CHAPTER - II

ROLE OF SOCIAL REFORM ORGANISATIONS AND THE DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS

The upliftment of the Dalits was the work of not one but several organisations belonging to all shades of opinion. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries were an era of social and religious reforms. Hence upliftment of Dalit sect became the aim of all reform movements. The difference was that some organisations worked only for this objective while others made it part their general social reform programme. Further, some organisations were of All-India nature, while some others were local. This chapter analyses the work of such organisations for the awakening of the Dalits.

Brahma Samaj and the Dalits

Brahma Samaj was the offspring of the Indian Renaissance Movement. It was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, to propagate reform ideas and to eradicate social evils. The Madras Branch of the Samaj was founded in 1881.\(^1\) It is interesting to note the evolution of many more Brahmo Samaj centres in various parts of the Madras Presidency. In the Tamil speaking areas apart from the major Brahmo Samaj centres that were already established at George town (presently Parrys) and Puraswalkkam. The Southern India Brahmo Sama had its branches at Pudukkotai, Salem, Coimbatore, Mangalore, Alleppey and Calicut by 1872. Leaders like Narasimhalu Naidu, Pomathu Ammal and

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\(^1\) *The Asylum Press Almanac and Directory of Madras and South India Calendar for the Year 1920*, Madras: 1920, p.992.
Bangaru Ammal were instrumental in starting a Samaj at Cuddalore on 10th September 1905. They ran schools and met regularly for prayers. They involved in social reform activities.  

It spread its activities among the dalits. It started three schools for the poor such as, (1) the Brahmo Ragged Day School at George Town, (2) Raja Ram Mohan Roy Free Night School at George Town and (3) Maharaja Gajapathi Rao Free Night School at Purasevakkam. The Dalits were admitted in these schools without any opposition. A Brahmo Samajist Calavala Cannan Chetty also founded schools, one at Purambakkam in Madras and another at Thiruvallur, Chingleput District. By 1918, the Brahmo Samajists maintained nine night schools. V. Govindan, and V.M. Subba Rao acted as managers for the schools. Advocate General Srinivasa Iyengar evinced great interest in the well being of these poor schools. The samaj centres never missed to celebrate the anniversaries of important All-India Brahmo Leaders. In 1933 for instance the birth centenary of the founder father Raja Ram Mohan Roy marked as an important function in various parts of the country.

**Arya Samaj and Dalits**

This movement was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswathi. His ideas are clearly explained in his book, *Sathyarthha Prakasan*. There he

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2. Ashok, G., *op.cit.*, p.29  
3. Purambakkam is most probably modern, Perambur.  
5. Ashok, G., *op.cit.*, p.29
vehemently condemned the caste system. Taking inspiration from Swami Dayanand, the Arya Samajist Sect of Hindus toiled much to improve the lot of the Dalits. They brought in a number of Dalits into their fold, shared with them the one exclusive scriptural knowledge and intermingled and moved with them with abiding equality. But the Arya Sarnajists were not able to make headway in canvassing more Hindus to accept their reformist ideas and treat the dalits with social equality. Hence, the Dalits while enjoying equal status among the Arya Sarnajists, continued to be the victims of rigid caste distinction, in their relationship with non-Arya Samajist Hindus. 

The work of the Arya Samajists in Madras City in 1900s was quite good. They worked among the Dalits at Sembium, a Corporation ward of the Madras City. There the Arya Samajists conducted Suddhi (purifying) ceremony for Dalits, made them wear the sacred thread and taught them the sacred Gayathri Mantra. After this initiation they were invited to dine with the high caste members of the Arya Sarnaj.

**Buddhism and Dalits**

Buddhism spread into Tamil Nadu even from the Sangam Age and was quite a success. The Buddhists came into contact with the Dalits and as they were opposed to the caste differences. They mixed freely with the Dalits. The

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8. G.O. Nos. 1675 -1676, Home Department, 2 December, 1919, p. 100.
Dalits who were an oppressed class found their emancipation in Buddhism. Opposition to the rigid caste system was one of the major reasons for the popularity of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{10}

The revival of Buddhism in the South was started by the Maha Bodhi society of India. This was established by Anagarika Dharma Pala of Sri Lanka on 31\textsuperscript{st} May 1981.\textsuperscript{11} The headquarters of the Society was established in Calcutta in 1904. The other centres of the Society are in Bodhgaya, Delhi, Sanchi, Bombay, Madras, Lucknow, Ajmer, Nowgarh, Kalimpong and Bangalore.\textsuperscript{12} The society’s initial purpose was restoration of Maha Bodhi temple at Gaya.

