

THE PEASANTS: THEIR ROLE AND ACTIVITIES IN NON CO-OPERATION MOVEMENT DURING CONGRESS MINISTRY IN TAMILNADU, 1920-21

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Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi who entering the political scenario galvanized support from the masses in Tamilnadu. In 1915, Gandhiji who made a momentous decision while on a tour in Madurai who seeing the conditions of plight of the peasants, he decided to wear two piece clothing. He gave up his traditional dhoti and vowed to wear Khadi dress always. Gandhiji's mission to Champaran in 1917 and his organisation of a labour strike in the Ahmedabad textile mills in 1918 were no less significant a contribution to the growth of most awakening. In the annual session of the Indian National Congress at Amritsar in December 1919, the class demands of the peasantry were put forward for the first time for adoption in the national programme. The paper described about the role of Peasants in Non Co-operation Movement in Tamilnadu.

Non Co-operation Movement and the Peasants

In Karur in the Tiruchirapalli District, a note is reported in which police were compelled to fire and here again they killed one man and wounded two others. In this case the refusal of a travelling theatre party to give a benefit performance for khilafat fund was the signal for a mob attack which resulted in the theatre party and a member of police being confined in the theatre hall for the whole night. The order was restored by 86th Carnatic infantry the next day. From other districts there are reports of harassment of persons frequenting liquor shops, boycott of the sale of toddy shops and of distain property and in Salem organized resistance to forest grazing regulations.¹

In Salem, Congress membership ticket at 4 annas each was sold to villagers. Though the report says, "villagers were told that the ticket entitled them to free grazing for their cattle in reserved forest. Then the theatre of political activity was in November 1921 in North Arcot and Dindugal". The Government measures to deal with forest offices were successful; but attempt to dissuade the villagers from paying forest dues continue. There was a good deal of unrest and discontentment among village officers but in many cases they are dissatisfied with their pay and general condition. These persons are however undoubtedly being influenced by political agitators and are probably ready to throw in their lot with them if they have any success. Agitation in North Arcot, Vellore and acts of disobedience at Erode, followed by at Tanjore were reported.²

The whole sale defection of village officers in the track graciously affected and rendered the work of collection difficult and the special staff sent to carry out the process for

recovery met with passive obstruction everywhere, bands of volunteers being at hand in every village to see that they are given no help or information though there is no active resistance to the service of demands or the distains or attachment of property. It was expected that, as the staff gains familiarity with the amount of each village and the portion of the house and lands of individual ryots its progress will be more rapid. The sight of their property actually being sold will break down the resistance of the ryots, while, the legislation which it is proposed to bring before the council, will enable sale to follow attachment with a much shorter interval than now has elapsed.³

The remaining installments of land revenue for the year 1922 fell due in the 10 February and out of a demand of 68 3/4 lakhs about 10% was collected upto 13th. It was not clear then whether Gandhi's suspension of the programme would any effect. Meanwhile a committee of the local district Congress, which reported that the district was not ripe for civil disobedience and there was some difference of opinion. The Congress felt the payment, of land revenue should begin and at the same time volunteer organisation should be strengthened. It is quite certain that parts of the districts would not accept the decision and to facilitate the collection of revenue, particular effort was needed to discourage the volunteers. Other than, Guntur, Krishna and Godavari there was no difficulty in collecting revenue. There were no further instances of violations on the part of village officer. By March 1922, many districts reported of complete cessation of the non-cooperation activity, in North Arcot especially Vaniyambadi and in Tiruchirapalli, there were some Congress volunteers creating popular excitement.⁴

In Tirunelveli, there was a district Congress promoted by the non co-operation congress workers. The view among the leaders was that time was not ripe for Mass Civil Disobedience and work they recommended was individual dis-obedience.⁵

No tax campaign in February 1924 in Tanjore district gathered momentum. The majority of them want to agitate for a reduction of the tax and the minority being in favour at all costs. Aruther Knapp visited and a memorandum from the landholders was given to him. Still there was no disturbance over the collection of revenue. The legislative members of the Legislative Council supported the campaign. As the Government was not able come to a decision, a similar 'no-tax' campaign was planned against the introduction of resettlement rate in Tiruchirappalli. The Government after due consideration reduced the resettlement rates; but efforts were made to carry on the non-payment. The Government was sure this campaign was more political in character.⁶

The whole of March 1924 non-payment of land revenue in Tanjore was the chief topic of interest. The reduce in resettlement had stifled the resistance, but the congress was "fostering a spirit of opposition to the government", said the fortnightly report. The District Magistrate issued order prohibiting about 30 persons from outside the district, from attending a *Khilfat* meeting on 27 March in an area which was the scene of serious non-cooperation riots two years ago. On that ground that it would be used as an opportunity for incitement to the non-payment of revenue. Following the defeat of Land Revenue Settlement

