INTRODUCTION

Gandhian Social Movements in Tamil Nadu is a captivating theme. The scholar has identified it as a potential theme for doctoral research, for it was a remarkable reform in the Indian Society in general and Tamil Nadu in particular as it brought out equality among various social groups. Moreover, this still remains a virgin theme for intensive research, for no one has taken it up for any doctoral programme so far. This is an added advantage and incentive to the scholar.

TEMPLES AS ABODES OF BRAHMINISM

The first half of the 20th century witnessed remarkable socio-political changes in Tamil Nadu. The temples had played a significant role in the socio-religious life of the people. Temple authorities became the makers of rules and regulations to control the life of the people. Like other

parts of India, in Tamil Nadu too, the temples were considered as the abodes of Brahminical deities.\textsuperscript{2} They were closely interrelated with the institution of \textit{caste system}. It is believed that casteism was the contrivance of the Brahminical mind by which the Brahmins always sought to maintain their racial superiority at the cost of the non-Brahmins.\textsuperscript{3} It was this pernicious system that had brought more corruption into the Indian society in general, and Tamil Nadu and its culture in particular, dividing man from man and placing an impassable barrier between the different classes of the same society.\textsuperscript{4}

It is believed that the hierarchical caste system with its many attendant evils were brought into India by the Brahmins in the early years of India’s history. According to \textit{Varnashrama Dharma}, the Indian society was divided into two larger sections, the high and the low castes, or the pure and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} S. Abid Husain, \textit{The National Culture of India} (New Delhi : National Book Trust, 1978), pp.40-42.
\end{itemize}
the polluting castes.\textsuperscript{5} The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras formed a pyramidal hierarchy with the Brahmins at the apex and the Sudras at the base. All others outside the pale of this system were considered as impure low-castes. It was considered that the touch of a few or even the sight of others polluted the high castes.\textsuperscript{6}

Though the caste system was an all India phenomenon, it was unknown to ancient Tamil Nadu. No distinction was made on the basis of birth and everything was decided on merit, ability and personality. Untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability and similar customs were unknown to the ancient Tamils.\textsuperscript{7} The Aryans who were familiar with the conventional system of Varnashrama Dharma in North India found an entirely different social set up during their migration to South India. Until their migration, the Tamil people


\textsuperscript{7} Joy Gnanadason, \textit{A Forgotten History - The Story of the Missionary Movement and the Liberation of People in South Travancore} (Madras : Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1994), p.18.
felt free with their respective professions. They never thought of their superior or inferior status. The Brahmins, who formed a microscopic minority emerged as the greatest arbiters and peace makers, extended their counsel to the reigning kings too. By virtue of their spiritual authority, they exercised considerable influence in the society. In order to buttress their spiritual superiority and temporal welfare, they gerrymandered customs and conventions, socio-economic and administrative systems which brought the entire society under the provisions of the Sāstras. Further, the status afforded to the Brahmins by the Tamil kings and the increasing use of Sanskritic forms provided the base for the introduction of the hierarchical organisation of caste in the Tamil society.

During the medieval period, the non-Brahmins including the untouchables were divided into Valankai or Right hand castes and Idankai or Left-hand castes. Abbe Dubois, a


French Missionary pointed out that the division did more harm than good by being a perpetual source of disturbance among the people.\textsuperscript{11} The ninety eight sects under each of the two divisions were generally of the industrial and agricultural classes.\textsuperscript{12} The Brahmins and a few other communities who claimed the highest predominance were kept aloof from these two groups. These superior castes acted as the creators of trouble between the \textit{Right-hand} and the \textit{Left-hand} factions.\textsuperscript{13} The division in the society led to regular confrontations among the different sects of the two groups. Most of the skirmishes were centred around certain privileges like the right to wear chappals or to ride through the streets in a palanquin or on horseback during marriage festivals.\textsuperscript{14} Confrontation also prevailed over the issue of the use of a particular kind of musical instrument suitable for such occasions, the right of carrying flags of certain colours or certain devices during these

