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MURUGESAM PILLAY – A CHAMPION OF THE OPPRESSED

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ABSTRACT

Princely Mysore in colonial parlance was called a 'Model State'. For a long time it was under the western influence although not under their sway. Tipu sultan the erstwhile ruler of Mysore had adopted technological modernity in so far as his army was concerned. Ever since the fall of Tipu in the battle of Srirangapatna in 1799, the state of Mysore and its rulers came under the direct influence of the British. The rulers of Mysore in their endeavour to be free from the hold of the British worked in conformity with them. This eventually paved way for liberal western outlook amongst its rulers. This earned them the title of being a 'Model State' in comparison with the other princely states that existed in India. However, the orthodox mindset of the Maharaja and its people who were reluctant to change needed effective catalysts. This was provided by the myride luminaries who were in the service of the princely government like the many efficient Dewans and men like C.R. Reddy, K.T. Bashyam, H.C. Dasappa, Kamalamma, H. Dasappa, P. Subbarama Chetty and P. Murugesam Pillai, to name only a few. These people were the torch bearers in bringing about a change in the mindset of the Maharaja as well as in the people of the state. These and a number of other intellectual dignitaries contributed immensely in evolving a favourable environment. It is in this context that the study of Murugesam Pillai becomes relevant as a person who championed the cause of the down trodden in Mysore.

Key Words: Model State, Depressed Classes, Mysore Representative Assembly, Mysore Representative Council, Malleshwaram Dena Daya Sangha, Adi Dravida Abhivridhi Sangham, Adi-Karnataka, Bangalore Social Service League, Kanteerava Narasimharaja Wadiyar, Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, Kantharaja Urs, Sir. M. Vishweshwaraiah, Miller Committee Report, Depressed Classes, Communal Representation, Poona Pact, S.K. Bole, Untouchables, Cooly, Toti, Talaries.

INTRODUCTION

The King in the Indian context has often been termed as the 'Maker of the Age' or other wise called 'Raja Kalasya Karana'. The statement only speaks of the determining force behind the office of the king. However, to prove it otherwise there were also many rulers in history who do not matter much in retrospective. It is only a few who have decisively shaped the future of their country in which they lived. While it is correct to say that few men have mattered most in the history of a nation, it is also equally true that it was the Age and Men of that Age who have shaped the attitudes of their benefactors. Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, was one such ruler who moulded the future prospects of Mysore in as much as he himself being a product of the age was shaped by the very men who surrounded him.

P. Murugesam Pillay was one among the many who obviously contributed immensely to the name and fame of what the government of the Maharaja was to attain in the years to come. It is in the light of the reforms envisaged by the government that we need to see the efforts of people like Murugesam Pillay. Pillay contributed to convince and hasten the progress of reform. It is people like them who brought to bare issues that would subscribe to the rule of Mysore being termed as a 'Model State'. It is in this context that the life and work of Murugesam Pillay becomes relevant as a topic of interest.

Not much is known about the early life of Murugesam Pillay. Chandrashekar. S, in his work 'Colonialism, Conflict and Nationalism: South India 1857-1947' gives a brief profile of Murugesam Pillay.¹ An unpublished M.Phil dissertation on 'Malleshwaram Dena Daya Sangha' by H.M. Jayaram gives a brief reference of Murugesam Pillay. Apart from this nothing much is known about this silent reformer.

Murugesam Pillay known from the records, was a person from the depressed classes. His antecedents are lesser known. He was a resident of Fort Street in Bangalore and he was employed as Assistant Weaving Master at the Binny Mill. That is when he was nominated as member of Mysore Representative Assembly and subsequently even as a member of the Mysore Representative Council. He was nominated sometimes from the labour constituency; sometimes from the special interest group and the minorities. He even contested the Mysore University election to the senate and had eventually lost.² (Proceedings of MLC, Budget session, June 1933, p.359-360).

Murugesam Pillai was also the president of the Adi Dravida Abhivridhi Sangham, Bangalore. In fact, it was as a leader of the Adi Dravida Abhivridhi Sangham that he was nominated to the Mysore Representative Assembly. He was nominated sometimes as a representative of the depressed classes, sometimes as a representative of Adi-Karnataka minority and sometimes from the labour electorate.

The heralding of the 20th century saw great political dynamics and caste mobility in the state of Mysore. It was a time when caste associations and representations became predominant. The pioneering effort in the amelioration of the depressed classes was made with the establishment of the 'Bangalore Social Service League'. This forum was inaugurated by Sri. Kanteerava Narasimharaja Wodiyar, the Yuvaraja of

Mysore.³ (MRA, Dasara Session, October 1920, P. 177). Kanteerava Narasimharaja Wadiyar was the brother of Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar. In 1914, it was Kanteerava Narasimharaja Wadiyar who inaugurated the campaign for the amelioration the condition of the oppressed classes by forming the league. He also enlisted the services of his uncle M. Kantharaja Urs, as the president of the league. It was Diwan Kantha Raj Urs, Successor of Sir. M. Vishweshwaraiah in 1919, who implemented the Millers Committee Report.⁴ [<http://www.ourkarnataka.com/Articles/march 2014 star of Mysore/hishigh08.htm> , “A memoir: Yuvaraja of Mysore: His Highness Sri Kanteerava Narasimharaja Wadiyar” by K.B.Ganapathy]

