



SOCIO-POLITICAL AWAKENING AMONG DEPRESSED CLASSES IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY

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ABSTRACT:

The present research article explores the 19th-century socio-political landscape of Tamilnadu, examining the emergence and struggles of the Backward Class, Depressed Class, and Nadar communities. Focusing on the Nadar community, it traces their evolution from facing social neglect to economic prosperity, propelled by education and missionary influence. The article highlights the Nadars' quest for social recognition, symbolized by temple entry rights, leading to legal battles and the establishment of the Nadar Mahajana Sangam in 1910. Shifting focus to the Depressed Classes, the article explores their delayed awakening and the pivotal role played by socio-religious reformers in fostering awareness. Christian missionaries and government initiatives aimed at uplifting the Scheduled Castes are analyzed, along with the challenges faced in mainstream education. The Depressed Classes' unity, advocacy through publications, and the establishment of organizations contribute to their socio-educational development. The Adi-Dravida movement's historical analysis reveals collaboration with Self-Respect leaders, bringing attention to the eradication of untouchability. The leadership of figures like M.C. Rajah and R. Srinivasan in legislative councils and their efforts in various spheres contribute to the upliftment of the Depressed Classes. The article concludes by emphasizing the socio-political transformations of the oppressed classes in the late 19th century, emphasizing the shift from national to social goals.

KEYWORDS: Nadar, Depressed Classes, Tamilnadu, Socio-political, Upliftment, Educational Initiatives, Social Awareness, Organizational Development

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century witnessed the emergence of movements among the Backward Class and Depressed Class communities in Tamilnadu. Their leaders, through organized efforts,

advocated for social and economic emancipation, highlighting their social and economic depression and underprivileged status. Consequently, enlightened individuals from the Depressed Castes undertook the cause of their people, working towards the upliftment and progress of the downtrodden. The movement contributed to the intellectual transformation of Tamilnadu, fostering awareness among the educated classes regarding their rights and responsibilities. The Government of Fort St. George also began to address the welfare of these communities, and various associations were formed to protect their interests. However, the politicization of these movements was hindered by a historical tradition of subservience, impeding the assertion of their rights. Awakening Among the Nadars: The Nadars, a notable community among the depressed class, predominantly inhabited various parts of Southern Tamilnadu, including Tirunelveli, Madurai, Coimbatore, Ramnad, and most parts of Kanyakumari District.¹ Despite economic prosperity in Ramnad and Madurai districts, they faced social and political neglect in other regions of Tamilnadu. The Nadars in Tirunelveli district particularly benefited from missionary influence, experiencing educational improvement. They were among the first in the depressed classes to turn their attention to education, encouraged by initiatives of the British Government.

The British Government, in its administrative setup, acknowledged hard work, merit, ability, and character, indirectly awakening the Nadar community.² Leveraging this opportunity, the Nadars, as a suppressed class, began to act independently. They broke caste barriers, shifted from traditional professions to engage in cultivation, trade, and industry, emerging as a prosperous community. As their wealth increased, they sought equal status in society, inspired by Christian teachings and educational opportunities. They demanded recognition as Kshatriyas and aimed to enjoy rights and privileges held by caste-Hindus, such as processions in palanquins, wearing sacred threads, and applying holy ash. After adopting these symbolic rights, they asserted their right to temple entry, a privilege denied to them. Although the initial legal cases at Tiruchendur, Madras, Srivilliputhur, Sri Vaikuntam, and Sivakasi did not favor the Nadars, these instances fueled their determination to fight for temple entry as first-class citizens in Tamilnadu. Notably, the Kamudi communal riot of 1897 marked a significant chapter in their struggle. When instructed to conduct a ritual purification ceremony at Meenakshi Sundaresvarar Temple in Kamudi, the Nadars refused, resulting in criminal cases filed against fifteen of them.³ The subsequent legal battles, including a civil suit filed by the zamindar of Ramnad, led to an unfavorable judgment in 1908 by the Privy Council in England. In response, the Nadars sought alternative avenues, constructing new temples and confining themselves in these spaces for a brief period to assert their rights.

