

Indian Streams Research Journal

International Recognized Multidisciplinary Research Journal

ISSN 2230-7850

Impact Factor : 3.1560 (UIF)

Volume - 6 | Issue - 1 | Feb - 2016



NATIONALISM AND POLITICAL AWAKENING IN TAMIL NADU: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



K. Jayakumar

Associate Professor , Department of History ,
Periyar E.V.R college,(Autonomous)Trichirapalli.
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University.

ABSTRACT

The study traces the evolution of political consciousness and nationalist fervour among the Indian populace, catalyzed by Westernization and the efforts of Christian missionaries. The study examines the formation of key political associations and their role in voicing grievances to the British Government, ultimately contributing to the emergence of the Madras Mahajana Sabha in 1884. The Madras Mahajana Sabha, led by influential figures like G. Subramaniya Iyer, played a key role in shaping organized political activity in Tamil Nadu. The article explores the dynamic shift in leadership from the merchant class to the intelligentsia, paving the way for the Sabha's influence as a provincial precursor to the Indian National Congress. It elucidates how the Madras Mahajana Sabha's members actively participated in the early sessions of the Indian National Congress, with a notable impact on its formation in 1885. The article further discusses the significant role played by Tamil leaders in various Congress sessions, their resolutions, and the dissemination of nationalist ideas through vernacular languages, particularly Tamil. It outlines the progression of the Congress in Tamil Nadu, addressing socio-economic issues, advocating for self-government, and fostering mass awareness. Besides, the research examines the parallel development of the National Social Conference, providing insights into the evolving dynamics of Indian nationalism and the ideological divide between moderate and extremist factions within the Congress. The article concludes by scrutinizing the repercussions of the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909, particularly the introduction of separate electorates, and its impact on Hindu-Muslim relations and the overall nationalist movement in Tamil Nadu.



KEYWORDS: Nationalism, Madras Mahajana Sabha, Indian National Congress, Political Awakening, Social Reform.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of English education and the progressive British administration exerted a profound influence on the fundamental beliefs of the Indian populace. Consequently, the people developed political awareness, contributing to a broader societal awakening. The Westernization of India instilled in Indians a desire to depart from traditional practices, prompting contemplation on political ideologies, economic progress, and social taboos. The efforts of Christian missionaries played a role in awakening consciousness

among caste Hindus, who responded with Hindu solidarity movements, expressing their patriotism and nationalism. To voice their grievances and seek redressal, the caste Hindus in Tamil Nadu formed groups, leading to the emergence of a new middle-class intelligentsia. These individuals established political associations to represent their concerns to the British Government, ultimately giving rise to political organizations that fostered a sense of national spirit among the people.¹ These associations played a pivotal role in creating political consciousness among the masses, highlighting the injustices of British rule and accelerating the growth of the national movement.

In Madras, the dawn of nationalism saw intellectuals forming groups to advocate for administrative and political reforms. The initiative for political formation was taken by non-Brahmin merchants, who had been actively involved in the agitation against the policies of the English East India Company in the 1850s. The British Indian Association in Bengal, founded in October 1851, inspired the creation of its Madras branch in February 1852. Gajalu Lakshminarasu Chetty, a prominent non-Brahmin merchant, played a key role in this society. Concurrently, the Madras Native Association emerged in July 1852 as an independent body after disagreements with the Bengal parent organization. This association aimed to uplift the middle and lower classes, establishing branches in various locations. It acted as a mediator between the Government and the public, collecting information about local grievances and submitting petitions to Parliament.² In 1852, M. Venkatarayalu Naidu founded the Madras Hindu Debating Society, representing Hindu nationalists' claims and criticizing British administration. Ibrahim Ali, a Muslim leader, established the Triplicane Literary Society in 1868 to voice people's sentiments and grievances. Recognizing the need for native newspapers, a group of young graduates, including G. Subramaniya Iyer, initiated *The Hindu* in 1878 and *Swadesamitran* in 1882. These newspapers played a crucial role in spreading nationalist ideas and reinvigorating political activities in the Madras Presidency.

