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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN TAMIL NADU, 1901-1920 : BRAHMINS VERSUS NON-BRAHMINS AND T.M. NAIR VERSUS ANNIE BESANT

A. Alociyas Ben Aliver
Ph.D. Full-Time Research Scholar, Department of History, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu State.

ABSTRACT :

The paper attempts to highlight the hectic political developments during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu. This period witnessed much political activities aiming at capturing power and position in the regional organizational st up and in the nationalist politics. The Brahmins, the traditional learning class, maintaining varnashrama dharma, upheld their position in public service and in the colonial administrative set up. Their preponderance all position irritated the elite non-Brahmin class which organised their people and represented the colonial government to give due share for their people. It led to political confrontation between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins. One of the stalwarts of the non-Brahmin movement was T.M.Nair who was also the editor of the newspaper, Justice, a mouthpiece of the Justice Party. In the meantime, Annie Besant, an Irish woman started the Home Rule Movement demanding self-rule to the Indians on the Irish model. This home rule demand displeased the non-Brahmin leaders like. Hence a propaganda warfare through the press media reached its climax between Annie Besant and T.M.Nair. The newspaper, Justice promoted the cause of the non-Brahmin Dravidians while the newspaper, New India of Annie Besant was well backed by the Brahmin leaders like C.P.Ramasamy Iyer . Thus communal politics prevailed between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century.

KEYWORDS : *Brahmins, Non-Brahmins, T.M.Nair , Annie Besant, Madras, Justice, New India, Dravidan.*

INTRODUCTION

The 1911 census showed that Brahmins were slightly over 3 per cent of Madras Presidency's population, and non-Brahmins 90 per cent. Within ten years from 1901 to 1911, Madras University turned out 4,074 Brahmin graduates compared with only 1,035 non-Brahmin graduates. Numbers for other groups (revealing also how the Empire classified the population at this time) included 'Indian Christian', 306, 'Mohammedan', 69, and 'European and Eurasian', 225.

A little over 22 per cent of Tamil Brahmin males in the Madras Presidency were literate in English by 1911. The corresponding figure for Telugu Brahmins was 14.75, for Nairs in Malabar around 3, for Balija Naidus 2.6, and for Vellalas just over two. Among Kammas, Nadars and Reddis, males literate in English were below half a per cent.

Many more had attained mother tongue literacy: 72 per cent of Tamil Brahmins, 68 per cent of Telugu Brahmins, 42 per cent of Nairs, 20 per cent of Indian Christians, and 18 per cent of Nadars.[1]

The period from 1914 to 1918 witnessed much confrontation and competition in Madras Presidency between nationalists and opponents of Brahmin domination. A small but significant advance for the latter was the opening in 1914 of 'The Dravidian Home' for non-Brahmin students. Financed by men like Panaganti Ramarayaningar (the Raja of Panagal), whose lands lay in the Telugu Country to the north of Madras, this hostel was run by C. Natesa Mudaliar, a Vellala doctor in the Madras City.

Leading the Madras nationalists was the Irishwoman Annie Besant (1847-1933), who had arrived in India in 1894 after turbulent years in England where she announced that she was an atheist before embracing theosophy. Though also spending time in Varanasi, her political base was Madras, where in June 1914 she purchased an English language daily , the old *'Madras Standard'* and renamed it, '*New India'.* She also started a weekly called , *'Commonweal'*. [2]

Through the paper, she asked for Home Rule for India. That stand, plus Besant's oft-expressed adoration for India's scriptures, her impressive bearing, and her eloquence made her a force to reckon with. The British in Madras, official and civil, responded to Besant with dislike, and *New India* was frequently asked to furnish security, all of these trends added to her popularity. In Madras, she was well backed by the Brahmin leaders like C.P.Ramasami Iyer and S.Subramania Iyer.[3]

On 3rd September 1916, she launched the Home Rule League. District centres appeared, and one of Besant's allies, the Congress leader P. Varadarajulu Naidu, an Ayurvedic doctor from a prominent Telugu-origin family near Salem, made speeches in Tamil about Home Rule. There was parallel activity on the other side. On 20th November 1916, around thirty or so eminent non-Brahmins met in Madras's Victoria Public Hall to form the South Indian People's Association (SIPA), a joint-stock company for publishing English, Telugu and Tamil newspapers which would voice non-Brahmin grievances.

A month later, on 20th December 1916, SIPA's leader P.Theagaraya Chetty issued the 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto', which declared open opposition to 'the Indian Home Rule Movement', portraying it as a Brahmin exercise for gaining control over Madras Presidency. It also announced the start of a new political party, the South Indian Liberal Federation (SILF).[4]

Although the manifesto claimed to speak for all non-Brahmins, and its signatories included Telugu, Tamil, Malayali and Kannada names, SILF's first aim was 'not so much to attract a following as to influence the official policy of the British in Madras Presidency' .[5] More places for non-Brahmins in government services and in colleges was the immediate goal.