In Madras, the Dalits leaders were Pandit C. Iyothee Thass and his two associates, Pandit G.Appadurai \textsuperscript{13} and P.Lakshmi Narasu. Under the Maha Bodhi Society’s Madras branch, the teachings of Buddha were propagated to the Dalits. This was very active in the same decade when the Arya Samajists of Madras City were concentrating their activities on Dalits. The Maha Bodhi Society chose propagandists for Buddhism from Dalits and trained them and set them to work as certified propagandists. These neo-propagandists took the surname of Upasakar. These neo-propagandists followed a very simple way of preaching and converting people to Buddhism. On the simple condition of

\textsuperscript{10} Mahathera, Dharmaratna, \textit{Buddhism in South India}, Ceylon: 1968, p.6.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}
renouncing and abstaining from meat eating\textsuperscript{14}, they converted a number of people to Buddhism in Madras City.

Appadurai founded the South India Buddhist Association at Kolar Goldfields in 1927. He also spread the message of B.R.Ambedkar among the Dalits and helped them to start the Scheduled Castes Federation. He succeeded Iyothee Thass as the editor of \textit{Tamizhan}.

In 1920 the Indian Buddhists of Madras Presidency met in the Vihara at Perambur, Madras. There they issued statements to the following effect. In the last twenty years three thousand converts to Buddhism had been added. The Buddhists were very poor and their position in Hinduism was bad, as they were untouchables and unlike the Sudras, could not enter temples and had to endure social ostracism. They had their own form of Hinduism and claimed ‘there is little doubt that those dalits are the descendants of the original inhabitants of India’. If they became Buddhists, they would no longer be untouchables and should achieve a ‘recognised status in the community’. The statement ended with an accusation that most Buddhists of other countries were selfish, narrow and indifferent to them, coupled with an appeal to monks to come and work among the poor.\textsuperscript{15} After B.R. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, the Buddhists from the Dalits were traceable in North and South Arcot Districts and Perambur in Madras City in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} G.O. Nos. 1675 - 1676, Home Department, 2 December 1919.
\textsuperscript{15} Mahar, Michael, J., (ed.), \textit{op.cit.}, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}
In the City of Madras, the Buddhists Association had branches in Pudupet, Nariyamanagar, Narasingapuram and Perambur. In the Madras Presidency, they had branches in Vellore, Gudiyatham, Palligonda, Chakkaramallur, Vannivedu, Walajabhad, Kanchipurarn, Enathur and Angambilckam. The Dalits leaders like N.Sivaraj and R. Srinivasan were very much attracted to the Buddhist philosophy and teachings.

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, most of the Buddhists were found in Madras and in the Districts of North Arcot, South Arcot and Chingleput. As a result of Buddhist propaganda, the dalits converted themselves to Buddhism in large numbers and the number of Buddhists increased from 697 in 1911 to 1222 in 1921. Still the Buddhists were not as successful in Tamil Nadu as they were in the Mysore State. Arya Shankar, Head of the Cycle Rickshaw Drivers and Transport Coolies Union, had established a Buddhist Centre at Perambur. The Periamet Buddhists consider Pandit C. Iyothee Thass the founder of the South India Buddhist Association to be their spiritual father. However, they have not achieved much success.

Theosophical Society and Dalits

Another organisation which took interest in rendering services to the Dalits was the Theosophical society. The Society took to its activity soon after its inception. The founder President of the Theosophical society Col. H.S.

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Olcott himself started a free school for the dalit boys and girls in 1894 at Adyar. \(^{19}\) In less than Rs.250 he built schools for the untouchable children which were mud walled, with palmyra thatched in the beginning. Later on they were converted into neatly built buildings. He was assisted by Sarah Palmer, an American Theosophist in the establishment of Panchama schools where Kindergarten system of instructions was first introduced. He also invited one G.Kafel, an American educator, to take charge of the development of these schools.\(^{20}\) At one time he even toyed with the idea of enhancing the status of about five million Paraihans by converting them into Buddhism. He seriously corresponded with the Buddhist High Priest at Sri Lanka for effecting the conversion. But later on he dropped this idea, saying that it was upto the Paraihans to look after the conversion.\(^{21}\)

In due course, the Society extended its services among dalits to the other parts of the Madras City. They established five such schools in the city 123 of Madras. They are, (1) Olcott Pancharna Free Schools, Adyar, (2) Damodar Free School, Teynampet, (3) H.P. Balavatsky Memorial Free School, Kodarnbakkam, (4) Thiruvallur Free School, Mylapore and (5) Annie Besant Free School, Krishnanpet. \(^{22}\) Most of these schools were attended by the children of the scavengers among the dalits. In 1917, there were a total number

\(^{19}\) The Asylum Press Almanac and Directory of Madras and South India Calendar for the Year, 1911, Madras: 1911, p.825.


