

CONGRESS MINISTRY OF RAJAJI: HIS MEASURES IN THE ELEVATION AND AMELIORATION OF HARIJANS IN COLONIAL TAMILNADU, 1937 -1940

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In the Madras Presidency, the announcement of elections in 1937, therefore placed the nationalists a frontal seat in the political vehicle wherein C. Rajagopalachari who gained political clout. After the won in the election of 1937, he became the Premier of Madras for two years between 1937 and 1939. This paper deals Rajaji ministry committed itself mainly to the implementation of social measures such as elevate measures for Harijans and Amelioration for Depressed Classes in Colonial Tamilnadu.

Congress Ministry of Rajaji

The Government of India Act of 1935 which was abolished diarchy system in the provinces and introduced provincial autonomy. This act was introduced significant changes in the constitution of the Provincial Government. The Legislature was made bicameral-a Legislative Council and a Legislative Assembly. The Council of Ministers, which was made responsible to the Legislature, was to administer provincial subjects. However, their powers were subjected to constitutional safeguards and Governor's special responsibilities. The Act came into operation from 1937 and elections were held to the provincial legislatures. In the election held for the Madras Legislature on 18 February 1937, the Congress Party swept the polls and emerged as the sole representative body of the people.¹

The Justice Party which was the regional rival the Congress party hoped to undermine the strength of the Congress in the election; but failed. In July 1937 the Congress formed the ministry with C. Rajagopalachari as the Premier. He in particular felt that the Congress should take office in 1937 to carry out constructive reforms rather than allow Nehru and the socialists to control the English and thereby divert it from nationalism to a class war. Notwithstanding all opposition, the Congress Party won support owing to its role in the national movement and became stronger and stronger while the other parties became weaker and weaker. However, the outbreak of the Second World War cut short the life of the Congress Ministry and brought to a standstill most of the welfare measures initiated by it.²

Elevation of the Harijans

Rajaji ministry turned its attention for elevating the status of the Harijans. He knew that as a first step in this direction, temples had to be thrown open to the so-called 'untouchables'. His Government was doing its best to educate public opinion on this revolutionary measure. The atmosphere was far more conducive than ever before with the

progress of the Temple-entry campaign in Malabar district and Cochin State. The Executive Committee of the All India Harijan Sevak Sangh requested the Governments of Madras and Cochin to declare open all Hindu temples within its jurisdiction to the Harijans. But the Government of Madras was different from that of Cochin where the Hindu ruler owned all the temples. It was within his right to open them to the Harijans as they were open to the savarna Hindus. But the Madras Government was responsible to the people of the Presidency who represented all classes and creeds. Temples could be thrown open to Harijans only by the Trustees either of their own accord or at the instance of the savarna devotees who would visit particular temples. Of course, the provincial legislatures could bring about this reform by passing needed legislations. Its passage would not be tough as the new Congress Ministry was pledged to Harijan uplift.³

In January 1938 M.C. Rajah a member of the Madras Legislative Council expressed his desire to move a Temple - Entry Bill which would give the worshippers the right by majority vote to open a temple for Harijans. Rajaji promised support for the measure. He even drafted the Bill for Rajah. But when it was moved by Rajah in August, Rajaji was not in favour of it. Instead, a legislative measure known as the Malabar Temple Entry Act was passed.⁴ This would facilitate free entry of the Depressed Classes into temples in Malabar if the step was favoured by the majority of the caste - Hindus in the particular revenue taluk, in which the temple was situated. M.C. Rajah felt deceived and complained to Gandhiji that the Harijans were exercised over the issue of temple-entry and were contemplating repudiation of the Poona Pact.⁵ Gandhiji advised him to bear with Rajaji assuring that the Harijans had no better friend than Rajaji. Gandhiji again advised him in a subsequent letter that the whole movement for temple entry was one of conviction of the *sanatani* heart. M.C. Rajah declared his whole hearted support to the Premier in this mighty religious reform and made the movement a thorough success.⁶ Rajah did so by extending his support to the Malabar Temple-Entry Bill. On 13 June 1939, the Tamilnadu Provincial Harijan Temple-Entry Conference was held at Madurai with Rameshwari Devi in the chair. Rajaji found at this Conference, that a majority of the priests and trustees of the famous Sri Meenakshi Temple of Madurai were ready to throw it open to Harijans. Nobody would have thought then in three weeks time Rajaji would achieve what was considered to be impossible of achievement. The 'wonderful event' on 8 July 1939 when with the help of Vaidyanatha Iyer of the Madurai Harijan Sevak Sangh and his co-workers, a party consisting of Harijans and caste - Hindus entered that temple. They were admitted by the Trustees to its inner precincts which hitherto were preserved by the Brahmans. The Harijans offered puja (worship) amidst the rejoicings of the Hindu population of the town.⁷ Gandhiji wrote:

