



G. SUBRAMANIYA IYER: A CATALYST FOR LABOUR UPLIFTMENT

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Introduction

In the late 19th century, G. SubramaniaIyer's interest in social reform focused on improving the lives of newly emerging workers in colonial India, particularly cotton factory workers, sack factory workers, and coal mining workers. As the Swadeshi Movement gained momentum following Lord Curzon's announcement of the Bengal Partition in 1905, Iyer's public life began amidst a backdrop of socio-political change, which led him to leave his career as a teacher and become a freedom fighter.

Agricultural Labourers

G. SubramaniaIyer wrote the 11th unit under the heading "The Agricultural Labourers" in his book, "Some Economic Aspects of British Rule in India". Here he has briefed the grave plight of the AdiDravidars who were the majority of the agricultural labourers along with the miseries of the agricultural labourers. The following passages serve as an instance. 'In Southern India or in the Presidency of Madras, the class of field labourers constitute a substantial proportion of the total population, being about seven millions or 20 per cent, of the whole. They consist of a number of castes of great antiquity and ethnological interest. Some of these castes are: 1,The Paraiyah numbering about two millions and inhabiting the Tamil Country: 2, the Palli, more numerous than the first, numbering over two millions also found in the Tamil country: 3,the Pallans found chiefly in the Districts of Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Madura and Tinnevely, about 800,000 in number: 4, the Malaswho number about 1,400,000 and who are the Pariahs of the Telugu Country: and 5, other Castes of less numerical importance living in certain limited areas of the Presidency. Of these the Pariahs and Pallis are the most important, not only in regard to their qualities as agricultural labourers, as sepoys, and as domestic and menial servants under alien residents of India. They are intelligent, enterprising and honest. They possess a good physique, and are capable of much endurance. These mostly profess Hinduism as their religion. Many have become converts to Christianity, especially in the more Southern Districts of the Tamil Country'.¹

Apart from the four Varnas of the Hindu Social groups, there existed another group that was 'Avarnar' (the Untouchables). The Northern language law books 'Smiruthi' indicates how these people have to be isolated in the public social life. The following regulations from the Manu Dharma Sastras can be indicated as instances.

'But the dwellings of kandalas and sivapakas shall be outside the village, they must be made Apapatras and their wealth (shall be) dogs and donkeys. (Manu X; 51).

Their dress (shall be) the garments of the dead,(they shall eat) their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornaments,and they must always wander from place to place. (Manu X; 52).

A man who fulfils a religious duty, shall not seek intercourse with them; their transactions (shall be) among themselves, their marriages with their equals. (Manu X; 53).

Their food shall be given to them by others (than an Aryan giver) in a brokendish; at night they shall not walk about in village and in towns. (Manu X;54).²

The following data throws light on the plight that prevailed during the period of G.SubramaniaIyer.

'They are not allowed to enter or pass through the village and when they talk to a person belonging to a higher caste, they must stand at a distance, lest their approach should communicate pollution-A more abject condition is hardly possible to conceive than that of these long-suffering, but most useful, classes of peoples. Still, it must be acknowledged that the caste landowners of the village treat these people not without consideration or Sympathy'.³

The agricultural labourers were subjected to various forms of social exclusion, which further exacerbated their already precarious economic condition. They were denied access to basic amenities like education, healthcare, and sanitation. The plight of the agricultural labourers was further compounded by the fact that they were forced to work under inhumane conditions, with long working hours, meager wages, and no social security.

¹G.SubramaniaIyer, Some Economic aspects of British Rule in India, 1903, p.48.

²Buhler.G., (Translator), 2006, The Laws of Manu, MotilalBanarsidass Publishers, Delhi, p.414.

³G.SubramaniaIyer , Some Economic aspects of British Rule in India, 1903, p.48.

