

## **GEORGE JOSEPH: HIS SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND PROMOTE OF *KHADI* MOVEMENT IN MADURAI**

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In 1925, George Joseph reached Madurai. Earlier he had left Madurai for being a part of the national movement. Due to the differences with Congress it seemed quite difficult for him to be inside the Congress party. That made him to turn towards his legal profession in Madurai; but he never left his Gandhian ideologies and principles which became a part of his life and continued till his last breath. After reaching Madurai, George Joseph continued his role in different social and political activities.

### **His Early Life and Career**

George was born at Chengannur in Central Travancore on 5 June 1887 into a middle class family. His family name was Oorayil. The origin of the family is not clear. This family belonged to the Syrian Christian community, the upper stratum among the Christians. None of the family members of the Oorayil family add their family name into their names which was unusual among the Syrian Christians of that time. The male members of the Oorayil family used their father's or grand father's name with their names. Thus George got his name as George Joseph. The members of the Oorayil family were much moderate than the contemporary traditional Syrian Christian families. This was a great advantage for the future generations of the family. This quality of the family indeed reflected on the character of George Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

George Joseph's father C.I. Joseph was one among the most educated men in Chengannur. George Joseph's mother Saramma was a woman with good qualities. Another prominent personality in George Joseph's family was his maternal grandmother, Chechamma. Her character was really astonishing. At his early age, George Joseph developed a great fascination towards reading. George Joseph started his schooling in Chengannur. He then joined in a primary school in Adoor. After completing his primary education, he moved to English High School Alleppey and from there to C.M.S College High school, Kottayam.<sup>2</sup> He completed his Matriculation from C.M.S College High School. He finished his schooling in 1903 after that he joined the Madras Christian College for Fellow of Arts (FA) Course. he was not at all very good at his studies. He had a very low academic brilliance. He was not an active student to go far away for further studies. By knowing this his father told him that if he passed the F.A Course, he would be allowed to continue his degree at the same college; but if he fails he would be sent to Britain for higher studies. His father thought that Joseph could never imagine a foreign visit so he would concentrate more on his studies. But this was a wrong judgment by his father about his son's wish. He really

intended to go abroad so he did his best to fail in the examination and became successful in that attempt. He celebrated his failure by jumping from a high haystack.<sup>3</sup>

### **George Joseph in Madurai**

George Joseph's father was anxious to see his son entering into a well known legal career. At that time it was not easy for a Syrian Christian to enter any department of Travancore State Government. Most of the departments were dominated by high caste Hindus. After finding that it was quite difficult to enter the state department of judiciary, George Joseph set out for Madras along with his wife in 1910. He was eager to start a perfect legal career; but after reaching Madras, he could not find it easy to start a good career there as he had expected. In Madras George he entered into the editorship of a paper called *The South Indian Mail*. It was his first attempt in the field of journalism. As per the advice of his friend K.P Gopala Menon, who had accompanied him to London, he decided to move to Madurai where he started his career as a Criminal lawyer. He followed the model of Earldley Norton.<sup>4</sup> He was a famous English Criminal lawyer. He had a crucial role in the trial of the Alipore Conspiracy case which was held in 1908. Eighteen persons were included in that. Aurobindo Ghosh was one among them. He was one among the famous revolutionaries of the Indian National movement; but no evidence could be established against him and he was acquitted in that case. Later he turned towards the spiritual path. He came to Pondicherry and there he founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.<sup>5</sup>

Madurai became the major centre of the political activities of George Joseph. He had spent a good part of his life in Madurai. He had an emotional attachment to that city. When reached Madurai for the first time, George Joseph had not been interested to enter into politics. He was busy with building a good legal career. Here, he could prove his abilities as a criminal lawyer. He could attain success in his career which made him affluent. His family began to enjoy all pleasures in life; but he could not lead his life through this way for a long time. He could not keep himself away from the political issues. He started entering into some local political issues.<sup>6</sup>