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Abbe Dubois, \textit{Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies translated by Henry Beauchamp} (Oxford : The Clarendon Press, 1897), p.75.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} K.K. Pillai, \textit{Social History of the Tamils} (Madras : University of Madras, 1975), pp.235-237.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} P. Chidambaram Pillai, \textit{Right of Temple Entry} (Nagercoil : Alexandra Press, 1933), pp.246-248.
\end{itemize}
ceremonies. The Mackenzie Manuscripts indicated that the members of the Valankai group were permitted to use white umbrella and white horse, both of which were symbols of honour. The Idankai group could use the white umbrella but never the white horse.15

The Dharmasastras put heavy inhibitions on the untouchables. The most important was that they were not allowed to worship inside the temples. These people remained far away from the glance of the non-caste Hindus who were also not permitted into the temples. Physical cleanliness, intellectual appetite and economic status never helped the non-caste Hindus to enter even the areas near the temples.16

In case of accidental pollution, the idols should undergo fresh consecration through various ceremonies in order to make them pure once again. These purification ceremonies were collectively known as Punyaham.17 Among the caste-Hindus, the


17. Punyaham means ceremonies connected with purifying the idols from pollution.
Brahmin priests alone were permitted to enter the inner-shrine or Garbhagraha (sanctum sanctorum) of the temples.

As the Hindu worship is congregational, even if the worshippers belonged to the castes which enjoyed the privilege of entering the temple, they could make their offerings to the deity only through the intermediary class of priests.\textsuperscript{18} Even now, they could not themselves perform the ritual of Archana (chanting of mantras with flowers) to the deity directly. The privileges of the caste-Hindus became the disabilities of the non-caste Hindus and the authorities in the helm of affairs wanted to perpetuate this system. No wonder, the authorities denied to the non-caste-Hindus the right to walk along the roads around the temples and worship.\textsuperscript{19} Inspite of their massive strength, the non-caste-Hindus accepted the spiritual and temporal predominance of the caste-Hindus and gave implicit obedience to all their arbitrary laws.

During the medieval period, in Tamil Nadu the Bhakti Saints preached the fundamental equality of all religions


and the unity of God. They advocated that the dignity of man depended on his actions and not on his birth. They protested against excessive ritualism, formalities of religion, the domination of priests and emphasised simple devotion and faith as the means of salvation for one and all.\(^{20}\) **Ramanuja**, one of the most celebrated Brahmin Bakthi saints, who held the view that though the Sudras and other lower castes could not read out the **Upanishads** and the **Vedas**, at least they could have been given the privilege of visiting the temples at least once in a year.\(^{21}\) But these revolutionary preachings failed to produce the expected yield in the hierarchical order of the Tamil society.

In the meanwhile, the advent of the **Christian Missionaries** and their educational institutions tried to expose the mythological concepts that governed the caste restrictions.\(^{22}\) The spread of English education and the formation of caste


associations inspired the non-caste Hindus to bargain for their legitimate status within the fold of Hinduism.23

Some of the non-caste Hindu communities like the Nadars amassed with wealth through their business and industry. Their sound financial position enabled them to rise equal to the high-caste people. Among them, the Nadars of Sivakasi were accorded the status of Kshatriyas24 in recognition of their being warriers, yet they could not follow the vedic form of ceremonies which remained the exclusive right of the Brahmins. They began to wear the sacred thread and to chant the Gayatri Mantras. They tried to secure freedom of worship in all the Hindu temples and also a due share in the administration of the temples.25 This movement gathered momentum during the last decades of the 19th century. When the caste- Hindus strongly opposed such moves, the Nadars


started asserting their right to perform temple ceremonies.\textsuperscript{26} It led to a number of clashes between the Nadars and the Maravas, another dominant Kshatriya Community. Finally the issue was placed before the judiciary for perusal and judgement.\textsuperscript{27} The \textbf{Privy Council} at London, the highest appellate body in the British Empire, in its judgement categorically denied permission to the non-caste Hindus like the Nadars the right to enter the Hindu temples since they occupied an inferior status in the caste hierarchy.\textsuperscript{28} After the Privy Council verdict, instead of continuing the struggle, they constructed massive temples on the model of the Brahminical style and tried to confine themselves within the precincts of their respective temples for a short period.

The advent of Gandhiji into the National Movement was a great blessing to the marginalised people like the non-caste

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\textsuperscript{27} Judicial Department, G.O. No.1332, dated 16\textsuperscript{th} July 1907.

