

**ROLE OF REFORMERS IN DEPRESSED CLASS ELEVATION MOVEMENTS TOWARDS
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN 20th CENTURY - AN OVERVIEW**

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Introduction

Indian society harbours socio-cultural inequality which manifests itself through the system of patriarchy and the caste system of Hinduism. The depressed people were subjected to many untold social and economic restraints. The discrimination against the down-trodden and underprivileged even at the place of worship is perhaps one of the cruelest and inhuman activities. Inequality and economic disparity irked the depressed class people. This paper attempts to portray the role of various depressed class elevation organizations and some reformists worked for the upliftment and betterment of the downtrodden people.

The untouchables were labeled as outcastes by Brahmin interpretations of Hinduism. Such outcaste in a caste society lacks both identity and self respect.¹ In the social hierarchy they were placed at the lowest end.² In the 19th century most of the depressed class people in the irrigated districts were bonded laborers to the local landlords.³ Since basic civil rights were denied they lived in huts segregated from main habitations.⁴ The epithet depressed denotes not only low status in the hierarchy of caste combined with religious and social disabilities but also a low economic condition.⁵ In toto, the depressed class people met with several disabilities. To redeem them from the shackles of social impositions and redress their grievances many social organizations emerged.

Adi - Dravida Mahajana Sabha

Among the scheduled caste organization started by the Dalit leaders, the Adi - Dravida Mahajana Sabha was the earliest one. Its origin can be traced to 1892.⁶ This organization tirelessly represented the problem of the scheduled castes to the government. Several branches of Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha were established all over Tamil Nadu and the local units were affiliated to the parental body. This sabha maintained a service army and scout wing for themselves.⁷ The service army consisted mostly of youngsters. Its duty was to safeguard the rights and liberties of the scheduled castes and organize them. The office of the sabha was at Nungambakkam, Madras. A galaxy of leaders like M.C.Raja, R.Srinivasa, R.Veerian, J.Siva Shanmugam Pillai and others were the office bearers and they served actively for the benefit of the scheduled castes.⁸ Among the leaders Srinivasan was prominent. He had close contact with the Theosophical Society. He decided to fight against injustice till his death. To create caste consciousness, he held several conferences. In order to create awareness among the scheduled castes he started newspaper 'Parrayan' to highlight the suffering of the people. He focused not only on the problem of the Adi Dravidas but also suggested the ways and means for their amelioration.⁹

This sabha held periodical conference in many districts. Prominent leaders like E.V.Ramasamy, Dr. Varadaraju Naidu and G.F.Paddison were invited to preside over the conference.¹⁰ The leaders were not only from scheduled castes but also from other castes. But they worked for the betterment and upliftment of the scheduled castes. In these conferences, various resolutions covering the

grievances of the depressed class people were passed. The sabha, by making frequent representation to the government, tried to redress the grievances of the scheduled castes. In 1892 the sabha sent petition to the government requesting some agrarian concession.¹¹ The sabha actively worked for securing the socio – economic political and educational rights for the scheduled castes from the government. In 1898 it again complained to the Madras government about the violation of rules regarding the admission of scheduled caste students in schools.¹² In addition to the social interests, the sabha looked after the political interests of the scheduled castes. On August 20, 1917 the Secretary of State for India announced that the policy of the British Government was to increase the Indian participation in the governance of the country. Accordingly in December 1917, S.Srinivasa Sastry and S.N.Banerjee were nominated to study the condition of the scheduled castes and their representation in the legislative bodies. Despite the active role, a split in the sabha was inevitable when M.C. Raja and R.Veerian succeeded in substituting the caste name pariah to Adi Dravida. However, this was the most popular and most successful association among the scheduled castes which worked for the causes of social identify.

