

The Congress, the Self-Respecters and Anti-Untouchability Campaign in the Later Colonial Tamilnadu

P. KUMAR

Ph.D. Scholar

Centre for Historical Studies /School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

It is often described that it is the emergence of organised nationalism which curtailed the social reform activities in India. However, it is rather erroneous to consider the social reform movement and national liberation movement to be two separate blocks in modern Indian history. Indeed, when the educated Indians forayed into the Nationalist movement, their previous priority and dynamic activities shifted from the social realm to the field of political proclivity. However, the social reform issues were not completely omitted but were exhibited with certain limitations according to the nationalist spirit. In fact, the clusters of social reform activities first organised on an all-India basis through the founding of the National Social Conference as an adjunct body of the Indian National Congress. With this broad understanding, this article attempts to discuss the composite nature of the anti-untouchability campaign as carried out by the Tamilnadu Congress and the Self-Respect Movement during the 1920s and 1930s in the Tamil speaking region of South India. It does an in-depth analysis of the achievements and limitations of the programmes and policies, as well as their practices which is generally ignored by most academic works on the subjects.

Key Words : Congress, Self-Respecters, Anti-Caste, Anti-untouchability, Tamilnadu

INTRODUCTION

It is often described that it is the emergence of organised nationalism which curtailed the social reform activities in India. However, it is rather erroneous to consider the social reform movement and national liberation movement to be two separate blocks in modern Indian history. Indeed, when the educated Indians forayed into the Nationalist movement, their previous priority and dynamic activities shifted from the social realm to the field of political proclivity. However, the social reform issues were not completely omitted but were exhibited with certain limitations according to the nationalist spirit. In fact, the clusters of

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social reform activities first organised on an all-India basis through the founding of the National Social Conference as an adjunct body of the Indian National Congress. With this broad understanding, this article¹ attempts to discuss the composite nature of the anti-untouchability campaign as carried out by the Tamilnadu Congress and the Self-Respect Movement during the 1920s and 1930s in the Tamil speaking region of South India. It does an in-depth analysis of the achievements and limitations of the programmes and policies, as well as their practices which are generally ignored by most academic works on the subjects.

The Congress in Tamilnadu, as elsewhere in the Indian Sub-Continent, emerged out of the self-conscious natives as a body chiefly promoting nationalist interest against foreign rule. Though it was formally initiated by the Anglophone communities in the upper caste middle class sections, especially the Brahmans, it gradually reached out to the other non-Brahman and lower castes and other classes of the region. Its primary object in the twentieth century was national liberation from the foreign yoke and it was essentially anti-British in character.

In contrast, the Self-Respect Movement was the radical part of the broad non-Brahman Movement. While the Justice Party² represented the political interests of the non-Brahman upper castes, the Self-Respect movement concentrated in the socio-cultural field of both the upper and lower caste non-Brahmans. Individual freedom from Hindu hierarchical caste society, eradication of superstitious beliefs sanctioned by all religion, most importantly the Hindu religion and upliftment of women were its important objectives. In order to achieve these goals the Self-Respect movement, like the Justice Party, subscribed to the Aryan-Dravidian racial theory propounded by the colonial scholarship and also allied themselves with the British colonialist except for very few years.

The Early Madras Nationalist and the Question of Anti-Untouchability :

From its very inception, the Madras Presidency Congress tendered no adequate attention to the social reform agendas in its platforms and felt that such demands would be a hindrance to its most important goal of the anti-colonial struggle. This, however, does not mean that there were no social reform issues that were raised and promoted by the nationalists in the region. Madras, as elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent, produced nationalist social reformers and they exhibited their reformist views in their individual capacity. G. Subramania Iyer (1855-1916), Veeraraghava Achariar (1857-1906), K. Veeresalingam Pantulu (1848-1919),

1 I thank Prof. Yagati Chinna Rao and my friend K. Deepanjan from CSDE, JNU and Dr. Rajesh from IISER, Mohali for their comments and suggestions on the earlier draft of this paper which I presented at the Indian History Congress took place at Tiruvananthapuram in December 2016.

