



STAND OF DRAVIDIAN AND DEPRESSED CLASS LEADERS IN THE WAKE OF THE POONA PACT

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this paper is to expose the position and stand taken by the Justice Party and Self-Respect League, which represented the Dravidian parties, in the wake of the signing of the Poona Pact by B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi and the political developments of that period. In November 1930, the First Round Table Conference was held in London, without Gandhi's participation. Congress leaders were released from prison and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed next year. Thereafter the Communal Award and Poona Pact were announced. In these two occasions the Dravidian parties supported the position of the Depressed Class leaders. The views and activities of E.V. Ramasamy exposed the stand of the Self-Respect League in promoting the interest of the Depressed Classes for the claim of the separate electorates while the Justice Party, the pioneer Dravidian Party also took the cause of the Depressed Classes. The Justicites of the Madras Presidency insisted the non-Brahmin - Depressed Class unison in the claim of the separate electorates. Bobbili Raja, a Justicite leader in his days strongly stood for this unity.



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KEYWORDS: Justice Party, Self-Respecters, E.V. Ramasamy, Depressed Classes, B.R. Ambedkar, Gandhi, M.C. Rajah, Separate and Joint electorates.

INTRODUCTION:

The Justice Party was busy with its own controversies and, except for denouncing civil disobedience campaigns, barely maintained contact, politically or ideologically, with the transcendental events of the period. When Congressmen accused the Justicites of being complicit with the Madras Police in the violence unleashed against the satyagrahis, it was E.V. Ramasamy, a well-known Dravidian leader pointed out that under dyarchy, an elected government could only wait and watch, as law and order were 'Reserved Subjects'.¹

But, as in previous cases, neither E.V. Ramasamy's support for the Justice Ministry nor his incessant criticism of the Congress mattered to the Justice leadership, who remained opaque and passive before the pressures and anxieties. E.V. Ramasamy, on the other hand, was extraordinarily

perceptive about the outcome of the First Round Table and observed that it had created the political, ideological and logical and institutional conditions for Congress to protect and guarantee its concerns and its hegemony. He further emphasized that such a situation would enable and allow Congress to exercise its own domination and overwhelming opposing political tendencies suited the rulers of India. Because now they could distance themselves, preserve their autonomy and maintain their authority, uncontaminated by the activities of everyday realpolitik. Britain, concluded E.V.Ramasamy, feared the spread of Bolshevik ideas to India, which was why it had decided to ask the Princely States to federate with British India, so that the political sagacity and cunning of the Congress, on the one hand, and the feudal and princely authority, on the other, could, in unison, quell the impending political struggles of the period.²

Throughout 1931 E.V. Ramasamy wrote and spoke against the wiles of Congress nationalism and subjected the Gandhi-Irwin Pact to his usual penetrating criticism. Repeating a previous observation, that civil disobedience campaigns represented a mere tug of war between upper-caste Hindus and the British commercial elite, with the former relying on the abysmal ignorance of the average Hindu to achieve their ends, and the latter they used the weapon of political reform to advance theirs, he then observed that Gandhi and Irwin met as honorary spokesmen of their respective Chambers of Commerce. E.V.Ramasamy also noted that the pact had caused Congress to give up a number of substantive political demands, even as Congress publicists touted it as a major victory.³ But E.V.Ramasamy's brilliant and prophetic reading of the historical situation, which made its mark in the early 1930s, was lost on the Justicites. It was only with the Second Round Table and Ramsay Macdonald's Communal Award that the Justicites woke up to reality of Congress-Brahmin ties of hegemony and their implications for non-Brahmins and Depressed Classes.

Opposing Gandhi, who vehemently rejected the Communal Award that established separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in 1931, E.V. Ramaswamy asserted that the Depressed Classes would gain no benefit from emulating Gandhi or the Indian National Congress. He argued that such a course of action would be detrimental, and that the only path to genuine development and dignity for them would be through separate electorates and representation, as he stated.⁴

POONA PACT AND THE DRAVIDIAN AND DEPRESSED CLASS LEADERS

Following the announcement of Ramsay Macdonald's Communal Award and Gandhi's stubborn opposition to it, E.V.Ramasamy's Self-Respect Movement and the Justice Party, together and separately, embarked on a propaganda mission for the cause of the Depressed Classes and defended their right to a separate electorate. A scathing editorial by *Kudi Arasu* of 25th October 1931, 'The Betrayal of Depressed Classes' by the Hindus' condemned Gandhi's clearly expressed view that he would oppose to the death the granting of separate electorates to the Depressed Classes and his assertion that he alone should be considered their sole representative. Several meetings were held in Madras in support of B.R. Ambedkar and R.Srinivasan, the Depressed Class Leaders, under the joint auspices of the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidian Justice Party.

