CHAPTER FIVE
EARLY LIFE OF GEORGE JOSEPH

George Joseph’s native place was Chengannur, which was a small town in Central Travancore, at the time of George Joseph’s birth. He was born on 5th 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 Joseph1.

George Joseph’s father C.I. Joseph was one among the most educated men in Chengannur. He was well qualified as an engineer. He passed his engineering degree from Madras and became an overseer in the Travancore Government Service. It was a prestigious job during those times. For a Syrian Christian getting a good job in the Government service was a rare chance at that time.
C.I. Joseph had a fine position in the society\(^2\). It was not only because of his prestigious post in the Government Service but also of his fine personality and the sense of humour. He was a regular guest at the local functions in Chengannur.

George Joseph’s mother Saramma was a woman with good qualities. She possessed some modern ideas which she acquired through wide reading. She had a great fascination towards reading, both Malayalam and Tamil books. She could read Tamil with skill she acquired during her stay in southern Travancore, as a part of her husband’s transfer. This quality possessed by Saramma was clearly absent among the Syrian Christian women who were mainly focused on their household activities. Saramma perfectly managed her domestic work. Money management was really a great concern to her.\(^3\) She preferred to cook with the products available in their own lands. Family menu was mainly consisted of jackfruit, which was easily available in their land. She was really an able and moderate woman of her times.

Another prominent personality in George Joseph’s family was his maternal grand mother, Chechamma. Her character was really astonishing. She was able to do many tasks which were believed to be done only by men. At a very early age she would climb coconut trees and go deep into wells to clean them. She was courageous enough to navigate through the water logged marshes by rowing a canoe to attend social gatherings. There was another more
interesting incident related to George Joseph’s grand mother. After a fight with her husband, she left home and travelled through swollen rivers, clinging to logs. After walking through thick jungle she reached a small town called Punalur which is 50 kilometers away from Chengannur. There she entered in a herbal factory as a sweeper. Finally she was caught by the family members and taken back to home. But George Joseph’s grand father was a saintly personality. He later met a non-conformist group.

George Joseph was an unhealthy child at his early age. Lack of good health made his survival quite impossible. This worried his mother very much. So she promised him to the local Mar Thoma Church if his life is being saved. George Joseph was the eldest son born to C.I. Joseph and Saramma. He had four boys and four girls as his siblings. It was customary among the Syrian Christians at that time that the eldest son in the family should take the responsibility of looking after his younger siblings. Thus the elder ones would be a father figure in the family. The same thing happened with George Joseph also. He whole heartedly accepted the responsibility which came to him, and he acted as a father figure among his brothers and sisters for a long time.

At his early age, George Joseph developed a great fascination towards reading. For this blissful quality, George Joseph is indebted to his mother. Her love for books had made a great impact on her son. There was a rock near to his home known as the
rock of the *Pandavas*. This rock got such a name because it is believed that it provided shelter to the *Pandavas* on their exile. George Joseph would pay a regular visit to that rock at his childhood and he would deliver speeches in a loud voice which he by-hearted from any of the famous books he read. This practice helped George Joseph in his future years to develop a fine oratory skill.  

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. 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. George Joseph was not at all very good at his studies. He had a very low academic brilliance. GJ 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. George Joseph’s father thought that Joseph could never imagine a foreign visit so he would concentrate more on his studies. But this was a wrong judgement by his father about his son’s wish. George Joseph 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.
By understanding his real interest, George Joseph’s father decided to send him abroad. At that time only the rich families could send their sons abroad for higher studies because it was too expensive and the middle class people could not afford it. But C.I. Joseph dared to send his son to England despite his middle class background. He strongly believed that after receiving a high degree from England his son would bring better fortunes to his family. C.I. Joseph received full support from his wife for sending his son abroad. They together did all preparations for sending their son abroad and raised funds for that purpose.\(^7\)

Another person, who was also going to England for higher studies was K.P Gopala Menon, brother of distinguished K.P.S. Menon, a member of the Indian Civil Service and a diplomat in Independent India.