It became imperative for the Nadars to recognize the need for organization, acknowledging that collective efforts through an association would yield more significant results than individual endeavors. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Nadar leaders actively worked towards elevating their social status and resolving internal divisions within their community. By the early twentieth century, owing to their industrious nature and hard work, the Nadars in Tamilnadu had achieved economic and educational prominence. The Nadar Mahajana Sangam was established at Poraiyar in Tanjore district in February 1910 by T. Rathinasamy Nadar, a prominent businessman, with the objective of uniting Nadars and fostering political awareness among them.⁴ The inaugural Nadar Mahajana Sangam Conference took place at Poraiyar from 6 to 8 February 1910, marking the beginning of various constructive programs for the welfare of the Nadar community. The Sangam consistently appealed to the Government to nominate Nadar members to the Madras Legislative Council, advocating for better representation and a voice for

their community. During the late nineteenth century, the Madras Government increasingly considered political petitions with caste considerations, leading to some recognition of the Sangam's demands. In July 1921, a Government Order was issued designating the community as 'Nadar' instead of 'Shanar.' W.P.A. Soundarapandian, a leader, was consistently nominated to a reserved seat in the Legislative Council, championing the cause of the Nadars.⁵

Soundarapandian played a crucial role in fostering better relations between Nadars and Adi-Dravidas, bringing a resolution to punish those obstructing Adi-Dravidas from using public facilities. After E.V. Ramasami's initiation of the Self-Respect Movement in 1925, Soundarapandian embraced Ramasami's social ideology. Nadars, under his influence, prioritized self-respect, avoiding Brahmin priests for ceremonies, advocating widow remarriages, pushing for inter-caste dining, fighting for temple entry, allowing Adi-Dravidas into their institutions, and moving away from Brahminical practices.⁶ To strengthen unity among the Nadars, community-minded leaders initiated various newspapers such as Dravidabimani, Vijaya Vikatan, Nadar Kula Mitran, Kshatriya Mitran, Sanror Kula Viveka Bodhini, Nadar Nanban, Pandiya Kula Deepam, and Vinoda Vikatan. These publications inspired the Nadar community in Madras to advocate for social rights on par with caste-Hindus, presenting an opportunity to stimulate social change and awaken Adi-Dravidas to demand their social rights. In the modern period, while certain British officials displayed a discernible interest in the education of the Scheduled Castes, the principal acknowledgment is reserved for the Christian missionaries who arrived in India.⁷ Their commitment to humanitarian service played a pivotal role in the expansion of Christianity, marking them as the first to extend educational opportunities to the scheduled castes within their settlements, thereby fostering a sense of community. Despite these efforts, the underprivileged still grappled with societal prejudice. The educational census of Madras in 1871 indicated a substantial number of children from scheduled castes availing themselves of educational opportunities provided by Christian missionaries. The issuance of Government Order No.68 by the Educational Department on 1 February 1893, deemed a milestone in scheduled caste education, was a direct outcome of the endeavors led by Christian missionaries, exemplified by figures such as Adam Andrew.⁸

The missionaries assumed a critical role in mitigating the educational disadvantages faced by the scheduled castes. When these communities encountered exclusion from mainstream schools due to social ostracism imposed by higher castes, the missionaries intervened by establishing schools and facilitating education to uplift their conditions. The government also embarked on initiatives to advance the education of the Depressed Classes, issuing an order that mandated educational institutions to be open to all classes without discrimination. This marked the initiation of direct government participation in scheduled caste education, with grants allocated for scheduled caste students.⁹

