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NON-BRAHMIN JUSTICE PARTY IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY – REVISITED

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ABSTRACT :

The communities to which the founders of the Justice Party belonged, all non-Brahmin elites, whether in terms of wealth, education or public position, or all together, often had Brahmins in their employ for much longer periods than the latter they were in the service of the white man in what eventually became the Madras Presidency. This was also the case in the much smaller French colony of Pondicherry. Early in the arrival of Europeans, a class of people called 'dubashis' arose, who were proficient in two or more languages. They acted first as interpreters and translators and ended up as product intermediaries and then traders. There was no shortage of languages in common use in these parts, as the English East India Company and the French East India Company began to expand their commercial operations and ended up in a political-military conflict, won by the former.



KEYWORDS : I.N.C., Justice Party, Madras, Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, E.V.Ramasami.

INTRODUCTION :

The first recruits of the East India Company were not Brahmin 'clerks' but Dubashi, who were mainly from Vaishya or Telugu speaking merchant communities, who were also numerically strong in the Madras City. The wealth created by the Dubashi families is well documented and has been written about in various forms. When the British East India Company obtained a concession from the Nawab of Arcot for the collection of taxes in his vast Carnatic "dependency", attached to the Nizam of Hyderabad, it also usurped civil power in phases, the white man also needed tax collectors at all levels. The Brahmin community which had lived under royal patronage for generations and centuries and had lost much of it after the departure of the local kings and kingdoms was able to get by on tax collection and other work, for which of all the ways were qualified.¹

Some Brahmins were already in the hereditary service of local hereditary chiefs and Poligars, for generations, and thought that as a community only they qualified. Those caciques were also major patrons of arts and culture during this period. With no concept of a recruitment policy in the early

¹.Subrahmanian, N., *The Brahmin in the Tamil Country*, Madurai: Ennes Publications, 1989, p.81

years, the British relied on their existing employees to proposition/recruit more staff, as their hunger for political expansionism was largely fed. There came a time when everything became 'family and clan'. It was fine as long as there was not an "equally educated and experienced" candidate outside the caste, or at least as long as the latter did not feel deprived and expressed his dismay.

A situation soon arose in which "qualified" non-Brahmin candidates appeared on the scene, but the choice invariably fell almost exclusively in favor of the Brahmin counterpart and competitor. With the intermediary officers for recruitment also coming from the community, birth, family ties and traditional practices in terms of eating habits and "social acceptance" have become the maker. With British expansionism providing job opportunities, the odds and alternating years of drought and the floods meant there was a growing demand for fixed-income jobs rather than seasonal and unpredictable income from agriculture. The fact that most landowners, including local chiefs and zamindars, being non-Brahmins meant that they and their communities were also more exposed to the benefits of a government job, though not necessarily to themselves in the early stages.

POLITICAL PROVOCATION

At or before its formation, the Justice Party inherited a social milieu, in which Brahminical rule was strongly felt as well as visible. Many founders and other first generation leaders of the Justice Party had championed the cause of non-Brahmins seeking jobs and higher education opportunities for nearly two decades before presenting the South Indian Liberal Federation. The Rubicon was crossed when Brahmin rule became invasive not only in the opportunities of government jobs, but also in electoral politics. The election of two Brahmins, both incidentally belonging to the I.N.C., to the Central Legislative Council in 1916, for two Madras seats, became the turning point.² Their non-Brahmin rivals lost. Incidentally, non-Brahmins also made up the majority of voters, but that would have been the case anyway, given the demographic realities, then and since.

Perhaps the two were eliminated not because they were Brahmins but because they were I.N.C. candidates. Founded in 1885, the I.N.C. had been around for three decades and had an organizational structure and name that losing non-Brahmin candidates did not possess. . Given the I.N.C. Charter , which was focused on jobs and other opportunities for the natives, it was only natural that Brahmins also dominated the party hierarchy, and not just in the Madras Presidency. The fact was that the party had not yet considered the need to field at least one non-Brahmin candidate for the two Madras seats in the Central Legislative Council , around 1916. This was the immediate provocation for the founding of the Justice Party, later the same year.