The earliest reference to Murugesam Pillai came to be found in this backdrop. As a representative of the Adi Dravida Abhivridhi Sangam he had submitted two addresses to Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, the Maharaja of Mysore. One was made in 1918 and the other was in 1920. The addresses appealed to the Maharaja for the sanction of special agency for the advancement of the depressed classes. He expresses that the social and unfavorable condition that his community laboured was on account of their economic degradation. So an improvement in their economic condition would automatically lead to an improvement in their social condition.⁵ (MRA, Dasara Session October 1920, P.177 & 1918 P.12-13, MRA).

Just as in the case of the Non-Brahmin communities and the backward communities, Pillai also stressed all through on securing to the depressed classes education and employment. Apart from this the depressed classes also faced the problem of access to public places, water and temples. Pillai relentlessly fought in securing to the depressed classes these necessities of life. He declared, “Our foremost need is education – more education – universal education”.⁶ (MRA, Dasara Session, October 1920, P.178). He urged the government to establish boarding schools in each district, on the model of the one found in Mysore city.

Pillai considered that in order to overcome their social plight an improvement in their economic condition was a desideratum. In order to overcome from their economic plight he suggested that they earn a decent living by virtue of their own toils. In order to earn a decent living by virtue of their own toil, he pleaded for at least one special agricultural settlement in each district. In this settlement each settler was requested to be granted at least 5 acres of dry land and an acre of wet land. Along with this an advancement of the necessary agricultural capital also was to be arranged. Such land was also to be declared as inalienable for two generations, to ensure their development into a prosperous agricultural community.

The other means of enriching them economically was also thought over by Murugesam Pillai. Murugesam Pillai also stressed for deputing a special officer of the Industrial department to carry the ‘Home Industries’ to the “Homes” of this community to improve the condition of weavers, rope-makers, basket-weavers and other artisans.

In order to overcome the need of capital, he was of the opinion that the co-operative movement was the only means of emancipation in this direction. He was also for the creation of a special organization which would oversee the effort made by various departments for the upliftment of the depressed classes. The organization would coordinate between different departments and officers to ensure that they would deal promptly with the requirement of the community in pursuance of the Government orders. As a result of

his efforts and perseverance in the matter, the government had come forward to the setting up of the Depressed classes Improvement Board.

The 1920's was a period of great transition in India. The Government of India Act 1909 and 1919 provided for separate electorates to certain communities for their participation in the provincial legislative. Similar such provision in the native assemblies was made for people participation. Mysore which was at that time given to the notion of being a progressive state could not remain aloof to the changing demands and politico-social developments of the period. An address of the Non-Brahmin deputation praying for Communal Representation was made on 24th June 1918, to the Maharaja Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar. The king assured them that the "Government will be careful to retain power of nomination to correct inequality in the representation of classes and interest."⁷ (Speeches by His Highness, Sri Krishnaraja Wadiyar Bahadur : Maharaja of Mysore 1902-1920, Government Press, Bangalore, 1921, P.224). This was in consideration of the local self-Government.

In the context of the growing demand from the other non-Brahmin communities to appointments in public services the depressed classes also sought for their due in representation. In the Address submitted to the Maharaja of Mysore in 1923, Murugesam Pillai on behalf of the Adi Dravida Abhivridhi Sangham sought for nomination of members of his class in large numbers to all local bodies, the Representative Assembly and the Legislative Council.⁸ (Proceedings for the MRA, Dasara Session, October 1923, Government press, 1924. P.101). Even as late as 1933, Murugesam Pillai urged the Government not to give up the system of nomination as there was very little chance for the members of the depressed classes to get elected.⁹ (Proceedings of the Mysore Legislative Council, Budget Session, June 1933, Govt press, Bangalore 1933, P.360).

This clearly indicates that even as the nation was making preparation for elections and working out modalities for the Government of India Act 1935, the depressed classes in the princely state of Mysore were still seeking representation by way of nomination. At the end of 1930's, the depressed classes had become a force which could not be ignored in national politics. Poona pact of 1932 and Joint-electoralates with reserved seats became a plank for depressed class participation in representative bodies. Thank's to the efforts of Ambedkar for bringing issues like adult suffrage and elections accessible to the depressed classes. However, the State of Mysore remained far from progressive on this count.

The Bombay legislative Council on 4th August 1923, adopted a resolution moved by Sri S.K. Bole recommending that, "the Untouchable classes be allowed to use all public watering places, wells and dharmashalas which are built and maintained out of public funds or are administered by bodies appointed by Government or erected by Statutes as well as public schools, courts, offices and dispensaries." Accordingly, the Bombay Government issued directives to that effect to all the departments on 11th September 1923.