2 A political party chiefly represented by the landholding *zamindars* and local rulers from the non-Brahman upper castes emerged to represent their political and other interest against the Indian National Congress. By 1916 the party was formally founded as the South Indian liberal Federation and latter came to know through its English mouthpiece the *Justice*.

C. Subramania Bharathi (1882-1921)³ and other social reformers attacked social problems such as the degraded position of women and caste discriminations and the subsequent inequality in society. However, they could not possess any powerful positions in the organized national movement and remained marginal.

When the Adi-Dravida (the erstwhile untouchable castes in Tamilnadu) sufferings were first brought into the public sphere, more effectively by the Christian missionaries⁴ and colonial officials⁵ in the early 1890s in and around the Madras city, the Madras Mahajana Sabha, the chief nationalist organisation in the presidency, motivated by missionary and colonial efforts invited the Adi-Dravida representatives to debate their sufferings in its platform. Iyothee Thass (1845-1914), an Adi-Dravida leader of Tamilnadu attended this meeting in 1892 and requested the nationalists' approval for the improvement of lower caste education and employment, free land and temple entry of the untouchable castes into all Hindu temples.⁶

The Madras nationalists expressed their desire to uplift the Adi-Dravida communities through education, employment and even giving them free land. Nonetheless, they differed on the issue of allowing them into Hindu temples. On the other hand, the Madras Mahajana Sabha took the initiative to promote the demands of education, employment and free lands to the Adi-Dravidas in the presidency. Furthermore, the Sabha demanded the Madras government take necessary steps to elevate the Adi-Dravidas in the particular fields.⁷ Nevertheless, the

3 K. Veeresalingam Bantulu was hailed from a Brahman family in Rajahmundry, the present day Andhra Pradesh. He had completed his schooling and taught in a village school. He was greatly influenced by the social reformers and societies from the Northern Indian especially the Brahma Samaj and set up its branch in Rajahmundry. G. Subramania Iyer and M. Veeraraghava Achariar were born to a Brahman families of Tamil villages in Thanjavur and Chengalpattu Districts respectively. While Subramania Iyer was matriculated from St. Peters College, Thanjavur and got his B.A. degree as private candidate Veeraraghava Achariar's schooling and graduation were in Madras city. Both came to know each other when they were working in the Pachaiyappas institution in Madras in 1870s. Along with other educated youths, Subramania Iyer and Veeraraghava Achariar played a key role in founding the first native English weekly, *The Hindu* in 1878. Subramania Iyer also started a Tamil weekly paper called the *Swadesamitran* in 1882. Both the *Hindu* and the *Swadesamitran* carried out social reform propagandas along with national interests. C. Subramaniya Bharathi, also popularly known as "mahakavi," was born to a Brahman family of Tirunelveli region in Tamilnadu. Bharathi involved nationalist politics and advocated social reform issues through his contribution into *Swadesamitran*.

4 Missionaries such as Rev. Adam Andrew (b.1851), Rev. William Goudie (1857-1921), T.B. Pandian (b.1863) were important among them.

5 Followed by the Missionaries's request the Government of Madras ordered H. Tremenheere (1853-1912), the then Collector of Chengalpattu, to furnish a report on the condition of the 'Pariah' (Adi-Dravidas) who occupied considerable proportion in the population of the district. Tremenheere enquired the Adi-Dravida problems in his district and submitted a report in 1891 which recommended the Madras Government to elevate the Adi-Dravidas through giving them education, employment and land for cultivation and so on.

6 G. Aloysius, *Dalit-Subaltern Emergence in Religio-Cultural Subjectivity: Iyothee Thassar and Emancipatory Buddhism*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2004. p. 24.

7 *Tamilan* (Tamil Weekly run by Adi-Dravida leader Iyothee Thass), Vol.4, No.28, 21 December 1910, p.3.

Sabha's failure to accept the temple entry demand of Iyothee Thass disabled the latter's support to the former and this led the Adi-Dravida castes to distance themselves from the Nationalists politics and also increase proximity towards the British colonialists.

