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NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT : TUSSE IN TIRUNELVELI CONFERENCE OVER COUNCIL ENTRY ISSUE : PERSONALITY CLASH BETWEEN KASTHURIRANGA IYENGAR AND RAJAJI

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ABSTRACT:

The return of Gandhi for South Africa to India was a new chapter in the history of the Nationalist Movement. His subsequent political involvement in enlisting the support of the masses was a new political phenomena. His simple life and clear vision attracted the masses to him. The Non-Co-operation Movement was the first major programme of Gandhi. This programme aimed at the boycott of educational institutions, courts, foreign cloth and legislative councils. When the Movement was initiated, it was associated with the Khilafat Movement. Regarding the Tamil Country, the issue of Non-Cooperation created a split in Tamil Country. One Group headed by Kasthuriyanga Iyengar insisted council entry and another group led by Rajaji demanded the boycott of council. This issue was much surfaced in the Tirunelveli Conference in June 1920.



KEYWORDS Non-Cooperation, Council Entry, Gandhi, Kasthuriyanga Iyengar, Rajaji, Tirunelveli.

INTRODUCTION

The Madras Nationalists under the leadership of Kasturiranga Iyengar did not accept Gandhi's programme *in toto* as they doubted the possibility of implementing it along the lines he suggested. They agreed that non-co-operation was the only legitimate constitutional weapon and by that they could assert their rights and bring Britain and her irresponsible agents in India to their senses. But they were not for boycotting the legislatures, educational institutions and law courts. They were particularly

opposed to the ban on Council-entry, although they attached very little importance to the new reformed Councils. In their opinion contesting the elections to enter the Councils did not constitute a violation of the principle of non-co-operation which had already gained a foothold in the Madras Presidency. They considered the elections which were then in the offing as the only immediate constitutional weapon in their hand. They wanted to utilise it to educate the vast mass of the people not only on their rights and duties but also on the

programme of non-co-operation and the mode of practising it. Otherwise they felt, mass civil disobedience would only lead to violence and lawlessness. The Nationalists felt that it would be unwise for them "to stand aside from the elections and to give the members of the Moderate party a walk over to their coveted seats in the Councils".¹

A similar stand was expressed by the General Secretaries of the A.I.C.C. who concluded their report for 1919 with the fervent hope that the Congress should be able to "carry the torch of political education to the door of

the masses and shall soon have developed in the country an intelligent electorate alive to its privileges and capable of turning the administrative machinery under the new Reforms to the best advantage of our Motherland".

The Nationalists of Madras led by Kasturiranga Iyengar did not give their acceptance to the whole plan of non-co-operation but preferred to await the outcome of the Special Congress. But Rajagopalachari and his group did not share this view. They had a tough time in defending Satyagraha as propounded by Gandhi. Keen on council-entry, the Madras Nationalists had started preparing for the elections. From January to March 1920, Satyamurthi and A. Rangaswamy Iyengar toured the whole of the Tamil region of the Presidency campaigning vehemently for the party. Satyamurthi with dedication involved into the vortex of Congress propaganda and attracted huge mass by his able lectures in Tamil for hours. His speeches in Tamil proved a great stimulus to Congress activities in the various Tamil Districts. Satyamurthi was a pioneer in using the mother tongue, a very powerful medium of communication and awakened the masses politically. His powers of oration in vernacular alarmed the Moderates of Madras. V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, a Moderate was often neglected by the mobs because he was reluctant to speak in Tamil.²

The activities of the Madras Nationalists under the leadership of Kasturiranga Iyengar towards Council entry made the general public wonder if the Rajaji group would have any place at all once the Congress accepted the Reformed legislature. Satyamurthi's recommendation to the Madras Provincial Congress Committee that candidates for contesting elections should be chosen at the next provincial conference caused considerable irritation to Rajaji.