\textsuperscript{28} Sankaralinga Nadan Vs Raja Rajeswara Dorai on Appeal from the High Court of Judicature at Madras to Privy Council at London. Reported in Indian Law Reports 31 Madras 236 (1908) and in 35 Indian Appeals 176 (1908).
\end{flushleft}
Hindus. In 1920, in its historic annual session at Nagpur,\textsuperscript{29} the Indian National Congress adopted a distinct and unequivocal political resolution for the admission of the depressed classes into the Hindu temples. By the Bardoli Resolution of 1922, Gandhiji brought out a new colour of social content to the Congress programme by advocating the idea of removal of untouchability. At the Congress session at Kakkinada a resolution was passed due to the initiative of T.K. Madhavan, a prominent nationalist from Travancore that proper steps should be taken for the eradication of untouchability in the country.\textsuperscript{30} The Congress volunteers tried to convince the people that the denial of elementary rights amounted to a great social injustice. It led to the inauguration of the Temple Entry Movement. It was a socio-religious protest spearheaded by an oppressed section of the Hindu society against the tyranny of caste-system.\textsuperscript{31} It was not a mere process of opposing sanskritization but a determined struggle against religious segregation and social


discrimination. By rising the banner of resistance against untouchability, it marked the beginning of another struggle for socio-religious equality and civil liberties in Tamil Nadu.

When the Indian National Congress included the Right of Temple Entry in its agenda, the Colonial Government started its traditional strategy of Divide and Rule in India. After the discussions in the three Round Table Conferences, Ramsay Mcdonald, the then British Prime Minister gave his famous Communal Award by which the Depressed Class People (Harijans) in India were given separate electorates. Gandhiji condemned it in letter and spirit and observed that it was a planned conspiracy to separate the Harijans from the main stream of Hinduism and started Fast unto Death agitation on 20th September 1932 while he was in the Yeravada jail. In order to save the life of Gandhiji, the leaders of the caste-Hindus under Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya conducted wide range of discussions with the Depressed class leaders like


**B.R. Ambedkar.** As a result, the latter agreed to give up his demand for *Separate Electorate* and signed the historic agreement called *Poona Pact* on 24th September 1932 with the leaders of the caste-Hindus and enabled Gandhiji to break his fast.34

Immediately after the *Poona Pact*, the caste-Hindus convened an All India Conference consisted of both caste-Hindus and Depressed classes at *Bombay* on 25th September 1932.35 In the conference, it was resolved that since then no one should be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth and that those who had been so far regarded would have the same rights like the caste-Hindus to use public wells, roads, schools, temples and other public institutions.36 As the first step to carry on the propaganda for the abolition of untouchability, they inaugurated an *All India Anti-Untouchability*


League in Bombay on 30th September 1932 with the blessings of Gandhiji. Subsequently the League was named as Harijan Sevak Sangh with Delhi as its headquarters. At the time of its inauguration Gandhiji was in prison. With true love and affection Gandhiji named the Depressed Classes as Harijans (the sons of God). When he was released on 22nd August 1933, Gandhiji observed that Harijan service would always be his first priority and would be the breath of life for him and the most precious one than his daily bread.

After the formation of the Harijan Sevak Sangh at the national level with Seth Ghanshyandas Birla and Amritlal V. Thakkar popularly called as Thakkar Baba as its President and General Secretary respectively, its branches were opened in

37. CWMG, Vol. LIV, p.177.
all over the country within a short span of time. The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh under the leadership of Dr. T.S.S. Rajan was also immediately formed with headquarters at Tiruchirapalli. As the President of the State Unit, T.S.S. Rajan worked hard for the abolition of untouchability in Tamil Nadu. By exhibiting his extra-ordinary talents and ability, he organised a lot of Harijan workers mostly prominent Congress leaders and established branches of the Sangh at District, Taluk and even at Village level to carry on the Harijan service.

The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh with its galaxy of versatile and dedicated leaders and volunteers totally plunged into the service for achieving Harijan Temple Entry at an earlier date and for the removal of all sorts of social disabilities from the Hindu society to give ways for the upliftment of Harijans.