\(^{22}\) The Asylum Press Almanac and Directory of Madras and South India Calendar for the Year, 1919, Madras: 1919, p.984.
of 212 girls and 594 boys studying from Kindergarten to Standard IV. The students learnt the basic subjects such as cooking, sewing, simple maths, sanitary habits and here and there advanced areas of learning.\textsuperscript{23} Annie Besant while identifying herself with the cause of India and the welfare of Indians, rendered service to the dalits through these schools and also propagated the need for championing the cause of the dalits. In 1913, she established the Theosophical Educational Trust in order to consolidate the various schools under Theosophical guidance. The schools were divided into three categories - boys schools, girls schools and the co-education. Schools which were open for both boys and girls. In 1914, there were twenty four such institutions.\textsuperscript{24} She also insisted that her followers should not observe any restrictions of caste.\textsuperscript{25} One of the topics of her lecture in 1913 was ‘Our Duty to the Depressed Classes’ (Dalits) \textsuperscript{26} The schools run by the Theosophical Society received aid from the Government from 1931.\textsuperscript{27} They were observed by the Government later on and converted into normal schools.

**Ramakrishna Mission and Dalits**

The Patriot Saint Swami Vivekananda was the first to bring *Sanyasi* order under an organisation and channelise their efforts towards service to their


\textsuperscript{24} McCoy, Dale, R., *op. cit.*, pp. 176-178.


\textsuperscript{27} G.O. 921, Public Works and Labour Department, 1 April 1931.
countrymen. He urged the monks of the order to give priority to Daridra Narayana Seva. Under his inspiration the Ramakrishna Movement involved itself in many social and educational service activities. The Ramakrishna Movement made impact on Dalits by starting one night school to them at Vengudi, Kanchipuram in 1916. The Ramakrishna Mission educational institutions were open to all castes and communities. They did not make any distinction between Dalits and non-Dalits at any time or at any place. Their main ideal was to elevate the poor and the downtrodden. When the Government was thinking about the problem of Dalits seriously, it also invited the Rarnakrishna Mission of Madras Branch to offer suggestions to ameliorate the conditions of the Dalits in the Madras Presidency.

The Servants of India Society and Dalits

The Society was unique in its mission and in its spirit of dedication. It was established by Gopala Krishna Gokhale on 12th June 1906 at Poona. It was founded to render service to dalits, the tribal on plains and on hills. It had a galaxy of distinguished people rendering dedicated service. The Madras branch of the Society was founded in 1910. The Society took up the elevation of the dalits as one of its aims as explained by its founder at Dharwar Social Conference. It brought out periodical magazines, viz., (1) Servants of India and (2) Social Reformer. In the editorials and articles in the magazines, it

28 G.O. Nos. 1675 and 1676, Home Department, 2 December 1919, p. 89.
29 Ibid.
30 Majumdar, B.B., op.cit., p.133.
appealed to the government Madras to render the social reforms concerning the
dalits more effectively. The Society also conducted lectures and educated the
poor people through slides about public health/temperance and helped them to
form co-operative societies for housing purposes. It was remarkable that
V.S. Sreenivasa Sastri who served as the President of the Madras Branch of the
Society presided over the Depressed Classes Conference in 1912 . 33 The
remarkable social worker Thakkar Bapa was associated with the Servants of
India Society. Noticing the zeal and self-effacing spirit of Thakkar Bapa, he
was invited to be the General Secretary of Harijan Sevak Sangh founded by
Mahatma Gandhi. 34 Other prominent members like K.G. Sivaswarny lyer,
Suryanarayanan and S.R. Venkataraman of the Society took active part in the
work of the Madras Branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. 35

The Madras Social Service League and Dalits

The Madras Social Service League was founded in 1912. It was
particularly interested in rendering services to the Dalits with reference to the
sanitation, education and promotion of temperance, under its president, Mrs.
Whitehead. 36 The League started quite a few night schools among the dalits to
spread general education and to improve their knowledge about sanitation and
temperance. The League also wanted to develop the spirit of self-help among

33. G.O. No. 1739, Revenue Department, 11 June 1913.
34. Jagadisan, T.N., and Shamlal (comp.), Thakkar Bapa Eightieth Birth Day
Commemoration Volume, Madras, 1949, p. 29.
35. G.O.No.1623, Public Department, 3 July 1944 ; G.O.No.21, Development
Department, 5 January 1948.
the dalits and accordingly formed quite a few co-operative Societies: (i) Nallancheri Co-operative Society, (ii) The Madras Salt Leaders Society, (iii) The Royapettah Co-operative Society and (iv) The Perambur Coolier Society.\textsuperscript{37}