He was against mixing the Congress with election affairs lest the Provincial conference should become the undignified scene of personal intrigues instead of being the threshing ground for political views. He wrote, "I feel the electioneering intoxication has completely overpowered the intellects of our leaders."³

The differences between the two groups came to the surface for the first time at the Tirunelveli Provincial Conference held from 21 to 23 June 1920 under the presidency of S. Srinivasa Iyengar who had by then given up his exalted position as Advocate General. At this conference, "one of the largest attended in recent years,"⁴ Kasturiranga Iyengar's group had put forth its plans for the ensuing elections. They even passed a resolution urging the electorate to return only Nationalist members to the Legislative Council.⁵ They set up a Subjects Committee to co-ordinate its campaign. Besides their own men the Committee consisted of some local celebrities like the Raja of Ramnad, the Zamindar of Kumaramangalam and the well-known and powerful Tirunelveli politician N.A.V. Somasundaram Pillai. The only members of the Congress Executive to be included in the Committee were Kasturiranga Iyengar himself and S. Srinivasa Iyengar. None of Rajaji's associates was considered initially for a place. It was only when Rajaji threatened to refuse to recognise the Committee that C. Vijayaraghavachari was given a berth in it unwillingly.⁶ The latter did not attend the Tirunelveli Conference despite the exhortations of Rajaji to him to be present there.⁷ In fact Rajaji's letters during this period were full of appeals to Vijayaraghavachari to contest the elections for the Legislative Council from Salem as there were distinct gains in his doing so. "Strong men in a position to take responsibilities are not many and the few should not keep back. If among Nationalists such men are not returned, the ministership will surely go to Moderates and our party will soon be discredited."⁸ Amazingly, these letters had originated from one who was a staunch advocate of boycott of Councils.

The Khilafat and Non-Co-operation were among the main topics of discussion at the Tirunelveli Conference. Though its President S. Srinivasa Iyengar was in full sympathy with the Muslims, he did not overtly commit himself to either Khilafat or non-co-operation. This gave a handle to mischief mongers. They propagated that Srinivasa Iyengar discountenanced any attempt at the weakening of the Government and that he knew that the Government would not be intimidated by the threats of non-co-operation.⁹

Srinivasa Iyengar's Presidential address was highly critical of the Reforms Act and also of the attitude of the Moderates who sought to discredit the Congress simply because they could not any longer control it. Referring to the changed political outlook he said, "A race of practical idealists has

come into existence who attend to political education as well as to agitation, to details as well as to principles, to means as well as to ends, to the minor problems of daily administration as well as to the more serious national questions and above all to the poor more than to the rich. Political mindedness and political activity are no longer confined to the educated classes, but have spread to the land-holding mercantile community and also right through the masses".¹⁰ But the existence of these men was not recognized either by the Government or by those who stood for "co-operation at all costs".

Buttressing the decision arrived at the Amritsar Congress, the Tirunelveli Conference adopted a resolution emphasising the unsatisfactory nature of the Reform Act. It did not also conceal its lack of faith in certain aspects of Gandhi's programme of non-co-operation. It passed on to the Special Congress the responsibility of deciding whether or not the resolution should be carried into effect. Europeans called this a stunt and accused the Madras Nationalists as irresponsible politicians whose privilege it was to shun responsibility. They also ridiculed Gandhi's invitation to the Viceroy to lead the Non-co-operation Movement. They called it a huge joke and Gandhi an "incurably thoughtless person".¹¹

However, the Tirunelveli Conference passed an additional resolution calling for non-co-operation on the Khilafat issue. It was proposed by Yakub Hasan and was carried through the efforts of Rajaji. The motion had the support of the League of Youth and the Khilafat Muslims who were there at the invitation of Rajaji, the nationalist opposition notwithstanding.¹² The Tirunelveli Conference was potentially volatile. There was every possibility of a split over the extent of non-co-operation. The group led by Kasturiranga Iyengar was not in favour of the radical aspects of the non-co-operation programme advocated by Gandhi. Fortunately however a split was avoided for the present. Rajaji was concerned about averting a split. It was amply illustrated by his subsequent correspondence with C. Vijayaraghavachari. In more than one letter, he exhorted the latter to meet S. Srinivasa Iyengar and have a frank talk with him and settle matters.¹³ He said that "As things now stand, it is not impossible to avoid a split and we may yet appear before the public as a single party without any differences or at least with all differences made up".¹⁴ But as the subsequent turn of events bore out, this was not to be. The personality clashes which led to bitter factional conflicts later could be traced to this conference.

In the beginning of August, when the massive Tilak Memorial Fund was set up, the Rajaji group was again squeezed out. The best any of its members could obtain in the office of the Fund was a minor position shared with the manager of the *Swadesamitran*.¹⁵ On 5th August at the meeting of the Madras Provincial Congress Committee, Kasturiranga Iyengar and his Nationalist party rejected the Tirunelveli resolution of non-co-operation on Khilafat.¹⁶ Rajaji brought a fresh resolution but the decision on it was postponed to another meeting on 15th August.