It is a great event in the campaign against untouchability and the movement for the opening of temples to Harijans. The Proclamation opening State temples of Travancore was no doubt a very big step. But it was the prerogative of the Maharaja. He had in his Dewan a wise adviser. The Maharaja, the Maharani and the Dewan brought about the transformation. But the opening of the celebrated temple of Madurai is a greater event in that it is the

popular will that has brought about the happy consummation. It reflected a decided conversion of the temple – goers of the Meenakshi Temple.⁸

Though the sanataniist opposition had not been extensive the Trustees had a tough time with them initially. They were encouraged in their step of throwing open the temples to Harijans by the Premier's assurance of legislation within eight days.⁹ But the unavoidable delay in bringing about the legislation caused them considerable embarrassment. The orthodox among the Hindus began filing civil and criminal suits against the temple authorities and social reformers. A criminal case was initiated against the temple's executive officer. There was a demand for a purificatory ceremony. Natesa Iyer sent a harrowing wire to Gandhiji charging that the party entered the Meenakshi temple stealthily and that the opening of the temple was in defiance of public opinion. Gandhiji wired to say that the contents of Natesa Iyer's telegram were 'unbelievable' and that he should not impede 'long overdue reform'.¹⁰

Natesa Iyer asserted telegraphically that every word of his wire was true and that Gandhiji could make enquiries from Minister Ramanathan and others.¹¹ The Minister, however, denied the charge. On the whole, the sanataniist opposition had not been extensive. The Ministry was over anxious to bring in the necessary legislation; but nothing could be done till the legislature met in August.¹² The Premier, therefore, requested the Governor to promulgate a temporary ordinance on the lines of the indemnity bill they had drafted to give immediate and complete protection to the reformers against vexations suits and proceedings. Although he had personally no objection to promulgating an ordinance, Erskine sought the Viceroy's instructions.¹³ In fact he was anxious not to stand in the way of emancipation of Harijans. When the Viceroy delayed sending his reply, the Governor wired that if the British authorities refused to issue this order:

We shall be laying ourselves open to the charges and with some reason, that we are interfering in the Hindu religious dispute and backing up the sanataniist Brahmans as against the harijans and their sympathizers.¹⁴

The Viceroy did grant the Governor the necessary permission to go ahead with the ordinance. Accordingly, an ordinance was promulgated in terms of the indemnity bill to take effect immediately. It indemnified temple officials who had already opened and might open their temples to Harijans with the permission of the government. Subsequently the Madras Temple Entry Authorisation and Indemnity bill was passed in the Madras Legislative Council on 7 August 1939. The Act empowered the trustees of temples to throw them open to Harijans subject to approval of Government. This was a general measure which applied to any temple in the Province.¹⁵ Rajaji owed his victory in carrying this bill to the support extended by overwhelming Hindu opinion. Following the ordinance the other temples in the Madurai, Tanjore and other districts were thrown open to Harijans. The temple at Courtallam (Tirunelvely district) also followed suit. The Vaishnava Brahman Premier did not however meet with immediate success in the case of Vaishnava Shrines. The temples at Srirangam and Tirupathi did not open. T.T.Krishnamachari was unkind and

unfair when he likened the indemnity measure to Ghazni's temple raids. In the Legislative Council, V.S.Srinivasa Sastri criticized the Premier's act as an 'indirect back-door method'. But he failed to spell out what the other method was Rajaji struck to the his guns. He said: "There is no use of my being a Minister if I cannot protest the people who brought this about".¹⁶