Emigration of the Agricultural Labourers

The village farmers chose the British hilly gardens as their abode during their grave situation. They worked as day labourers in hilly farms where they cultivated tea, coffee and rubber. Hence they emigrated offshore. G.SubramaniaIyer quoted the following news that was published in the “Madras Mail” as proof:

‘The Pariahs have found it impossible to live under the old conditions, and after years of mute endurance, are shaking the dust of their native land from their feet and going out to discover what a new world will offer them. The exodus seems to afford proof positive that the pressure of hunger on the lives of the lowest. And is far greater than has ever been admitted by the authorities who are responsible for the condition of the people in times of scarcity. We are asked to believe that the people will not travel five miles to obtain Government employment on famine test works. While we have before our eyes proof that many of them are only too willing to cross the black water and pledge themselves to hired service for long years in strange lands. We are told that they will not accept famine labour at famine rates: but here they are waiting for ships to carry them across the sea willing to dare its dangers, rather than endure hunger at home’⁴

It was alleged that the instigation of the Christian missionaries had also been one of the reasons for the occurrence of such emigration to these places. G.SubramaniaIyer has also criticised this as follows,

‘The activity of Christian missionaries in the field of proselytism is another cause which drags away numbers of these poorer classes from their old occupation in the Hindu villages into fresh occupations, mostly non-agricultural. There is no part of India where the population of Native Christians has recently increased more rapidly than in Southern India, and unlike those in most of Northern India, the converts to Christianity in this Presidency are recruited almost entirely from the classes of Hindus which are lowest in the social scale. These classes being exceedingly poor, it is no wonder that they are easily tempted to quit the fold where their ancestors have lived for centuries and to enter that of the Christian faith in times of difficulty’⁵

He had also indicated as follows how the planters would convince the agricultural labourers and take them along with them:

‘Though the labourer is supposed to accept service under the planter by a voluntary contract, still every one knows that the contract is a farce, and he no more knows about his contract than the man in the moon. The maistry goes about the country with a bag of money: he goes into villages, and pries into the secret quarrels and differences of families, and, by plenty of false promises, allures the discontented male or female member of the family away from the village. He does not tell his victim whether he is taking him or her, whether the place of destination is near or far off, or beyond the seas. The would-be labourer on the planter’s estate has no idea of the nature of his work, of the wages he will receive, of his treatment from the planter, from the manager or the magistrate’⁶

Similarly he has also pointed out the plight of the mine workers and about their wages. These mine workers had once been agricultural labourers. It would be relevant to quote what Bibin Chandra has assessed the work of SubramaniaIyer who exposed the plight of the village farmers in his works. “G.SubramaniaIyer was also the First and the only nationalist economist to study the Problems of agricultural labour.”⁷

Formation of Labour Class

The rapid growth of the working class in India was a direct outcome of the colonial economic policies, which led to the displacement of traditional artisans and peasants. As a result, many Indians were forced to seek employment in the modern industries and mines that were established by the British. The working class in India was characterized by its diversity. However, despite their differences, they shared a common experience of exploitation and oppression at the hands of the colonial rulers and the native bourgeoisie. The formation of the working class in India was a significant development. This new class of workers was concentrated in urban areas. The growth of the working class also led to the emergence of a new urban culture, marked by the rise of slums, tenements, and working-class neighborhoods. In the period of 1880-81, cotton mills, jute mills and coal mines employed 47,955, 35,235 and 11,969 operatives respectively. By 1905-06, however, the dimensions of this new class had reached respectable proportions which led cotton mills, jute mills and coal mines to provide employment to 212,720, 144,879 and 89,995 persons, respectively. Nearly 700,000 workers were employed in modern factories, worked by mechanical power, alone.⁸ As the working class grew in size and strength, it began to organize itself to demand better wages, working conditions, and social justice. The Indian labour movement, which emerged in the early 20th century, played a crucial role in mobilizing the working class and advocating for their rights.

Condition of Labourers

The labourers who worked in these industries worked for 11 ½ to 14 hours. In 1887 when electricity was discovered their working time increased from 12 ½ to 16 hours. In certain industries they were not permitted to take lunch intervals and were made to eat amidst their work. They were scheduled just 15 days leave per year. Above all, women worked up to 11 hours. Most cruel was the condition of children from 7 to 12 years of age who worked for at least 9 hours. The Industry Act of 1891 however amended the age from 7 to 9 and decreased the working hours from 9 hours to 7 hours. On the other hand, in England, laborers had 88 holidays with 52 Sundays and 52 half working Saturdays.⁹

⁴G.SubramaniaIyer, Some Economic aspects of British Rule in India, 1903, p.49.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷Bipan Chandra, The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India, People’s Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, p.389

⁸Bipan Chandra, The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India, People’s Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, p.323.