George Joseph always possessed some interest in the issues and problems of the depressed classes in the society. He had always kept a soft corner for such sections. Such a mentality of George Joseph drew him into the problems of a tribal community in Madurai called piramalai kallars. As per the Criminal Tribes Act, which was introduced by the British Government in India, certain communities or tribes were considered as criminals and they could be easily punished without proving their crime. This was really a cruel action from the side of the British which badly affected the life of the poor illiterate section in the society. They were not aware of their privileges. Piramalai kallars were such a tribal community in Madurai's Tirumangalam taluk. Once they were caught by the police, bail was not allowed to them. As per the section 10(a) of the Act, certain restrictions were imposed on certain members of this tribal community.<sup>7</sup> They were required to report to the police whenever needed. On some occasions they had to sleep at the police station at every night and allowed to go back to home in the morning to do their work and to return to the police station at

night. It was really a hard practice for this people. There would be a long distance between the police station and their home. All these difficulties led these tribal communities to riot against the authority. But the situation could not change more. George Joseph came to know about this depressed tribal community and the cruelties they were facing.<sup>8</sup>

As a lover of the downtrodden section in the society, George Joseph could not turn his attention from their suffering. Along with some activists he made some attempts to reduce the severity of the inhumane action against the tribes in Madurai. They also tried to improve the pathetic condition of the tribal community in Madurai. They wished to create awareness among the tribal people about their rights and privileges and also about the unnecessary hardships, they were suffering now. Special schools were formed for educating the tribal children. Some arrangements were made to introduce various cottage industries to the tribal community, provisions for taking loans and grants too introduced to them.<sup>9</sup>

George Joseph and other activists tried their best to provide employment to the tribes in the textile mills of Madurai and the tea and coffee estates. Such activities could raise the poor condition of the Piramalai Kallars in Madurai for some extent. He worked hard for attaining justice for this depressed class. Such an action from him kept him close to this community throughout his life. For these tribals, he was like a hero. They treated him with great respect and love. They called him as '*Rojappoo Durai*'. Their love and respect for him began with the first day they met him in 1915, with a complaint regarding the ill-treatment of the police towards them. The way he treated them was really touching for the tribal people. He took up the case very seriously and became victorious in that case. After this more tribal people started visiting him with their complaints. He showed keen interest in their cases and found a solution for each case.<sup>10</sup>

George Joseph's successful attempt in the cases of the Piramalai Kallars gave him wide popularity in that area and also in the press. He provided his full support to organize a youth forum for the kallars which aimed to educate the youth of that community. In Madurai, he established a well known and lucrative legal career which gave him much popularity and money. He acquired great success in his profession which enabled him to have a big house with several servants and a horse and carriage.<sup>11</sup>

George Joseph and Susanna welcomed a large number of guests daily into their house. The way Susanna treated her guests got much appreciation. George Joseph was busy with his legal career; but still he was ready to give much attention to the problems of the tribal community in Madurai. It did not provide him with monetary benefit still he continued paying attention to the cases of the tribal people. Before leaving to North, George Joseph had involved with another issue in Madurai which was the problems of the labourers in the Madurai Cotton Mill and the formation of the Madura Labour Union. With the coming of the British, life of the Indian workers fell into utter turmoil. The British severely exploited the Indian workers, working in their various mills and factories. The workers had to work hard for long hours. They were paid only low wages. The life of the workers became so miserable. These workers were mainly from the lower strata of the society. Most of them were illiterate and unaware of their rights so that they could be easily exploited. As their

suffering was too high they could not wait for a long time to start some strikes and labour unrest against the mill owners and they sought the help of certain personalities from outside. The workers sent their representatives to make the employers aware of their misery and also to get raised wages. But everything seemed to be in vain.<sup>12</sup>

The First World War which broke out in 1914 provided a favourable atmosphere for the emergence of organized labour in India. The British Government was not ready to do anything favourable to the working class instead of that they tried to suppress the agitations raised by the workers brutally. Gradually the problem of the working class became a national issue. National leaders too began to interfere in that. The first trade union formed in India was the Madras Labour Union which was formed on 27 April 1918. The food riots which broke out in Madras and Madurai during the years 1917 and 1918 intensified the misery of the workers in the Cotton Mills of Madras and Madurai. They sought the help of some leaders; but that could not get them any solution to their problems. The employers were not ready to give them any mercy. At this time B.P. Wadia, a prominent lawyer of that time and also a great supporter of the Home Rule movement came as a rescuer of the working class. He organized various discussions with the working class and other groups and finally framed a constitution for the first trade union in India which was the beginning of trade unionism in India. The Madurai Mill Workers were also not free from all these troubles.<sup>13</sup>