Before the emergence of the Justice Party, almost from the second half of the previous Nineteenth Century, some British officers of the East India Company, and later of the Government of British India, had begun to highlight social inequalities in recruitment of jobs. This was already happening in 1854, a few years before the British monarch, Whitehall and the House of Commons in distant London took direct control of the Company's land holdings in India and began administering them directly in 1858. There was a gap of about fifty years from that time, until the end of the century, before people, especially those based in the capital of the Madras Presidency, started coming together to form organizations to raise "non-Brahmin" voices and demands. They wanted a fair share of government jobs and higher educational centres in the Madras Presidency. Madras University was the hub of such aspirations. Established in 1857, it was a cousin of those in the other two Presidency cities of Calcutta and Bombay.³

Early initiators of what later became the election-based social justice movement founded organizations such as 'Non-Brahmin Sabha', 'Madras Dravidian Association' and the 'Madras United

². Saraswathi, S., *Minorities in Madras State: Group Interest in Madras Politics*, Delhi : Impex India, 1974, p.36

³.Kumar, Senthil, J., *Higher Education in Tamil Nadu, 1947-1967*, Ph.D. Thesis, Chennai : University of Madras, 2010, pp. 19-20.

League', to exchange ideas and represent their views to the British-Indian government. ⁴In essence, their modus and mission represented the (non-Brahmin) middle-class elite's pre-Gandhian goal of the I.N.C. since its inception in 1885, to want to be heard and represented. The first non-Brahmin organizations were conceived by a few middle-ranking "middle-class" employees of the Raj, as was the case with the founding of the I.N.C. But there were no white men like Allen Octavian Hume and William Wedderburn, who had acted as midwives in the conception of the I.N.C. Even while demanding a fair share of the benefits, early non-Brahmin leaders sought to equip their next generation to be equal to the task. To this end, they set up a hostel for non-Brahmin students in Madras City.⁵

It was also a hands-on approach to problem solving. Non-Brahmin students from poor families and those who came from out of town with nothing but their aspirations needed such minimal facilities for survival and livelihood. In the medium to long term, such structures alone created an atmosphere of learning and healthy competition among themselves as well, not to mention competition with their Brahmin counterparts. In an urban and relatively cosmopolitan context, the environment of a hostel gave rural adolescent students a sense of security and belonging to a group or community. It also threw up role models from among them in the same mould as Gandhi's followers across the country. This was even more true for pro-Periyar youth in the 1930s and 1940s and for D.M.K. students in the 1950s and 1960s. For the early Dravidian reformers, their long term programs proved too ambitious. However, at least to some extent, they had lived up to their own aspirations and expectations and passed them down the line.

INCORRECT EVALUATION

When the Justice Party was formed as an offshoot of such organizations from over the previous ten or fifteen years, both the leadership component and the content of the cause had changed radically. Although the list of founders of the Justice Party included some of the early middle-class initiators of such groups with a small number political ambitions and strategy, most of the promoters came from an elite socio-economic background. All of them were not Brahmins. Some were highly educated, including professionals, while others were from the landowning class of the zamindars, or traditional trading communities.⁶ Most of them were Hindus and they did not abandon their religion or caste identity, starting with the marks visible on their foreheads, their gods, temples and family or community rituals.

Despite leading a non-Brahmin movement, the founding leaders did not abandon caste labels such as Chetty, Naidu, Mudaliar, Pillai and Nair in their given names, as was the case with the two broad categories of Brahmins: Iyer and Iyengar. Even Periyar E.V.Ramasami in his day did not remove the caste tag 'Naicker' which was attached to his given name, E.V. Ramasami. In the 1970s, the Karunanidhi government did this for all communities. The cause of non-Brahmins in the Madras Presidency might not have gained the momentum and recognition it did but for the collective intervention of all non-Brahmin communities, which again came at a time when Gandhi was taking the the Congress organization to the masses. Both the Non-Brahmin Movement in the Madras Presidency and the Gandhian Movement across the country originated in the aspirations and initiatives of the middle class but took alternative and exactly opposite paths to become popular, self-sustaining with a long life span and pioneering achievements in their favour.

It is easy to criticize the founders of the Justice Party on the grounds that they stood against Brahmins because they were non-Brahmins. It can be safely argued that while they didn't apply for government jobs for their children, they did so for a larger social cause. Higher education at that time was limited mainly to the general stream under-graduation and professional courses like medicine, law, and engineering. The children of most of the founders of the Justice Party could afford to send their children abroad for the best professional education if they wanted. The first generation of aspiring barristers, both Brahmins and non-Brahmins, had already enrolled at one of London's four Inns of

⁴.More, J.B.P. , *Rise and Fall of the 'Dravidian' Justice Party 1916-1946*, IRISH: Nirmalagiri, 2009, pp.21-24.