⁹ Ibid, p.324.

The industrialists of India opposed the amendment of the Industry Act that was made in 1891, according to which the working hours was minimally reduced and a short span of time was given for them to rest. In such a condition, the Industrialists of England too wished to start business in India, as labourers were available in India for low wages. Hence they too opposed this act along with the Indian capitalists. This situation persisted until the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, who championed the cause of labour rights in India. His relentless efforts led to the formation of the Trade Union Act in 1926, which aimed to protect the interests of workers and improve their working conditions. The Act enabled workers to form trade unions, bargain collectively, and strike against exploitative employers. Gradually, the working hours began to decrease, and the concept of paid leave and social security started to take shape.

Indifference of the National Leaders

The Indian intellectuals and the national leaders were not concerned about the Indian labourers who worked for long hours in the modern industries which were formed due to the colonial rule. Ramesh Dutt neither did mention about the plight of these labourers in the two collections of his book, "The Economic History of India" nor in the various essays that he wrote nor in the number of speeches that he delivered. Even the national leader GopalakrishnaGokhale failed to mention about the labourers in the public meetings and his speeches in the parliament. SurendranathBannerji, another national leader expressed his sympathetic feeling alone. The Indian National Congress did not execute any resolution in favour of the Indian labourers. The Indian magazines such as the "Amrita Bazar Patrika", "The Hindu", "The Mahratta", "The Kesari", "The Indu Prakash", "The Dhyam Prakash", "The Native Opinion", "The Advocate", and "The Tribune" also did not discuss the welfare of the labourers.¹⁰

Even G.SubramaniaIyer remained in the similar state of mind initially. Bibin Chandra commented on this as, "As editor of the Hindu till the end of the 19th century, G.SubramaniaIyer was more or less hostile to the interests of the factory labourers".¹¹

But there happened to be a change in the attitude of G.SubramaniaIyer regarding the labourers in the early 20th century. Bibin Chandra had also commented on this change as follows, 'It was, however ,G.SubramaniaIyer who made a systematic study of the labour question in his article, 'Our Labour Problem', in the Hindustan Review and KayasthaSamachar of August 1901, and in his book, Some Economic Aspects of British Rule in India, published in 1903. He was also the first national leader to try to look at the question from a consistently pro-labour angle'.¹²

In the reference that follows these lines he had distinguished his previous stand as follows, 'But he obviously acquired this pro-labour attitude some time near the close of the 19th century, because as editor of the Hindu, a responsibility which he relinquished only in 1900, he had consistently taken a pro- employer and anti-labour stand'¹³ This change in attitude is significant as it highlights the growing awareness among Indian intellectuals and national leaders about the plight of labourers.

G. SubramaniaIyer and the Labourers

By this time, capitalism had emerged as a result of the colonial rule which resulted in the formation of the new group called the 'labourers' in India where handicrafts and agriculture alone were the prime occupation. G.SubramaniaIyer has also distinguished between the ancient village labourers and these newly formed labourers as follows,

'In the changed industrial and economic condition of to-day, the great concentration of capital and the massing of thousands of the employed have brought about new problems. In the old times, master and men lived and worked together there was a daily point of contact, a continuous personal touch. To-day all is changed. The employer, in many cases, is as much of an absentee as were the nobles in France in the latter part of the eighteenth century'.¹⁴

It is noteworthy to mention that G.SubramaniaIyer had written as follows in the preface of the above mentioned book,

'.....the following pages I have put together the re-suits of my studies during a pretty lengthy period of my journalistic career. Since I gave up my connection with the Hindu, I have been able to make a special study of Indian financial and economic questions, and my impression has been strengthened that the time has come when our public men should distinguish between the different branches of politics and devote themselves to their study with a due sense of proportion as to their relative impotence.The great bulk of the Indian press mainly concerns itself with what may be called administrative politics'.¹⁵

The book 'Some Economic Aspects of British Rule in India' of G.SubramaniaIyer served as the base for Bibin Chandra's assessment of him. However let us discuss about G.SubramaniaIyer's views on the welfare of the Indian labourers in this book.

