

Nationalism and early nationalist movements in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu is generally regarded as a political backwater as far as nationalism and anti-colonialism are concerned. However, during the nationalist era, Tamil Nadu provided for the early agitational political movements by founding the Madras Native Association and Madras Mahajana Sabha. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the early nationalist ideology, their aims and objectives of the two earliest political organizations, the Madras Native Association and Madras Mahajana Sabha.

Keywords: *nationalism, colonialism, madras native association, madras mahajana sabha*

1. Introduction

Tamil Nadu is generally regarded as a political backwater as far as nationalism and anti-colonialism are concerned. Nevertheless, the early Poligari revolts in Panchalankurichi and the subsequent struggles of the “South Indian Rebellion” and the Vellore Mutiny of 1806, the precursor to the 1857 Revolt, tell us a different tale altogether. During the nationalist era, Tamil Nadu provided for early agitational political movements by founding the Madras Native Association and the Madras Mahajana Sabha.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the early nationalist ideology as well as the aims and objectives of the two earliest political organizations, the Madras Native Association and the Madras Mahajana Sabha.

2. Madras Native Association

The earliest political organization, the Madras Native Association was founded on 26 February 1852. The Association had grown out of the Hindu Literary Society founded in 1830 [1]. Majority of the Madras Native Association members belonged to the affluent commercial group. Gazulu Lakshminarasu Chetty and Srinivasa Pillai belonged to this category. Among others who represented the Madras Native Association were the rich mirasudar C. Yagambaram Mudaliar and educated persons such as V. Sadagopah Charlu and V. Ramanuja Chari [2]. The Madras Native Association was sharply critical of the Company's rule. The organization criticized the judicial, revenue, and public works and the revenue policies of the English East India Company. Preparing and sending petitions directly to the Parliament, organizing public meetings, lectures, and sending deputations and memorandums formed the chief mode of agitation [3].

As they were critical of Company's misrule, the need for the Crown to replace East India Company's rule was felt and was duly represented for the first time the people of Madras even before such decisions could be taken by the Parliament. It also did not spare the religious policy of the Company [4].

The Madras Native Association began to branch out by late

1853. The Association persuaded the local leaders in Cuddalore, Tiruchirapalli, Salem and Tirunelveli to start branches of the Madras Native Association as a means of helping the Madras Native Association with funds and information [5].

Lakshminarasu Chetty's political activities were viewed with suspicion by the British. He was regarded as a seditious person and a police watch was set over him. His speeches were closely scrutinized, and his movements were monitored by the police. Subsequently, in order to prevent the financial aid, government issued warning circulars and instructions to the district collectors to prosecute supporters of the Madras Native Association [6].

The Company's misrule, malpractices and its failure to associate Indians in the administration served as key factors for the end of the Company's rule. The transfer of power from the Company to the Crown in 1858 brought about sweeping changes in their policies and their relationship with the people [7].

The Association had a fluctuating existence from about 1862 till the inception of the Madras Mahajana Sabha in May 1884. Henceforth it gradually faded out of political existence. Although it is very difficult to assess the causes for the demise of the Madras Native Association, the nature of its membership could be one of the principal causes for its disappearance. The Madras Native Association consisted of official and non-official members. The former group, perhaps, hindered the free functioning of the Madras Native Association. Moreover, the officials in the Association were not allowed to criticize the government beyond a certain limit [8].

3. Madras Mahajana Sabha

There were certain attempts at reviving the Madras Native Association in 1881 but in vain [9]. Hence prominent persons and the newly emerging leaders of Madras strongly felt the need for a well-organized and well-coordinated forum that could be better than the now-defunct Madras Native Association to effectively voice the popular aspirations to the

government. The outcome was the Madras Mahajana Sabha, which was inaugurated on 16 May 1884. Rangaiah Naidu was elected the first president of the Madras Mahajana Sabha and continued this office till his death in 1902^[10].

During the inauguration of the Madras Mahajana Sabha, Naidu said, "Many might wonder what was the need for a new sabha when Madras Native Association existed. Madras Native Association consisted officials and non-officials, but the new Sabha would consist of non-officials alone, so that the grievances of the public would be represented fearlessly to the government."^[11]

By arranging for periodical conferences, the Sabha departed from the Madras Native Association's agitational techniques. It had a solid share in mootings, discussing and finalizing the formation of the Indian National Congress. When the first Congress session was held in Bombay in 1885, nearly 21 delegates went from Madras Presidency, of whom 8 were from Madras City^[12]. It is a matter of interest that G. Subramania Iyer, one of the members of the Sabha moved the first resolution regarding the appointment of Royal Commission to enquire into the working of Indian administration^[13]. Another resolution related to the expansion of the local and Imperial legislative councils was seconded by Iyer^[14].