The reference to this Bombay Government circular issued to various public bodies in the presidency, of throwing open to the Untouchables all institutions belonging to and maintained by the Government, in pursuance of the Bombay Legislative Council resolution of 4th August 1923, was made by Murugesam Pillai in the Mysore Representative Assembly as early as October 1923.¹⁰ (Proceedings of the MRA. Dasara Session, October 1923, P.101-102). This clearly indicates that the debates that engrossed the public mind in British India also echoed into the princely states.

Murugesam Pillai voiced concern that along with the general education, steps also should be taken to do propaganda work on a large scale to give the depressed classes, spiritual and moral education so that the community “may become better Hindus and remain in the Hindu fold.”¹¹ (MRA, Dasara Session, October 1923, P. 102).

The state seems to have picked up this dictum as early as 1927 when it spelled its policy related to the Adi-karnatakas. The Government declared that it has extended to the Adi-Karnatakas representation on all the great constitutional bodies of the state. It has ever listened to their voice with respect and sympathy. It is the political wisdom of the state to address itself to the need of these communities. “These people ought to be strength of our strength. If they are let to become our weakness they would have a rankling sense of wrong which only kindness could heal. Therefore, the aim should be to “Hinduise” them more and more – for they belong to the Hindu community really – and to offer them every facility to remain within the fold. If included, they will be a might addition to the strength of our body politics; if not they would equally render a heavy subtraction. Alienated they would introduce an addition element of heterogeneity which will further complicate the already difficult problems of administration”¹² (MRA, Birthday session, June 1927, P. 4-5).

Murugesam Pillai, Pleaded for the starting of boarding homes in six district headquarters, beginning with Bangalore, which became materialized shortly afterwards. He further asked for extension of facilities in terms of drinking water wells and lands to be given on darkhast.

In June 1931, he strongly voiced the feeling that “now a days, there were many qualified non-Brahmins and that it was no longer true to say that intelligence was the monopoly of any particular community”.¹³ (MRA, Birthday Session, June 1931, P. 219). This was in contrast to the statement made by Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar on 24th June, 1918. Maharaja Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar of Mysore in a reply to the address of the Non-Brahmin deputation had said, ‘I must tell you that it is far from my desire that any community should in any way be penalized on account of its caste simply because it has worked hard and utilized fully the opportunities for advancement which are open to all my subjects. For I believe I have in the Brahmin community as loyal subjects as any among my people. Nor can I for a moment forget the eminent services rendered in the past and are still being rendered to my House and State by the representatives of that gifted community.”¹⁴ (Speeches by His Highness Sri Krishnaraja Wadiyar Bahadur, Maharaja of Mysore 1902-1920, Govt press, 1921, P. 223). Since Murugesam Pillai felt that the depressed classes had made much head way in the acquisition of intelligence, he now wanted that, “other things being equal, it was

necessary to show preference to his community in matter of recruitment.”¹⁵ (MRA, Birthday Session, June 1931, P. 219)

The other grievances’ addressed by Murugesam Pillai was with regard to the coolies working in the estates. There coolies, he said had become worse than slaves. He felt that, if a cooly once took an advance from his master, he would have to be at his mercy always. The masters not maintaining correct accounts would result in the coolies being kept under perpetual subjection. He further said that, “the labourers had to work in many cases for 22 hours out of 24 and the food given to them was not even fit for dogs.”¹⁶ (MRA, Dasara Session, October 1932, P.70). Hence, he was not in favour of the Breach of Contract Act.

Before the introduction of survey and settlement, lands were under the Batayi system. Under this system, the Totis and Talaries (Talwars) had to guard the crops of the villagers. The villagers in return for this favour had to pay the ‘Miras’ to these servants. ‘Miras’ was payment to be made to the Totis and Talaries in lieu for their service rendered to the villagers. However, with the introduction of Survey and Settlement, these village servants were not rendering any help to the raiyats. Hence, in October 1924, there was a move in the Mysore Representative Assembly to discontinue the payment of Miras to Totis and Talaries.¹⁷ (MRA, Dasara Session, October 1924, P.137). Murugesam Pillai defending the Miras paid to the village servants said, that they were very hard working people and hence they are expected to get Miras. But the reality was that this expectation was not always realized, with the end result that they got nothing. They were expected to get something only in lieu of favour from particular individuals. Since their expectations were hardly materialized, Pillai was in favour of continuation of mamul under which they would get some rate from the raiyats.

These were only some of the efforts attempted by Murugesam Pillai in realizing the unfulfilled tasks of his community in the princely state of Mysore.

CONCLUSION

Mysore, the so called ‘Model State’ in the context of its pioneering efforts in matters of industrial and scientific advancement, was no less so, in so far as social progress was concerned. The myriad luminaries who were in the service of the princely government like the many efficient Dewans and men like C.R. Reddy, K.T. Bashyam, H.C. Dasappa, Kamalamma, H. Dasappa, P. Subbarama Chetty and Murugesam Pillai, to name only a few were torch bearers to the social change. These and a number of other intellectual dignitaries contributed immensely in evolving a favourable atmosphere in the princely state of Mysore.

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