency to organize them to fight for their social upliftment. The first organized effort on the part of the peasants was attempted by the communists and the Socialists and a definite platform was created by them to ventilate their grievances. Efforts were started by the communists to mobilize the kisans. Singaravelu brought the labourers and the kisans under a single party.²⁴ The work started by Singaravelu was strengthened by Amir Hyder Khan's concrete programme to organize the kisans. To this member of eminent leaders like Kandasamy, Annaji, M.V. Sundaram, Jambunath Kaushik and others contributed a lot.

3.1. Labour and Kisan Gazette in 1923

Singaravelu offered equal importance both to the peasants and the labourers. He also brought about the Labour and kisan Gazette in 1923. But, the Communists paid attention to industrial labour first and later turned to agricultural labour. It was the peasants who feeds the people and his welfare should be taken care of by the society. But, ironically enough, the peasants' life was miserable during the twentieth century.²⁵ The methods of cultivation were also primitive and no advanced technology was applied in India when compared to the foreign countries. Singaravelu felt that the hardships of the peasant could be minimized by implementing the Communist ideology and also by adopting scientific methods of cultivation. Peasants, during the times of famines met with innumerable hardship and this was multiplied by the burden of taxation. As a result, nearly twenty crores of Indian peasants suffered.²⁶ The need for improvement of the condition of the labourers was stressed. The Legislative Council amended the Madras Estate's Land Act on 14 November 1933. The amendment conferred occupancy right to tenets in villages. In spite of all criticism against the amendment, it was given effect to by a large majority.²⁷ The period between 1923 and 1947 was the period foundation of the peasant proletariat unity and solidarity. During the period, the condition of the peasants was deplorable. They were put to many hardship and had to work hard to earn their livelihood. Their miseries were not at all organized.²⁸

3.2. Kudiyanavan Muennetra Sangam

In *Kudiyanavan Muennetra Sangam* (Farmers Development Association) was founded by Amir Hyder Khan, to deal with the economic problem of the peasants and extended help to those oppressed by the money lenders. The most important side of the preparation for the revolution in the south was to be an organization of the poor peasants. The Kudiyanavan Munnetra Sangam was formed as the second organization.²⁹ This was to function within the limit of socialism until the peasants were organized into one big union. In the initial stages, the peasant organization dealt with the economic problems of the peasants, whenever they were oppressed by the Marwadies and Chettis. When once the whole of the peasantry is organized, the land for the peasants' campaign commenced in a more organized way. The "Communist" was to impart lessons to labourers and peasants on Communism and to shape the trend of the working class movement.³⁰

3.3. The Campaign Land for Peasants

The campaign, "Land for the peasants" was started. The British Imperialist Government banned the Communist party of India and its organizations in 1934. At this juncture the Communists allied themselves with the Congress Socialist party which was formed out of the leftists in the Congress itself. This helped the unification of the trade union movement as well as the development of the kisan and student movement. The peasants were united under the Kisan Sabha. Particularly since 1935, B. Srinivasa Rao's contribution to the peasant movement of Tamil Nadu is significant.³¹

P. Ramamoorthy, and Jeevanadam and others started many unions. On 21 April 1937 they formed the North Arcot Kisan Society and started the District Ryots Association at Tirunelveli. While the Communists and the congress socialists were busy organizing the peasants Madras Agricultural Relief Bill was introduced in the assembly in December 1937 with the concurrence of the Council.³² The object was to help the indebted agriculturists by reducing by the debts. On 25 May 1938. The Janasakthi, organized a conference of the kisans labourers took place at Nagapattinam. Some of the proposals brought out by the conference were:

- i. Those who possessed below in five acres of active land should not be axed:
- ii. Those loans that were not justified and those agriculturists unable to repay the debt should be relived from debt: and

- iii. Agriculturists were always prepared to fight against the British imperialism along with the Congress Party.³³