**Labour Unions and the Dalits**

Labour Unions totally covered all the urban and rural population of the dalits, as they constituted a major portion of the labour force. These Labour Unions induced them to fight for their rights which were denied to them by the orthodox. There were many Labour Unions in the Madras City for each trade or profession.\textsuperscript{38} A section of the dalits practising the scavengers profession struck work in 1930s demanding higher wages and leave benefits. This strike had its repercussions at Madurai, Dindugal, Chittoor, Vizagapatnarn, etc.\textsuperscript{39}

M .C. Rajah, the leader of the dalits was a Labour Union leader and was the leader of the Mill workers in Madras. His supporters in the Mill sided with the administration at the time of the Mill strike in 1919. In consequence of the support given by the Rajah’s Union to the administration, the dalits faced many problems and sufferings, due to the communal disturbances at Pulianthope. The Government helped the affected people of the dalits by providing house sites.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} For example: There were separate unions, like. (1) European House-hold Workers Union, (2) Scavengers Union (3) Rickshaw Pullers Union, (4) Weaving Workers Union etc.
\textsuperscript{39} G.O. Nos.215-216, Public (General) Department, 21 March, 1931.
\textsuperscript{40} Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency, 1926-1927, Madras: 1927, pp.133-137.
Since Independence, Labour Unions have become politicised and are more concerned with politics. All the political parties have their own Trade Union wing in many establishments. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have their own associations in Government establishments.

**Other Minor Organisations and Dalits**

Since 1900 several organisations devoted their services to the enhancement of the dalits. Some of them were the Sociological Brotherhood League\(^41\) Madras City and Social Service League in Erode, which attended to the needs of the Pallars.\(^42\) The East India Distillers and Sugar Factories at Tirunelveli ran a school for them.\(^43\) The Damodhar Malabar Re-construction Trust gave instructions in gardening, coir-making and pattern-work for the Dalits at Parur.\(^44\) The Catholic Co-operative Credit Society, Tellicherry worked for the general advancement of the dalits. The Madras Christian Central Cooperative Bank helped the dalits through Cooperative Societies.\(^45\) In Madras City an association known as Madras Cheris Vigilance Association was founded in 1921, with G.Narayanaswamy Chetty as President and V.G. Vasudeva Pillai as Secretary to protect them, from the troubles of caste Hindus.\(^46\) There were 250 Cheris in the City of Madras. The grievances of the people living in the *Cheris* were looked after by this association.

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\(^{41}\) G.O. No.1715, Revenue Department, 15 July 1920.
\(^{42}\) G.O. No. 2242, Public Works and Labour Department, 2 October 1927.
\(^{43}\) G. O. No. 559, Revenue Department , 8 March 1920.
\(^{44}\) G.O. No. 2242, Public Works and Labour Department , 2 October 1927.
\(^{45}\) G.O. No. 259, Development Department, 15 February 1935.
Kannappa Nayanar Kalvi Kazhagam founded in 1929 had started a school for the dalits in Madras City. The Gurukularn Village Method Association in Royapettai was one such organisation to which Jawaharlal Nehru paid a visit in 1946. The Ganesapurarn Valibar Seerthirutha Sangam, Vyasarpadi, Madras, was running a hostel for the Dalits.

**Societies Organised Solely for the Upliftment of the Dalits**

**The Depressed Classes Mission Society of India**

This Society with its headquarters in Bombay was founded by Justice Chandarvarkar, who was the President of the organisation. The Madras Branch of the Society was started in 1909 by the labour of Shinde of Bombay. It functioned from where the Madras Branch of the Brahmo Samaj also carried its work. The President for the Madras Branch of the above Society was the Justice Sir C. Sankaran Nair, while S. Kasturi Ranga Iyengar and C.Ramanujam Chetty were its Vice-presidents. Govindan, Manager of Brabmo Samaj schools, was the Secretary.

The object of the Society was to uplift the dalits of India by providing them, education, providing them, work, and preaching them, higher ideals of religion, morality, personal character and good citizenship. The workers of the

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48. G.O. No. 4354, Development Department, 23 November 1946; *The Hindu* 1 November 1937.
society visited *Cheris* in Madras City and explained to the residents about their degraded position and helped to inculcate in them self-respect and higher-moral standards in life. The Society maintained both day and night schools for dalits at the following places: (1) Vyasaipdi (2) Pulianthope (3) Broadway (4) Kadapadacheri near Washermenpet (5) Malayappan street George Town and (6) Chintadripet.52

**Depressed Classes Mission Society of Mangalore and Its Madras Branch**

The Madras Branch of the Mangalore Society started by K. Ranga Rao maintained schools in Madras City with the support of the Servants of India Society, Madras. In 1909 seeing their progress in Mangalore, V. Subramaniya Ayyar of Mosur Village appealed to Government to grant 41 cents of land for the Dalits school in Nammaneri Village in North Arcot District.53 Thus, the activities of the Depressed Classes Mission Society of Mangalore were extended to Madras, and they were an inspiration to other Societies.

