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POLITICAL AWAKENING AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE DRAVIDIAN LEGACY

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ABSTRACT :

The period from 1870 to 1920 witnessed a significant political awakening in the Madras Presidency. The expansion of modern education, growth of newspapers, emergence of political associations, and development of representative institutions encouraged new forms of political participation. Increasing competition for education, government employment, and political representation also contributed to the emergence of non-Brahmin consciousness. The formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation, popularly known as the Justice Party, in 1916 marked an important stage in the organisation of non-Brahmin political interests. The Home Rule Movement and the constitutional reforms of 1919 further expanded the political sphere. These developments laid the institutional and ideological foundations for later Dravidian politics, particularly its emphasis on social justice, communal representation, equality, regional identity, and opposition to caste-based dominance. Thus, the political awakening of the Madras Presidency between 1870 and 1920 played a crucial role in shaping the foundations of the Dravidian legacy in South India.

Keywords: *Political Awakening; Madras Presidency; Provincial Politics; Non-Brahmin Movement; Justice Party; Home Rule Movement; Social Justice*

Introduction

The period between 1870 and 1920 was a decisive phase in the political history of the Madras Presidency. During these five decades, the Presidency witnessed the gradual transformation of political life from limited elite participation to organised provincial politics. New forms of political association, education, journalism, social reform and representative institutions created an environment in which different social groups began to articulate their interests. The emergence of provincial politics in Madras cannot be understood simply as an extension of Indian nationalism. Although the Indian National Congress played an important role, political developments in the Presidency also reflected local social divisions, caste identities, economic changes and competition for government employment and educational opportunities. By the early twentieth century, these developments contributed to the rise of the non-Brahmin movement and eventually the Justice Party, which became one of the principal institutional foundations of what later came to be known as the Dravidian political tradition.

The Madras Presidency and the Colonial Political Order

The Madras Presidency was one of the largest administrative regions of British India. It included large parts of present-day Tamil Nadu as well as areas that later became parts of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Odisha. Its population was linguistically, socially and culturally diverse. British colonial rule introduced new administrative institutions and reorganised existing political and economic structures. The establishment of modern courts, revenue administration, municipalities, educational institutions and legislative councils created new opportunities for sections of the Indian population to participate in public affairs. However, political participation remained highly restricted. The early colonial political system was dominated by educated and economically influential groups. English education became particularly important because knowledge of English and access to modern education enabled individuals to enter professions such as law, teaching, journalism and government service.

Growth of Education and the Political Awakening

One of the most important foundations of political awakening in the Madras Presidency was the expansion of modern education. Missionary institutions, government schools and colleges produced a growing number of educated Indians. Universities and professional institutions helped create a new political intelligentsia. Education provided access not only to employment but also to political ideas such as liberalism, constitutionalism,

nationalism and representative government. The educated population began to question aspects of colonial administration. Newspapers and journals became important instruments for political communication. Public debate expanded beyond traditional local structures and increasingly involved provincial questions.

Early Political Associations and the Emergence of Provincial Politics

Before mass political movements developed, political activity was mainly conducted through associations and petitions. Educated Indians formed organisations to communicate their demands to the colonial government. The early political elite generally believed that constitutional methods could bring gradual reforms. Petitions, representations to government officials and appeals to British political institutions were common methods of political activity. The formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 gave Indian political activity a broader national framework. Madras became an important centre of Congress activity, and several prominent political leaders from the Presidency participated in the organisation.

Caste, Representation and the Non-Brahmin Question

The question of caste representation became one of the defining issues of Madras politics. Brahmins were disproportionately represented in several modern professions, especially education, law and government employment. This did not mean that Brahmins controlled every aspect of society, but their presence in the new administrative and professional institutions became a major source of resentment among sections of the non-Brahmin population. Non-Brahmin political consciousness developed gradually. It was influenced by social reform movements, competition for education and employment, and the desire of emerging middle and landed groups to secure a greater share of political power.