When Annie Besant's Home Rule movement geared up during World War I, the nationalist spirit also reached the educated non-Brahmans. Even though the numerical strength of non-Brahmans gradually increased in the Madras Congress which strongly pronounced Hindu fundamentalist views until 1920, it did not change the fact that not only the Brahmins but the majority of non-Brahmins were also orthodox in character and ardently religious. For instance, when controversial debates mounted around a marriage between G.S. Arundale (1878-1945), a Christian theosophist, and Rukmini Devi (1904-1986), theosophist from a Brahmin family, the nationalists' views were much pronounced on orthodox Hinduism. Apart from the Brahmins, even the non-Brahmin extremist nationalists such as V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (1872-1936) and Subramaniya Siva (1884-1925) spoke in several public meetings against the impending inter-religious marriage and condemned it to be destructive to Hinduism.⁸

Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of the religious fundamentalists' leadership in the Congress no longer lasted and began to decrease when the reform-minded nationalists, both from Brahmin and non-Brahmin section, took active participation in the politics of Congress at the turn of the 1920s. The forming of the Madras Presidency Association, a non-Brahmin wing of the Madras Presidency Committee and the setting up of the Tamilnadu Congress Committee (hereafter TCC) in 1920 based on the linguistic line, as recommended by the All India Congress Committee, enabled such changes. C. Rajagopalachari (1878-1972), the southern lieutenant of Gandhi, E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), P. Varadarajulu Naidu (1887-1957), T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar (1883-1953), V. Chakkarai Chettiar (1880-1958)⁹ and others occupied an important leading position in the Committee. The changing character of the TCC reflected through in its forthcoming annual meetings which gradually began to advocate social reform agendas and temple entry demands from the lower castes. In order to bring the Nadar¹⁰ caste into the platform of nationalist struggle, the TCC recognised

8 *Swadesamitran*, 26 March 1920, p.3.

9 Apart from C. Rajagopalachari all others were belonged to the respected families of the non-Brahmin castes. E.V. Ramasamy popularly known as 'Periyar' ('the great one'), was born into a wealthy Vaishnavite family of Balija Naidu caste in Erode in 1879. As a school dropout, E.V. Ramasamy was put to assist his father's business at the age of 12. By the time his father passed away in 1911, E.V. Ramasamy had contact with many public charities and associations, due to his wealthy and religious family background.

10 The Nadars, a lower caste in the non-Brahmin section, also known as Shanar in the colonial times numerically present in the southern region of Tamilnadu especially Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Virudunagar, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumary districts. Like the untouchable Adi-Dravidas, the Nadars were in a degraded position due to their traditional occupation of toddy taping and not allowed into some of the Hindu temples in the south. A small section in the caste also involved in trading and agriculture with their own land. In the mid nineteenth century they were converted to Christianity in huge number which allowed them to get educated and employment. Like the emergence of other caste organisations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, The Nadar Mahajana Sangam also came into being and this demanded equal rights in social and religious matters including the temple entry of his castes.

the lower caste rights in the Hindu temples through passing a temple entry resolutions of Nadar caste with the majority in its annual conference that took place at Madurai in late 1919.¹¹ However, this resolution also came to be opposed by the orthodox nationalists, who were now nothing more than being marginal themselves.

By the early 1920s, some of the local committees of the TCC, which functioned under the urban environment, began its campaign against caste and untouchability. For instance, the Chennai District Committee celebrated its 'Gandhi Day' by organising public meetings and rallies through which the condemnation of caste inequality and inhuman practice of untouchability were made as major issues. Also, Gandhi Day was celebrated through initiating the inner-dining programme in which, according to the newspaper report, nearly 600 people from different strata of Hindu society including the Adi-Dravidas and Muslims participated.¹² The members of the committee initiated some programmes to elevate the Adi-Dravida castes such as opening and aiding schools for the caste.¹³ The North Arcot District Committee of the Congress passed a resolution in its annual conference to start a campaign against untouchability practice in its region.¹⁴ But all these activities in the 1920s were not intended to question the predominance of Hindu religion in society but was rather in order to modify or purify the very religion.