However, resistance emerged from caste-Hindus advocating for separate schools for scheduled caste children. An editorial in *The Hindu* in 1891 opined that expecting caste-Hindu and Scheduled Caste children to study together was impractical. The editorial justified the government's special consideration for a class facing social challenges.¹⁰ Administrators like J.H.A. Tremeneheera, the Collector of Chengleput District, displayed a keen interest in the education of the Scheduled Castes, and his efforts became a potential starting point for government policies aimed at improving their education. Despite the establishment of separate schools, both the government and voluntary organizations encountered difficulties in their maintenance, primarily due to the discriminatory attitudes of caste-Hindu teachers and officials. Furthermore, a shortage

of trained Scheduled Caste teachers persisted, as teachers from higher castes were reluctant to enter and inspect institutions located in Scheduled Caste settlements.

UNITY AMONG THE DEPRESSED CLASSES

The Depressed Classes constituted the final social stratum to experience a surge of awareness among the populace of Tamilnadu. This delayed awakening was a consequence of their prolonged economic deprivation, social marginalization, cultural decline, and enduring political fragility. Their plight was indeed distressing, leaving them unable to articulate their grievances. In these circumstances, the predicament of the Depressed Classes evolved into a national concern. Nationalist caste-Hindu leaders championed the cause of the Depressed Classes, driven by a commitment to their upliftment and an awareness of their significant numerical strength in a democratic framework.¹¹ Certain selfless socio-religious leaders, products of Western education, engaged at the national level, forming associations to educate the masses against the scourge of untouchability. Their objective was to enhance the social status and civic position of the untouchables. The primary focus of socio-religious reformers in India was the eradication of untouchability. Renowned figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who established the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, Keshab Chandra Sen, founder of the Prarthana Samaj, and Jothirao Phule of Maharashtra played pivotal roles in shaping the consciousness of the untouchables and working towards their emancipation. In 1873, Jothirao Phule founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society for Seeking Truth) to ameliorate the condition of the untouchables. Dayananda Saraswathi, through the establishment of the Arya Samaj in 1875, advocated for the removal of all discriminations in society. Swami Vivekananda, founding the Ramakrishna Mission, joined the cause against caste system and untouchability, attributing them to India's downfall. Theosophical Society, founded by Madam Blavatsky and Col. Olcott in 1886, opposed varnashrama dharma and championed the universal brotherhood of mankind. Another reformer, Narayana Guru, established Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (S.N.D.P. Yogam) in 1903, and his followers worked in Madras for the material progress and social upliftment of the untouchables. While these reformers instilled confidence in socio-political awakening to some extent, they utilized both public platforms and the press to spread their cause.¹²

In addition to public speeches, they leveraged the press to disseminate their ideas. Several journals emerged, such as Suriyothayam (Sunrise) in 1869, Panchama (The Outcaste) in 1871, Dravida Pandian in 1885, Megha Vikata Thoothan in 1888, Parayan in 1893, Poologa Vyasani in 1900, Tamilan in 1907, and Tamil Women in 1916. These publications not only enhanced the literacy rate among the untouchables but also organized them into a formidable force.¹³ The journals reflected the grievances of the 'untouchables' and offered valuable suggestions, condemning casteism, Brahmanism, social evils, Hinduism, and the Manu Code. These thought-provoking articles underscored that 'untouchable' leaders were pioneers in challenging Brahmanical monopoly in Madras, even though mass support eluded them due to the persistent stigma of untouchability.

The proliferation of magazines, journals, and newspapers played a pivotal role in providing extensive coverage of events and incidents highlighting the Adi-Dravidas' victimization through untouchability and mistreatment by the caste-Hindus. One such incident occurred in the Chingleput district, where the Depressed Classes faced ill-treatment from Brahmins and other Cudras. Shams-ul-Akbar, a Muslim newspaper, in 1892, strongly condemned this ill-treatment and appealed to the British Government in Madras to grant them equal rights, privileges, and freedom.¹⁴ The portrayal of such incidents, like the Cub-Collector's neglect of a Pariah School in

Coimbatore district in 1894, underlines the widespread discrimination and maltreatment faced by the hapless Depressed Classes, as documented in the Tamil weekly Parayan.

