

THE PARTICIPATION OF PEASANTS IN THE REFLECTIONS OF GANDHIAN PROGRAMMES IN TAMILNADU

Dr. S.P. Prem Singh Muthubalan,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Department of History
Tirunelveli – 627012

Abstract: *The Indian National Congress became the party of masses after the arrival of M.K. Gandhi. The resolutions of Congress through its annual sessions and sometimes with special one was sincerely followed and executed by the provincial leaders of Congress Working Committee in their respective areas. The participation of Tamil peasants in the Congress movements against the Colonial government was not severely dealt by the previous authors, even they gave scant attention to the struggles based on Tamil provinces. The role of peasants in the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil-disobedience movement in Tamil Nadu has been analysed in this paper.*

Keywords: *Kheda, Indigo, Salt tax, temperance, Vedaranyam.*

The new era of Indian National Congress (INC) started after the entry of M.K. Gandhi, the bourgeois character of Congress changed by him.¹ The two revolts which were Champaran in Bihar and Kheda in Gujarat familiarized him among the rural masses. Under the leadership of Gandhi, they agitated against the injustice of indigo planters and the land revenue collectors respectively.² Due to Gandhi's efforts, a large number of rich and marginal farmers entered into the party.³ During that time Gandhi neither conducted any Satyagraha nor had any disciples in Tamil Nadu so he was unknown to the Tamil people. Before his arrival, Congress survived there as a small political club of wealthy upper-class people. It was overshadowed by the Justice party⁴ and it was not firm in its policy concerned with the problems of peasantry up to the end of the second decade of the twentieth century.⁵ But it was succeeded in mobilizing the youth, women, the urban petty bourgeoisie, the urban and rural artisans, peasants, workers, merchants, capitalists and a large number of small landholders⁶ of Gujarat, the United Provinces, Bihar and the Andhra region of Madras.⁷

In 1920, Gandhi stressed that the peasant's assistance is much needed to attain swaraj, other leaders of Congress also realized Gandhi's thesis.⁸ On the same year of July a committee headed by him who drafted the non-cooperation plan which conceived triple boycott of government-run courts, colleges and councils. On 4th September the agenda of Gandhi secured sufficient support from the Congress special session held at Calcutta⁹ which approved the non-cooperation proposal of Gandhi.¹⁰ Most importantly, the Session propounding the non-payment of taxes impressed the peasants who responded instantly to this movement.¹¹

Gandhi had captured the attention of the INC through his non-cooperation programme.¹² He made strenuous efforts to popularize the idea and necessity of the plan.¹³ He toured several places including Madras and addressed numerous public meetings for the support of the movement. In Madras, he tried to influence the Tamil youth and he achieved his desired effect. According to the government report, Gandhi created tremendous enthusiasm and attracted enormous crowds wherever he went.¹⁴ A meeting held at Madras beach on 12th August 1921 where Gandhi declared that non-cooperation (Khilafat) is a just and religious doctrine; it is the inherent right of every human being and it is perfectly constitutional.¹⁵ At that time the rural masses had already politicized by the tireless efforts of the regional leaders were brought into the orbit of the national movement.¹⁶

Non-Cooperation Movement & Salt Satyagraha in Tamil Nadu: The anti-liquor agitation of Tamil Nadu (July 1921) was a spontaneous movement by the common people and was then taken up by the Congress.¹⁷ C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), S. Satyamurthi and E.V. Ramaswami Naicker, the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, were the important leaders of the non-cooperation movement in Tamil Nadu. Under the leadership and in the name of Congress, temperance campaign was conducted in many parts of the Madras province especially in Madurai.¹⁸

An annual discussion of INC was held at Lahore in December 1929 under the presidentship of Nehru.¹⁹ During this time Gandhi had decided to protest against salt tax based on the Salt Act of 1882.²⁰ On 12th March 1930, Gandhi marched to Dandi with his followers to break the salt laws.²¹ This movement quickly spread among the masses throughout India. It was a part of the civil disobedience movement.²²

The Gandhi's Dandi march was followed by Rajagopalachari (Rajaji), the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee President, along with T.S.S. Rajan and others.²³ Rajaji addressed several meetings during this period at Thanjavur, Mayavaram and other places in the latter District.²⁴ The Vedaranyam march began on Tamil New Year's Day on 13th April 1930. Nearly a hundred Tamil volunteers under Rajaji set out Vedaranyam to offer Salt Satyagraha against the Madras Salt Act.²⁵ In the beginning, neither the people of Thanjavur district participated in the march nor did they show any practical sympathy with it.²⁶ The party members mostly participated from the other districts viz., Madurai, Tiruchirappalli and Tirunelveli.²⁷

They did not follow the shortest route to Vedaranyam, as a result, the march had taken sixteen days to reach the destination via Kumbakonam and Thiruthuraiipoondi. On the 20th Morning, they went to Kumbakonam where they were accommodated in the house of V. Panthulu Iyer, a leading and influential *Mirasdar*, a staunch Congressmen, Ex-M.L.C and a member of the working committee of the Tamil Nadu Provincial Congress Committee. After five days they reached Thiruthuraiipoondi where they were warmly welcomed by Ramachandra Naidu, a wealthy and influential landlord of the place. After passing 22 miles finally they reached the destination on the 28th evening. The next day was observed as a day of fast and prayer.²⁸

The programmes of Gandhi and the INC are inextricable. The temperance campaigns and the Vedaranyam salt march were the reflections of Non-cooperation movement and the civil disobedience movement of INC respectively. The Tamil Nadu Congress Committee followed the instructions of prominent party leaders especially M.K. Gandhi.