**Depressed Classes Elevation Society of South India**

In the beginning of the first decade of the Twentieth Century, this organisation functioned in the Madras Presidency with its headquarters at Saidapet. The activities of this organisation which conducted conferences under the name “Depressed Classes Conference” were reported in the daily newspapers of the time like *The Hindu, The Mail*, etc.

52. G.O. No. 3010, Revenue Department, 6 November, 1909.
This organisation was founded by Israel Nallappah, Headmaster, Agriculture and Industrial School, Pandur, Tiruvallur, Chingleput District. He was the founder President of the Society.\textsuperscript{54} Being an independent organisation, it created a platform known as Depressed Classes Conference. Whenever these conferences were held, it authorised the President of the Depressed Classes Elevation Society of South India to submit the resolutions and proceedings of the conference to the Government to take necessary action to redress the grievances of the Dalits. This society was inaugurated on 29\textsuperscript{th} June 1903. The first conference was presided by Abraham Bakhianathan.\textsuperscript{55} Prominent among those who were associated with this organisation were V.S. Srinivasa Sastri of the Servants of India Society, Satya Joseph, O. Kandaswami Chetti, Lecturer, Christian College, Madras, K. Seshu Iyer, Yakub Hassan, E. Brutzer, Muthuveerian Pandithar, Editor Boologavachan, and G.A. Natesan. G.A. Natesan was very helpful.\textsuperscript{56} It was at his press that the proceedings and memorials of the Society were printed. The conferences were held annually under the auspices of the Society at different places in Tamil Nadu.

Most of the Resolutions passed at the conferences of the Society were printed in a booklet form running to more than twenty five pages containing the speeches made and the resolutions passed. This organisation worked at district and village levels. Some of the centres were Chidambaram, Tindivanarn, Acharapakkam, Mangalore, Cuddalore, Kanchipuram, Arakonarn, Tanjore,

\textsuperscript{54} Depressed Classes Conference Report, Madras: 1911, p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p.75.  
\textsuperscript{56} G.O. No. 585, Revenue Department, 27 February 1913.
Karethatangudi, Palliery, Palliyaram, Karupur, Moolengudi, Kooruvadi, Nagapatinam, Nannilam, Peralarn-Pundanur, Poriyar, Tirucadayur, Tranquebar, Shiyali, Tiruvengadu, Manigrarnam, Nagur, Mayavaram and Virudupati. This organisation raised funds from philanthropists and with the funds thus raised, issued scholarships, provided drinking water facilities and constructed tanks for the Dalits. They criticised the landlord’s claim on the house sites of the Dalits and asked the Government to protect them. They also sought the Government’s help to give land grant near a Railway Station in Chingleput or South Arcot to start an agricultural and industrial school.

They also demanded that the Government should check the evils of temperance and remove toddy and liquor shops from the villages and towns, criticised the wage policy which was for fifty years the same, when the value of money was diminishing\(^57\) and sought Government’s aid to provide help in settling the disputes with Mirazdars. The main motto of the organisation was to ameliorate the condition of the Dalits by every legitimate means in its powers, offering them sympathy and relief on non-sectarian lines. The society had its branches in Sri Lanka also. Separate Internal Auditors and bank accounts were maintained. In this way this organisation provided a platform to ventilate the grievances of the Dalits and sought redress by soliciting Government help and by requesting the philanthropists and benevolent minded persons to help in the Dalits’ upliftment. This organisation and its work did not gain much popularity.

\(^{57}\). In the *Madras Year Book, 1923*, the year shown as 1800 and in the 1924 Year book as 1881.
This was perhaps due to the patronage extended to this organisation by high castes. After 1910 as the anti-Brahmin attitude increased in Madras and the Brahmins were accused of every social evil prevailing in society and the British Government was adopting a strictly neutral attitude, perhaps no one was in a mood to give publicity for this organisation’s work. As such publicity would also seldom highlight the work done by Brahmins and other high castes for the upliftment of the Dalits.