MADRAS MAHAJANA SABHA

Madras Mahajana Sabha, established on 16 May 1884 by Hindu ideologists, marked the initiation of organised political activity in Tamil Nadu. This political association, comprising notable figures like G. Subramaniya Iyer, M. Veeraraghavachariar, A. Anandacharlu, P. Rangaiah Naidu, and S. Balaji Ramasami Mudaliar, aimed to communicate the perspectives of Madras citizens to the British Government and accurately represent the people's needs.³ The inaugural session in December 1884, led by P. Rangaiah Naidu, emphasised the necessity for a new organisation distinct from the Madras Native Association, focusing solely on non-officials to fearlessly present public grievances to the Government. Although initially drawing members from the city of Madras, the Sabha successfully expanded its reach to include mofussil members.⁴ Despite the historically limited political involvement of the merchant community and zamindars in Madras, the professional elite, particularly lawyers and journalists, assumed a significant role in shaping the political landscape. There was a notable shift in political leadership from the merchant class to the intelligentsia, with members of the Madras Native Association joining the Mahajana Sabha after some initial reluctance. The educated members of the Sabha coalesced, envisioning a common national political organisation. Although the Madras Mahajana Sabha served as the provincial precursor to the Indian National Congress, which was officially established in 1885, its members played a crucial role in the broader formation of the Congress.⁵ Representatives from similar associations in Calcutta, Lahore, Bombay Presidency, and Poona came together in 1885 to establish the Indian National Congress, with Madras occupying a significant role in the decision-making process for its formation.

CONGRESS SESSIONS

At the national level, spurred by the efforts of A.O. Hume, a British Civil Servant, the Indian National Congress was established, holding its inaugural session in Bombay on 28 December 1885, with W.C. Bannerji serving as the President. Between 1885 and 1905, the Indian National Congress adopted a moderate approach towards the British Government, articulating their grievances through appeals and prayers.⁶ During this period, the Government maintained a friendly disposition towards the Indians. The Congress played a pivotal role for Indians, offering a platform for interaction among individuals with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Umesh Chandre Bannerji from Bengal assumed the presidency at the first Indian National Congress meeting. In his address, Bannerji took pride in noting the representation of all

districts of Tamilnadu and gave special recognition to press representatives from Tamilnadu. G. Subramaniya Iyer from Tamilnadu proposed the first resolution at the conference.⁷ The Congress passed eight resolutions, and members from Tamilnadu were notably active in proposing, seconding, and supporting them. The Tribune journal from Patna paid tribute to the Tamilnadu representatives, describing them as highly educated and socially prominent, capturing the audience with their progressive views and oratory skills.

G. Subramaniya Iyer, who proposed the initial resolution, called on the Government to establish a Commission to examine the political situation in India, with Indian representation, recording statements from individuals in both India and England. Subramaniya Iyer's newspapers, *The Hindu* and *Swadesamitran*, extensively covered the Bombay Conference.⁸ The nationalists from Tamilnadu who participated in the first Indian National Congress session facilitated Madras hosting the third session on 27 December 1887 at 'Mackenley's Garden.' This event in Madras contributed to the dissemination of Congress ideology in the Tamil districts, leading to periodic meetings across Tamilnadu. The Madras Conference drew attendees from diverse professions, including zamindars, agriculturists, merchants, teachers, press representatives, labourers, physicians, and lawyers, totaling 206, including retired judges. The conference was not only attended by the educated elite but also by the masses, representing various communities, including Brahmins and non-Brahmins.⁹ The third annual Congress conference in Madras was truly national, with representatives from all sections of the people. Key speakers from the province included T. Madhava Rao, S. Subramania Iyer, P. Somasundaram Chettiar, N. Subramanian, Salem S. Ramaswami Mudaliar, Rao Saheb Sabapathy Mudaliar, Rao Saheb Mukkanachari, Sundaram Sastri, Anneswami Iyer, C. Sankaran Nair, and P. Rengiah Naidu.