SIPA's daily newspaper in English, *Justice,* first came out on 26th February 1917. The Tamil daily, *Dravidan* appeared in mid-1917. Published from 1885, the Telugu *Andhra Prakasika* was acquired. T.M.Nair served as the editor and publisher for *Justice*. The charge of *Dravidan* was taken over by Bhaktavatsalam Pillai and Viswapathi Chettiar.[6]

Soon SILF became known as the Justice Party. Many of its members took the line that 'Tamil', 'Dravidan' or 'Dravidian', 'non-Brahmin' and 'South Indian' were synonymous terms, as were 'Brahmin'; 'Aryan' and 'North Indian'. Their wish was to induce all the non-Brahmins to a recognion of their past glory with a view to put the haughty Brahmin who is the intruder from the North in his proper place'.[7]

Although it attacked Brahmins, Aryans and the caste system, the Justice Party remained elitist. Moreover, its leaders quarreled publicly, and the colonial establishment's praise for the party became an embarrassment. Yet the SILF laid the foundation for non-Brahmin political power in the South especially in Tamil Nadu.

As for Annie Besant, her fame was at its pinnacle for a year from end-1916, when, at the Congress's Lucknow session, she and two others- Tilak (released in 1914 and back in the Congress) and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (then belonging both to the Congress and the-Muslim League)- put together a historic pact where the Congress accepted a separate Muslim electorate and the League joined the Congress in a national demand for self-government.

Grumblings by some in Madras that the pact offered nothing to non-Brahmins were drowned in the protests raised in June 1917 when Besant was ordered not to speak or write politics and interned in Ooty.[8] When she was released in September 1917, there was exhilaration. Returning to Madras, she was taken

from the railway station to her home in Adyar in a four-wheeled carriage drawn by white horses.

Mocking her, and clothing her with 'Brahminness', the relentlessly critical *Mail,* which was British-owned, wrote on 21st September 1917 that a silk canopy, obtained from one of the temples, was held over Mrs. Besant by two students. The procession was preceded by a number of *bhajana* parties chanting hymns. When the procession reached the Mylapore Tank, it was met by a large number of Brahmins singing Vedic hymns.[9]

A month earlier, on 20th August 1917, Edwin Montagu, His Majesty's Government's Secretary for State in India, had announced in the House of Commons a new policy of 'increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration' and of developing 'self-governing institutions' towards the 'progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire'. In London, *The Times* called the statement the 'clearest and most definitive declaration of British aims in India' made since Victoria' proclamation of November 1858.

However, Madras's British businessmen viewed the announcement as the most serious threat to the English position since the Ilbert Bill agitation of the 1880s, and thought that the Justice Party, believing in the retention of the British connection', needed their support.

Their sarcastic spokesman was T. Earle Welby, editor of the *Mail* , who in 1916 had said of Besant's writings: 'Venom is not made the more acceptable by being mingled with slime'.[10] In August 1917, the *Mail* asked that she be deported to England. [11] Four months later, Besant presided over the Congress session in Calcutta.

The Montagu announcement triggered a range of claims. Pointing out that Muslims had received special treatment in 1909, the Justice Party said that non-Brahmins (comprising, it was asserted, 40 million of the presidency's population of 41 million) should have something similar. But separate associations and separate political conferences bothered *The Hindu,* which pointed out that the Congress included many non-Brahmins.[12]

Though unhappy at the Lucknow Pact's silence on non-Brahmin representation, the South's non-Brahmin Congressmen were opposed to the Justice Party for its refusal to ask for self-government. In September 1917, a group of them formed the Madras Presidency Association (MPA), which said that the Lucknow scheme could be modified by adequate recognition of 'the various communities' of South India.[13]

If most zamindars and large landowners seemed to back the Justice Party, well-educated, middle-class non-Brahmins formed the core of the MPA, which, too, started a pair of journals, *Indian Patriot* in English and *Desabhaktan* in Tamil, the latter edited by a young Vellala, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, or Thiru.Vi.Ka as he would become known. [14]

As for the Panchamas, the term at the time for the 'untouchables', one of their organizations, the Pariah Mahajanah Sabha, rejected an offer from the Justice Party to 'guide' them. The president, Anchas, said that Home Rule, whether by Brahmins or non-Brahmins, would crush the Panchamas.

Viceroy Chelmsford put the brakes on Montagu, the Secretary for State after he landed in India in November. In Madras, where, along with the viceroy, Montage spent ten days. Lord Pentland, and his wife, Lady Pentland, plainly told Montagu that they disagreed with his approach and with Besant's release.

Evidently the Congress, Brahmins and Home Rule, lumped together by the Pentlands, deserved opposition from the Empire and all sensible people, whereas the Justice Party, together with the Madras British, merited warmth.