Meanwhile, following a suggestion made at the Third Provincial Self-Respect Conference on held at Virudhunagar, E.V.Ramasamy and S. Ramanathan had embarked on a tour of the Soviet Union and other European countries to learn and see for themselves the effects and uses of practitioners of atheism as a doctrine of the State.⁵ Indeed, W. P. A. Soundarapandian had also considered this trip to learn about the political uses of atheism in the Soviet Union and Western nations. However, meetings supporting B.R. Ambedkar continued to be held in their absence. These meetings brought prominent Depressed Class leaders like M.C. Rajah (who initially supported the Communal Award), N. Sivaraj (member of the Madras Legislative Council and long-time advocate of Justicite and Self-Respecter) and others on a common platform. Some Congressmen and Brahmins tried to disrupt one of these meetings, and nationalist newspapers made great play of the ensuing confrontation, publishing strident headlines like 'Gandhi in Danger' and 'The Evil of the Depressed Classes'. Undeterred, the Justicites and Self-Respecters and hundreds of Depressed Class members continued to hold their protest meetings and passed resolutions demanding immediate implementation of the Communal Award. In one case, a

meeting of 7,000 people was held at the Egmore, the neighborhood of Madras, after which Depressed Class members, returning home, were allegedly attacked by hooligans .⁶

The announcement of reserved seats for the Depressed Classes in 1932, following the conclusion of the Poona Pact between B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi⁷, did nothing to allay the real anger of the Depressed Classes in Madras. *Kudi Arasu's* editorial on the Poona Pact, published on 17th July 1932, had a rather telling title: 'The Liberation of the Depressed Classes and the Deception of the Hindus'. This, as well as many others, bluntly condemned Gandhi and the Hindu Mahasabha leader Moonje. M. C. Rajah, after initially supporting the idea of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes , had supported Moonje's position on this issue.⁸ M.C. Rajah held the view that joint electorates would do justice to the Depressed Classes.⁹ He signed the famous Rajah- Moonje Pact favouring joint electorates with Hindus. He, thus , played a prominent role during the days of Poona Pact.¹⁰ He was therefore also criticized, albeit mildly, and called to account for his sudden opposition to separate electorates.¹¹

Gandhi's 'Epic Fast' was roundly rebuked, and another article posed the indignant question: Following the advice of Gandhi and in response to a statement issued by Rajagopalachari, the Brahmins resorted to prayer and fasting. But had any of them observed a fast for the cause of the untouchables? These men pledged to fast when Gandhi pleaded with them that the integrity of the Hindu faith must be saved at all costs, but was there any Brahmin willing to fast to end the misery of the untouchables?¹²

The same article went on to ask why not even a small part of the attention so generously given to Gandhi was dedicated to Kelappan, who had been fasting in Kerala for some time, for the abolition of untouchability and for securing the right of entry to the temple by Depressed Classes.¹³

To highlight the commitment of the Dravidian leaders in the cause of separate electorates for Adi- Dravidas, a special conference on Depressed Classes was organized with the support of the Justice Ministry and the Self-Respect Movement, in which Self-Respecters, Justicites and Depressed Class members participated, including prominent community leaders such as Munusamy Pillay and Kanakaraj. ¹⁴

The issues raised by the Poona Pact allowed the Self-Respecters to isolate the pro-Brahmin and pro-Congress elements grouped around Munisamy Naidu in the Justice Party. In any case, the latter had managed to distance himself from Tamil Justicites such as P. T. Rajan and, worse still, he had not called a party conference despite three years having passed since he had been elected president. When this conference was convened at Thanjavur in October 1932 (E.V. Ramasamy had not yet returned from his Continental journey), it was clear that Munisamy Naidu's days as president were over. The Rajah of Bobbili was elected president in his place. Bobbili was a man whom E.V.Ramasamy warmly praised in the following days as a leader free from corruption and not prone to nepotism or fraud. The Self - Respecters, many of them later criticized Bobbili for his feudal "class" interests, gave in quietly at Thanjavur; so urgent was the imperative to liberate the Justice Party from possible and imminent co-optation by the Congress and transform it into a party that would represent and mediate the achievement of a general non-Brahmin good.

