

## **NATESA AIYAR AND MEENACHI AMMAL: PIONEERS OF TRADE UNIONISM AND FEMINISM ON THE PLANTATIONS**

Till the 1930s, the colonial government and the planters had managed to keep workers on the Ceylon plantations in virtually slave-like conditions in enclave structures. They were largely confined to the boundaries of the estates, worked under exploitative labour relations, were employed at the lowest level of the extremely hierarchical plantation order and were subject to violence and abuse at all levels and in their daily lives. And while there were attempts by concerned British, Ceylonese and Indian bureaucrats and politicians to ameliorate the oppressive laws and improve poor living conditions on plantations, they did not question the structure and nature of the plantation system. None of them, except with the social British leader Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, encouraged workers to mobilise and fight for their labour rights. It is also a testimony to the power of those in authority that, in spite of the spread of trade unionism in the rest of the Island from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the plantation workers remained isolated from these struggles and did not collectively mobilise for increased wages and better conditions of work.

### **The Radical Couple**

The exploitation of the plantation workers took on public and political significance through the interventions of S. Kothandarama Natesa Aiyar and his wife Meenachi Ammal who originated from Tanjavur District in South India. They not only sought to influence colonial government policy with regard to the labour and citizenship rights of the plantation workers, but also paid special attention the particular disadvantages that women workers experienced in their daily lives. They were also involved in

encouraging and organising the women and men on plantations in trade unions. In these ways, they were responsible not only for stimulating a major breakthrough in the labour relations on plantations, but also in raising consciousness on the disadvantages faced by women workers, countering male chauvinism in politics and demanding parity of rights not only with their male counterparts but also with others in the country.

### **The socialist vision of Natesa Aiyar**

Born in 1887 into a Brahmin family, Natesa Aiyar was to get involved in the anti-colonial and nationalist movement in India. From being a minor bureaucrat in Madras, he moved to Ceylon in the 1920s where he was able to use his education, eloquence and skill of expression to fight for the rights of Indians in the Island. He became editor of the the Tamil nationalist paper, *Thesa Nesan*, which was owned by Arunachalam and Dr. E.V. Ratnam, who were also executive members of the Ceylon National Congress. He also edited the English language journal *The Citizen* which supported the Indian National Movement and demanded independence from colonial rule for both Ceylon and India. He also wrote several pamphlets on the condition of plantation workers, including an English journal “The Indian Estate Labourer” and a pamphlet called “Planter Raj”. The latter, as we shall see, was a powerful indictment of the system of wages that prevailed on the plantations.

Natesa Aiyar was considered a ‘radical’ by the colonial authorities who were also concerned about his close links with the Indian nationalist lawyer D.M. Manilal, who had worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa, taking up the plight of the Indians in that country. Manilal had also encouraged migrant workers in Fiji and Mauritius to organise and

demand better conditions of work, and was viewed as having links with Communists.

By the 1920s, Natesa Aiyar had also got involved with the labour movement in Ceylon, and was for a while even the Vice President of the urban-based Ceylon Labour Union in the 1920s. During this period he was able to get the support of the Sinhalese Labour leader A. E. Goonesinha to support the rights of the plantation workers. His experience with the urban trade union movement gave Natesa Aiyar greater awareness and insights into the potential of organising workers to gain their labour rights. It was also the first time that the urban labour closely allied with workers in the plantation sector. But the potential alliance between the urban and plantation workers on joint action did not develop during this period. There was a split between the two leaders in 1928 with Natesa Aiyar accusing Goonesinghe of being anti- Indian, as a result of which Natesa Aiyar left the Ceylon Labour Union and formed the first trade union on the plantations, All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation in 1931(ibid:342).

### **Debates and Representation in Legislative and State Council**

For nearly a century since from the establishment of plantations in Ceylon in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the plantation workers did not have any sort of political representation. In some contrast the interests of plantation capital were heavily represented in all spheres of government activity, including the legislature. But this situation changed with the discussion in the 1920s on the possibility of representation of Indian interests in the Legislative Council with the constitutional reforms of 1923 acceding the appointment of two Indian members to the Ceylon legislature for this purpose. The main purpose was to safeguard the interests of the Indian

business community but the appointment took on a new platform when K. Natesa Aiyar in 1924 was elected to the legislature.

Given his political standpoint and involvement with labour concerns, it was not surprising that he raised issues relating to wages and conditions of urban and plantation workers. He even demanded during the of 24<sup>th</sup> February that the recruitment of workers for the estates be stopped until the owners had built sufficient 'coolie lines' and latrines, stating that the same conditions of the 1870s prevailed on the contemporary estates (Legislative Council 24 Feb 1927). This early induction of Natesa Aiyar into a colonial political forum gave the possibilities for the grievances of plantation workers to be effectively expressed through the legislature.