The Madurai Mills were also formed by the British in 1892 that the first mill was formed by two British brothers called Harvey brothers. They formed a Mill in a village near to Madurai. It was close to Tirumangalam. Gradually two more mills were built by the same persons. Later the three were joined together and known as the Madura Mills. The workers of these mills were ill treated by the employers. The workers of these mills came from the nearby villages. They consisted of various castes and groups in Madurai and nearby villages. The workers in the Madura Mills also came from the tribal sections in the society. Like kallars and maravars, the employers were treated them as either criminals or local thieves. They received only a lowest amount of money as their wage. All their difficulties compelled the workers to approach some personalities whom they believed to find a solution for their problems. Such two personalities were George Joseph and Ramanathan. Both persons were very sympathetic to the problems of the working class. With their strenuous effort, the Madurai Labour Union was formed. Ramanathan was a member of the Justice party in Madurai.<sup>14</sup>

The British Government and the employers never showed any sympathetic attitude towards the newly formed Trade Union. In 1918 a strike broke out in the Madura Mills. The mill owners and the employers wanted to suppress the agitations raised by the union members. Ramanathan was banned from delivering any speech within ten miles of the Madurai Meenakshi temple. This worsened the situation. The union leaders met George Joseph and requested him to take over the leadership. But at this time he thought of another personality, whom he believed would be more suitable to take over the leadership. He was Varadarajulu Naidu. He was an active member of the Home Rule League. He made his

speeches in Tamil which drew the attention of many local people. He severely criticized every action of the British. Under the leadership of George Joseph and other union leaders a warm welcome was given to him on his arrival in Madurai. After Varadarajulu Naidu's arrival the situation in Madurai changed as imagined by George Joseph. He made stirring speeches against the British Government. He spoke about the intensity of the exploitation made by the Government and the employers and also pointed out the severe condition of the working class section due to these exploitations. His speeches shook the mill owners and the employers. Varadarajulu Naidu was arrested on 18 August 1918. The case against him was delivering of seditious speech. During the trial George Joseph became his counsel. But the court found him guilty of sedition; but however at last the mill owners were compelled to increase the wages. The workers got a 25 percent increase in their wages. The struggle of the mill workers resulted in a huge hike in their wages.<sup>15</sup>

### George Joseph in *Khadi* Movement

George Joseph's ideological differences with Gandhi regarding certain issues could not affect his interest on Gandhi's constructive programme. He welcomed it as a solution for various social issues. As a social worker, George Joseph provided his whole hearted support for the conducting of various constructive programmes. Gandhi's constructive programmes consisted of mainly three programmes – promotion of *khadi*, the removal of untouchability and the restoration of communal harmony.<sup>16</sup>

The *Khadi* programme acquired much popularity. Earlier the All India Khadi Board had issued an appeal that every Congress member should have atleast one spinning wheel working in his family. One of the main objects of the Congress organization was the production and substitution of hand spun *khadi* for all other clothes. If a person does not own a *charkha* working regularly in his home, he could not be a member of the Congress. It became a condition for getting membership in the Congress. National schools were established in different parts of India. These schools became the recruiting grounds for Congress cadres.<sup>17</sup> Foreign clothes occupied a dominant position among the Indians. Importing of foreign cloth to India provided a huge profit to the British. At the same time it badly affected the Indian cottage Industries. Indian weavers were put into utter poverty. The *khadi* programme initiated by Gandhi aimed at the removal of such pathetic conditions of the rural Indian masses. He believed that the uplift of the poor would be a better solution for the growing poverty in India. Gandhi conducted tours to different corners of India to spread the idea of *khadi* issue. He demanded the use of hand spun clothes. He advised the people to give up the use of foreign clothes and also to become self sufficient in their clothes.<sup>18</sup>