G.SubramaniaIyer's observation highlights the plight of Indian labourers during the British colonial rule. The exploitation of labourers was further exacerbated by the lack of uniformity in wages across different regions. This disparity in wages led to a significant decrease in the purchasing power of labourers, making it difficult for them to afford basic necessities.

'It is a well-known fact that, within the last 20years, the prices of provisions have increased from 25 to 50 per cent, while the rates of wages have remained more or less stationary. The consequence is what Mr. W.C. Bonnerjee related to an interviewer in Landon, that the lower middle classes and the labouring classes have to pay for their articles of food nearly twice as much as was paid some years ago. The wages are not uniform everywhere,

¹⁰Bipan Chandra, The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1991, p.357.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, p.387.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴Iyer,G.Subramania, Some Economic aspects of British Rule in India,1903, p.44.

¹⁵Iyer, G.Subramania, Some Economic aspects of British Rule in India, 1903, p.1.

Within the same area, the wages vary for the same kind of work; and for different kinds of work, according to their nature, different rates of wages are paid'.¹⁶

Moreover he considered that the fact that the number of labourers which was more than the need was the cause for the minimization of wages. He specified this as 'the Law of Supply and Demand in Their Operation'.

G.SubramaniaIyer's Contribution

It was during the era of the Swadeshi movement that labour strikes were conducted with the support of the leaders of the Nationalist movement to improve the working condition of the labourers and the hike in their wages as its priority. BalaGangadharTilak from Bombay and V.O.Chidambaram from Tamilnadu ought to be mentioned here. G. SubramaniaIyer did not involve himself in the job of establishing trade association and mobilizing the labourers such as this people. The Congress movement did not emerge as a mass movement during his period. These were stabilised only after the establishment of the Swadeshi Movement. However being a middle class intellectual, with the help of the government reports and the books, G.SubramaniaIyer expressed with sympathy the plight of the labourers of India and Tamilnadu and worked for their welfare and upliftment.

Notwithstanding his limitations, G. SubramaniaIyer's contributions to the labour movement cannot be overlooked. Through his writings, he brought to the forefront the deplorable conditions of the labourers, highlighting their struggles and hardships. His works served as a catalyst, inspiring many to take up the cause of labour welfare and reform. His intellectual contributions played a significant role in shaping the discourse around labour rights and welfare in India during that era.

Conclusion:

The condition of the agricultural labourers during the period of G. SubramaniaIyer was one of utter despair and hopelessness. They were subjected to social exclusion, economic exploitation, and political marginalization. The formation of the working class in India during the colonial period was a pivotal moment in the country's history. It marked a significant shift from traditional occupations to modern industrial employment and laid the foundation for the growth of a modern class-based society. The history of labour laws in India is a testament to the struggle and sacrifice of workers who fought against exploitation and oppression. The amendments to the Industry Act of 1891 and the subsequent formation of the Trade Union Act in 1926 marked a significant milestone. Today, India has a robust labour law framework that protects the rights of workers and ensures their welfare.

G.SubramaniaIyer's work "Some Economic Aspects of British Rule in India" provides valuable insights into the exploitation of Indian labourers during the colonial period. His observations on the wage disparity, employment insecurity, and the impact of British rule on the Indian economy are still relevant today. Iyer's work serves as a reminder of the need for Indian leaders to prioritize economic issues and to develop policies that promote the welfare of Indian labourers. Moreover, the chapter supports historian Bipin Chandra's assertion that G. SubramaniaIyer was the first national leader to champion the cause of workers, emphasizing his pioneering efforts in this area. The chapter discusses G. SubramaniaIyer's keen interest in the labor conditions that emerged under British rule, focusing on plantation workers, cotton and sack factory laborers, and coal mine laborers.

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The authors stated that they have no potential conflicts of interest related to this article's research, authorship, or publication.

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¹⁶Ibid, p.52.

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