In August 1924, M.C.Raja moved a resolution in the Legislative council calling for the abolition of discriminatory practices against them. But C.P.Ramaswami Iyer, the Law member, ignored the motion stating that it could not be done all of a sudden.¹³

Harijan Sevak Sangh

Another non – governmental organization, Harijan sevak Sangh has done a lot for the eradication of untouchability. It carried out an extensive propaganda for the eradication of this evil practice. The Harijan Sevak Sangh not only wanted to redress the grievances but also to amalgamate the scheduled castes. It was Gandhiji who took up the cause of such amalgamation of the untouchable with the other section of the Hindu society. It was for this avowed purpose, Gandhiji joined with his close associates and founded the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932. The noble aim of this Sangh was redeeming the so called depressed classes.¹⁴ The Sangh aimed at the removal of untouchability and the liberation of scheduled castes from the shackles of social, economic, educational and political disabilities. Gandhiji believed that the evils of untouchability could not be removed forcibly. Through this Sangh Gandhiji tried to uplift the Harijans to the level of equality with the high caste Hindus. Very soon many provincial branches of Harijan Sevak Sangh were established.¹⁵

Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh

An Anti untouchability Conference was held at Trichinopoly on November 20, 1932 under the Presidentship of TSS Rajan. During the conference, the provincial branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Tamil Nadu was formed. The Harijan Sevak Sangh was purely kept as a social and cultural organization. The organization of the Sangh was divided into twelve district branches which had their own presidents and secretaries. Anti – untouchability campaign was the first action of the Sangh. Gandhi planned a whirl-wind tour to popularize the eradication of untouchability from the country and to spread the ideas of human brotherhood. The tour was conducted by Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh and they made all arrangements for the same. The Harijan Sevak Sangh was fortunate enough to have efficient and devoted presidents. T.S.S.Rajan an old Gandhian was selected to lead the Tamil Nadu *Tindamai Ozhippu Sangam* on November, 22, 1932. M.Bhaktavatsalam was the Vice President of the Sangam. Rajan was followed by A.Vaidyanatha Iyer from 1936 to 1955 and he was succeeded by L.N.Gopaldaswami from 1955 – 1968.¹⁶

Gandhiji toured the Tamil District twice with a party of 20 volunteers for the Harijan upliftment. The first tour lasted from December, 20 to December 22, 1933 and the second tour took place from January 23, 1934 to February 22, 1934. T.S.Rajan accompanied Gandhiji on tour. The tour was very inspiring to the Harijan workers of the Sangh who came to be imbued with more enthusiasm. Gandhiji collected Harijan welfare funds and these funds were utilized to carry out the constructive programmes of the Harijan Sevak Sangh.¹⁷ Following the footsteps of Gandhiji, other prominent leaders like Baba Rajendra Prasad, Thakkar Baba, Shri Raja Gopalachari, Deva Dass Gandhi, G.Ramachandran, Rameswari Nehru, S.S.Bharathi and others toured for the Harijan cause. These tours helped to change the outlook of the general public towards the Harijan cause. In Madurai City, the Chairman of the Municipal Council V.S.K.Muthu Ramaier, a Sourashtra Weaver provided conveyances to the untouchables who lived within the city limits. Assisted by Vaithiyanatha Aiyar and others he installed taps for drinking water and kerosene lamps to the untouchables living quarters or *cheri*. Another individual in Madurai who did much untouchability work was L.Krishnaswami Bharati. He was the son of the famous *Dravidanist* Somasundara Bharathi. Along with tours, conferences were also conducted by the Harijan Sevak Sangh to condemn untouchability.

Vaithiyanatha Iyer made a solid contribution towards the Dalit cause. His active role as President of the Harijan Sevak Sangh earned him the title 'Father of the Harijians' in the whole of Tamil Nadu and particularly in Madurai district. Adorned as the president of the Sangh for quite a long time, he did immense work for the Harijans. He obtained aid from the Government and philanthropists. He maintained schools, hostels and provided financial assistance to dig wells for the use of the Dalits.¹⁸ His companion L.N.Gopalswami was equally efficient and devoted. He had worked in a capacity of Secretary during the tenure of Vaithiya Natha Iyer. He was responsible for the creation of separate department for Harijan Welfare

Welfare activities of the Sangh

The Harijan Sevak Sangh carried out a lot of welfare activities. It established primary schools, supplied pure drinking water by constructing wells in the scheduled caste localities. It granted scholarships to students and provided industrial training to the Harijan students. It also established *Namsgars* (House of Prayers) in some villages for their moral and spiritual development. In the religious field, the Sangh worked for the opening of temples for the Harijans. The Sangh provided scholarships to the scheduled castes students thanks to the donors. In the economic field, promotion of cottage industries, cattle breeding, bee keeping were encouraged. Priority was given to sanitation in the *cheris*. Village cleanliness and disposal of the waste was taken care of. The evils of drinking and carrion eating were eliminated to some extent. In villages, bee-keeping, cattle breeding, poultry keeping and a small tannary were established. Supported by the Government, the Sangh maintained separate hostels for the scheduled castes at Periyakulam, Melur, Devakottai, Cheranmadevi etc.¹⁹ These hostels were run by the Sangh from 1934. Caste Hindus were also accommodated as inmates in the hostels. In these hostels, a feeling of oneness was inculcated among the inmates through common worship, common dining and training. Besides the general schools, the sangh organized industrial schools.

