

The History of Segregation and the Politics of Industrial Unrest in Tamil Nadu¹

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu has a rich commercial past due to its geographical position. While it has had its own benefits in building a prosperous state, it has also on the other hand led to divisions among the people on the lines of class, education and class. This has led to growing intolerance among people. It has affected the industrial sector too where the lack of unity because of segregation of the workers or disunity among them due to differences seep out. There has been a gradual rise of cases of unrest in the industrial sector in Tamil Nadu and this has transformed into huge losses for the state. This paper is an attempt to link the historical formation of various groups and parties and the recent outbreak of unrest in industries in Tamil Nadu.

Key words: segregation, elite, Dravidan, unrest, industrialization, intolerance, killings

Introduction

Tamil Nadu has been exposed to foreign influences historically by dint of its geographical position which gives easy access to foreign countries to this region through the sea. Moreover, its long association with the Britishers also cannot be ignored. There have been major divisions in the state owing to this. One has been the segregation between the elite and non-elite, while the other has been a segregation between the upper castes and the lower castes. Due to the connection to the outside world through trade, there was a rise of the trading class who later also participated in industrialization. This led to a rift between the moneyed and disadvantaged class. The influence of the Britishers also led to the rise of a class who because of their exposure to the western modes of education, considered themselves superior to the rest who were indigenously educated (Rajendran, 1997). This also led to segregation. Lastly, the differences between the lower castes and the upper castes played a major role in creating distrust between the people of Tamil Nadu. In this paper, the researchers will trace the historical developments which have contributed to this. The present rise in industrial unrest can also be linked to this lack of unity amongst the people of the state who are protesting mostly for their immediate concerns.

British period: Beginning of new forms of segregation

The Hindu Literary Society was founded in Tamil Nadu as early as 1830. It later transformed into the Madras Native Association in 1852. The members of this association were mostly officials from the elite class who engaged in trade. It also had non-official members in them who were majorly dominated by the former. Due to this, though the association was very successful in criticizing the British for their policies, it did not last and fell out before long. The rigid hierarchical system made the association fizzle out. Later in 1884, the Madras Mahajan Sabha was established, which comprised entirely of non-official members. Though this association did a good work in trying to spread its branches throughout the country, but because of its soft stance towards the British, and its unwavering loyalty for the Congress party, it could not do anything significantly. Also, the members had a fad about writing in impeccable English. Due to this reason, many people who were well versed in Tamil were left out. In time, the New Party emerged with members who had radical thoughts, different from the earlier party which was now the Old Party. They believed in swadeshi practices and soon created the Chennai Jana Sangam in 1908. This organization held its meetings in open spaces and reached out to rural areas.

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It was for the first time in the history of Tamil Nādu that there was mass mobilization. Pamphlets were written and widely circulated in the native language (Rajendran,1997).

Regional consolidation in post-independence period

This step strengthened the efforts of the people who for the first time felt empowered. It took more than 70 years for the segregation to finally stop. This is very important in understanding the history of class segregation in the state. The importance of the Dravidian language was felt by all scholars and educators across the country and it has remained that way till date. In the 44th annual conference of the Indian Political Science Association in 1966, Professor V. K Padmana, the Chairman of the panel spoke about the necessity of educating and empowering the masses in their mother tongue. However, in the same conference, Dr S Gabriel also spoke about the widening gap between the brahmin and the non-brahmin(Padmanabhan,1986). The Madras United League and the Dravidian Association had spoken about empowerment of the lower castes. However, it was only in 1916 that the South Indian People's Association was formed which comprised entirely of non-Brahminical people. Interestingly, the association did not support the Home Rule Movement because they did not want to revert back to the ancient form of governance where the upper castes always ruled over the lower castes. For them the rule of the Britishers was better because they did not differentiate between an upper caste native and a lower caste native. This association became gradually very powerful and strong but it could not accommodate other lower-class workers in its fold. The reason was its demand for concessions from the government. This created dissatisfaction between the lower-class workers who would not get the grants and the lower caste workers who would, despite both being in the same economic condition. This prevented the association from becoming popular among the masses (Basu, 2011).