The members of the Congress at the third session exhibited a tendency to disseminate nationalist and self-government ideas through pamphlets. Notably, the use of the Tamil language marked a distinctive feature of this Congress session. Rao Saheb Mukkanachari, an iron merchant and representative of the association of handicraftsmen, delivered the first speech in Tamil. A report by A.O. Hume revealed that approximately one-third of the attendees at the Madras conference knew only Tamil and naturally spoke in Tamil. They circulated pamphlets in Tamil titled "Congress Vinaa Vidai," addressing the objectives of the Congress in question-and-answer format.¹⁰ The *Hindu's* manager, Veeraraghavachariar, produced a pamphlet named "The Congress Questions and Answers," which was distributed not only in Tamilnadu but also in other Tamil-inhabited parts of the world. G. Subramaniya Iyer, the editor of *The Hindu*, issued a new edition of the booklet titled "Self-Government: Questions and Answers," distributed for free at the conference and during his tours. The booklet comprised forty-two questions on self-government and their corresponding answers. The discussions at the Madras Conference covered various subjects such as swaraj, boycott of foreign goods, encouragement of Swadeshi industries, revival of panchayats, temperance, and other issues affecting Indian interests. These discussions contributed to increased awareness among the rural masses.¹¹ After the session, Tamil leaders submitted numerous memoranda and petitions to the Government seeking redressal of their grievances. Nationalist newspapers like *The Hindu* and *Swadesamitran* strongly criticized the British administrative setup, inspiring a more national-minded sentiment among the Tamil people. Lord Dufferin, the Viceroy of India, ridiculed the Congress in his farewell dinner in Calcutta in 1888, dismissing it as a microscopic minority. To counter its growth, the Government issued orders prohibiting public servants from collecting money for or rendering help to the Congress. Another circular barred Government servants from attending political meetings. The tenth session of the Indian National Congress in Madras in 1894, the second of its kind after the third session, featured new leaders N. Subba Rao and C. Sankaran Nair alongside the old leaders. N. Subba Rao raised a resolution highlighting loopholes in the British judicial setup. The fourteenth session in Madras in 1898 faced a decline in delegates due to the 1897 famine, plague in Madurai, and inadequate relief measures. In this session, N. Subba Rao emphasized the need for socio-economic equality and concessions to the oppressed. G. Subramaniya Iyer proposed a resolution urging the British Government to allocate Indian money for Indian needs. The leaders' appeal led to the organization of district conferences from 1899, fostering mass awakening. In 1898, the Madras Congress organized a 'Corps of Volunteers.' In 1903, the nineteenth session, the fourth in Madras, addressed the exclusion of Indians from higher public services.¹² In 1904, Congress leader Annie Besant established the Madras Hindu Association, marking a milestone in the revivalist movement in Tamilnadu.

By 1904, the Congress had evolved beyond being solely an organization of wealthy, patriotic, and energetic natives; it had become a beacon of hope for people across numerous castes, classes, and creeds. The Congress continued to grow each year, with the Madras Congress session deciding to establish a permanent body. This body aimed to discharge its duties through two methods: circulating pamphlets in the vernacular throughout the year and sending delegates to the countryside to explain the programme. This strategic approach to propaganda played a crucial role in sparking interest in the Congress's work across the entire country.¹³ As differences between the British rulers and the Congress widened, some foresighted Congress leaders initiated another platform to strengthen the movement. For instance, in 1905, Gopal Krishna Gokhale founded the Servants of India Society, which, while sharing a similar primary purpose with the Congress, placed strong emphasis on social, economic, educational, and depressed class activities. A branch of the Servants of India Society was established in Madras in 1910, with the aim of instilling a profound love for the motherland in the hearts of the people.