**A.V. Panchama Charity Institution, Madras**

This Institution was founded in 1880 or 1881\(^\text{58}\), and it offered religious and secular education to poor boys of all denominations in general and those of the Dalits in particular. Schools were mainly run by it. In these schools students were provided with midday meals as early as 1900. Clothes, books and slates were also provided to them. They were run with philanthropic contributions.\(^\text{59}\) The schools were (i) A.V. Panchama Charity L.S. Girls Mixed School, New Town, (ii) O.D. Lascartine Mixed School, Vepery, (iii) O.D. Lascartine for Adults, and (iv) Pancharna Girls Mixed school. They also maintained a destitute home at Navel Road. Moreover, two night schools were also maintained at (1) Thiruvengada Mudali Street, Periamet and(2) Upper Primary

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\(^{59}\) *Madras Year Book, 1923, op.cit.*, p.287.
School at Navel Hospital Road, New Town, Periamet. M. Arogiathammal was the Manager of this organisation.\(^{60}\)

**Harijan Sevak Sangh**

All the above organisations and associations worked for the welfare of the Dalits by emphasising redressal of their grievances. But Harijan Sevak Sangh not only wanted to redress the grievances but also to amalgamate the Dalits with the rest of the caste Hindus. It was Gandhi who took up the cause of such amalgamation of the untouchables with the other sections of the Hindu Society. It was for this avowed purpose that he founded the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932. Through this organization, he popularised the movement for the eradication of untouchability and elevation of the Harijans to the level of equality with the high caste Hindus.

In the beginning Harijan Sevak Sangh was known as “Servants of Untouchables Society”. It was formed with the name “Anti-Untouchahility League” as per the resolution of the All India Conference held in Bombay from 25\(^{th}\) to 30\(^{th}\) September 1932, under the Chairmanship of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Thus, “The Servants of Untouchables Society” was formed on the 30\(^{th}\) September 1932.\(^{61}\) Mahatma Gandhi wanted to rename the Society as Harija Sevak Sangh. Accordingly the Society came to be known as ‘All India Harijan Sevak Sangh’. Thakkar Bapa was the General Secretary and G.D. Birla

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\(^{61}\)Annual Report of Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1932, Madras: 1932, pp.2-6..
was its president. The aim of the Sangh was removal of untouchahility and the liberation of Dalits from the shackles of social, economic, educational and political disabilities. The Tamil Nadu branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh faithfully carried out the aims of the central organisation in Tamil Nadu. Gandhi believed that the evil of untouchability could not be removed forcibly. He believed that social equality could be established only gradually by educating the masses and creating the necessary public opinion.

**Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh**

Mahatma Gandhi gave a new impetus to the movement. In one of his speeches, he said, “Unless and until we befriend Harijan, unless and until we treat him as our own brother, we cannot treat humanity as one brotherhood. The whole movement for the removal of untouchability is a movement for the establishment of universal brotherhood and nothing else”. This message was taken as a caption by the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh and in every administrative report the message was printed in the first page of the report itself. With this message as its guide, the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh worked for the dalits.

The provincial branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh in Tamil Nadu was formed at the provincial Anti-Untouchability Conference held at Tiruchirappalli, on 20th November 1932, under the Presidentship of T.S.S.

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63. Gandhi’s party includes following persons. (1) Miss Muriel Lister and Miss Slade, (2) Herr, Butow, (3) Uma Bajaj, (4) Krishna Bai, (5) Sukla, (6) Damodar Dass, (7)
Rajan. The provincial board was formed in the same conference. The Government instead of supporting, the Anti-Untouchability campaign, thwarted it by prohibiting its servants from participating in the campaign or its work. The Harijan Sevak Sangh was purely kept as a social and cultural organisation. C. Rajagopalachari resigned his membership and joined the Civil Disobedience Movement only on that count.

The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh organisation was divided into twelve district branches which had their own Presidents and Secretaries. With this administrative set up, separated from the Congress, the Harijan welfare work was taken up by the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh. As its first action, the Sangh took up anti-untouchability campaign.

Gandhi planned a whirl-wind tour to popularise the eradication of untouchability from the country and to spread the ideals of human brotherhood. The tour was conducted by Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh and they made all arrangements for the same. Gandhi toured the Tamil districts twice with a group of twenty volunteers for the upliftment of the Harijans. The first tour lasted from 20th December to 22nd December 1933 while the second one lasted from 23rd January 1934 to 22 February 1934. The tour was very inspiring to the Harijan workers of the Sangh who came to be imbued with more


64. U.S.S.F., No.877, 1 March, 1934, p.163.

enthusiasm. But the tour also faced black flag demonstrations organised by the Self-Respectors. In the tour, Gandhi collected Harijan welfare funds. These funds were utilised to carry out the constructive work of the Harijan Sevak Sangh.

Following the footsteps of Gandhi, other prominent leaders like Babu Rajendra Prasad, Thakkar Bapa, Rajagopalachari, Deva Dass Gandhi, G. Ramachandran, Romeswari Nehru, S.S. Bharathi and others toured Tamil Nadu for the cause of the Harijans.

