



**SIR PITY THEAGARAYA CHETTY-A FOUNDING FATHER OF
THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Among the great leaders who occupy the annals of modern South Indian history, Sir Pitty Theagaraya Chetty also holds a prominent place in the roll of honour. It was he who sought to help the downtrodden and non-Brahmins at a time when their well-being was neglected. To improve their conditions, he founded the famous Justice Party and established its ministry in 1920. He was the driving force behind all the legislations that passed in the Madras Legislative Council during that period. The first person elected to serve the Madras Corporation as President was Sir Pitty Theagaraya Chetty. His pivotal role in improving the



civic conditions pushed him to the level of one of the founders of modern Madras. As he championed the cause of the Dravidian non-Brahmins, by causing a non-Brahmin organization, he was fondly called one of the founders of the Dravidian Movement.

KEYWORDS: Sir Pitty Theagaraya Chetty, Dravidian, Madras Presidency, Madras Corporation, Legislative Council.

INTRODUCTION

Born at Egathur village on April 27, 1852 in the northern part of the Madras, Sir Pitty Theagaraya Chetty elevated himself by the hard labour and dint of his leadership quality. This village is located He graduated from Madras Presidency College in 1876 and devoted himself to leatherwork, maintaining a high level of quality in agriculture. He was a forerunner in causing reforms in the political and social spheres.

Even as a student, Theagaraya Chetty recognized the dominant influence of the Brahmin community in public service, both in education and politics. From the beginning of his academic career, he was committed to protecting the interests of the non-Brahmin community.

The Society was divided into three major groups: Brahmins, non-Brahmins, and Untouchables.¹ Historically, Brahmins were regarded as the guardians of the religious faith and held a prominent status within the social structure. After 1850, Brahmins, who constituted only 3.2% of the total population of southern India, consolidated their position in the social system, gradually occupying the vast majority of administrative and educational positions then available to Indians.² By 1912, they dominated many high-level government positions thanks to their high literacy rate in both Tamil and English.³ In the city of Madras, the 'Mylapore clique' was well established⁴, and local merchants and contractors lost their influence. The Madras Corporation also fell under its influence, and one of the city's wealthiest charitable foundations, Pachaiyappa's Trust, was absorbed into it.⁵ The All-India Congress, while having a majority of Brahmin members, witnessed an interesting division in 1907 when it split; Iyers aligned

with the moderates, whereas Iyengars sided with the nationalists in Madras.⁶ With their expertise, they grew more essential within the governmental administration. Despite British colonial rule in India, the Brahmins wielded significant control over the administration of the country. British officials also feared, to a greater or lesser extent, the educated Brahmins, whom they viewed as a potential threat to British supremacy in India.⁷ In the city of Madras, most Brahmins joined Annie Besant and supported her Home Rule Movement for self-government.⁸ Thus, the government's top advisors became the leaders of the seditious movement. They had one foot in the administration and the other in the nationalist movement.⁹

Sir Theagaraya Chetty identified this as a chance for non-Brahmins to collaborate with the British and take over governmental roles. Meanwhile, the activities of Dr. C. Natesa Mudaliar of Triplicane, who founded the Dravidian Association Hostel for non-Brahmin students, attracted Sir Pity Theagaraya Chetty and Dr. T.M. Nair, then a Congress leader. Nair's election to the Imperial Legislative Council was hindered by the Madras Legislative Council because of the dominance of Brahmin influence.¹⁰ These three non-Brahmin leaders, along with about thirty other non-Brahmin leaders, met on November 20, 1916, at the Victoria Public Hall in .There their aim was to establish a joint-stock company. The formation of South India People's Association was the event-making result of their gathering.¹¹ They aspired to spread their opinions and ventilate their the sufferings of the vast non-Brahmin majority. They planned to start newspapers in Tamil , Telugu and English.¹² On December 20, 1916, Theagaraya Chetty published the 'Non-Brahmin Manifesto' in The Hindu, making a convincing case for the predominance of Brahmins in public life and calling on all non-Brahmins to speak up and present their grievances against their predominance.¹³ As a next step, the prominent non-Brahmin leaders began to gather themselves by organizing the South India Liberal Federation. Its main aim was to enhance the beneficial interests of non-Brahmin caste Hindus in political sphere. A newspaper named, *Justice* was started by the organization in English .Hence the organization earned the name of the Justice Party.¹⁴