The twenty-third session of the Congress, held in Surat in December 1907, saw the participation of prominent leaders from Tamilnadu, including V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, V. Chakkarai Chetty, C. Subramaniya Bharathi, Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, K. Venkatarama Rao, N.K. Ramaswami Aiyer, T.G. Sankara Narayana Aiyer, S. Duraiswami Aiyer, N.S. Venkatarama Aiyer, and Ganapathi Aiyer.¹⁴ However, this session ended in a clash over the election of the Congress President, laying bare the inherent ideological contradictions within the Congress and significantly impacting the national movement. The subsequent session, held in Madras in December 1908 with Rash Behari Ghose as president, marked the fifth of its kind in Madras. During this session, the disapproval of separate representation for Muslims was evident, with nationalists arguing against allowing the majority to be cornered by a minority. Following the Surat Session, there was an upswing in nationalist activities in Tamilnadu, particularly with the widespread acceptance of the Swadeshi concept. The Chennai Jana Sangam organized frequent Swadeshi lectures in Madras and other towns, featuring leaders like V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, Subramania Siva, Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, Subramania Bharathi, who spared no effort in propagating Swadeshi ideas. The visit of radical leaders B.C. Pal and Chandra Kantha Chakravarthi from Bengal resulted in the formation of secret societies in Madras.¹⁵ Another method employed to popularize nationalistic politics in Tamilnadu was the circulation of Swadeshi Gold Coins, featuring a figure of Goddess Lakshmi with inscriptions such as "Deri Prasida 5008," "help the poor," and "Swadeshi pendant."

Five Congress sessions took place in Madras, during which members of the Congress actively worked towards establishing a constitution for the organization. Subsequent sessions strongly denounced the oppressive policies of the government, passed resolutions addressing the concerns of the people, and appealed for their resolution.¹⁶ The primary focus was on increasing Indian representation in the Legislative Councils, yet these efforts did not yield significant concessions from the Government. Concurrently, the emergence of extremists within the Congress brought forth a new philosophy, political ideology, and innovative methods of struggle, centered around the demand for Swaraj.

CONGRESS SOCIAL CONFERENCE

The inception of the National Social Conference occurred two years after the establishment of the Indian National Congress, functioning as an adjunct to the Congress. This social conference aimed to address the limitations of the Congress. Despite facing opposition from both political and social reform leaders within the Congress, the tradition of holding annual sessions in the same city persisted, influenced by figures like Ranade and Chandrasekhar.¹⁷ However, the dynamics changed when the Liberals withdrew from the Congress, initiating their separate annual conferences in different cities. Consequently, if reformers wanted to convey their message to a broader audience, they had to align with the Congress, while influencing the Government required collaboration with the Liberals.¹⁸

As the twentieth century unfolded, the Congress shifted towards nationalists, and Indian nationalism became synonymous with Hindu nationalism. This shift, driven by extremists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Aranind Ghose, led to a disconnect with Congress leaders such as G.K. Gokhale, Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, and W.C. Banerjee, who followed a moderate policy.¹⁹ The ideological divide extended to social reform, with the extremists asserting that addressing social issues could weaken the national front, emphasizing unity as essential for combating foreign domination. In Tamilnadu,

Brahmins dominated the Congress, prioritizing political freedom over social problems. Non-Brahmin leaders in the region, however, aligned with national social reformers, advocating for social reforms rather than political freedom. This ideological discrepancy contributed to the emergence of the Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu, hindering the growth of the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress. The National Social Conference, Provincial Reform Association, caste conferences, and local reform bodies were established to address local issues, emphasizing the removal of social disabilities.²⁰ The Conference, particularly in its second session in Allahabad in 1888, highlighted concerns such as the anti-Nautch Girl Movement in the Madras Presidency, aiming to discourage the employment of disreputable women at social and religious gatherings. It also underscored the importance of Hindu-Muslim accord for national development.

Founded in 1892, the Hindu Social Reform Association placed a significant emphasis on personal purity. Its objectives were to discourage practices involving nautch girls and immoral lifestyles, prescribing a specific code of conduct for members regarding personal purity. Additionally, members were required to advocate and practise total abstinence from alcoholic beverages and other intoxicating substances.²¹ A concerning trend noted by The Indian Social Reformer was the adoption of new advertising methods for liquors, such as a liquor shop in Madras offering a free meal to those purchasing a specific quantity of country liquor on a given day, announced by the beat of a drum.