But the production of *khadi* seemed to be very expensive than the foreign clothes. As a result the price became too high. Gandhi was informed of such situations. George Joseph sent a letter to Gandhi, in which he explained such difficulties related to the production of *khadi*. He wrote that the production of *khadi* is a highly expensive affair and it would severely affect the domestic mills than the British. In George Joseph's view, Indians should promote the use of '*khaki*' instead of khadar. He said that production of *khaki* is cheaper than



*Khadi* and using this as uniforms would provide the people with an appearance of military discipline. Such view of George Joseph was for supporting the poor, who could not afford any kind of over expenses. For George Joseph, priority was for the social issues that is, the issues of the common people. According to him, if the production of *khadi* is not less costly to the people, we should stop the production of it and find something which is easier and affordable to the common masses. No political issue or any other programme should badly affect the life of the common man.<sup>19</sup>

But Gandhi could not support the view of George Joseph. For Gandhi, the use of *khaki*, instead of *khadar* was not a good solution for the problem. In his opinion, the use of *khaki* as uniforms would remind the people of military dictatorships just like the Fascists in Italy and Nazis in Germany. But all these issues could not take George Joseph away from the constructive programmes especially the *khadi* issue. George Joseph and his family had earlier boycotted all their foreign clothes as a part of the non co-operation movement called by Gandhi. From that period onwards George Joseph and family gave up wearing of foreign clothes and started using *khadi*. They continued that till the end of their life. During his imprisonment in Trivandrum, he undertook the activity of *khadi* spinning. A spinning wheel was given to him. He engaged actively in the spinning process for long hours during the imprisonment, which gave him more pleasure and satisfaction. Occasionally there was a need for raw cotton which is evident from his letters from the prison. In his letters he made requests for more raw cotton from places like Madurai.<sup>20</sup>

As a part of the *khadi* programme, Gandhi paid a visit to Madurai. He was overwhelmed by the progress of *khadi* programme in Madurai. Gandhi was pleased by seeing the activities of some prominent personalities there like Vaidyanath Iyer, A.Vedarama Iyer etc. They were members of the Spinner's Association and they had keen interest in the *khadi* movement. Activities of George Joseph for promoting *khadi* movement were another happiest moment for Gandhi during his visit in Madurai. He had full praise for Mr. and Mrs George Joseph for their dedication. Gandhi used the term 'guide less soul' for Mrs. George Joseph. She was more dedicated than her husband for the programme of promoting *khadi*. Gandhi wrote that, Mrs. Joseph is responsible for any interest in spinning *khadi* and George Joseph continues to have this interest.<sup>21</sup> She became a member of the women's spinning club in Madurai. Gandhi gave a silver *charka* to each member of that club for their dedicated work for promoting *khadi*. For Susanna Joseph it was a precious gift and she kept that with her with much care till the end of her life. She collected money for the promotion of *khadi* movement. She took an active interest in carrying on the spinning propaganda among the women. During her propaganda she made friends in the lowest sections of the society. She made friendship even with the *devadasis*. She made some of them the members of the spinning club. For Gandhi she was one of the truest representatives of real charity.<sup>22</sup>

George Joseph was the president of the *Swadeshi Prachar Sabha* in Madurai at the time of Gandhi's visit in Madurai in 1921. He conducted various campaigns to get the support of the people for *khadi*. He worked hard to create awareness among the people about the

importance of the *khadi* programme. He advised the people to buy *khadi*. On that visit of Gandhi in Madurai he stayed in George Joseph's house. On that occasion, Gandhi started wearing only a loin cloth and a small towel for the first time. From that day onwards that became the dressing style of Gandhi.<sup>23</sup>

By promoting the *khadi* movement George Joseph became part of Gandhi's constructive programme. Even though he pointed out some defects associated with the production of *khadi* he never turned against the *khadi* programme. With the dedicative participation in the khadi issue George Joseph proved himself as a true nationalist.

### End Notes

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