



## History

## THE DEPRESSED CASTE MOVEMENTS OF SOUTH INDIA – THE HISTORICAL STUDY

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**ABSTRACT** Colonial rule brought some important change in both the social and economic share for depressed classes. In ancient time and the medieval period the conditions of depressed classes were very critical.<sup>1</sup> Then social status was at a low level and their economic conditions were very critical because in this period Brahminism, caste system, and Hinduism is at the very high level. So the Social and economic position of the depressed society is at the low level in the society and it was continued in various forms till the 18<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>2</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup>-century during British rule the condition of the depressed class was not as worse as it was in ancient time and during the Bhakti period. The emergence of British power made a lot of difference for *down trodden* people. They brought a sense of Liberty for the marginalized communities.<sup>3</sup>

**KEYWORDS** : Social respect in south India, Dalit reformers; Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar.

## INTRODUCTION

The British strongly opposed the rituals as Sati Partha and unsociability. During this period, the depressed were known as untouchables and they were officially called as Scheduled Castes.<sup>4</sup> After independence the position of Dalits has improved considerably due to constitutional provisions and after undertaken by the government spread of education and awareness. In colonial rule, it led to some opportunities for education including English education for the lower caste it led to access to historical writings and to their own history but the efforts of the radical Bahujan and Dalit reformers from Phule to Periyar and Ambedkar remained a subordinate one.<sup>5</sup>

## Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (spy)

The untouchable Ezhavas or Iravas of Kerala clustered around the religious leader Shri Narayana Guru (1855-1928), who formed the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SPY) in 1902-1903. It organized some temple entry rights movements. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was founded in 1903 with the guidance and blessings of Sree Narayana Guru.<sup>6</sup> The SNDP is a charitable society working for the spiritual and educational upliftment of the Ezhava community for the past 102 years.<sup>7</sup> It is the social development of Ezhava from (according to the 824 Royal order) mere 'owner of *thalappu* and ladder' to the present state. It is also the shining story of the change of an almost food-gathering society into a cosmopolitan world order. Yogam is the first organization which envisaged Kerala as a whole. During the 1890s the caste system in Kerala was very rigid; with untouchability.<sup>8</sup> Dr.Palpu started works towards getting the rights of Ezhava community. With the 1891 Malayali Memorial Revolt, he came forward by taking the leadership of the community. He tried to make an organization called 'Ezhava Sabha'.<sup>9</sup> In 1896, he created the bye-law of it and published the same in Malayali, a newspaper published from Thankussery. Even though he organized some meetings at Paravur and Mayyanad, that movement failed.<sup>10</sup>

## Dalit Movement Of India

From the 1920s there was a rise of Dalit movements in various parts of the country. The Montagu Chelmsford reforms and massive economic and political upheavals of the post-World War I period provided the background for most of their organizations.<sup>11</sup> Their common theme was *adi*, or a definition of themselves as the original inhabitants of the country, a claim that their own inherent traditions were those of equality and unity, and a total rejection of castes as the imposition of the conquering Aryans who used this to subjugate and divide the natives. Of these, the most important were the Adi Dravida<sup>12</sup> movement in TamilNadu; the Adi Andhra movement in Andhra, Adi Karnataka movement; the organization of Puranas and Cherumans in Kerala; and the Adi Hindu movement, mainly centered on Kanpur in U.P. In Punjab, the Adi Dharma movement claimed that untouchables formed a distinct religious community like Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs and that this had existed even before the arrival of the Hindus. Later on, this movement was absorbed into Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation, which by the 1940s was providing an all-India umbrella to such Dalits movements.<sup>13</sup>

## Dravida Mahajana Sabha

C.Iyothee Thass, a Paraya by birth, was a great Tamil scholar. His writings establish him as a person well acquainted with Sanskrit, Pali, and English. He was well versed in the philosophical thoughts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, and Christianity. He founded Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891 at Nilgiris.<sup>14</sup> He emerged as the leader of the Depressed Classes and worked strongly against the practice of caste system and the atrocities committed on the helpless depressed people. The Sabha stressed equal treatment to the depressed people in the public places and demanded reservation in the job opportunities and concessions and facilities in education for the uplift of the Depressed Class people. The conference of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha was held on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1891 at Ooty. Other This involved in the educational efforts of the Depressed Classes. His meeting and association with Henry Steele Olcott was indeed a happy coincidence and became instrumental in the organization of Olcott Free Panchama Schools in Madras.<sup>15</sup>