Even though liberal and reform-minded nationalists occupied important positions both in the TCC and its local committees, the religious fundamentalist had a considerable hold in all its committees, especially in the ones in rural areas. A handful of *sanadanist* in the TCC often opposed social reform agendas, especially the temple entry of lower castes and Adi-Dravidas in its platforms. The Seranmahadevi Gurukulam controversy which mounted during the year 1925 exposed their orthodox nature once again. While some non-brahman reformers in the TCC like P. Varadarajulu Naidu, Ramasamy, and Thiru.Vi. Ka. and others were opposing the separate dining arrangement for Brahman boys in the *Swadeshi* school run by extremist nationalist V.V. Subramaniya Iyer (1881-1925) and was funded by the TCC, the Congress *sanadanists* including Subramaniya Iyer justified the separate dining of Brahman boys in the national school.¹⁵ The firing debates and contending activities between the reformist and orthodox nationalists regarding social reform matters in the Tamilnadu Congress was very effective until the early 1930s.

The Self-Respect Movement and its Anti-Untouchability Campaign :

As mentioned earlier that the non-Brahmans of Tamilnadu were drawn into the Home Rule Movement led by Annie Besant in Madras and urged to join the nationalist movement. They were further stimulated when Gandhi took charge of the National Congress and

11 *Swadesamitran*, 12 December 1919, p.8.

12 *Ibid.*, 17 March 1923, p.3; 18 October 1932, p.8.

13 *Ibid.*, 28 November 1923, p.9.

14 *Swadesamitran*, 13 November 1923, p.7.

15 T. V. Kalyanasundaram, *Thiru. Vi. Ka. Vazhkaikkurippukal*, p. 600; E. Sa. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker: A Study in Politics of Tamilnad, 1920-1949*, PhD. Thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1973, p. 50.

introduced Non-Cooperation struggle against the British Colonialists. However, after the formal withdrawal of the movement and more importantly the discussion of assembly entry of nationalists, a considerable number of non-Brahman nationalists were frustrated,¹⁶ but not all of them. This was chiefly because a section of non-Brahman nationalists, while actively participating in the nationalist politics, were also influenced by the racial theory which was employed and propagated by the Justice Party. This section continuously raised the Justice Party's agenda of communal proportion in education and employment in the Congress platform for the approval of the latter. However, other influential Congress nationalists and social reformers from non-Brahman castes such as Varadarajulu, Thiru. Vi. Ka, Chakkarai Chettiar, Singaravelu Chettiar (1860-1946)¹⁷ and others did not stress the communal proportion even though they were influenced by the racial theory. They were also very critical about the politics carried out by the Justice Party in alliance with the British Colonialists.¹⁸

It was not the social reform or anti-caste agendas but the controversy over communal proportion in the TCC which paved way for the immediate quitting of the non-Brahmans from the nationalist movement. When the annual conference of the TCC took place at Kanchipuram in 1925, the resolution demanding communal proportion was not allowed to be brought in the conference by its president Thiru. Vil. Ka, a non-Brahman Congress leader.¹⁹ Ramasamy, S. Ramanathan (1896-19??), Sami Chidambaram (1900-19??), C. Natarajan (1902-1937) Kovai Ayyamuthu (-1975), Manavai R. Thirumalaisami (?) and other few non-brahman youths quit the Congress and enthusiastically campaigned for the dignity and 'self-respect' of the non-Brahman castes and untouchable Tamil masses and founded the vibrant Self-Respect Movement (hereafter SRM) in Tamilnadu. Instead of joining the Justice Party, Ramasamy's intention to form a new organisation was laid down on the basis of his opinion that Justice Party too did not pay adequate attention to the anti-caste programmes and had no interest to undertake an effective anti-untouchability campaign.²⁰ However, Ramasamy allowed many Justice Party activists and leaders to take part in the SRM movement and also utilised the influence of the party in order to build the movement across Tamil region.