P.S.D. Muthusamy Pillai, representing the Indian Christian Missionary of Madras, urged the Government to appoint only inspectors from the depressed classes to examine schools exclusively meant for them.¹⁵ At the national level, Sir M.G. Chandravarkar played a crucial role in founding the Depressed Class Mission in 1905, aiming to educate Depressed class children, promote temperance and cleanliness, and eliminate social disabilities imposed by caste-Hindus. The Hindu, in 1911, acknowledged Chandravarkar's contributions and emphasized the need for increased support from the upper class to uplift the Depressed Classes.

Depressed Class leaders, including C. Ayothidas Kaviraja Pandithar, significantly contributed to the community's betterment in Tamilnadu. Kaviraja Pandithar, a prominent scholar proficient in Sanskrit, Pali, English, and Tamil, founded the Advaitananda Sabha in 1870, the Dravida Mahajana Sangham in 1881, and the Chakya Buddhist Sangham in 1898.¹⁶ A conference held by the Dravida Mahajana Sangham in 1891 at Ooty resulted in ten resolutions demanding civil rights, educational concessions, removal of objectionable rules in the Jail Manual, economic advancement of the Depressed Castes, and a fair share in government service appointments. Subsequently, the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha was established in 1892, and both organizations collaborated on matters of common interest concerning the welfare of the Depressed Castes. The concerted efforts of these leaders and organizations aimed at raising awareness and enhancing the socio-educational development of the Depressed Classes in Tamilnadu.

ELEVATING THE DEPRESSED CLASSES

In the pursuit of further reforms, the Madras Mahajana Sabha, a nationalist forum predominantly composed of Brahmins, extended an invitation to untouchable leaders to participate in a conference held in Madras in 1890. C. Ayothidas and other prominent untouchable leaders attended the conference, where they advocated for reforms, proposing the assignment of poramboke (government) lands to the untouchables and the establishment of more schools.¹⁷ Ayothidas, in particular, openly criticized the Indian National Congress, labeling it as an association primarily representing Brahmins. He accused the Congress of dominating key positions in the British administrative setup and obstructing efforts to address the concerns of the untouchables. The collaborative efforts of the Depressed Class leaders and Christian missionaries yielded success. Ayothidas engaged with prominent figures like Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and Col. Olcott of the Theosophical Society.¹⁸ Seeking Olcott's support, Ayothidas aimed to convert the Pariahs of Tamilnadu to the Buddhist faith. He recognized the necessity of constructing a counter-tradition that would elucidate the history and culture of Dalits, firmly condemning the Brahmanical attitudes responsible for their degradation. In this regard, Ayothidas emerged as a precursor to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He advocated for the inclusion of depressed castes in communal representation in various spheres, such as the Governor's Executive Council, army, medical, police, railway, educational services, and municipalities in the Madras Presidency. According to Ayothidas, it was the caste-Hindus who obstructed the grant of communal representation to the Depressed Castes. His noble example inspired other eminent Dalit intellectuals, including G. Appaduraiar, Masillamani, Maduraiyar, Rettaimalai Srinivasan, J.S. Kannappan, M.C. Rajah, Mayor Sivaraj, Mayor Sivashanmugam Pillai, Munisami Pillai, and Balagurusivam, who tirelessly worked for the upliftment of the Depressed Castes and the

promotion of their self-respect and self-consciousness long before the advent of the Justice Party and Self-Respect Movement.¹⁹

Subsequently, the Dravidians also initiated organizational efforts under the leadership of P.V. Subramania Pillai, forming the Dravida Mahajana Sabha. This organization, consisting of learned scholars, businessmen, and social workers from the Depressed Classes, convened its first conference at Ooty on December 1, 1891. During the conference, ten resolutions were passed, addressing concerns related to better treatment for the untouchables, separate schools, scholarships and stipends, job reservations in public services, and the removal of all social restrictions.²⁰ Copies of these resolutions were sent to the Government and various socio-political bodies. This marked the first organized attempt from an urban center by the depressed classes to articulate their grievances.²¹