⁵.Arooran, Nambi, K., *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905-1944*, p.43.

⁶.Rajayyan, K., *Tamil Nadu A Real History*, Trivandrum: Ratna Publications, 2005, p.381

Court. Those who wanted to join the Indian Civil Service (ICS), also went to London to prepare for and sit for the common examination, when it opened for Indians.

The founders of the Justice Party regretted their incorrect assessment of the causes of the defeat of the two non-Brahmin candidates in 1916. While of academic interest only, it should be noted that the I.N.C. did not contest the 1920 election and the Justice Party had an easy walk. Had it been otherwise, the basic premise of the Justice Party might have been lost. This was because later in 1926, six years after the Justice Party won two terms of three each in Presidency Council elections, the rival Swaraj Party, a splinter faction from the I.N.C., became the largest party and formed government in 1926.⁷ It was the Swaraj Party-led government that implemented the Justice Party reservation scheme, after the change in individual community quotas.

Founded by S Satyamurti and Srinivasa Iyengar among others in 1923 along with the All-India Swaraj Party of Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru, the former merged with the latter after becoming the largest party again in 1934.⁸ Unified Swaraj Party merged again with its parent Congress Party in time for the Elections of 1937. The Congress won in 1937 and the Justice Party all but disappeared from the scene.⁹ From 1938, when the party asked E.V. Ramasami to become its president, followed by the party's merger with its D.K in 1944¹⁰, until its final demise in the post-independence of 1957 elections, a remnant group remained. P.T Rajan remained the President of the Justice Party from 1945 to 1957, when it all ended.¹¹

However, on broader issues, Justice Party leaders focused more on introducing 'social justice' which should appeal to and benefit larger sections of non-Brahmin society. In the 1920 election, their campaign focused on the single issue of 'social justice', translated as a fair distribution of government posts and admissions to higher education. In its first three-year mandate, the Justice Party government had achieved a lot in terms of reservation and also in the harmonization and homogenization of the administration of Hindu temples.¹²

When it came to giving an actionable legislative forum to their social justice scheme, their law made provisions for non-Hindu religionists such as Muslims, Anglo-Indian Christians and local Christians. Its 8.3% provision for "Others" under the quota scheme, while numerically the lowest by comparison, addressed the aspirations of "untouchable" communities. These are communities Gandhi called 'Harijans', or 'children of God'¹³, and are now commonly known by the North Indian nomenclature of 'Dalits'¹⁴, a term once banned by British rulers. The Constitution of Free India recognizes them as Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

To conclude, the Justice Party had chosen a localized name for the "untouchables" in the Madras Presidency, officially calling them 'Adi Dravidas'. In due course, similar names arose to identify other

⁷.Nagoorkani, P., *Justice Ministry and Social Measures in Tamilnadu, 1921-1930*, M.Phil Dissertation, Madurai : Madurai Kamaraj University, 1988, pp.81-84

⁸. Kumar, Sanjeev, R., *Role of the Swarajya Party in the Nationalist Movement in Tamil Nadu 1920-1934*, Ph.D. Thesis, Chennai : 2021, p.173.

⁹.Vadivel, A., *Social History of Modern Tamil Nadu-Ramanathapuram*, Chennai: V.Geetha Priya Darshini, 2017,p.207.

¹⁰. Rajaraman, P., *The Justice Party, A Historical Perspective 1916-37*, Madras : Poompozhi Publishers, 1988, p.278

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¹². Nagoorkani, P., *Struggle for Social Justice and Social Acceptance in Tamil Nadu 1916-1949*, Vadipatti: Sathish Publication, 2006, pp.85-118.

¹³.Chandrasekar, S., *Colonialism, Conflict and Nationalism : South India, 1857-1947*, New Delhi : Wishwa Prakashan, 1995, p.171.

¹⁴.Haripriya Narasimhan, Fuller, C.J., *Tamil Brahmins, The Making of a Middle –Class Caste*, New Delhi : Social Science Press, pp.6-7

localized "untouchable" sub-sects such as "Adi Andhras". The Justice Party scheme did not create the Brahmin community non-existent, nor did it so completely marginalize them. The Brahmins were not denied jobs and education but also got their guaranteed share, much higher in proportion to that guaranteed by their population. Also the Justice Party government achieved social justice in its full extent in terms of law and enactment. Implementation was undertaken by the Government of the Non – Justice Party, 1927-1930, with good reason.

END NOTES

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