At the second general elections held under universal franchise in 1936, K. Natesa Aiyar, entered the State Council as the member for Hatton

### **'Under Planter Raj'**

In spite of his position in the State Council, the colonial authorities viewed Natesa Aiyar's anti-nationalist writings as 'seditious' and his demands for better wages and conditions of work for the plantation workers as a direct threat to both British Rule and plantation capitalism. Defying the authorities who were carefully watching his activities, he was able to make contact with the plantation workers, surmounting the stringent trespass laws sometimes dressed as a cloth merchant to gain entry. No doubt his experience with the urban trade union movement also gave Natesa Aiyar greater awareness and insights into the potential of organising workers to gain their labour rights..

One of his most powerful pamphlets was *Under Planter Raj: The Standard Wage in Ceylon*, a stinging critique of Committee Report on the 'Standard Wage' stating that it was both biased and of an inadequate level, and highly critical of the planters and their treatment of the workers. Using

facts and figures he argued that the report “engineered, manipulated and brought out without the least regard for the interest of the 6 ½ lakhs of Indian labourers who are to be affected by it” with “no attempts... to safeguard the interest of the voiceless Indian Labourers” (ibid: 4-5) According to his calculations just 15% of the workers received sufficient pay, a situation worsened by the fact that these low levels of pay were compounded by the late payment of wages normally after 50 days after the due date, as a result of which the “ the ignorant labourers do not generally know at what rate they are paid” (ibid: 7).

He condemned other practices that planters used to lower the cost of production, including late payment of wages and manipulating the Check Rolls, suggesting that a weekly payment would help the worker to know more about his earnings. He noted that the planters continued their practice of providing advances, even after Tundu had officially been abolished, but had never attempted to actually increase wages to attract workers; but rather resorted to providing cash inducement, advancing loans, bonuses and even reducing the price of rice (ibid:10). His plea was clear and passionate underscoring the exploitation suffered by the workers in plantation capitalism:

... it must not be forgotten that labour power is a perishable commodity and its sale to some extent forced. The labourer must find immediate employment and cannot wait till he gets a demand; otherwise he will have to starve and die. In case he doesn't get employment at the rate he expects, he is necessarily forced to enter service under an employer for a lower rate lower than the actual cost of subsistence and in consequence he has to reduce his standard of living. This is exactly what has happened these 40 years in this Island (ibid:10).

He also showed that there were increasing numbers of dependants in the country (children till 9 years old and adults over 60 years) who were also to

be taken care of by the workers, the extent of which was not taken into account by the Committee.

It is an open secret that when the labourers find themselves unable to do work in the estates they always resort to begging in the neighbouring estate towns. That is the old age “pension” the labourers are getting after several years of faithful service (Ibid 15).

In pleading their cause he noted:

The labourers do not come to Ceylon to pass their days in poverty; just to pass off their days in meagre subsistence. There must be something for them to fall back upon. They should not be made a burden to their own kith and kin (ibid:20).

Finally, he concluded that the Government of Ceylon appears to be in the main, “dictated by the Planting Community and it would not dare to do anything against their wish or interest” (ibid:22). In speaking of the workers he noted that they:

.... are not organised and are helpless. They could not easily be approached by any outsider for fear of being charged for criminal trespass or for the troubles that may follow to anybody who entertained them. There is no public place where they can assemble in most of the Planting districts.

He proposed that, under these conditions, it was best to stop the emigration of these workers to Ceylon, indicating that the benefits of such an action would be more than what “100 years of agitation or negotiation” would be able to achieve (ibid:23). He was a forerunner in his thinking on this issue, which was subsequently taken up by the Ceylon Indian Congress in the 1930s with the Indian government placing a complete ban on emigration of Indian workers to Ceylon in 1939.

## The All-Ceylon Indian Estate Labour Federation

The First Trade Union on the plantations, the All-Ceylon Indian Estate Labour Federation was formed in 1931 under the leadership of Natesa Aiyar . While he was a powerful and charismatic politician and labour leader, there was no doubt that increase in elementary education after the Education Ordinance of 1920 also played a role in the spread of trade unionism. The table below shows that while there were just 60 schools in 1904, the numbers had increased substantially by the 1940s with significantly more pupils accessing basic education.

Number of Children in Estate Schools

Year	No. of Schools	No. of Pupils	No. of Children of School-going Age
1904	60	2,000	Not available
1910	227	11,500	Not available
1920	275	11,000	68,000
1930	501	26,000	78,000
1935	608	38,000	73,000
1938	784	44,000	77,000
1939	820	45,000	79,000
1940	845	47,000	80,000

Source: Annual Reports of the Indian Agent.

By the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a significant group of workers had emerged with some rudimentary education, and there were significant numbers of young literate workers who were capable of challenging some of the labour practices on the plantations, most notably the role of the Kangany. Furthermore they became also increasingly involved in the wider politics of the country. Those workers who were able to read

kept in touch with local politics through the Tamil daily papers, and informed other workers of these issues. Plantations were also a ready market for Indian newspapers and for nationalist propaganda from India. During the general elections in Ceylon in 1931 and 1936, election manifestos and literature were eagerly read and discussed by the estate workers, who had obtained franchise rights in 1931. Political literature was circulated in plantation areas and increasing literacy made for keener participation in the political process. Nor was their interest confined to the politics of this country; they took an enthusiastic interest in the activities of the Indian nationalist movement and Congress leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, were honoured.