3.4. The Tamil Nadu Kisan Sabha

The Tamil Nadu Kisan Sabha held its meeting in Madras in February 1944. It was to draw a consensus of their opinion on the issues relating to agricultural problems. Agitation was carried on for better wages at different places. There was death of hands to harvest to paddy. The Fortnightly Report stated that the wives of local landlords went out to harvest the paddy. The all India Kisan day was organized at a number of places.³⁴ The peasants in 1944 demanded the abolition of bonded labour system and urged that long-standing debts incurred by labourers be written off. The Association conducted several agitations which led to the signing of two agreements between the representatives of the land owners and the labourers. The first agreement was signed at Kalappal in the presence of the Assistant District Superintendent of Police of Thanjavur provided that.³⁵

- i. The wage rate for an attached labourer (pannaiyal) was fixed two measures of paddy.
- ii. To stop practice of whipping labourers and making them drink cow dung selection was stopped.
- iii. Tenants could utilize thrashing floors at a place of their choice near the field,
- iv. For harvesting, casual labourers were paid a daily rate of one measure (markakkal) and 1.4 percent of the produce.

The second agreement was signed a Mannargudi in the presence of the District Collector and District Superintendent of Police.³⁶ Its conditions were that:

- i. The daily wage rate of attached labourers (Pannaiyals) was fixed as their measures (marakkals) of paddy,
- ii. Apart from the daily rates, the attached labourers were to be paid one-seventh of the produce of a field which they were engaged to till;
- iii. Measurement of wages paid in kind was with standard measures;
- iv. Upon receiving the rent, the labourers issued receipt to the tenant at the thrashing floor itself.

3.5. Agriculturist Welfare Association

It is due to the differences between them in Chengleput in June 1945, in January 1946 the land owners formed a new Association in Mannargudi (Thanjore districts) called the Agriculturist Welfare Association. It demanded increased wages to labourers. Unrest prevailed in February 1946 among agricultural labourers. In North Arcot, Trichy and Tirunelveli there were strikes organized by cultivators for higher wages.³⁷ In 1946 there was another wage dispute between the farmers and the labourers. This dispute was settled through arbitration of the District and sessions Judge of Thanjavur. He enhanced the wage of attached labourers from three to three-and-a-half measures (marakkals) of paddy. Thus, the year 1947 was a period of unrest and disquiet the kisans of Tamil Nadu. The Government was questioned and public order was disturbed.³⁸

In 1948 agrarian situation appeared to be quiet. But, in Tanjore district some trouble was expected in the month of June when the lands were leased out for cultivation. The Tillers Association conducted agitations demanding higher wages and farmers were compelled to sign an agreement in October 1948 proving that,³⁹

- i. The wage rate of attached labourers was increased by one measure (Marakkal) for male labourers and their fourths measure for female labourers.
- ii. For various harvesting operations, attached labourers were paid one-seventh of the gross produce of the fields in which they worked
- iii. Where casual and attached labourers worked together, the latter received one and a half measure out of every fourteen measures produced regardless of the wages paid of outside labour.
- iv. To Prevent the attached labourers from claiming his share and working elsewhere a penalty of two measures for each day of willful absence during the harvest season was deducted from the dues entitled to him.
- v. Each attached labourer got as his share, the yield of not more than one veli (6 and 2/3 acres) of land.
- vi. For work on thrashing ground attached labourers were paid wages at the rate of one measure of paddy.
- vii. Attached labourers were given the customary of paddy.

Between 1939 and 1940, strikes were conducted at several places in East Thanjavur under the auspices of the share cropper's movement, with the aim of achieving higher wages and a higher share of the produce. The Thanjavur peasants organized strikes from 1945 to 1946 were against land lords.⁴⁰

4. Conclusion

Politics like collaborating with the British and working against the freedom movement alienated the social adherents to some extent, from the main current of political development in the Province. The activities of self respect movement created some amount of awakening among the peasantry. *Dravida Agricultural Labourers* association was formed in 1952 by E.V. Ramasami. The first branch of the association was formed at *NagammaiirPadipagam Village* in Nagapattinam taluk. He believed that the main problems of agricultural labourers, including their economic backwardness arose because of their lower status in the caste hierarchy.

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