The Home Rule Movement

The First World War created a new political environment throughout India. In Madras, the Home Rule movement became an important force in the political awakening of the Presidency. Annie Besant played a major role in organising the Home Rule League from Madras. The movement demanded greater self-government for India while initially working within a constitutional framework. The Home Rule agitation expanded political participation and brought political questions before a wider public. Public meetings, speeches, newspapers and political organisations helped transform the nature of political mobilisation. Washbrook argues that the Home Rule movement represented one of the major developments that transformed Madras politics between 1914 and 1917. The political environment of the Presidency changed rapidly, and the Home Rule League became a major challenge to the colonial government.

The Rise of the Justice Party

The most important institutional development in the final years of the period was the formation of the South Indian Liberal Federation, popularly known as the Justice Party. The organisation emerged in 1916 in the context of growing non-Brahmin political mobilisation. Important figures associated with its formation included P. Theagaraya Chetty, T. M. Nair and C. Natesa Mudaliar. The Justice Party sought greater representation for non-Brahmins in government employment, education and political institutions. Its political position was expressed clearly in the **Non-Brahmin Manifesto of 1916**. The manifesto criticised the disproportionate influence of Brahmins in public institutions and demanded greater opportunities for non-Brahmin communities. The movement therefore introduced a new vocabulary into provincial politics: communal representation, social justice and proportional access to public institutions.

The Justice Party and the British Government

The relationship between the Justice Party and the colonial government was complex. The Justice Party was critical of Brahmin dominance and Congress nationalism, but it did not initially demand immediate independence from British rule. Many Justice leaders believed that British constitutional reforms could provide opportunities for non-Brahmin communities. This position distinguished the Justice Party from the increasingly nationalist Congress movement.

The colonial government also had an interest in supporting political groups that opposed Congress nationalism. This created a political relationship between the government and sections of the non-Brahmin leadership.

The Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms and the Elections of 1920

The period culminated in the constitutional changes associated with the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms. The Government of India Act of 1919 introduced dyarchy in the provinces. The new system increased the importance of legislative politics and provided Indian ministers with responsibility for certain areas of administration. The elections held in 1920 marked an important turning point. The new provincial legislature was considerably larger and more representative than earlier legislative councils. It provided an important institutional arena for provincial political competition. The Indian National Congress chose to boycott the elections as part of its broader Non-Cooperation strategy. The Justice Party, however, participated in the elections.

Foundations of the Dravidian Legacy

The political developments between 1870 and 1920 laid several foundations for the later Dravidian movement. First, they established the importance of **social representation** in politics. The demand for greater representation of non-Brahmins eventually became a central element of Dravidian political thought. Second, the period encouraged the development of a political identity based partly on opposition to social hierarchy. Although the early Justice Party was dominated by elite non-Brahmin groups, its political language created space for later movements to address caste inequality more radically. Third, the period strengthened the connection between politics and regional society. Political questions were increasingly discussed in terms of the specific social and cultural conditions of South India rather than only through an all-India nationalist framework.

Limitations and Contradictions

The rise of provincial politics was not an entirely progressive or inclusive process. Political participation remained restricted by class, caste, gender and education. Many rural communities had little direct access to political institutions. Women were largely excluded from formal political participation. Similarly, the non-Brahmin movement itself contained internal inequalities. Wealthier non-Brahmin groups did not necessarily share the same interests as labourers or oppressed communities. The relationship between the Justice Party and Adi-Dravida communities illustrates this problem. Scholarship on Madras politics shows that claims of a common non-Brahmin interest could conceal significant differences between social groups.

Conclusion

The period from 1870 to 1920 was a formative era in the political history of the Madras Presidency. During these fifty years, colonial institutions, modern education, economic change, journalism, political associations and representative reforms transformed the nature of political activity. The emergence of provincial politics created a new arena in which different social groups could organise and express their interests. The Indian National Congress and the Home Rule movement contributed to the growth of nationalism, while the non-Brahmin movement developed a distinctive politics centred on representation and social equality. The formation of the Justice Party in 1916 was particularly significant. It institutionalised non-Brahmin political demands and challenged the existing distribution of power in education, government employment and public institutions. Although the Justice Party represented primarily elite non-Brahmin interests in its early years and had complicated relationships with other oppressed communities, it nevertheless became an important foundation for the later Dravidian political tradition.

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