Amendment Bill in the Legislative Council, a large number of ryots meetings were held in Tanjore district. According to the newspaper reports in these meetings, the intention of the ryots to resist the payment of new rates was reaffirmed. The policy of the Government was to permit free discussion among the people of the district as far as possible without prejudice to the peace and safety of the district; but to discourage and curb interference on the part of agitators from outside. The Government regarded collection of revenue for the movement as a matter of comparative unimportance and except that their ordinary power will prove sufficient in the long run, though the process of collection would be delayed. Though the section 144 was in vogue, the agitators tried to induce landholders to refrain from cultivating their lands as a protest against the new rates though it was not met with much success.⁷

Till March 1924, the political side of the Tanjore no-tax campaign continued. Taking the whole district payment of *kist* up to the end of April amounted to about 75% of the demand. In some parts collection was difficult because of unfavourable season. In other parts, the determined attitude of the Government, in continuing to hold sales of moveables and property was having its effect. In other cases, the delay in payment was attributed to the ordinary phenomenon of cultivators waiting for a rise in the price of paddy to sell their crops and pay their tax. The Congress party was making determined attempts to make the ryot come over en bloc. At a conference at Mannargudi on 18 and 19 May, the proposal to adopt mass civil disobedience failed after heated arguments and a similar fate befell the proposal to merge the Mirasidar Ryots Association with the District Congress Committee.⁸

The Government acted with serving the speakers with prohibitory orders before the meeting. Satyamoorthy M.L.C managed to escape by getting down in an earlier station make the speech before the police could arrive on the scene with the order. The campaign also slowly wore off. As there were good rains, almost, threatening floods. The Government machinery checked the no-tax campaign in time.

Gandhi's visit along with Srinivasa Ayyangar, President of the Congress and C.Rajagopalachari preached khadi at Krishnagiri in Salem district. The boycott of Simon Commission in February 1928, Satyamurthi led the struggle. One Tamil paper characterized the visit of the members of the Simon commission to villages' incognito, as "premeditated stratagem adopted by the authorities to conclude from the miserable conditions of the villages that Indians are not fit for self-Government".⁹

The Bardoli Satiyagraha was greatly talked about. The Tamil press said the subject of labour was due to repressive measures and indifferent attitude of the Government. Mufassil members came from Tanjore, Salem, North Arcot and Tirunelveli to attend the formation of League of Independence in 1929. With S.Srinivasa Ayyangar, Resident of Tamil Nadu Provincial Congress Committee and the Satyamurthi as President of the League and Kolandai as Joint Secretary. The immediate object was to organize mass demonstration and hartal. The effect was seen in North Arcot, where congress leaders made inflammatory speeches and section 144 criminal procedure code had to be invoked.¹⁰

Vallabhai Patel's visit to Madras, Tanjore and Tiruchirapalli. He talked with the congress leaders on political and land revenue problems and delivered several addresses. In Tanjore he presided over the Tamil Nadu Congress. The decision of the Tanjore Mirasidars to form a land league was the result of Patel's influence. In Trichirapalli, Patel talked on the present land revenue policy to a large extent.¹¹

Conclusion

Almost similar conditions existed in the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The British strengthened the administration by reorganization. The Department of Agriculture was started in 1901 for collection and arrangement of facts and statistics. The Organisation of the Department was a step to find out the complex situation that existed in the agrarian scenario in Tamil Nadu.

End Notes

1. FNR, No.4057-1, 3 September 1921, Public Madras, p. 6.
2. FNR, No.24-1, 6 January 1922, Public Madras, p. 18.
3. Singarajan, S., *Agrarian Movements in India with Reference to Tamil Nadu 1857 - 1947*, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1976, p. 56.
4. FNR, No. 1670-1 February 1922, Public, Madras, p. 34.
5. Sukhbir Choudhary, *Peasants' and Workers' Movement in India 1905 - 1929*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971, p. 89.
6. FNR, No.874-1, 2 February 1924, Public, Madras, p. 23.
7. FNR, No.3441-1, 3 April 1924, Public, Madras, p. 34.
8. FNR, May 1924, No.13210-1, 2 June 1924, Public, Madras, p. 19.
9. Deesai, A.R. (Ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India after Independence*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 78.
10. FNR, January 1929, No.P-4-1, 16 January 1929, public, Madras, p. 37.
11. FNR, September 1929, No.P-4-17, 1 September 1929, Public, Madras, p. 19.