R.Srinivasan, the first secretary of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, played a pivotal role in convening a conference in Madras on December 23, 1892. Additionally, he established another association known as Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, dedicated to enhancing the socio-economic, moral, and intellectual status of the depressed classes through various means. Both the Dravida Mahajana Sabha and the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha consistently represented the issues faced by the untouchables to the Government. This led to the appointment of S. Srinivasaraghava Iyengar by the Government of Madras to study their condition, and his subsequent report depicted the dire state of the untouchables, recommending various measures for their upliftment.

ADVANCEMENTS FOR THE DEPRESSED CLASSES IN TAMIL NADU

The Madras Government, responding to the reasonable demands of the 'untouchables' in Tamil Nadu, issued various favourable orders, providing substantial support to uplift the untouchables. These measures included the establishment of schools and the allocation of lands to landless and ex-servicemen among the 'untouchables'. Additionally, as a legacy of British influence, members of the depressed society were appointed to various positions in the administrative setup.²² They began serving in public services, holding roles such as sirasthars, engineers, surgeons, inspectors, managers, registrars, head-writers, and guards. Between 1891 and 1935, a series of forty conferences and meetings were conducted across different parts of the Madras Presidency, providing a platform to openly discuss and address the myriad issues faced by the Depressed Castes.²³

The Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, a pivotal organization, dedicated itself to the organization and education of their people. Recognizing the priority of social reforms over political emancipation, the Sabha actively worked towards the upliftment of the depressed classes. Education was identified as a key instrument for societal improvement, particularly for those treated as 'untouchables'.²⁴ The peculiar social system that existed for over a millennium in India had denied educational opportunities to the untouchables. It was during the British Rule in India that emphasis was placed on the education of the depressed classes. The government, sympathetic to their cause, expressed a willingness to provide educational opportunities to this section of society. At the first meeting of the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, participants unanimously agreed that, among other things, for the swift economic advancement of their people, all the educated among them should enter government service. The Sabha also recognized the importance of individuals with good conduct from their community serving as representatives in panchayats and municipal bodies.²⁵ By 1913, the Imperial Legislative Council, acknowledging the representation made by the Depressed Class leaders, stated that the

government would welcome their appointments in competition with others, provided they were qualified. This move aimed to address the domination of Brahmins in all government posts and their control over temples and charitable funds, a concern raised by the South Indian non-Brahmin Confederation and other Brahmin critics in Madras. As a result, appointments in government services were proportionately distributed to other communities based on their population, marking organized attempts from the last decade of the nineteenth century to fight for the rights of the depressed classes.

Madras Council Debates, 1920 During the Justice Ministry, the Adi-Dravidas continued to improve their condition through education and governmental measures. Leaders such as M.C. Rajah, R. Srinivasan, R. Veeraiyan, V.I. Muniswami Pillai, Swami Sahajanandam of Chidambaram, M. Devadasan, R. Murthy, P.V. Subramanian, M. Palanisami, P.M. Madurai Pillai, L.C. Gurusami, N. Sivaraj, H.M. Jeganathan of Madurai, Poonjolai Muthuveera Pavalar, C. Ayothidas, P.K. Pushparaj, and Meenambal Sivaraj worked in various positions through different political parties. The roles played by M.C. Rajah and R. Srinivasan gained national significance for the upliftment of the Adi-Dravidas.²⁶

M.C. Rajah, serving as an Adi-Dravida representative in the Madras Legislative Council during 1921, 1925, and 1926, played a crucial role in debates on renaming the people of Depressed classes as the Adi-Dravidas. The Justice Party passed a resolution in the local Legislative Council in 1922 recommending the adoption of the name Adi-Dravida in place of caste titles like panchama and Pariah. Furthermore, M.C. Rajah served in various capacities, including the Madras Publicity Board, the Madras Soldiers Board, the Madras Labour Advisory Board, the Public Services – Communal Representative Committee, and the Madras Widows Home Committee.²⁷ His efforts were instrumental in the reorganization of the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, where he served as its honorary secretary. In 1926, he presided over the All-India Depressed Class Association, addressing numerous meetings and demanding adequate representation for Adi-Dravidas in provincial legislatures, local bodies, and public services.