Apart from the tours, the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh conducted referendums at Madurai, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, Srirangam and other places to gauge public opinion on important social questions like opening of temples to dalits, etc.

Along with tours, conferences were also conducted by the Harijan Sevak Sangh to condemn untouchability. In 1925 the Madras Provincial Anti-Untouchability Conference was conducted under the Presidentship of Venkatarathinam Naidu, the Vice-Chancellor of the Madras University. Dr. A.L. Mudaliar was a member of the reception committee. The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh conducted many conferences at the provincial, district and village levels. The conferences were conducted to propagate the ideals of

66. Annual Report of Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1934, Madras, 1934, pp.2-8. R. Venkataratnam Naidu in those days i.e., as back as 1886 adopted untouchable girls as his own daughters, gave them education. They became daughters and teachers.( Ashok, G., op.cit., p.25) Dr. AL. Mudaliar later became the Vice – Chancellor of the University of Madras.
humanism and to fight against the demon of untouchability. Nearly 3000 people belonging to dalits attended such a conference held at Shiyali, Tanjore District on 5th January 1933, under the Presidentship of T.S.S. Rajan. This was the first district conference. After this conference, district and local village conferences were held.

On 26th February 1933, Purada Vannar’s conference in Tirunelveli was conducted. The Purada Vannar’s were inferior to Harijans, as they were hereditary washer men for the dalits. In this Conference resolutions were passed to include these people in the local Adi-Dravida Sabha. 67

Similar conferences were held on 12th April 1933 at Cuddalore; on 21st May 1933 at Tirunelvadi, Udayarpalayarn Taluk, Tiruchi District, on 21st May 1933 at Vellore, North Arcot District, and on 5th June 1933 at Madurai.

A special conference for Nattar-Harijan conciliation took place on 25th May 1933 under the Presidentship of Rajararn Pandiyan, Devakottai, with the object of putting an end to the continuous strife prevailing between the two communities for three years, prior to this.

T.S.S. Rajan, Vaidyanatha Iyer, P. Varadarajulu Naidu, T.R. Venkatararna Sastrigal, G. Ramachandran, Swami Sahajananda, Duraiswarni Mudaliyar, T.S. Avinasilingam Chettiar, V. Bashyarn iyengar, C.N. Muthuranga Mudaliyar, M.C. Rajah and others actively participated in the conference. T.S.S. Rajan was the President of Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak

Saugh from 1932 to 1935. A. Vaidyanatha Iyer succeeded him and acted in that capacity from 1936 to 1955 till his death. He was succeeded by L.N. Gopalaswarni from 1955 to 1963. These luminaries were responsible for the large volume of work turned out by the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh. They gave suggestions and plans to the Government from time to time for the Harijan upliftment work.

In the beginning, the Sangh was preoccupied with the Gandhi tour and anti-untouchability campaign under the Presidentship of T.S.S. Rajan. This work was pursued by other Presidents as well. The active role of Vaithiyanatha Iyer as President of the Harijan Sevak Sangh earned him the title “Father of the Harijans in the whole of Tamil Nadu and particularly in Madurai District”. As the President of the Sangh for quite a long time, he did immense work for the Harijans. By obtaining Government aid and philanthropic support, he maintained schools, hostels, provided wells, etc. all over Tamil Nadu. His companion L.N. Gopalaswami was the Secretary of the Sangh. He was also responsible for the Government’s one crore plan for the dalits upliftment and the creation of the separate department of Harijan Welfare. He acted as the Chairman for the one crore plan.

The welfare work carried on by the Sangh consisted of establishing primary schools, supply of pure drinking water by constructing wells in the dalits localities, granting of scholarships to students and providing them

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68. Ibid., p.70.
industrial training. Apart from these material services, they also established *Namghars* (House of Prayers) in some villages for their moral and spiritual development. In the religious field, the Harijan Sevak Sangh worked for the opening of temples for Harijans. For such temples a number of Trustees were appointed from among the dalits communities. A number of Bhajan parties were conducted. With regard to education, a number of Scholarships were provided out of donations given by philanthropists. In the economic field, promotion of the cottage industries, cattle breeding and bee keeping were encouraged. Sanitation was given priority. Village cleanliness and disposal of the waste was taken care of. They encouraged the ideas of thrift among the people. The evils of drinking and carrion eating were eliminated. General work of the Sangh was carried on, as per the principles of Gandhi. The Sangh in 1937 started a model colony at Korattadipalayam, Pudur. There they provided the Harijans with terraced houses, with separate kitchen enclosures. In this village, beekeeping, cattle breeding, poultry keeping and a small tannery were established. Perfect rural sanitation system was provided. Most of the inhabitants were Chakkiliyas. Such model villages were maintained at Vannivalasi, Udumalpet and Palani.