The news that George Joseph was going to Britain spread everywhere in Travancore. No Syrian Christian had received such an opportunity before. Another important event took place was the invitation received by George Joseph from the Maharaja of Travancore for an audience. Another invitation came to George Joseph was from the Principal of the C.M.S College Prof.Asquith. George Joseph and Gopala Menon visited the house of Prof.Asquith with their brothers, Pothan Joseph and K.P.S Menon. Brothers of the guests were unexpected guests for the Asquith family. They were surprised by meeting two uninvited guests. Without showing any
hesitation Mrs. Asquith ordered two more places for them. Everything they saw at the dining table of Prof. Asquith was really new to the four brothers. After food, they were given hot tea. As it was too hot, the two younger brothers poured some of it from cup to saucer and started sipping the tea from it. Mr. and Mrs. Asquith became so embarrassed by seeing this. The butler told the young brothers in a low voice that what they had done was an odd thing. The elder brothers looked angrily at them. K.P.S. Menon suddenly poured the tea back into the cup but Pothan Joseph continued drinking from saucer.8

In 1905 George Joseph proceeded to Britain with great enthusiasm and hope. He joined the University of Edinburgh in Scotland for taking an M.A Degree in Philosophy. Everything he saw there was something new to him. During his first year he had to be familiar with some prominent philosophical works. Important among them were Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, Kant’s *Fundamental principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics*, Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Signwick’s *History of Ethics*. Study of all these texts were essential for each student studying Philosophy. The professor who taught moral philosophy was James Seth. This professor might have put much influence on George Joseph for his love for public speeches and debates in the future. Professor Seth was famous among his students. He did not want to continue the former style of lecturing in the class room. Instead of that he preferred to take classes and discussions in his retiring room. Seth’s class was really inspiring to the students.
especially to George Joseph. He was really influenced by the teaching method of Professor Seth, which contained debates on various subjects. George Joseph's passion for debates and public speaking increased by attending Seth’s classes. Professor Seth was an active member of various societies. He also became the Chairman of Fabian Societies and the Indian Association.

George Joseph’s strong passion for debates and public speaking had reflected in some of his activities during his University days in Edinburgh. The Indian Association organized a debate at the University on the Topic ‘India is ripe for Home Rule’. Majority supported this and George Joseph too showed his own strong support for the Home Rule Movement in India. Later he became an activist of Home Rule Movement in India. Another debate was held during the student days of George Joseph in Edinburgh, which was a debate on the subject. ‘The success of a cause depends more on its organization than its justice.’ It was George Joseph who introduced this motion to others. He was a strong believer of the effectiveness of the organization for the political success.

During his stay in Edinburgh, George Joseph met an English lady. Her name was Mary Caldwell. He wished to marry her. He sent a letter to home seeking permission for getting married to that English lady. His mother became so upset and she replied to George Joseph that if he would do any such attempt she would kill herself. By hearing this George Joseph changed his decision. After acquiring an M.A in Philosophy from the University of Edinburgh, he
decided to move to London to start his legal studies. The days in Edinburgh provided George Joseph a great opportunity for wide reading. The Indian students in Edinburgh spent their spare time in reading rooms and libraries. George Joseph was one among them. He became familiar with a number of books. At the same time he engaged in some entertainments too. He attended some amusements in the evening. He visited some musical performances by famous musicians of the time. Church going was also became a habit of George Joseph during that time. From there he became familiar with Jesuit Sermons. Like other Indian students George Joseph too developed a fascination for everything western. He started wearing trendy clothes of the time. 11

George Joseph’s stay in London was quite different from that of Scotland. A student appearing for the barrister-at-law had to move through certain steps to be qualified for that. Initially they had to do was to appear for a certain number of dinners. It was believed that these dinners will provide the students an opportunity to understand some rules for the polite behaviour in the society. The student of the bar-at-law had to have their dinner in one of the four Inns of Court, they were The Inner Temple, The Middle Temple, Lincoln’s Inn and Gray’s Inn. A student like George Joseph, not having much experiences in this field found all these practices somewhat difficult. 12
In addition to these first steps, a barrister should move through some more terms and regulations. He had to produce a certificate of good conduct and eligibility signed by a senior and well experienced barrister. And also to produce a pass certificate of the bar examination from the Council of Legal Education.

During his days in London, George Joseph spent most of his time in libraries. This habit of George Joseph made a deep impact on his life which gave him a new outlook and a different thinking. Like George Joseph, most of the Indian students studying in London during that time spent most of their times in libraries. Most of these students later came to the forefront of Indian Freedom Movement and their familiarity with world’s famous books and ideas made them capable enough to evolve new strategies to throw out the British from their country. George Joseph was one among them.