Harijan Day and Harijan Utsav

To stress the importance of the upliftment of the scheduled castes and removal of untouchability, the Sangh started the celebrations of Harijan Day and Harijan Utsav. . The Harijan

Day was celebrated to impress upon all the people the imperative need to remove untouchability and other disabilities. It was celebrated on 30th of every month in every taluk and village to promote amicable relationship between scheduled castes and Caste Hindus.²⁰ The Harijan Utsav was celebrated from 24th September to 2nd October every year. In commemoration of Gandhi's birth day the Utsav was celebrated upto 2nd October. Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh used to celebrate the nine days as Harijan Utsav. The aim of this celebration was promoting brotherhood between the untouchables and the caste Hindus. Thus, the Harijan Sevak Sangh worked for the overall improvement of the depressed class people. Besides working for scheduled caste upliftment and their amelioration, the Sangh also went to the help of scheduled castes at the time of social disturbances or any natural calamity like floods, fire etc. Even though all the organizations worked for the upliftment of the untouchables, it was the Harijan Sevak Sangh which rendered active service for the material improvement of the untouchables.

Emboldened by the support of Gandhi and Adi Dravida leaders like M.C. Raja during the early 1930s the movement to eliminate untouchability in the Tamil Districts became strong. It was reported in 1930 that in Ramnad District, the movement of the Adi Dravidas (untouchables) towards their emancipation was almost a mass movement. So it resulted in the many caste related violence in Ramnad District.²¹

Tamil Nadu Servants of Untouchable Society

With the formation of the Tamil Nadu Servants of Untouchables society on November 20, 1932, the temple entry agitation got momentum in Madurai. S.Somasundara Bharathi, the president of the society took keen interest in the Harijans temple entry. Thanks to the efforts of Vaithaiyanatha Iyer, president of the Harijan Sevak Sangh and Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar, this movement got a new vigour. Gandhi through his Harijan tour created an awakening for the casue of temple entry for the Harijans. He stayed a number of days in Tamil Nadu and made tremendous change in the socio - political realm of Tamil Nadu.²² Temple entry by the non-Brahmins especially by the depressed classes of Tamil Nadu formed an important stage in social reform.²³

During 1932-33, the Tamil Nadu servants of untouchables society conducted a referendum in Madurai. About 5732 Hindus were approached. Among them, 4746 persons had given their consent in favour of temple entry. Thus the referendum in general had supported temple Harijan entry. Election to the six seats in the Devasthanam committee of the Meenakshi Temple Madurai were held in January 1933 and all the six seats were won by the candidates of the servants of Untouchables Society.

The Initiatives Rajaji

Rajaji the Premier of Madras Presidency maintained close relationship with many Harijans and dined with them. He wanted to secure their right to enter into Hindu Temples. He tried to persuade the priests and temple trustees in the Madras Presidency to open their temples to Harijans. Some of the trustees complied but some refused. When he failed in persuasion, Rajaji turned to legislation. The varnashramites who later were called sanatanists tried to mobilize support on a large scale against the move of Rajaji. They insisted that the Congress ought to function only as a political body and it could not and ought not canvas for support to legislation affecting religious beliefs. But Rajaji was strongly in favour of temple entry and in the battle of religious reforms he sided with reformers.²⁴

The temple entry regulation brought about a silent and bloodless revolution in the Hindu society. Due to the inspiration given by Rajaji, the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sang workers under the leadership of A.Vaithyanatha Iyer, planned to launch a vigorous campaign for temple entry. Provincial level temple entry conference was also held in Madurai on July 30, 1939 at the Victoria Edward Hall. It was presided over by Rameshwari Nehru, a kinswoman of Nehru family and Vice President of All India Harijan Sevak Sangh. She came to Tamil Nadu on Harijan propaganda tour. After a grand procession in the afternoon, a public meeting was held in which Mrs.Rameshwari Nehru asked the Caste Hindus if they were prepared to allow the non -caste Hindus to enter the Meenakshi Temple. The reply was positive and they raised their hands and gave their support for temple entry.²⁵