The Sabha leaders kept the political tempo in Madras by holding annual conferences of the Madras Mahajana Sabha besides attending the annual conferences of the Indian National Congress^[15]. These conferences were conducted mainly to unite people from different parts of Madras^[16]. In the fifth annual session of the Indian National Congress held in Bombay in 1889, Madras contributed a substantial contingent of 366 members. This was larger than the number of delegates from Madras present at the third annual session of the Congress held in Madras in 1887.

The strong representation of Madras at the annual Congress sessions did not, however, last long. The next four sessions, at Calcutta (1890), Nagpur (1891), Allahabad (1892), and Lahore (1893), witnessed a much depleted attendance of 58, 61, 38 and 31 respectively, from the Madras Presidency. This was perhaps a reflection of the bleak picture within the Madras Mahajana Sabha in the years following the 1889 Congress session. In fact, no significant activity was undertaken by the Sabha for several years and even its annual conferences were suspended for a while^[17].

The Madras Mahajana Sabha was established with a view to bringing to the notice of the British government the views of the Madras public as well as to represent correctly to the government the needs of the people and to seek retribution for them. The founders of the Mahajana Sabha believed that such measures would ultimately improve the condition of the people. The Sabha in its infant stage drew its sustenance mainly from the metropolitan city of Madras. However, it soon succeeded in bringing the mofussil members also into its fold^[18].

The Madras Mahajana Sabha by and large followed the directions of the Indian National Congress and never violated latter's methods of approach to political issues. The individuals in the Sabha who acted in violation of this code of conduct were sidelined irrespective of the popularity they might have been enjoying. G. Subramania Iyer can be shown

as an example. He could never be the president of any Indian National Congress session. Nevertheless, the Sabha was genuinely concerned about the welfare of the people but remedial measures should be obtained from the colonial government within the rule of law. The Sabha never outwardly expressed anger against the Raj. Nor did it conceive the idea of free India outside the British Empire. In matters of social policy, Mahajana Sabha towed the line of the moderate wing of the Congress^[19].

The social reform movement, started in Tamil Nadu by the Western-educated Indians, did not result in a consensus among them. On the contrary, the Indians were divided as pro-changers and no-changers for the intended government reforms. Among the pro-changers, not only did G. Subramania Iyer stand head and shoulders above others in supporting and advocating social reforms on platform and through press but he actually practised what he preached^[20].

In 1884, G. Subramania Iyer's daughter of twelve was widowed before consummation. At this juncture, Iyer had to take a hard decision of either braving the orthodox fury and ostracism by remarrying his daughter or enforcing harsh widowhood on her. Iyer "could not face the life-long misery of a daughter whom he loved as his own soul" and preferred the risk of ex-communication. He performed the wedding at Bombay in December 1889 during the fifth Congress gathering there. His happiness was, however, cut short by the reactionary attitude of his relatives, friends and servants. The social stress had weighed so hard upon Iyer's family that his wife succumbed to the stress of social ostracism and died in April 1890^[21].

The elaborate structure of the Congress organization itself collapsed. Between 1886 and 1900, the Sabha lost close to half of its membership. The membership declined from 607 in 1885 to 267 by 1900. Further the working nature of the Sabha was criticized by the press and the government.

4. Conclusion

Dissolution of the Madras Native Association symbolized the decline in the importance of the Hindu commercial elite in the civic life of Madras. Propelled into prominence in the 1840s on the crest of the anti-missionary sentiment then prevailing in South India, this elite had given institutional expression to its power by organizing the Madras Native Association. However, as the anti-missionary feelings slowly subsided during the 1860s, the influence of this elite also waned and the rival group of Madras Mahajana Sabha emerged to provide an alternative focus of leadership in Madras Presidency.

The Merchant community and zamindars of Madras showed little active interest in politics. It was the professional elite, particularly lawyers and journalists, who were playing a major role in the politics. The members of the Madras Mahajana Sabha lost their focus due to their controversial stand on the question of social reforms. Moreover, there were factional conflicts among the members of the Madras Mahajana Sabha. Despite their weaknesses and limitations, the Madras Mahajana Sabha and the district associations formed in the 1890s provided a strong base for the nationalist politics in Tamil Nadu. Thus, the formation of the Madras Mahajana Sabha symbolized the crystallization of anti-colonial consciousness in an institutional form.

5. Reference

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