The Justice Ministry responded to these demands by providing representation to an Adi-Dravida on the Simon Committee, sending another representative to the Round Table Conference, and conferring the title of Dewan Bahadur on another. The Communal Government Orders passed by the Justice Ministry allowed them to occupy high official positions, such as Deputy Collectors and other dignified jobs in the Madras Civil Service. R. Srinivasan, a dedicated leader within the Adi-Dravida community, maintained a non-partisan stance, refraining from aligning himself with specific political parties. Despite this, he fostered political connections with prominent national leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar and M.R. Jayakar. Operating independently, Srinivasan formulated his opinions and actively worked towards the upliftment of the depressed classes. Serving as a nominated member of the Madras Council from 1923 to 1938, he played a pivotal role in the annulment of civic restrictions imposed on the untouchables through a government order in 1924. In 1928, he established the Madras Presidency Depressed Class Federation, later renamed the Scheduled Class Federation, dedicated to the social progress of the Adi-Dravidas.²⁸

The dominance of caste-Hindu leaders within the Justice Party and the Congress limited the beneficial measures that the Adi-Dravidas could secure. Consequently, their leaders sought new alliances to address the social progress of the untouchables. The Self-Respect ideas propagated by E.V. Ramasami resonated with them, leading to a temporary merger of the Self-Respect Movement with the Adi-Dravida movement. Influential Adi-Dravida leaders, including M.C. Rajah and N. Sivaraj, aligned themselves with the Self-Respect leaders.²⁹ The collaborative

efforts of Adi-Dravidas and Self-Respecters involved open discussions of thought-provoking ideas, assuring the former of their legal rights and equal treatment. To fortify their communal unity, conferences were organized at provincial, district, and grassroots levels. The eleventh provincial conference held in Madras on 5 January 1928, under the presidency of L.C. Gurusami, a Madras legislator, saw the participation of Adi-Dravida leaders like M.C. Rajah and Swami Sahajanandam alongside Self-Respect leaders. The unanimous demand of the conference was for the representation of Adi-Dravidas in the Madras municipality and local boards. The South Indian Reforms Conference in Madras on 26 November 1928, presided over by E.V. Ramasami, emphasised the eradication of untouchability and condemned the intentions of caste-Hindus to subjugate the Adi-Dravidas. E.V. Ramasami asserted that without abolishing untouchability, self-rule could not be achieved. Leaders like N. Sivaraj and W.P.A. Soundarapandian concurred with Ramasami's opinion. The second Untouchability Abolition Conference on 10 February 1929, initiated by E.V. Ramasami, further highlighted the need for the development of human society and the nation by eliminating the evils of untouchability.³⁰