In response to the increasing use of intoxicating liquors and drugs, the Madras Provincial Conference in Cocanada in June 1902 vehemently protested, recommending measures to prevent their use for purposes other than genuine medical needs. The National Social Conference in Madras in December 1903 and January 1904 reiterated a resolution on sea voyages from 1902. It acknowledged efforts to introduce religious and moral education in educational institutions, recommending its expansion. A rising number of Hindus undertaking sea voyages for various purposes led the Madras Provincial Social Conference in 1906 to pass a resolution in favour of foreign travel.²²

During the early twentieth century, efforts to abolish the Devadasi system gained momentum. A significant moment occurred on May 6, 1909, when the Maharaja of Mysore took measures to abolish the system, receiving praise from The Times of India and The Indian Social Reformer. The National Social Conference, adopting a more radical approach to social upliftment, witnessed a shift in its stance on matters related to caste, moving from demanding sub-caste amalgamation to encouraging the amalgamation of different castes within Hindu society. The social reform landscape in the country underwent substantial changes by 1918, with Srinivasa Iyengar noting a diminishing influence of caste, except in matters of inter-marriage and widow-marriage. While caste-related taboos continued to exist in villages and smaller towns, urban centres experienced a decline in their impact. Education among Hindu women further fostered associations that brought women of different castes together, contributing to reduced caste-based rigidity.

In the same period, C. Rajagopalachari moved a resolution at the conference proposing the abolition of the caste system as it existed then. As the Indian political scene unfolded, a contentious issue emerged due to the Congress's exclusive focus on nationalism, neglecting social objectives.²³ Sir Seyd Ahmed Khan, a Muslim leader, advocated for safeguarding minority rights and advised Muslims not to align with the Congress. This led Muslims, including those in Tamilnadu, to forge close ties with the British and align with Dravidian forces, hindering the Congress's influence in Tamilnadu. Responding to these developments, the British Government introduced the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909, providing special representation and communal electorates for Muslims. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 marked the introduction of communal representation in legislatures, granting two seats for Muslims in the Madras Presidency.²⁴ This success of the Muslim League in securing separate electorates set a precedent for non-Brahmins to seek special representation as an underprivileged community. The Government of India Act of 1909 further increased the strength of Legislative Councils, with non-official majorities in provincial councils. Separate electorates for Muslims were introduced for the first time, setting the stage for subsequent political developments.

The primary objective of the British Government in enacting the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909 was to curb the momentum of the nationalist movement, gain the support of moderate nationalists, and counter those perceived as extremists and terrorists. A public meeting in Madras on December 3, 1909, expressed gratitude to the British Government for the perceived generosity of the reforms.²⁵ The Hindu acknowledged the potential benefits of the legislative councils' increased rights, stating that, if used judiciously, they could significantly promote the interests of the people. However, the Congress, in its resolution, expressed

disapproval of the creation of separate electorates based on religion, particularly criticising the composition of non-official majorities in provincial legislative councils as ineffective.

The Madras Provincial Congress Committee opposed the separate electorate for Muslims, advocating for proportionate representation instead, but their recommendation went unheeded. The Muslim League in the Madras Presidency was concerned about the Hindu press and associations opposing Lord Morley's recognition of Muslim claims, fearing it would strain Hindu-Muslim relations. They argued that separate electorates would foster good relations by preventing friction, disappointment, and social differences.

In the aftermath of the Minto-Morley Reforms, various opinions emerged, reflecting diverse sentiments. While some considered the concessions generous and crucial, others, especially non-Brahmins in Tamilnadu, saw it as an opportunity to press for more communal representation in the Legislative Council.²⁶ However, there was criticism from different quarters, with concerns about partiality towards Muslims and the potential negative impact on Hindu-Muslim relations. Several publications expressed dissatisfaction with the reforms, suggesting they created divisions among Indians and accentuated racial ill-feeling. The Andhra Kesari believed that the reforms obstructed the formation of a united Indian nation. The Tamilan questioned the reforms for neglecting the lower classes and perpetuating the social issues faced by the downtrodden. Kerala Patrika considered the reforms as fostering racial ill-feeling, and The India noted that they split united Indians into Hindus and Muslims.