When the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms were announced in the House of Commons, intended to transfer power to the Indians, Theagaraya Chetty believed that only Brahmins would benefit from this transfer of power if non-Brahmins remained silent. He thought that, in the absence of political supervision, the Justice Party's requests might be overlooked. He campaigned for a distinct electorate for non-Brahmins and ensured the community's representation in the elections. Twenty-eight of the total sixty-three seats were guaranteed to the non-Brahmin majority by the Meston Award. The remaining thirty-five seats available for open competition.¹⁵ The Congress opted to boycott the elections but the Justice Party participated in the election , won the election and assumed the leadership of the Council. Thus, in one fell swoop, the social structure, which entirely benefited Brahmins, changed, and the backward community was given the opportunity to emerge. Justice Party leader Theagaraya Chetty declined the offer to become Premier of the Madras Presidency, citing health reasons and suggested other high-ranking members for ministerial posts.¹⁶

Although Theagaraya Chetty did not hold a ministerial position in the Madras Legislature, he was primarily responsible for the passage of several beneficial legislations. The Local Self-Government Act was passed in 1920.¹⁷ His greatest achievement as a Member of Madras Legislature was his herculean work in passing the two Communal Local Government Acts, which significantly contributed to providing sufficient opportunities for non-Brahmins to access government posts¹⁸ and obtain promotions.¹⁹ The Andhra University Bill ²⁰ and the Madras Reorganization Bill ²¹ were also passed. Another milestone during his tenure as a Member of the Madras Legislature was his initiative for the Hindu Religious Endowment Bill, a bill to prevent the mismanagement of temples and mutts, etc.²² The State Aid to Industries Act enacted by the Justice Ministry , helped the government to extend its support to the development of industries in the Madras Presidency.²³

Sir Theagaraya Chetty was particularly interested in promoting local self-government and developing the city of Madras. Perhaps this was his sole intention when he chose the President of the Corporation, an honorary position. He was the first elected president of the Madras Corporation (1919-1923). During this period, every corner of the city bore the imprint of some improvement he had made.

He opposed the Madras Rent Restriction Bill, arguing that it would discourage housing construction.²⁴ He was instrumental in enhancing public services in Madras. He took a keen interest in the City Improvement Scheme and brought it to the government's attention.²⁵ When the Prince of Wales embarked on his royal tour of India in 1921, Theagaraya Chetty, the President of the Corporation, delivered a civic address to the Prince in Madras, although his tour was boycotted by the Congress.²⁶

He took a keen interest in developing the textile industry and urged the government to support it. He built a large textile factory near his residence in Tondiarpet and employed several people. He was a Swadeshi and believed that we should wear only what we knitted. He always dressed in white, so people knew him as the 'White-Robed King'.²⁷

He was interested in expanding industrial and technical education. He reorganized and developed the Chengalvaraya Naicker Technical Institute and served on its Board of Directors between 1918 and 1922.²⁸ Among the many educational institutions fortunate enough to receive the services of this eminent South Indian, the Pachaiyappa Charity was the most important. As a trustee, he served forty years for the public cause of charity. The then Governor of Madras, Lord Wellington, unveiled the portrait of Theagaraya Chetty at Pachaiyappa Hall in Madras in recognition of the services of the latter.²⁹ On December 3, 1897, Theagaraya Chetty founded the North Madras Secondary School, which became a college in 1950 and was named after him.³⁰

To acknowledge his contributions to the Madras Province and his collaboration with the government, the British Government in India awarded him the title of 'Rao Bahadur' in 1909, followed by 'Diwan Bahadur' in 1918, and a 'knighthood' in 1921.³¹

After his death in 1925, the citizens of Madras, in recognition of his services to the city, honoured him by naming schools, public parks, and so on. In 1926, East Mambalam was included within the boundaries of the Corporation, and the newly designated area was named 'Theagaraya Nagar'.³² His statue was erected at the main entrance of the Ripon Building, which today houses the administrative office of the Madras Corporation. He was among the genuine architects of modern Madras and the Dravidian Movement. Together with his colleagues in the Justice Party, he sparked a new awakening among the masses of South India, raising their awareness of their rights and responsibilities, while also striving to eliminate their disabilities and uniting them in the effort to better themselves. He guided South India toward a more fulfilling life.

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