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PICKETING OF TODDY SHOPS IN DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS OF COLONIAL TAMIL NADU ,1931-1932

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Abstract:-The Prohibition Movement gained its support from the leaders and the volunteers during the Civil Disobedience movement in Tamil Nadu from 1930 onwards. With the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact" in 1931, a vigorous and more organised campaign of picketing at toddy shops was started which continued throughout in the important the presidency. There was a decrease in the consumption of country spirits, imported spirits and wines, and locally-made foreign liquor and beer, opium and hemp drugs. The number of trees marked for the toddy lease too decreased during the year 1930-1931. The main reason for the decrease was the Civil Disobedience Movement which played a contributory cause which gave rise to considerable difficulty in certain parts for carrying out the excise administration. Picketing of shops was one of the common methods resorted to by the adherents of this movement.

Keywords:-congress, toddy, liquor, picketing, prohibition, civil-dis-obedience movement, Rajaji , Gandhi.

INTRODUCTION

Rajaji was the leader of Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Districts, and he was elected as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee¹ The volunteers picketed the liquor and toddy shops by the method of constitutional agitation, but later on it became vigorous, because the Government took effective measures to suppress the prohibition movement.

The press criticized the liquor policy of the Government. '*Mother India*' stated that the Government established the Excise Department for the purpose of promoting the consumption of drink and increasing the number of toddy and liquor shops in every place. They also took efforts to stop the prohibition movement in the Country.² The renters of the shops and their supporters also took efforts to suppress the activities of the picketers. But the Congress Party's propaganda and picketing was effective and more powerful and it served as weapon for the reduction of the drink evil.³

In Madurai Town

The picketing activities were more powerful and noticeable in almost all the Tamil districts during the Civil Disobedience Movement. It took vigorous turn in Madurai. The volunteers picketed the liquor shops at Podinayakanur in the Madurai district but were arrested by the police.⁴ Again the volunteers from outside the town attempted to revive the picketing of liquor shops which led to serious riots but their efforts were checked by the Government.⁵

In 1931, a huge force of Reserve Police armed with lathies, and guns made a lathi charge on the congress volunteers who were picketing the toddy shops at Madurai town, Semmatipuram and Puttuthope. When the volunteers were picketing the toddy shops, about 13 volunteers at Puttuthope, and about 25 volunteers at Semmatipuram in a peaceful manner, they were attacked by the police and most of them sustained injuries.⁶ A. Vaidyanatna Aiyar, the President of the District Congress Committee, Madurai, sent a telegram to Rajaji about this incident, C, Rajaji condemned the action taken by the Government and the suffering of the volunteers were invaluable asset for them and it would not act as a moral force against drink quite as efficiently as any amount of uninterfered picketing.⁷ The citizens of Madurai in public meeting, criticized the highhanded arbitrary and indiscriminate attack of the police, with out any prior warning on the Congress volunteers who engaged in peaceful picketing at the Semmatipuram and Puttuthope toddy shops and at Madurai Town.⁸ They criticized that the action

taken was violated the Gandhi-Irwin pact and challenged an immediate enquiry by a non-official committee or Arbitration Board, which should be set up to enquire into the said incidents.⁹ The Government directed the District Magistrate to investigate personally the incidents which occurred in Madurai in connection with the picketing and the dispersal of the picketers by the police.¹⁰ The District Magistrate stated that the use of force by police in dispersing the aggressive picketers was justified, since the Government itself had given permission to disperse the aggressive picketers using force.¹¹

In '*Young India*' Gandhi stated that the Government had been receiving reports from the provincial Governments that picketing was not always peaceful. He further said that he did not know how far those complaints were justified, but they could not be too strict in the observance on their part of the settlement irrespective of how the authorities implement their complaints. The ultimate success would demand on the penetration into the homes of drinkers.¹² Vaidyanatha Aiyar stated that were in action in a non-violent way in Madurai. In response to the appeal at Puttutope, the shops were closed and there was no toddy sale, when the volunteers reached there. The beating was therefore without any justification.¹³ Again the intensive picketing of liquors shops in a suburb of Madurai town began on 30th September 1931. Starting with nine, the number of picketers increased day by day by sixty four in the month of October 1931. The customers were forcibly interfered with and driven away from the shop. A similar situation had developed. At the same time at another liquor shop, but their efforts were checked by the Government.¹⁴