Moreover, there were concerns about the separate electorate perpetuating the division between Hindus and Muslims, hindering India's unification and growth of communalism. Critics argued that it failed to address the educational and economic backwardness of the middle-class Muslims, isolating them from the nationalist movement. This division was seen as a successful implementation of the British policy of divide and rule.

The early 20th century witnessed a spontaneous demand for the realization of socio-economic and political rights, propelled by the growth of Western education. The rise of associations like the Madras Native Association, Madras Mahajana Sabha, and the Indian National Congress accelerated socio-economic progress.²⁷ However, Brahmins dominated higher positions, leading to the emergence of the Dravidian ideology among non-Brahmins. This ideological shift led to the non-Brahmin movement, marked by demands for socio-economic and political rights through reservation policies, creating communal differences and triggering social reforms in favour of backward classes.

CONCLUSION

The research illuminates the intricate interplay of historical forces that shaped the political and social landscape of Tamil Nadu during a transformative period. The proliferation of English education and British administration instigated a profound awakening among the Indian populace, leading to the emergence of political consciousness and nationalist sentiments. The Madras Mahajana Sabha, founded in 1884, stands out as a crucial catalyst, with its leaders playing instrumental roles in the provincial precursor to the Indian National Congress. The evolution of Congress sessions in Madras showcased the active participation of Tamil leaders, influencing resolutions and disseminating nationalist ideals in vernacular languages. The article underscores the nuanced nature of the nationalist movement, marked by a shift in leadership from the merchant class to the intelligentsia, and the subsequent establishment of a more inclusive political organization. Simultaneously, the research gets into the National Social Conference, offering insights into the ideological divergences within the Congress and the broader nationalistic landscape.

REFERENCES

1. Rajayyan K., "South Indian Rebellion: The First War of Independence, 1800-1801," Mysore, 1969, p. 36.
2. Unmai, 5 April 1991, p. 8.
3. Suntharalingam R., "The Madras Native Associations: A Study of an early Indian Political Organisation," The Indian Economic and Social History Review, No. 3, Vol. IV, Sept. 1967, p. 237.
4. Suntharalingam R., op. cit., p. 233-238.
5. Ram Gopal, "How India Struggled Freedom: A Political History," Bombay, 1967, p. 30.

6. Mehrotra S.R., "The Emergence of the Indian National Congress," Delhi, 1971, pp. 204-205.
7. Rangaswamy Parthasarathy, "A Hundred Years of the Hindu: An Epic Story of Indian Nationalism," Madras, 1907, p. 25.
8. Mehrotra S.R., op. cit., p. 251.
9. Sundaram Pillai K., "Sri. Subramania Iyer," Chennai, 1907, p. 25.
10. Tara Chand, "History of the Freedom Movement in India," Vol. II, Delhi, 1967, p. 545.
11. Rajendran N., "National Movement in Tamil Nadu, 1905-1914," Madras, p. 12.
12. Sundaralingam R., op. cit., p. 208.
13. Gopalakrishnan S., op. cit., p. 12.
14. Rajendran N., op. cit., p. 12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. David Arnold, "The Congress in Tamil Nadu: The Nationalist Politics of South India, 1919-1937," New Delhi, 1967, p. 67.
18. Encyclopedia of Indian National Congress, 1885-90, Vol. I, Appendix I, p. 594.
19. Report of Indian National Congress, Bombay, 1885, p. 20.
20. Sivagnanam Ma.Po., "History of Freedom Movement in Tamilnadu," Tanjavur, 1928, pp. 64-65.
21. Ibid., p. 66.
22. Premalatha P.N., "Congress Party in Tamilnadu, 1905-1937" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Madurai Kamaraj University, 1989), p. 25.
23. Chopra P.N., Ravindran T.K., and Subraminan N., "History of South India," Vol. III, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 253-254.
24. Baliga B.S., "Studies in Madras Administration," Vol. I, p. 4.
25. Baliga B.S., "Madras: Struggle for Independence," Vol. I, Madras, 1957, p. 4.
26. Kerala Patrika, M.N.N.R., 8 Dec. 1888, p. 273.
27. G.O. Nos. 678-79, Public Dept., 18 March 1890.