41. CWMG, Vol. LIV, pp.18-19.


Gandhiji wanted to mobilise the popular will in favour of the abolition of untouchability and the right of temple entry to the Harijans. Gandhiji requested A.V. Thakkar Baba, General Secretary, All India Harijan Sevak Sangh to prepare a plan to conduct an All India Harijan Tour. The latter consulted all the provincial heads of the Sangh about the proposed ‘Gandhiji’s Harijan Tour’ and finalised it. Accordingly Gandhiji started his Harijan Tour from Wardha on 7th November 1933. After completing his tour in the Central Province, Gandhiji began his tour in South India from Vijayawada on 16th December 1933. He reached Kanyakumari on 23rd January 1934 where he was given a rousing reception by Thakkar Baba, T.S.S. Rajan and others. Gandhi spent a number of days in Tamil Nadu and created awakening for the cause of the temple-entry for the Harijans. His tour has made tremendous impact in the socio-political realm of Tamil Nadu.

Blessed and solemnised by Gandhiji, surprisingly the Temple Entry Movement was organised and sphere-headed by the

44. Harijan, Vol. III, dated 22nd March 1935, p.44.
caste-Hindus who once denied permission to the non-caste Hindus for their entry into the temples. Temple-entry agitations were organised at **Vaikkam**, **Guruvayur**, **Suchindrum**, **Madurai** and **Trichirappalli** etc. In 1937 when **C. Rajagopalachari** formed the Congress Ministry in the **Madras Presidency**, the **Temple Entry Regulation** was passed which legally opened temples to the non-caste Hindus. The Temple entry regulation brought about a silent and bloodless revolution in the Hindu society.

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HYPOTHESIS

In this study, certain fundamental questions have been raised which constitute the working hypothesis. To mention a few:

a) Whether or not the social scenario in Tamil Nadu favoured social inequality?

b) Whether or not the attempts made by the Indian National Congress were aimed for the abolition of the distinctions and disparities based on caste, if so in what way it served as an instinct for social equality?

c) Whether or not the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh was capable of bringing out any change in the social realm in favour of Temple Entry?

d) Was the Harijan tour of Gandhiji mobilised the public opinion in favour of Temple Entry Movement in Tamil Nadu?

e) To what extent did the Indian National Congress and its Temple-entry agitations serve as agents for change in the social realm?

These and similar questions have been raised in this study and an attempt has been made to find answers which constitute the findings of this research work.
METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed in reconstructing the thesis is partly descriptive and partly analytical and interpretative. In order to describe the major developments in the historical sequence and to establish their interconnectedness, a chronology based narration becomes essential. In highlighting the most significant developments, historical explanations and critical interpretations become imperative.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Data for the present study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data for the construction of the thesis have been culled out mainly from the original documents preserved in the National Archives of India, New Delhi; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; Gandhi Memorial Museum and Library; Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad; Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai; Gandhi Memorial Museum Library, Madurai and Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, Madurai. They included Despatches or General Letters, the Judicial and Revenue Proceedings, C.I.D. Reports,
Fortnightly Reports, Native Newspaper Reports, Sundries and Miscellaneous. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (100 volumes) published by the Government of India, the back volumes of *Harijan, Young India, Indian Opinion, The Hindu, The Mail and The Madras Mail* served as the primary sources of information to complete this research work.

*Epistolary Sources* also provided a good deal of information about the social conditions prevailed in Tamil Nadu during the period under review. Abbe Dubois’s *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Oxford : Claranden Press, 1906) and Francis Buchanan’s *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London : Bulnor and Co., 1807) vividly portray the social settings in Tamil Nadu. John Chandler’s *Seventy Five Years in the Madura Mission* (Madras : American Madura Mission Press, 1909) gives not only a picture of religious activities but also interestingly narrate matters of socio-political and economic significance that came to the notice of the Missionaries.

Of course, there are several *Secondary Sources* of importance like Robert L. Hardgrave’s *The Dravidian Movement*
ventured to do further research on the theme, making use of several new source materials preserved in the Archives and other institutions. An analytical study of the source materials served the purpose of reconstructing the thesis in a spirit of free enquiry and with a view to present an objective account as humanly as possible.