Since the mid-1920s, the SRM posed a serious challenge to the TCC and structured its work as anti-caste, anti-religion and anti-Congress. By 1925, *Kudi Arasu*, a Tamil weekly was founded by Ramasamy, for both to carry out polemics on the reactionary nature of Congress *sanadanists* in social reform matters and to propagate radical social reform ideas

16 Particularly E. V. Ramasamy and S. Ramanathan, even they quit from the Congress activities for some times and campaigned against the propaganda for assembly entry. *Swadesamitran*, 10 October 1923, p.5.

17 He is portrayed as the first communist of South India. While he was actively participating in the Madras District Congress Committee even he strongly opposed the very forming of the Madras branch of the Hindu Maha Sabha and the nationalists' support for it.

18 T. V. Kalyanasundaram, *Thiru. Vi. Ka. Vazhkkai kurippukal*, p. 190&203.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

20 *Kudi Arasu*, 27 December 1925.

in the Tamil region. The Self-Respecters did not simply criticise the Congress *sanadanist* alone but labelled the Tamilnadu Congress, as a whole, a brahman party like they did the nascent Communist party in the late 1930s. When the Congress observed 'South Africa Day' in order to mobilize mass support against the Indians sufferings in South Africa, E.V. Ramasamy questioned this very event by saying that the Congress has no credibility to observe this day because the party was very insensitive towards the socio-cultural sufferings of crores of people at the hands of fellow Indians within the Indian territory.²¹

From its inception, the SRM made aggressive propaganda against caste customs and practices of untouchability among the Tamil masses and urged them to allow the Adi-Dravidas to use the public utilities. In order to strengthen their anti-caste and anti-untouchability propaganda, the self-respecters conducted inter-caste marriages called the 'self-respect' marriages, inter-dinning and temple entry programmes. Even though they did not desire temple worship due to their subscription of atheist views, they supported temple entry of Adi-Dravidas and other lower castes on the basis of protecting their civil rights in the public places.²² Even though the anti-caste programmes of the SRM were based on the racial theory²³ given by the colonial scholars, it had a great impact on the Tamil public sphere in the late 1920s and 1930s. Even many Tamil youths attracted towards Congress nationalist struggle at the commencement of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930 also influenced by the self-respecters' principles. For example, P. Ramamurthy (1908-198) and M.P. Sivagnanam (1906-1995), the chief campaigners of the anti-untouchability programme of TCC in Chennai city in the 1930s were also supporters of the self-respect principles.²⁴

However, the self-respecters' programmes were poorly implemented at the grassroots level. For example, the Self-Respect marriages conducted between 1925 to 1944, numbered around 779, chiefly were conducted within the same caste and sects leaving only one marriage that took place between untouchable Adi-Dravida and upper caste non-Brahman. Even in this case, it must be noted that the bride was taken from Adi-Dravida caste.²⁵ The inner-dinning programmes were organised by very few local committees and majority of the committees did not even try to organise such programmes. The temple entry programme of the SRM too had similar tendencies. The most important factor is that the tiny initiatives that were taken all came from cities and towns leaving the major rural areas untouched. These self-respecters' programmes were mainly aimed to eliminate the Brahman priests in the non-Brahmans' social and cultural life and it had succeeded in achieving this aim. The SRM programmes of anti-caste and anti-untouchability often accompanied polemics on Tamil Nadu Congress and gave publicity especially on the caste practices of its *sanadanist* nationalists

21 Ibid., 11 October 1925.

22 Periyar Kalanchiyam: *Jaathi-Theendaamai* (Tamil), Vol. 1, Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, Chennai, 2004, p. 124.