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71. Carrion means, the carcasses of domestic animal especially cow, buffalo, etc. One among the major group in the Dalits were driven to the position to consume carrion and delighted with it, due to their servitude and non-availability of other foods and the belief that killing an animal is a sin hence after the natural death or by poison, the animal’s flesh was devoured.

Through the funds of the Sangh, a separate water fund was created and utilised for the construction and repairs of wells. Though the number of wells did not reach more than 100 per annum, it was commendable.

Scholarships were also given by the Sangh to the school and college going students. With the help of Government aid, the Sangh maintained hostels for Dalits at Madurai, Dindugal, Periakulam, Melur, Lalgudi, Trichy, Devakottai, Vellore, Namakkal, Sheranmadevi, etc. These hostels were run by the Sangh from 1934. In that year, R.K. Shanmugam Chetti donated his choultry to the Sangh. Similarly Varadharajulu Naidu, donated a site at Salem. The number of hostels and inmates increased gradually:

Table-II-1
Hostels and Inmates, 1935-1965

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hostels</th>
<th>Inmates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: G.O. No. 2813, Development Department, 30 June, 1947.
Separate hostels were maintained for girls and boys. The inmates of the hostels included caste Hindus. This taught them from the very beginning how to behave decently towards Dalits and to get rid of feelings of hatred for them. In these hostels a feeling of oneness was inculcated among the inmates through common worship, common dining, training and discipline. Prayers, spinning, sanitation, discipline and dignity of labour were specially emphasised in these hostels. The Sangh also ran schools where children from all communities were admitted, along with dalits. But in the beginning they were meant only for dalits.

A number of schools established during the period of the study which looked after the interest of the Dalits also.

**Table: II-2**

**Number of Schools, 1933-1965**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>N.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source*: G.O. No. 3220, Development Department, 23 July 1947.
Most of these schools were only of primary and middle level stages. Very few were at the High school level. Apart from these general schools, industrial schools were also organised by the Sangh at Kodambakkam, Kancheepuram and Devakottai. The Industrial School at Kodambakkam is known as ‘Thakkar Bapa Vidyalaya’. It was founded by Gandhi in 1933. Reading rooms were also started and maintained by the Sangh in order to provide a place for the public to get together and enrich their minds.

The Harijan Sevak Sangh officials and volunteers also provided useful suggestions to the Government on staff recruitment, model colonies, removal of social disabilities, hostel management, housing, etc.\(^7^4\)

Prominent personalities belonging to all walks of life associated themselves with the Harijan Sevak Sangh and its work. To stress the importance of the upliftment of the Dalits and removal of untouchability, the Sangh started the celebration 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 and also to popularise the measures taken to uplift the dalits. The 30\(^{th}\) of every month was earmarked for this celebration. It was celebrated in every taluk and village to promote amicable relationship\(^7^5\) between dalits and caste Hindus.

\(^7^4\) G.O. No. 3220, Development Department, 23 July 1947.

\(^7^5\) Harijan Welfare in Madras State, Madras: 1955, p. 32.
The Harijan Day was celebrated from 24th September to 2nd October every year. These days are historically important. On the 24th September Poona Pact was signed and on the 26th September it was ratified. On the 30th September Harijan Sevak Sangh was formed at Bombay and 2nd October is Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday. All the nine days were celebrated by Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh from 1938.76 The aim was to promote brotherhood between all Hindu dalits and non-dalits.

Besides working for upliftment of Dalits and their amelioration, the Sangh also went to the help of dalits at the time of social disturbances or any natural calamity like floods, fire, etc. The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh was working in fourteen districts and seven taluks in 1955. The work of the Sangh was two fold, that of converting the hearts of the Caste Hindus, and bettering the social, economic condition and education of the dalits.77 In 1950, the Sangh itself felt that concentration of work must be on small areas and zones so that the problems of the dalits could be studied and solved to the maximum extent possible.

Thus almost all organisations engaged in social reform or social upliftment made dalits upliftment as part of their reform programme. However, while all organisations tried to ameliorate the condition of the dalits, the Harijan Sevak Sangh, along with improving the material condition of the dalits, also aimed at their absorption into Hindu Society. It was the Sangh which

77. Ibid., p. 200.
began in right earnest to achieve social equality. Even though untouchability has been removed by law and the condition of dalits has improved to a great extent, associations are still necessary because the public has to be educated in bringing about social equality. This is especially needed in the rural areas where conservatism and social harriers are still strong.