In Madras City

In Madras the Congress volunteers picketed the liquor shops vigorously. The Round Table Conference had been taken advantage by the leaders of the civil disobedience movement to secure recruits for wholesale picketing on the assurance that they would be released shortly when they were sent to jail. Therefore in the beginning of the year 1931, it was marked by definite increase in the civil disobedience activities, particularly in Madras city due to the vigorous propaganda made by Satyamurthi and Nageswara Rao, with the help of a number of volunteers brought for the purpose from different parts of the Madras Presidency.¹⁵ In Madras the picketing was going on and the volunteers were doing it without any kind of violence, obstructions and harassment. But in a number of places, the volunteers were assaulted by liquor shop keepers' men.¹⁶ Satyamurthi and other leaders after inspecting the toddy and liquor shops in the city in connection with the picketing of these shops, stated that the Excise officials were abetting illegal acts, and these acts were done in the very presence of the police. Toddy was also taken out of certain toddy shops and sold elsewhere.¹⁷ Consequent on the picketing of toddy shops in Madras, the vendors were selling toddy in streets, lanes, and other places and that the Excise officials did not take any interest in preventing such sale despite the restriction that toddy should not be sold in unlicensed places.¹⁸ Satyamurthi led a picketing party in Georgetown and took more aggressive action, which attracted a large crowd. He and other volunteers were arrested, convicted and he was sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment.¹⁹ K. Bashyam Iyengar thereupon assumed the presidency of the Council of action and announced that picketing would be continued in different parts of the city by which the revival or picketing activities were continued.²⁰

The picketing was also directed against the toddy shop sales.²¹ But, the picketing of toddy shop sales was objected by the Government. Rajaji in a letter to Government stated that there could be no difference between the picketing shops and picketing sales. The rule that the picketing should be peaceful and free from intimidation, coercion etc., applied to both picketing of auction sales and picketing of shops. According to the peace settlement, that is, the Gandhi-Irwin Pact which gave the Indians the right to adopt peaceful picketing against consumption of intoxicating liquor and drugs. The only question was whether the picketing would be peaceful or not, that conditions might be laid down to ensure the peaceful character of the picketing but not to prevent picketing altogether as the Commissioner of Excise had notified.²² The Excise Commissioner stated that the peaceful picketing of liquor shops should not include the picketing of abkari sales, and the collectors should be asked to take all steps, which might be necessary to see that the forthcoming sales would not be interfered by picketers and others and no obstruction should be offered to intending bidders.²³ He also stated that the picketing of abkari sales was not included in the Gandhi-Irwin agreement.²⁴ Regarding this, Gandhi stated that his opinion was, auction sales should be picketed.²⁵ In '*Young India*', he stated that the picketing in a most peaceful character would continue without remission till the state would be converted into the policy of prohibition. The authorities in some places in the south had promptly notified that not more than five picketers might be employed under any circumstances. But, even for an entrance, the necessity of having more than five picketers was realised. The number would depend upon the situation of the shop.²⁶

In Coimbatore and Ramnad

The picketing of toddy shops was again started in certain parts of Tamil Nadu. In Coimbatore and Ramnad districts, the crowding of pickets in the shops and outside around the sale centres continued during the auction sales of toddy shops for the lease 1931-1932. This resulted in a considerable fall in toddy rentals. It became necessary to dispose of many shops by private renters and number of shops had to be closed during 1931-1932, the situation in certain places so unsettled and so depressing. Hence some time after the commencement were not able to run their shops and some others refused to take out licences.²⁷ A number of tree owners were subjected to Congress displeasure and they refused to give the trees for tapping purposes and sites for locating the shops.²⁸