In London George Joseph made friendship with other Indian students. London days gave him several experiences in life. That benefited him for becoming a national leader in the future. He was also blessed with meeting some prominent personalities there. One among them was Bipin Chandra Pal. He became one of the three extremists of India along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai. They together known as Lal – Pal – Bal led the Extremist Group of the Congress. They criticized the prayer method of the Moderates for dominion status to India and demanded ‘Poorna Swaraj’ or complete Independence from the hands of the British. It was really a
happy moment for George Joseph. It is believed that George Joseph must have contacts with Bipin Chandra Pal after reaching back to India. One letter from the prison to his wife contains some evidences of that, in which he asked her to visit Bipin Chandra Pal in Calcutta.

Another event that had taken place at this time in London was the 50th anniversary of the 1857 Revolt. The British Government celebrated it to memorise their victory over the Indian mutineers in that revolt. But at this time the Indian revolutionaries in Britain decided to arrange a meeting in London on the same day. This meeting was organized mainly under the leadership of Madam Bhikaji Cama and S.K. Varma. They wanted to preach some revolutionary ideas among the Indians, who were staying in London. They spoke about the need of a tremendous change in the political activities of India. They also talked about the importance of various revolutionary activities to drive away the British out of India. George Joseph had little interest in such speeches. He believed that only speeches cannot bring any change in a political situation and only action can bring a change. Just delivering speeches in the anniversaries would not have a better result.14

George Joseph was not much satisfied over all these events. As a result he lost his interest in the student politics. The revolutionary movement and its inspiring ideas had made a great impact on the Indian students in London. George Joseph could not become a big fan of the revolutionaries. There were different
opinions among the Indian students in London, some still supported the moderate ideas. But the other side severely criticized the ineffective methods of the moderate leaders. The students who supported the revolutionary ideas worshipped some leaders, who dedicated their lives for the cause of the country through revolutionary activities. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) was one such person. He was becoming very popular among the Indian students. But George Joseph did not come in that list. George Joseph had met Savarkar at India House but Savarkar and his revolutionary ideas could not make any impression on George Joseph. He regarded him as a ‘revolutionary without a cause.’

After qualifying as a barrister, George Joseph returned to India in 1909. He reached Kottarakkara Railway Station. There he was received with a warm welcome by the people. From there he went to home accompanying with a procession. Fire works were arranged in his home town. His family welcomed him with high expectations. His father expected that his highly qualified son would bring good fortunes to the family. But George Joseph could not fulfill his father’s dream as he moved towards the national movement.  

Soon after his return from England George Joseph’s marriage was fixed to Susannah. She was a perfect match for George Joseph. He was lucky enough to receive whole hearted support from his wife in his every action. Whether it is for his passion for Western style or his dedication for the national
movement, Susannah stood behind her husband and she was a dedicated wife.

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, George Joseph could not find it easy to start a good career there as he had expected. In Madras George Joseph 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, George Joseph decided to move to Madurai where he started his career as a Criminal lawyer. He followed the model of Earldley Norton. 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.19

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. Joseph family began to enjoy all pleasures in life. But George Joseph 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.20

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. 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.

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.
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. George Joseph worked hard for attaining justice for this depressed class. Such an action from George Joseph kept him close to this community throughout his life. For these tribals, George Joseph was like a hero. They treated him with great respect and love. They called him as ‘Rojappoo Durai’. Their love and respect for George Joseph began with the first day they met him in 1915, with a complaint regarding the ill-treatment of the police towards them. The way George Joseph 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 George Joseph with their complaints. He showed keen interest in their cases and found a solution for each case.

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 George Joseph 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.
George Joseph and Susanna welcomed a large number of guests daily into their house.\textsuperscript{25} 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.\textsuperscript{26} 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.
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 27th 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.

The Madurai Mills were also formed by the British. It was in the year 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.

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 George Joseph 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 this 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.

End notes:

1. Interview with Maya Thomas by the present author on 11th May 2007, 12th May 2007.
6. Ibid
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, pp.19-46
10. Ibid.
11. Interview with Maya Thomas by the present author on 20th January 2008.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Interview with George Geverghese Joseph by the present author on 4th July 2007, 26th February 2009.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
19. Aurobindo Ghose, Autobiographical Notes and other Writings, pp.8-11.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. NAI, Documents on Social issues (unclassified), Vol IV, pp. 6-17.
28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.