Thus, the temple entry conference gave fillip to the temple entry campaign. As soon as the conference was held, a temple entry propaganda committee was constituted in Madurai under the leadership of Vaidyanatha Iyer. The committee decided to work towards temple entry in the Meenakshi temple Madurai. Of all the temples in Tamil Nadu, Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple in Madurai is the most celebrated one.²⁶ So it was a litmus test. The committee succeeds in its attempt in bringing the people inside the temple. Other temples would follow the suit and the reform would be accomplished for the entire Tamil Nadu. Since the atmosphere for temple entry was quite conducive in Madurai this movement gained significance in 1932 and 1939. Notwithstanding, Madurai had a number of congress leaders who played a vital role in translating the ideals of Gandhiji and Rajaji into practice. Their active support and co-operation made the temple entry movement a grand success in Madurai. In the midst of some bitter opposition from some orthodox Hindus in Madurai, the movement to reform the society got success. The workers of Harijan Sevak Sang made laudable efforts in this regard.

Through leaflets, slips and wall posters, the members of Harijan Sevak Sang propagated the temple entry movement. Public meeting in this regard became very common. Vaithyanatha Iyer spoke in many meetings and impressed upon the urgency of the reform. He attracted the attention of every individual in Madurai town. All the meeting in Madurai were largely attended by the people and in course of time the mind set of people of Madurai yearned for reform. The workers of Harijan Sevak Sang even carried on house to house propaganda and met the leading people of all communities in this regard.²⁷

Temple Entry Movement in Action

The wonderful event of temple entry by non-caste Hindus in Madurai happened on July 8, 1939 under the leadership of Vaithyanatha Iyer and L.N. Gopalasamy the President and Secretary of Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sang. A batch of non - caste Hindus numbering six made their first entry into the famous Meenakshi temple at 8.45 am. R.S.Nayudu, the Executive Officer, A.Chidambara Mudaliar, a member of Devasthanam Committee, the Superintendent, Peishkar and other servants of the temple were present at the entrance and they all received the temple entry team. Nobody present in the temple raised any objection or protest when Vaithyanatha Iyer and his team entered the temple and offered worship. All the ceremonies were duly performed. But on the following evening there was some delay in performing pooja owing to one of the priests having locked the inner shrine and gone away with the key. The temple Executive Officer, however, immediately brought in other priests and worship had since proceeded uninterrupted.²⁸ A number of people witnessed this wonderful event and news about the event spread at once like wildfire.²⁹ It was grand success for the depressed class people and they were jubilant on hearing the

news of temple entry. This was a severe blow for the caste Hindus who had been imposing restriction on the depressed class for a long period. Thus the entry into the Madurai Meenakshi Temple broke the social barriers.³⁰ But the sanatanists who were not reconciled to this event became very active and convened and attended a large number of meetings to oppose temple entry.

The temple entry in Madurai Meenkashi Temple was a great land mark. It was a remarkable reform in the Hindu religion as it brought about equality among the worshippers of God. A great change had come over the land without violence and bloodshed. The programme was executed non-violently without any preach of peace.³¹ By leading the temple entry movement, Madurai had made another History in the annals of Hindu Religion

Opening of Other Temples Per Non Caste Hindus

When the historic temple entry got success in Meenakshi Temple in Madurai on 8th July 1939, The Kallagar temple was also opened to the non-caste Hindus on the same day. The Kudal Alagar Temple, located in Madurai City was also opened in the next day.³² The Madurai Municipal Council held a meeting under the presidentship of N.M.R. Subbaraman and adopted a resolution rejoicing over the peaceful and successful entry of the non-caste Hindus in the Meenkashi Temple, Kudal Alagar Temple and the Kallagar Temple. Moreover, this resolution congratulated Vaidyanatha Iyer and other workers as well as the public of Madurai for their firm efforts to accomplish the task.³³

Thus the contribution of depressed class organizations and the reformers were tremendous in shaping the society by breaking caste barriers and its impacts were the Socio-economic transformation in Tamil Nadu.

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