The first Provincial Self-Respect Conference held at Chengleput on 7 February 1929 resolved to eradicate untouchability. The second Self-Respect Provincial Conference at Erode on 10 May 1930 marked a significant collaboration between the Self-Respect Movement and Adi-Dravida movement. M.R. Jayakar, an All-India 'untouchable' leader, was invited by E.V. Ramasami to preside over the conference.³¹ Jayakar acknowledged the role of Self-Respecters in advocating for the depressed classes and appealed to the Adi-Dravidas to collaborate. The conference elected L.C. Gurusami, an Adi-Dravida leader, as one of the executive members. Dravidian newspapers, particularly Kudi Arasu, played a crucial role in exposing the ill-treatment of 'untouchables' by caste-Hindus. On 20 July 1930, Kudi Arasu condemned caste-Hindu atrocities against Adi-Dravidas, highlighting incidents where they were blocked in their streets. The Self-Respecters from the Nagercoil region, including P. Jeevanandam and P. Chidambaram Pillai, contributed to the dissemination of egalitarian and rational ideas through articles in Kudi Arasu and publications. Adi-Dravidas, attracted by these rational ideas, dedicated themselves to the cause of social justice and generously contributed to the resurgence of the depressed classes.³² K. Abdul Hameed, a Self-Respecter, underscored in an article in Kudi Arasu on 12 October 1930 that political leaders should prioritize efforts to eradicate untouchability, akin to their initiatives against British imperialism.

The Adi-Dravida conference convened in Salem in 1931 marked a significant moment when M.C. Rajah articulated the imperative need for eradicating untouchability prior to achieving self-rule. He emphasised that the failure to address this issue would jeopardise the sustainability of self-rule.³³ A parallel conference held in Lalgudi, Tiruchirapalli district, on 30 May 1931, saw E.V. Ramasami vehemently condemning caste-Hindus for imposing civic restrictions. Swami Sahajanandam, responding to atrocities against 'untouchables' in Coimbatore, Tiruchirapalli, Ramnad, and Tirunelveli, openly accused the Congress of not adequately addressing social issues. Consequently, Adi-Dravida leaders urged the depressed class populace to align with the Self-Respecters who championed their cause.³⁴

The latter half of the nineteenth century bore witness to transformative changes in the socio-political landscape. The political movement, coupled with urbanisation, gave rise to national and Dravidian formations, fostering increased social mobility and organisation among the oppressed sections of society. Leveraging western education and missionary initiatives, the Nadars and Dalits, two major social groups, emerged from their historical subjugation. The Nadars, capitalising on urban demands and consumerism, ventured into business and solidified

their position through the formation of associations. In contrast, the Dalits faced formidable challenges in advancing, primarily due to their segregation from the social mainstream and their rural background.³⁵ The progressive legislations and reform measures introduced by the British further heightened socio-political awareness among the oppressed classes. Notably, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the political movement underwent a transformation towards social goals under the leadership of non-Brahmins. As urban-based employment opportunities proliferated, facilitated by job reservations and state-sponsored financial support for education, the oppressed classes asserted their denied rights more assertively.³⁶ While Brahmins centred their focus on national issues, non-Brahmins, alongside other oppressed classes, coalesced into formidable organisational structures. Ultimately, social ideology took precedence over national issues, at least for a few decades, under the leadership of non-Brahmins.

CONCLUSION

The 19th-century socio-political landscape of Tamilnadu witnessed transformative changes, particularly for the Nadar and Depressed Classes communities. The Nadars' journey from social and political neglect to economic prosperity and social recognition illustrates the impact of education, missionary influence, and strategic advocacy. The establishment of the Nadar Mahajana Sangam in 1910 marks a significant milestone, symbolizing their collective efforts for upliftment. Concurrently, the Depressed Classes experienced a delayed awakening, with socio-religious reformers and Christian missionaries playing crucial roles in fostering awareness. Government initiatives, despite challenges, sought to provide educational opportunities and improve the condition of the Scheduled Castes. The unity among the Depressed Classes, advocacy through publications, and the establishment of organizations like the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha contributed to their socio-educational development. The collaboration between the Adi-Dravida movement and Self-Respect leaders, such as E.V. Ramasami, highlighted the shared goal of eradicating untouchability. Leaders like M.C. Rajah and R. Srinivasan, through legislative representation and organizational efforts, significantly contributed to the upliftment of the Depressed Classes. This historical analysis underscores the socio-political transformations driven by education, advocacy, and organizational initiatives, emphasizing a shift from national to social goals for the oppressed classes in Tamilnadu during the late 19th century.

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