In his revealing diary (not published until 1930), Montagu spoke of Pentland as 'an early Victorian' serving 'in post-War India' [15] who talked about the Brahmins bitterly. He assured me that all respect for the Government had gone; that people used to consider all officials, from the Viceroy downwards, as sort of gods not to be challenged. That had all disappeared.[16]

Madras had changed 'appallingly', Montagu thought, from the contented state he had witnessed five years previously, an impression confirmed to him by Mrs Henry Whitehead, the bishop's wife, whom he called 'a very clever woman, very much loved in Madras'. In the Madras of 1917, Mrs Whitehead and Montagu agreed, 'the English hate the Indians, the Indians hate the English, and this new violent opposition

of the Brahmans to the non-Brahmans has become the guiding principle'.[17]

Annie Besant impressed Montagu, who told Chelmsford she should have been invited to a garden party the Pentlands had given. When the viceroy passed on the remark to Pentland, the Governor replied, 'Most of the Europeans would have walked off the grounds.'[18]

Led by Welby, the British in Madras distrusted Montagu. His being a Jew was held against him, and he was accused of pro-Brahmin bias.[19]

Unsympathetic to communal representation for 'backward' classes, Montagu thought that the Justice Party leaders who called on him did not seem 'backward' in wealth, social standing or education. In his diary, he called one of them, Dr T. M. Nair, the *Justice* editor, 'eloquent and vigorous' but with 'a bee in his bonnet'. In a bizarre gambit, Nair had tried to convince Montagu that 'the Home Rule movement was financed by German money'.[20]

Born in a Malayali family in bilingual Palghat (Palakkad) in the Madras Presidency's Malabar district, Taravath Madhavan Nair (1868-1919) studied medicine in Madras, Edinburgh and Paris before practising in Madras and entering politics as a Congressman. Holding Brahmin responsible for an electoral reverse, he left the Congress in 1916 and became one of SILF's founders. [21]

Familiar with Sanskrit, a fluent speaker in English, and an excellent Malayalam writer, Nair was always found in Western attire, a practice yet to spread among South Indian men. In a series of articles in *Justice,* 'Political Reconstruction in India', he argued that British authority had kept India united. Demanding its early withdrawal would invite anarchy.[22] For months in 1918 and the following year, lobbied for the non-Brahmin cause in England, where he died of heart seizure in July 1919.

On 2nd July 1918, the eagerly anticipated reform scheme had come out, , everyone calling it 'Montford', after the secretary of state and Viceroy pair. Rejecting proportional communal representation except for Muslims and Sikhs, it proposed for provinces a 'dyarchy' where authority over defence, police, land revenue and other 'reserved subjects' would lie with Empire-appointed officers, while Indians elected under a restricted franchise would look after 'transferred subjects' like local self-government, education and sanitation, all supervised by a governor chosen in London.[23]

It was not Home Rule, only a modest advance towards it. And while the Madras Presidency's non-Brahmins too did not get what they wanted, the scheme gave them scope. In 1920, when the first elections following Montford Reforms of 1919 were held in the Madras Presidency, 29 out of 98 elected places in a house of 127 were filled from improvised non-Brahmin constituencies.

Only those with land, property or taxable income could vote. Other constituencies, fewer and also improvised, were labelled 'Muslim', 'non-Muslim', 'Indian Christian', 'Anglo-Indian' and 'European'. Of the 29 nominated members, five came from designated 'untouchable' castes.

To conclude, the first two decades of the Twentieth Century witnessed with political confrontation between the Brahmins and Non-Brahmins. The Brahmins dominated not only the Congress but also they held important positions in the native and British administrative setup. The statistical revelation of the British high officials about the predominant position of the Brahmins in the administrative, judicial and educational services startled the elite non-Brahmin leaders of the Madras presidency, who in turn , formed their political organization, Justice Party. This party as a representative body of the non-Brahmins insisted the longevity of the British rule when the Annie Besant demanded home rule. There took place hectic press warfare between T.M. Nair and Annie Besant. T.M. Nair became the champion of the non-Brahmins while Annie Besant was supported by the Brahmin elites. T,M.Nair passed away in 1919. the Annie Besant's influence in Indian or Madras politics began to decline with the growing influence of Gandhi in 1919. In spite of this political developments , Besant became a mass leader. Unable to communicate in an Indian language, she dominated the poltical scenario of India and Madras Presidency from 1914 to 1918. Her white skin attracted many Indians for a while until events made it a accountability. And the year 1919 would see the inauguration, linked to Madras, of a more dramatic way in which large numbers could directly fight for self-rule. But even if others led later marches to the Promised Land, those marches would owe something to the 'Home Rule' platform raised by a fearless Irishwoman, Annie Besant.

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