23 E. Sa. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker*, p. 85.

24 Ma.Po. Sivagnanam, *Enathu Porattam*, (Tamil), Poongodi Pathippagam, Chennai, 2010, p. 103.

25 P. S. Chandrababu, *Tamizhagathil Samooga Odukkumuraikku Ethirana Ezhuchi*, Tamil Translation by N. Ramakrishnan, Bharathi Puthakalayam, Chennai, 2009, pp. 127-128.

in the rural area. This polemical attack on Tamil Nadu Congress was increased when the latter commenced in the anti-untouchability campaign during the early 1930s. In their part, the Tamil Nadu Congress and its vernacular newspapers supporting nationalism along with the Tamil *Saivates* vehemently attacked the self-respecters, not for their social reform agendas such as anti-caste and anti-untouchability, but for preaching atheism.²⁶

The TCC and its Anti-Untouchability Campaign :

The series of attacks by the self-respecters on the orthodox nature of TCC had a greater effect on the latter. However, the Congress nationalists did not give up their religious belief like the self-respecters but were motivated towards changing some unaccepted practices in the Hindu religion keeping in accordance with the changing contemporary socio-political environment. With this understanding, Tamil Congressmen like Rajagopalachary, Vaidyanatha Iyer, T.S.S. Rajan, K. Bashyam Iyengar, Thiru.Vi.Ka., and others were turned to be propagandists of anti-caste and effectively campaigned for anti-untouchability and temple entry of the Adi-Dravidas when the Harijan work was made as part of the nationalist's programmes.

When Congress leader Rajendra Prasad visiting Tamil Nadu during October 1932, the anti-untouchability campaign was effectively carried out by the Congress Nationalists, mainly in urban centers in the region.²⁷ In order to gain public support for the anti-untouchability programme, the Congress leaders of Tamil Nadu, majority of whom were from Brahman caste, issued a press statement, which appealed the Tamil masses to open all temples for Adi-Dravida castes as a first step towards the eradication of untouchability practices in the society.²⁸ The statement gained wider support across the region. The Adi-Dravida leaders, hitherto distanced themselves from the Congress platforms, also taking representations in the Harijan Sevak Committees formed by the TCC, both at the Presidency and local level.²⁹ Adi-Dravida leaders such as R. Srinivasan (1860-1945), M.C. Rajah (1883-1947) and Swami Sahajanandam (1890-1959) were included in the nine-member Presidency Committee and leaders such as L. C. Gurusamy (1885-1966), V. Dharmalingam Pillai, Pushparaj, and Jayavelu were included in the Chennai District Committee.

The primary objects of the Harijan Sevak Sang, notes its president T.S.S. Rajan, were two. One was the campaign among the caste Hindus through which the explanation was given that the anti-untouchability campaign was much needed in order to keep the Adi-Dravida castes in Hindu religion. The second was to campaign among the Adi-Dravida castes through which they should be requested to relinquish some unaccepted degraded customs which they were practicing traditionally and also to facilitate them to use common utilities such as tank, road, public schools and temples and so on.³⁰

26 E.Sa. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker*, p. 111.

27 *Swadesamitran*, 10 October 1932, p.8; 11 October 1932, p. 3.

28 *Swadesamitran*, 13 October 1932, p.4.

29 *Ibid.*, 22 November 1932, p. 3; 31 November 1932, p. 6.

30 *Ibid.*, 7 November 1932, p.11.

Since the mid-1930s the anti-untouchability campaign of the Congress was not solely confined within the limitations of the reform-minded Hindus and their programme was not just 'cleanliness.' The attraction and participation of Adi-Dravida youths and Congress-Socialists in the programme enabled it much wider perspective. The nationalists' campaign in the cities like Chennai had great influence among the Adi-Dravida castes especially the educated youths who began to participate in the politics of Congress in a considerable number. In order to check this influence, an Adi-Dravida paper of the mid-1930s instructed its community, especially its youths that they should only participate in Harijan work of the Congress and not in its nationalist politics.³¹ Not only the Adi-Dravidas but also some influential self-respecters quit from the movement and joined the Congress. Even though these committees spearheaded the anti-untouchability campaign among the Tamil masses, it failed to change the orthodox character of its fellow Congressmen and it did not prevent caste and untouchability practices even in its political platform especially in the rural areas and this failure was effectively exposed by the self-respecters.