Although the Self-Respecters at Thanjavur had worked hard to keep Naidu out of the leadership of the Justice Party, they were not overly optimistic about that party's prospects and strengths for the times ahead. They were particularly concerned about the factionalism that had almost torn the party apart at Thanjavur. An editorial of *Kudi Arasu* of 16th October 1932 lamented that the Thanjavur events had shown the Justice leaders in a rather poor light. It seemed like that they were more concerned with their own interests and consolidate their individual positions of authority within the party rather than working to broaden and deepen the common good of non-Brahmins.

It was clear that Self-Respecters' support for Bobbili was nothing more than a tactical gesture, because they certainly would not have been very happy with someone whose understanding of the Self-Respect Movement was quite limited and, even worse, misinformed. Speaking at a meeting on self-respect in Trichy on 2nd October 1932, Bobbili had remarked that he had learned that the Self-Respecters were horrified by the depravities that had entered Hindu social life and wished to reform it. He went on to say that in every religion a particular moment in its historical existence it is known that reformist movements emerged that worked to achieve reforms acceptable to all. The Self-Respect

Movement, for its part, wished to purify the Hindu religion and rid it of the defects that had crept into the practice of the most ancient of religions. Later, in Thanjavur, Bobbili returned to this topic and observed that, as far as he knew, the Self-Respect Movement worked to valorize the nobility of the Hindu faith and free it from those growths that had grown around its original splendor. He claimed the Self-Respecters were interested in the unity of all people and wished to concretely realize this unity. Recalling the anti-religious and anti-caste sentiments expressed at the First Provincial Self-Respect Conference, Bobbili observed that these were expressed by impetuous youths whose misplaced zeal and enthusiasm made them cross the boundaries of decorum, but this impetuosity should not be used to condemn the movement as a whole.¹⁵

It is important to reiterate that the decision of Self-Respecters to support the Rajah of Bobbili and back his claims to leadership was purely tactical. Young Self-Respecters like S.Gurusamy, for example, had no illusions about the nature of the Justice Party's leadership. Indeed, Gurusamy had tried to distinguish the Self-Respect Movement from the Justice party, even though both were working in concert against the Poona Pact. In an article written in September 1931, Gurusamy observed that the Self-Respect Movement and the Justice Party shared some common goals. Both wanted concessions for the Depressed Classes, the poor and women in the proposed political reform scheme. Both were convinced that the Congress was nothing but a forum of Brahmins trying to compensate for their lost sacrality by thus operating in the field of politics. However, Gurusamy was quick to add, the opposition of Justice Party appeared at times half-hearted and even fearful of its own audacity in this regard. Furthermore, the Self-Respect Movement and the Justice party did not agree on all issues. It was obvious that Justice Party leaders and newspapers opposed some of the cardinal principles and goals of the Self-Respect Movement. So they did not support the latter's position on the need to destroy religion, faith in God, religious symbols and caste titles.

Gurusamy added that even with respect to the opposing Brahmins, the apparent unity of the Justice party and the Self-Respect Movement belied the real differences. Both opposed the Brahmin because if one attacked and challenged the caste order, one would necessarily have to shoot the first arrow at the Brahmin. The arrow must pass through the Brahmin before it could reach the others. But this did not mean that the Self-Respecters would tolerate religious zeal and caste feeling among non-Brahmins, whether they were righteous or not. As far as the Self-Respecters were concerned, religious frenzy and caste prejudices were to be condemned, regardless of who expressed them.¹⁶

Thus the Dravidian parties led by E.V.Ramasami opposed the Poona Pact and insisted the Separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. These parties conducted meetings for the cause of the demands raised by the Depressed Class leaders like B.R. Ambedkar who signed the Poona Pact along with Gandhi. To ensure the Dravidian entity, the Justice Party and Self Respect League stood on the side of the Depressed Classes with regard to the separate electorate and implementation of the Communal Award of Ramsay Macdonald.

END NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, 25 January 1931.
3. *Ibid.*, 28 June 1931.
4. *Viduthalai*, 9 November 1931.
5. *Kudi Arasu*, 25 October 1931.
6. Mangalamurugesan, N.K., *Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu 1920-1940*, Madurai: Koodal Publishers, 1981, pp.105-107.
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8. *Kudi Arasu*, 25 October 1931.
9. Madras Native Newspapers Report, January to March 1932, p.265; *Tamil Arasu*, 18 February 1932.
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13. *Kudi Arasu*, 2 October 1932.
14. *Ibid.*, 23 October 1932.
15. *Ibid.*, 9 October 1932; 16 October 1932.
16. Velu, Kuruvikarambai, *Kuthoosi Gurusamy*, (Tamil) , Madras : Valavan Pathippagam, 324-326.