He invited Miss Mary Sarah and Palmer from America for the opening of the schools at Kodambakkam (1898), they opened (1899), Mylapore (1901) and Krishnampet (1901) in Madras. He preached Buddhism, morality, and education among the Depressed people. He strongly opposed the conversion of the tea estate laborers in Ooty. After the demise of Iyothee Thass, John Rathnam and T.M. Nair looked after the entire works of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha between 1914 and 1917,<sup>16</sup> this organization was the outcome of a split in the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. The editor of Dravida Pandian, John Rathnam presided over the joining function. In the meeting, the leaders like M.C.Rajah, A.Madurai Pillai, Munisami Pillai, and many others participated and expressed their happiness over the union of the two major organizations of the Depressed Classes and also spoke about various needs of the Depressed Classes especially Government of Madras, G.O.No.817, Law (General) Department, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1922.<sup>17</sup>

## Congress And The Harijan Movement

Congress did not have social reforms in its agenda in the beginning. However, when in 1918 the first Depressed Classes Conference was organized in Bombay, and the Dalits and non-Brahmins made proposals for separate electorates, the Congress reversed its policy.<sup>18</sup> The verdict of the Division Bench, which has looked into the problem from the perspective of the constitutional rights of Dalits, such as the right to economic justice and the right to live with dignity, gains significance in the context of repeated appeals of Dalit and Left organizations to the government to retrieve Panchami lands, assigned to Dalits but now in the possession of non-Dalits, and restore it to Dalits.<sup>19</sup> Only massive, concerted efforts of the government to survey the land assigned under the Panchami Land scheme and identify the land alienated to non-Dalits in violation of the conditions can lead to rectitative justice on the ground.

## Justice Party Movement of Tamilnadu

The birth of the Dravidian movement, the oldest and most enduring anti-British movement in the country, can be traced to November 20, 1916, when a group of leading non-Brahmin citizens of Madras such as

Dr. T.M. Nair, Sir Pitti Thyagaraja Chettiar and the Raja of Panagal came together to form the South Indian Liberal Federation (SILF), which was also known as Justice Party. Their joint declaration, which came to be called the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto*, demanded the representation of non-Brahmins in government jobs. This was the first cohesive demand for reservation raised in India. SILF soon launched a newspaper called *Justice*.<sup>20</sup> The party won that election as the Indian National Congress boycotted it. To a great extent, the Justice Party and its popularity was a reaction to the domination of the Congress in the then Madras Presidency by Brahmins and other upper castes. This was used by the British rulers as a platform against the Congress, which was attracting more and more educated Brahmins and upper castes. The Justice Party was responsible for many changes, including the passing of a Government Order in 1930 providing for reservations for various groups, including non-Brahmin Hindus.

### Self-Respect Movement of TamilNadu

The Anti-Brahmin crusade got a further impetus when E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker,<sup>21</sup> popularly known as Periyar, joined the anti-Brahmin movement. Naicker, who actively participated in the Non-Cooperation movement, broke with the Congress in 1924 to develop an anti-Brahmin, anti-caste populist and radical alternative to Justice Elitism. He had been with the Congress and had even served a term as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress, before he quit the party in 1924 following differences over the issue of social justice and representation of non-Brahmins. After leaving the Congress, Periyar launched the Self-Respect Movement (1925) aimed at awakening non-Brahmins. His journal *Kudi Arasu* and his movement progressed from advocating weddings without Brahmin priests, forcible temple entry, the burning of *Manusmriti* to outright atheism at times. In fact, he tried to provide an umbrella movement to all non-Brahmins of South India, particularly of Tamil Nadu.

When the mantle of Justice Party leadership fell on Periyar after 1937, he considered moving away from electoral politics and confining the role of the Non-Brahmin in the movement to a reformist one. Accordingly, at the Salem conference in 1944, the Justice Party was renamed Dravidar Kazhagam.<sup>22</sup> Periyar had lent a cutting edge to anti-Brahmin tirades by targeting Hindu religion and its practices, decrying the gods of the Hindu pantheon as figments of imagination created by the invading Aryans to keep the Dravidians subjugated. He propounded his theory of rationalism, which denied the existence of god (that is, Hindu gods). It was basically because of the agitation by the Dravida Kazhagam that the first amendment to the Constitution was made to incorporate a provision granting concessions to the socially and economically backward. But it was not long before differences crept in over the question whether the Dravida Kazhagam should remain only a social movement. When Periyar's marriage to Maniammai, a woman much younger to him, sparked it controversy, some leading lights of the DK led by C.N. Annadurai walked out and formed the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949, and three years later DMK decided to enter electoral politics. After independence the position of Dalits has improved considerably due to constitutional provisions and after undertaken by the government spread of education and awareness. In colonial rule, it led to some opportunities for education including English education for the lower caste it led to access to historical writings and to their own history but the efforts of the radical Bahujan and Dalit reformers from Phule to Periyar and Ambedkar remained a subordinate one. Hence the study reflects that the social and political condition of the Dalits was very critical before colonial rule. The emergence of British power made many attempts and created many rules and regulations for improvement and their social condition and political upliftment.

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