The picketing of liquor shops were carried out by the volunteers vigorously in the places of Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram, Saidapet, Sembium and Tiruvallur in the Madras Presidency.²⁹ Congress determined to get rid of the drink evil from the country. The toddy shop licensees were retrained from bidding in the recent auction in Madras, and referring to this, 'Virabharati' remarked that Madras had stood first in the field of picketing toddy shops and the auction thereof. It also added that the district and taluk congress committees should also follow the example of Madras in regard to the auction of toddy shops on the days on which they were held, without stopping with merely picketing such shops.³⁰ Regarding the picketing of toddy shop sales, Rajaji wrote a letter to Gandhi, stating that the action of the volunteers was suppressed. It was true that toddy shop renters experienced a considerable loss but this was not due to any acts in convention of law, but was due to the fact that previous year when the licences were sold, the Government put all anti-liquor workers in prison and induced licensees to bid against public auction. As a result of national call which spread throughout the length and breadth of the country, the number of drinkers declined.

Government had made a private promise to the previous year licensees that losses arising out of civil disobedience movement would be compensated. The truth was that the picketing had proved much more effective than had been originally expected by the Government.³¹ Hence the Government took repressive measures. Regarding the action taken by the Government, 'Virabharathi' pointed out when the Government were doing prohibition propaganda, why they should not help the congress organisations in their work in regards to prohibition.³² The Government responded that they were rendering all sort of help that they could do for the prohibition movement. But, in fact, the Government placed obstacles in the way of peaceful picketing by the exercise of their powers vested in them.³³ Rajaji stated that local police authorities started to harass and interfere with the picketing. Finding that there was no sort of coercion or disturbance of the peace and they could not legitimately object to the picketing, they were trying other ways. They were pushing the volunteers away to possible distances from the shops and from each other and demanding the observance of conditions that reduce picketing to an intellectual farces. Local police authorities were permitted to terrorize town and village folk and proclaimed that any assistance or harbouring of congress volunteers would amount to abetment of offenders. However, the suffering of the volunteers would add strength to the movement which would rid the great curse of the drink traffic from the country.³⁴

In Thanjavur

The picketing of liquor shops continued in many districts. Activities of volunteers in Vedaranyam camp were demolished by the police³⁵, even though the picketing of liquor shops increased in Tanjavur.³⁶ On 6th August 1931 the members of the congress officials and other responsible men were ordered out of taluk office compound in Thanjavur at the time of auction sales. When it was questioned in the Madras Legislative Council, they were replied that the private individuals, some congress officials and responsible men were allowed inside the taluk office compound. The volunteers were excluded, because, it was obvious that if the picketers had been allowed to get inside the compound in large numbers, it would have required a very large force to prevent the individuals acts and rowdyism.³⁷

In Tuticorin

The local Tuticorin Congress Committee started picketing of liquor shops in Tuticorin Town vigorously. But the volunteers were violently assaulted by the police, who were restraining the consumers who wanted to go to the toddy shop at Devipuram. Again the police action against the volunteers in Tuticorin was questioned in the legislative council. For that the Government claimed that they took repressive measures to control the crowds in thousands gathered in a militant mood who obstructed looted, and even assaulted consumers going toddy and arrack shops and also threw stones which hit the policemen on duty.³⁸

To conclude, the Congress launched the constructive programme along with the Non-Co-operation Movement in Freedom Struggle. It was a progrmme of social regeneration. It included Khadar, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Eradication of Untouchability and Prohibition. In Tamil Nadu, this Gandhian Programme was shouldered by Rajaji. Under the leadership of Rajjai both No-Co-operation Movement and Civi-Dis-obedience Movement were successful. Prohibition Movement in Tamil Nadu took the form of toddy ship picketing. Madras, Madurai, Coimbatore, Ramnad, Thanjvur and Tuticorin were the important centres of toddy-shop picketing during the Civi Dis-Obedience Movement. As a result of toddy shop picketing, the excise revenue of the Madras Government was reduced much. Even though the Government adopted repressive measures on the Congress volunteers who involved in the toddy shop picketing, agitations for the closure of toddy and arrack shops in Tamil Nadu was successful. The Leaders like Rajjai, Satyamurthi, K. Bashyam Iyengar and A. Vaidyanatha Iyer led the volunteers. The Indian Press supported the cause of the nationalists who struggled for the cause of the prohibition by law.

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