During the early 1930s when anti-liquor programmes were undertaken by the TCC and non-violent satyagrahas and picketing were organized in front of toddy shops, these were not solely confined to non-violent satyagrahas or simply preaching among the Tamil masses, but were also targeted violent attacks on Adi-Dravida drinkers in the rural areas. In August 1931, some nationalist agitators in the Thanjavur region went on to the extreme stage with the understanding that the Adi-Dravidas were the chief consumer of toddy liquor and threatened of burning their houses if they did not relinquish their drinking habits.³²

The Harijan Sevak Committees of the Congress often failed to condemn caste practices within their platforms. For instance, when A.G. Sannasy, an Adi-Dravida and a supervisor of Thiruchirapalli District Harijan Sevak Committee, wrote an open letter to TCC in June 1935, it exposed the Congress nationalists' orthodoxy character in rural areas. Through this letter, he narrates how he was insulted in the Congress platform. He was invited to participate in the Perambalur Taluk Congress Conference held along with the TCC meeting in Esanai village in the Taluk. While participating in the Conference, Sannasy was not allowed to dine with caste Hindu Congressmen and separate arrangement was made away from the Congress dining area. Sannasy being an activist of the Congress Harijan Sevak Committee, ashamed of this open caste practice in the Congress platform, refused to take food which was served in separate dining space in the Congress conference and returned home with empty stomach.³³ When this open letter was published in the local news paper run by a self-respecter, condemnations were expressed by various sections including the self-respecters and Adi-Dravida leaders. Instead of ratification, the Tiruchirappalli Congress dismissed Sannasy from his platform for his open protest.³⁴

Another incident here is worth noting that took place in 1938 and which resulted in a serious protest against the regressive nature of the Congress. When the Conference of

31 *Adi-Dravida Mitran*, Vol. 2, No. 3, June 1935, p. 25.

32 *Puduvai Murasu*, 31 August 1931, p. 9.

33 *Nagara Thuthan*, 30 June 1935, p. 12.

34 *Ibid.*, 28 July 1935, p. 8.

South Thanjavur District Congress was held in Needamangalam on December 1937, some Adi-Dravidas attended the Conference and dined with the caste Hindu Congressmen. The Adi-Dravidas who took their food along with caste Hindu Congressmen faced humiliation at the hands of the organizer of the conference Santhan Ramasamy Udaiyar. In order to punish Adi-Dravidas, Ramasamy Udaiyar reported this incident to the *mirasdar* of Anumanthapuram village under whom the Adi-Dravidas were working as *panniayals*. The next day, the Adi-Dravidas who participated in the Congress Conference and had their food with upper caste Congressmen were severely beaten and forced to drink the cow-dung given by the *mirasdar*.³⁵ The Adi-Dravida leaders and their organisations, such as the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, strongly condemned the cruel attacks on the lower castes and criticized the Congress' involvement in the incident.

Conclusion :

Thus, both the Tamilnadu Congress and the Self-Respect Movement influenced each other and their anti-caste and anti-untouchability programme had great impact in the Tamil region. While the self-respect principles attracted the young nationalists, the Congress programme of Harijan work along with nationalist struggle influenced the young self-respecters as well. Both the movements campaigned anti-untouchability and took programmes to ameliorate the conditions of the Adi-Dravida castes. But these initiatives were confined within certain limitations based on their ideas and regional variations. Even though many young nationalists from various town centres were involved in the Harijan work, with more radical views, majority of its propagandists could not overcome their religion completely. Likewise, the self-respecters only stressing on the socio-cultural sufferings of the Adi-Dravidas failed to demand economical advancement of the same community. On the other hand, the Self-Respecters were more interested in destroying the Brahman domination over the non-Brahman castes but failed to condemn the non-Brahman dominance over the Adi-Dravidas in equal measure. The anti-untouchability campaign of both the movements only had some success in the urban areas, while the rural areas remained completely untouched. Furthermore, due to its anti-Congress nature, the Self-Respect movement exposed the Congress' weaknesses in the rural areas, which are the epicentre of caste system, where the self-respecters also did not possess any influence.

35 Ibid., 9 January 1938, p.5.