Recent worrisome trends

Though there is a lot of support from the Tamil Nadu government for encouraging inter-caste associations by doling out schemes, but it is countered with the recent rise of segregational politics practiced for petty gains by various political parties. This has been the case since the early decade of this century (Gorringe, 2016). A lot of measures have been taken for the lower castes in terms of health care, education and infrastructural facilities. However, not much has been done for them in the organised and unorganised industrial sectors. They still lack a decent means of income. In other sectors dealing with cooking, lower caste women have even been debarred from working in government schools. While some districts are more prone to this than others, the situation remains more or less the same in the entire state.(Thangavelu, 2018). Such instances amongst many have shattered the perception that the Dravidan Parties have brought an end to caste violence.

Since the declaration of many reforms post-liberalization, the number of cases of strikes and lock decreased in Tamil Nadu. There is also a smaller number of industrial disputes recorded especially in the first decade of economic reforms. However, surprisingly disputes among the workers have risen from the second decade of economic reforms. A study of the textile industry of Tamil Nadu has exposed this fact. While the lessening of industrial disputes and strikes is attributed to fierce industrial competition and conversion of permanent jobs to temporary ones, the rise in disputes within the workers can be attribute to job insecurity and the growing segregation among the workers on various grounds (Moorthy, 2005).

While the differences among the elite/ non-elite, upper caste/lower caste and upper class/lower class have lingered and widened over the decades, the fact is that the downtrodden in industrial sector today comprise of the disadvantaged groups. In the manufacturing segment, these groups make up for most of the unorganized labour groups. These comprise of people who have no stability of jobs, no added benefits, no security of income, no benefits and risk cover. In 2002 thousands of workers marched 880 kms in 50 days as a sign of protest (Roy,2002). The sheer magnitude of the crowd reveal the size of this unorganized sector in industries which indicate the precarious position of lakhs of labourers working here. This condition has led to various instances of violence in the state as far as industrialization is concerned. Unless the conditions of this sector is bettered, there will be no respite to unrest. A news article published by "The Hindu" on February 17th 2019 mention the dismissal of some employees because they refused to budge from their demands. These varied from

தமிழ் ஆய்வு ஆராய்ச்சியின் சர்வதேச நடுவர் இதழ் (ஐ.ஆர்.ஜே.டி.எஸ்.ஆர்)

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demanding wage revision to uninstalling CCTV cameras. The important point to be noted here is that their demands were not met because of the lack of unity between the workers who chose to comply with the administration after the ultimatum given by the employer to either return to work or get fired. Needless to say, the majority returned to work. (PTI, 2019). There is another news of a senior executive being killed by employees at Pricol allegedly because he had fired them on disciplinary grounds (Bharati, 2009). It reveals the growing intolerance among workers and also the insensitivity of the employers towards the employees. In May 2018 twelve people were shot dead by the police when they opened fire on workers in Thoothukudi who were protesting against the expansion of a copper smelter plant. This incident has gone down history as the infamous Thoothukudi Massacre. These are few incidences which have brought to the fore the problems which are brewing because of the early divisiveness of politics and formation and reformation of various groups on various grounds of differences.

While protests have always been the norm for meeting demands, and is practiced all over the world, but these kinds of incidences expose the growing intolerance among the people in Tamil Nadu. There is rising polarisation between the have and the have-nots. There are differences even among people of the same economic status on grounds of caste differences. Between 2016 and 2020, there were more than 300 murders of Dalits alone (Srikrishna, 2021). This brings out the intolerance of the people for the depressed castes. This article is published with the hope that the conditions of the industrial working class is brought to the notice of the administration who can take proper measures to check and control such behaviour among the masses. One has to understand that for the prosperity of a state or nation, unity is of utmost importance and this can only be attained by driving out intolerance and differences of any sort.

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