In the meantime, in response to Gandhi's instruction, 1st August 1920 was observed as the Third Khilafat Day in the Madras Presidency under the inspiration of Rajaji and Yakub Hasan. It was declared a "day of *hartal*", signalling the inauguration of the Non-cooperation Campaign. There was a general *hartal* with offering of prayers and meeting on the Madras beach. Shops remained closed both in the city and in the mofussils.

On 12th August Gandhi came to Madras with Shaukat Ali to visit some of the principal Muslim centres. He did his best to dispel the fear of the Nationalist critics of Madras. Both the leaders addressed a mammoth gathering at the beach the same evening. This being Gandhi's first appearance in the Madras Presidency since the beginning of the Non-Cooperation Movement. He spoke at length explaining to the public the tenets of the campaign. He said non-co operation was a means to gain the two specific objects of redemption of the "promise" given to the Muslims on the Khilafat and of the redressal of the Punjab wrongs. It should also aim at the boycott of the Legislative Councils, the courts by lawyers who would definitely find alternative occupation in arbitration and withdrawal of students from educational institutions, which were just factories to train clerks. Gandhi insisted the order of progress out of the political chaos.¹⁷

Gandhi reiterated that the Movement was perfectly constitutional. It was a just and religious doctrine and it was the "inherent right of every human being and it is perfectly constitutional".¹⁸ When a representative of the *Madras Mail* asked whether Gandhi was satisfied that all efforts at constitutional agitation had been exhausted and that non-co-operation was the only course left to them, he soon

replied that non-co-operation was not unconstitutional and that it was the only constitutional remedy left over to them.¹⁹ He agreed with the Madras Nationalists that the last stages of the programme were fraught with danger but assured them that mass civil disobedience would not be resorted to unless the Central Khilafat Committee was convinced that there would be no outburst of violence on the part of the people. However, on the issue of Council boycott, he refused to compromise. Seeking election and then refusing to take the oath of allegiance would make "the nation distrust their leaders". He also rejected the nationalists' idea of entering the Legislative Councils and then wrecking the Reforms Scheme. Gandhi believed that participation in any form in the Reforms Scheme preferred by the British Government would make the Nationalists the "Unwilling instruments of injustice". He also dismissed their contention that they had to contest the elections in order to preempt the Liberals from winning seats. Seeking elections to the councils was against the tenets of non-co-operation programme.²⁰ Before the end of August, boycott of Councils had become the central item of his programme.

Gandhi and Shaikat Ali visited North Arcot, Kumbakonam, Nagore, Tiruchirappali in Tamil Country. There was a good response in all places to Gandhi's appeal for funds and there was an increasing number of resignations of honorary offices and titles in the wake of Gandhi's visit to Tamil Country. Several honorary magistrates also resigned.²¹

However, Gandhi's sojourn in the Tamil Country did not diminish the opposition of the Nationalists to the non-co-operation programme. Presiding over the Madras Provincial Congress on 15th August, Kasturiranga Iyengar spoke at length on the necessity of having a Nationalist majority in the legislatures. The Moderates too, who were present at the Congress, expressed their total opposition to the programme of non-co-operation. They held that inasmuch as it was designed to paralyse the Government it was unconstitutional and opposed to the tenets of the Congress which aimed at achieving *Swaraj* by constitutional means. Since the Nationalists also would not go the whole hog of it, final decision on non-co-operation was again postponed. After prolonged debates and discussions, it was approved on 24 August but in a form more cautious than Gandhi's plan and without the Council boycott.²²

To conclude, the Tirunelveli Conference gained significance because the Nationalists under Kasthurirenga Iyengar openly expressed their strong opposition to the boycott of councils as a part of the Non-Cooperation Programme. This made Gandhi to visit Tamil Country for the first time to allay the fear of the Nationalists that the end of the programme would end in violence. Further Gandhi called for the involvement of the masses but the Nationalists led by the Professional middle class feared that the mass revolution would endanger their power and privilege. Hence they advocated council entry. Thus the council entry issue became a political contest between the men of Kasthurirenga Iyengar and Rajaji

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