Amelioration for Harijans

The Removal of Civil Disabilities Act which another important measure was aimed at the amelioration of the Harijans in the Colonial Tamilnadu. It provided that no Harijan could be prevented merely by reason of his caste from enjoying any social or public amenity to which other castes of Hindus had access or which was maintained for the use of the public from out of State or local funds; and that no court of law should recognize any such disability. A sum of Rs.11.24 lakhs was spent in 1938-1939 on the amelioration of the condition of the Harijans. In 1939-1940, a sum of Rs.12.43 lakhs was earmarked for it.

The Government refused recognition and aid to schools which denied admission to the Harijans. Scholarships were granted to the scheduled caste pupils for elementary, secondary, collegiate, special, commercial, professional and industrial education. No fee was charged for them in the elementary schools. In the arts and professional colleges they could obtain half remission of fees on production of poverty certificate. There were also separate schools run for Scheduled Caste children. They were supplied books, slates, etc., freely; small grants for clothing for deserving pupils were also given in this school. Deserving Scheduled Caste pupils were exempted even from paying the examination fees for the SSLC and other public examinations. Members of this caste were given concessions in the matter of employment in Government Service by the reservation of one out of every twelve appointments; by raising the age limit to twenty seven and by lowering the general educational standard in their case. If a scheduled caste candidate was an under-graduate or graduate, no age limit would be insisted upon.¹⁷

The Government helped this caste to acquire also house sites by bearing half the costs itself and by collecting the balance in easy installments. Considerable extend of land was reserved for and assigned to the min addition to the unreserved area for which also they could apply. There were co-operative societies specially organized for their benefit. Through these societies, they could obtain loans for agricultural and general purposes and secure leases of government lands. An Advisory Committee was set up in each district to co-ordinate the work of the District Committees.¹⁸

There existed in Madras politics two political view points of different goals when elections were ordered under the Act of 1935. The Justice Party, which enjoyed political power under the Act of 1919 which done several social measures for the upliftment of the backward and Harijans. Rajaji as premier touched mainly on two socio-cultural fronts for a revolutionary change. The first area of anti-alcoholism touched mainly the rural folks from their traditional habits of drinking. Yet this measure could not be extended at the entire Colonial Tamilnadu level for want of funds and lack of acceptances by the illiterate

population. Due to this confrontation of interests Rajaji ministry moved towards opposition from the socio-political justicities.

End Notes

1. Madras Administration Report, 1939-1940, Government of Madras, Madras, p. 3.
2. G.O.No.353, Public (Confidential) Department, 28 Feb.1935.
3. C.W.M.G., Vol. LXVI, pp. 299-300.
4. Two Years of Congress Rule in Madras, 1937-1939, p. 6
5. Rajah, letter to Gandhiji, 25 Aug. 1938, C.W.M.G., Vol. LXVII, p. 337.
6. Gandhiji, letter to Rajah, 5 Oct. 1938, p. 398
7. Two Years of Congress Rule in Madras, 1937-39, p. 16.
8. Harjian, 22 July 1939, C.W.M.G., Vol. LXIX, pp. 421-422.
9. Rajmohan Gandhi, *The RajajiStory, 1937-1972*, Bombay, 1984, p. 34.
10. Gandhiji's wire, 14 July 1939, C.W.M.G., Vol.LXIX, p. 437.
11. NatesaIyer's Telegram, 15 July 1939.
12. Gandhiji's wire, 14 July 1939, C.W.M.G., Vol.LXIX, p. 441.
13. Erskine's telegram to Viceroy, 10 July 1939, Erskine Papers.
14. Erskine's telegram to Viceroy, 16 July 1939.
15. Two years of Congress Rule in Madras, 1937-1939, p. 6.
16. Rajmohan Gandhi, *op.cit.*, pp. 34-36.
17. Two Years of Congress Rule in Madras, 1937-1939, p. 8.
18. Annual Report of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1938-1939, p. 35.