Chris Baker has opined that the non-cooperation in the Madras presidency was 'nothing more than a few attacks on liquor shops by zealous advocates of temperance, and some scuffles involving the police with forest tribesmen.'²⁹ The participation of Tamil Nadu peasants in the Vedaranyam march was quite impressive. The government arrested nearly 350 participants at the end of the march but it did not enlist the person's status except the leaders. The available records provide a general list of persons. It is clear that the representation of peasants in the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee was not getting much importance during the cited movements of INC.

Conclusion: In the name of nationalism, Congress made the mass movements as their own and vice versa. For instance, the temperance campaigns were a spontaneous movement which was utilized by the Congress party in the name of Non-Cooperation movement. The party leaders of Tamil Nadu pretended that the Vedaranyam event was a mass movement. During the march, Rajaji avoided the shortest route to reach the destination because he was not ready to meet the marginal people especially the Kallar tenants and agricultural labourers of Thanjavur district. Most of the marchers were participated from other districts than Thanjavur, it ascertained that the salt march was purely a political campaign. Its intention was to follow the advice of the first-line leaders of INC not to redress the grievances of common people especially the peasants. The agrarian policies of Congress party were dramatically changed after the evolution of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Tamil regions who took up the cause of marginal people especially in Thanjavur district.

¹ R.C. Kochar, *Congress and Socialism: Economic Programmes and Policies* (Delhi: Anamika Publishers & Distributers, 1997), pp. 11-16

² N.G. Ranga, "Indian Peasants' Struggles and Achievements", in A.R. Desai (Ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 72-73.

³ Bipan Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), pp. 15-16.

⁴ David Arnold, *The Congress in Tamilnad: Nationalist Politics in South India 1919-1937* (N.p.: South Asia Book, n.d), p. 9.

⁵ K.C. Alexander, *Peasant Organizations in South India* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1981), pp. 94-95.

⁶ Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 28.

⁷ Ian Copland, *India 1885-1947: The Unmaking of an Empire* (New Delhi: Pearson Education Ltd, 2001), p. 50.

⁸ Kapil Kumar, "Peasants, Congress and the Struggle for Freedom: 1917-39", in Kapil Kumar (Ed.), *Congress and Classes: Nationalism, Workers and Peasants* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988), p. 218.

⁹ Peter D Reeves, "The Politics of Order: Anti-Non-Cooperation in the United Provinces, 1921", *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 25, no. 2 (1966), pp. 261-262.

¹⁰ Veena Choudhury, *Indian Nationalism and External Forces, 1920-74* (Delhi: Capital Publishing House, 1985), p. 23.

¹¹ Kaushal Kishore Sharma, *Agrarian Movements and Congress Politics in Bihar* (Delhi: Anamika Prakashan, 1989), p. 58.

¹² Richard Gordon, "Non-Co-Operation and Council Entry, 1919 to 1920", *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 7, no. 3 (1973), p. 443.

¹³ Vinayak Chaturvedi, *Peasants Pasts: History, Politics and Nationalism in Gujarat* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007), p. 142.

¹⁴ P. Kandaswamy, *The Political Career of K. Kamaraj: A Study in the Politics of Tamilnadu, 1920-1975* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2001), p. 15.

¹⁵ Arnold, *The Congress in Tamilnad*, p. 34.

¹⁶ N.G. Ranga, *Outlines of National Revolutionary Path* (Bombay, Hind Kitabas, 1945), pp. 28-29.

¹⁷ Arnold, *The Congress in Tamilnad*, p. 64.

¹⁸ *Madras Legislative Council Proceedings* vol. IV, 12th March 1921, p. 836.

¹⁹ Kochar, *Congress and Socialism*, p. 22.

²⁰ Chaturvedi, *Peasants Pasts*, pp. 153.

²¹ K.S.K. Velmani (Ed.), *Gazetteers of Tamilnadu – Tiruchirappalli District* vol. I (Chennai: Chennai Printers Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd, 1998), p. 228.

²² Dennis Dalton, "The Dandi Drama", in Peter Robb and David Taylor (Ed.), *Rule, Protest and Identity: Aspects of Modern South Asia* (London: Curzon Press, 1978), p. 133.

²³ R. Parthasarathi, *Builders of Modern India: S. Satyamurthi*, pp. 93-99.

²⁴ *Civil Disobedience Movement*, p. 155. (Collected from Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai).

²⁵ S.R. Bakshi, C. Rajagopalachari: *Role in Freedom Movement* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1991), pp. 326-331.

²⁶ *Civil Disobedience Movement*, (N.p.: n.p., n.d), p. 155. (Collected from Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai).

²⁷ *History of Freedom Movement, 1928 to 1937* vol. 72, p. 82. (Collected from Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai).

²⁸ S.R. Bakshi, *Indian Freedom Fighters-74 Struggle for Independence – C. Rajagopalachari: Role in Freedom Movement* (New Delhi: Anmol Publication, 1996), p. 278.

²⁹ D.A. Low, *The Indian National Congress: Centenary Hindsight* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 110