The main feature of Natesa Aiyar's union was its hostility to the kangany system, and he began a vigorous campaign against both the kanganies and the planters. Natesa Aiyar stated in 1940 that 95% of the petitions he received were grievances against the head kangany and subordinate staff. The complaints included allegations that the head kangany was often the rice-storekeeper and the shopkeeper; that he held weeding contracts and contracts to feed estate children and gave good jobs to his relatives.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Indian Estate Workers' Federation it had, by 1940, a membership of 37,000 and formed branches in Hatton, Badulla and Nuwara Eliya.<sup>2</sup> Membership was open to all Indian workers excluding head kanganies and subordinate staff on the estates, and the direct objects of the Federation included "bringing the employer and the labourer into closer touch" and the promotion of "better understanding between the employer and the employee without the aid of the middleman"<sup>3</sup>. The broad objects of

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<sup>1</sup>Ceylon Indian Workers' Federation Report

<sup>2</sup>Administration Report of Controller of Labour 1944

<sup>3</sup>Ceylon Indian Workers' Federation Constitution



the union were “economic progress, social uplift, moral elevation and cultural advancement of workmen” (ibid). The economic policy included improving the standard of living and conditions of workers and the securing of permanency of employment and opportunities for promotion. The union also had the objects of educating workers on their “duties, responsibilities, rights and liabilities” and to “inculcate in the minds of the workmen a feeling of self-reliance” (ibid).

### **Meenachi Ammal, Women’s Rights and the Women’s Franchise Union**

The early trade union movement on the plantations was also inspired by Meenachi Ammal, the wife of Natesa Aiyar, who was a powerful poet and singer, and spoke eloquently of the exploitation of the plantations workers and argued for equal treatment of women and men with regard to labour and political rights. She was of Indian origin but her father who was a poet, lived in Matale, a town that bordered the plantation region. Her mother was a schoolteacher. From her youth therefore she was familiar with Tamil literary traditions. In the 1930s she became famous not only as the partner of Natesa Aiyar but as a composer of songs on plantation workers’ oppression

Her collection of nine songs was published under the caption “ *The Conditions of the Indian’s Life in Sri Lanka*” (1940). In the forward she wrote:

The situation of the Indians living in Sri Lanka is progressively deteriorating. The time has come for the people of India living in /sri Lanka to unitedly carry forward a relentless fight to establish their rights....If such propaganda is carried out through songs, it will be more fruitful. That is why, today, I have ventured to expose the position of the Indians living in Sri Lanka through song. In order to make the Indians fight relentlessly to establish their rights without falling prey to leathery and passivity, it is my desire that these songs will motivate them (cited in ibid: 71).

She spoke and sang on public occasions to large crowds of workers and in the journal *Desabhaktan*, which she edited from 1928 with her husband Natesa Aiyar, she raised questions of women's rights and female franchise at a time when universal suffrage – including voting rights for plantation workers – were being hotly debated.

She was also linked with the Women's Franchise Union formed in Colombo in 1927 which also included several wives of prominent politicians and women professionals, including Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher and Colombo Chetty middle-class activists. Meenachi Ammal for example spoke out against men who talked and wrote on women's equality but never practiced it at home. On the franchise, Meenachi critiqued a national figure Sir P. Ramanathan, a die-hard patriarch, who had not only opposed women's franchise, but even denounced voting rights for Sri Lankan women as casting pearls before swine (de Alwis & Jayawardena, 2001). In reply Meenachi commented: "Ceylon has been considered more advanced than India. But if people say that voting rights should not be given to women, how could it be considered advanced? (Desabhaktan 13 April 1928). Meenachi Ammal was also critical of the urban-based Women's Franchise Union for charging an annual membership fee of Rs.50/- and also not catering "to those sisters" who did not speak English:

This union has to achieve more in the coming years. The annual subscription ... is not affordable for a person with an average income. It is not enough that only the rich participate in the activities of the Union, it is time for everyone to contribute towards the women's franchise campaign. And it is high time to begin propaganda among those sisters who were not educated in English. (*Desabhaktan*, 26 Jan. 1929, quoted in de Alwis & Jayawardena 2001: 58)

In some contrast to many male-dominated institutions, the Women's Franchise Union, supported the rights of plantation women to franchise. As noted by Agnes de Silva who was a delegate of the Union of their invitation to give evidence before the Donoughmore Commission:

We went like Crusaders and answered the questions in an inspired manner...I held a watching brief for such questions that we had not prepared. Lord Donoughmore asked if we wanted Indian and Tamil women labourers on the estates to have the vote. I replied "Certainly, they are women too .We want all women to have the vote .

Natesa Aiyar and Meenachi were labour activists, politicians and visionaries who used their the oratory and organisational skills, to mobilise the workers to struggle mobilise for better working conditions and wages, as well citizenship rights for all women and men on the plantations. exploitative conditions but he also emphasised the need to provide higher wages to women as well as to ensure children's right to education.