

## **M.C.RAJAH, THE BUILDER OF MODERN DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dalit society got new identification in India because of the impact of western education. This fact help to emerge the number of leaders in this society. For example, M.C.Rajah, (M.C.R) is the most familiar architecture of Tamil Nadu. M.C.R was a multi-personality thinker, as a teacher, politician, writer, and social reformer. He well understands without education there are unable to get Dalit consciousness. Therefore he focused spite of education on that society. He participated in a number of political achievements and educational commissions. His every movement form a new platform of Dalit emancipation. This paper discussed his educational achievement and Indian Politics in Colonial Times.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Education, Political, Madras Presidency, M.C.R

### **Early Life**

One of the major Dalit voices of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Rao Bahadur Mylai Chinnathambi Rajah, popularly known as M.C.Rajah,(1883-1943) he was born at St.Thomas Mount, Madras.<sup>1</sup> Who at the regional as well as national level raised his voice for freedom, justice, and equal rights of Dalit. It is a different story that in spite of being the first Dalit leader in the Provincial Legislative Council and also the first Dalit leader in the Central Legislative Assembly we hardly come across any reference to the works of M.C. Rajah and his struggle for the cause of the Dalit emancipation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Political Careers**

He was a secretary of the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha in 1916 and who presided over the All India Depressed Classes Association since its inception in 1928.<sup>3</sup> M.C.R was fortunate to have access to education. He studied in Christian Missionary School and then the Madras Christian College which according to him helped in learning the spirit of tolerance. Being born in a Dalit family he could feel the sufferings of Dalit from his own experiences and was enlightened enough to understand that how in the name of caste system a vast section of Indian society was denied of social justice and equal rights for such a long period. He worked as a teacher-trainer at Teacher Training College,

Saidapet, and as a lecture in Voorhees College, Vellore. M.C.R was elected to the Madras Legislative Council, representing the Justice Party. He was also Deputy Leader, South Indian Liberal Federation in the Council; Vice-President, Hindu Mahasabha; President, Madras Temple Entry Sangam; Secretary, Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, 1916; and President, All-India Depressed Classes Association, in 1926.<sup>4</sup> M.C.R, a nominated Dalit Member in Madras Legislative Council and the later in Central Assembly pioneered the cause of depressed classes in the Legislatures. He had raised the innumerable question which concerned the Dalit in Madras Legislative Council. Beginning from 1919 till 1939 M.C.R was a member of either provincial or central legislature. In 1919 itself, M.C.R recommended in the Legislative Council the Panchamas that is Depressed Classes, should be admitted in the Schools.<sup>5</sup> In 1922, he proposed the amount of the scholarship given to Depressed Classes should be increased.

### **M.C.R. Role on Dalit Education**

Realizing the importance of education as the liberating force M. C. R appealed to the government for providing better opportunities for education to children of Dalit families. His concern for the education of Dalits caught the attention of the government education department. He was instrumental in securing scholarships, building hostels for Dalits, and also setting up a Dravidian School in 1936 at Nungambakkam.<sup>6</sup> He was a valuable Dalit leader for Madras Legislative Council. He proposed a number of resolutions on Dalit welfare, yet, participated in more debates. On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1922 debate on **scholarships for pupils of the Depressed Classes**. Some members do not like to move this bill. But M.C.Rajah has moved this bill. The council was permitted to move the resolution, 34 members voting in favour of such permission, and two against. Rajah stated his argument, "Sir, I thank the House for giving me leave to move the resolution. The resolution is as follows:-

**That this Council recommends to the Government that for the next five year not less than 50 per cent of the scholarships awarded by the Government in educational and industrial institutions under their control be reserved for and given to the members of Hindu Adi-Dravida and other depressed communities.**

*Sir, my community is in need of secondary education, and the great obstacle in the way of the secondary education of my boys is poverty. Moreover fees are abolished, it is, I think, iniquitous to debar the children of the poor from the benefits of the secondary education. If this resolution is passed, it will be an incentive to boys of my community to continue for higher education. If secondary education is necessary for the full development of the brain power of the nation, its access to the poor must be as possible to take advantage of the benefits of secondary education. Education, Sir, is the panacea for all evils for the people of my community; and if they go in for higher education it will*

*benefit not only them, not only the community, but it will benefit the whole nation. Moreover, Sir, this resolution is a very modest one. It says that this concession should be extended only for five years. I now request the House to accept the resolution.*<sup>7</sup>

M.C.Rajah's leadership to Dalits for emancipation from social oppression influenced the British government to nominate him as a Dalit representative in the Madras Legislative Council and thus he earned the honour of being the first Dalit leader to be nominated in the Provincial Legislative Council. Again he had the unique distinction of becoming the first Dalit representative nominated by the government to the Central Legislative Assembly. On behalf of Dalits he gave representation to the government committees for administrative reforms to safeguard the interests of Dalits. He was president of the All India Depressed Classes Association for many years. M.C.R and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar contemporary leaders on Dalit Society, many times both of traveling one aim, it is education through Dalit emancipation, yet, at the same time political and congress relationships many contradiction.

M.C.R. criticized the Elementary Education Act passed by the Madras Government on the ground that it did not envisage any idea of social reform. He put forth the argument that though the Justices wanted the 'Adi-Dravidas' to take advantage of Elementary Education, they did not prefer the idea of 'untouchables' giving up their old vocations or professions.<sup>8</sup> Non-Brahmin efforts to mobilize the Adi-Dravida to the ranks of the Justice Party continued well after Dr.Nair's Spur Tank Road, Madras address and, eventually, a sizeable section of the Adi-Dravida represented in the Madras Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha, of which M.C.Rajah was member, did respond favourably to the Justice party's ideological and political overtures.

On 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1922 Rajah was moving one important bill on the exemption from examination fees in the case of depressed classes. **“What this Council recommends to the Government that candidates for the Secondary School-Leaving Certificate Examination belonging to the Adi-Dravida and other depressed classes be exempted from the payment of the examination fees.”**

*Rajah start his argument on this bill, “I am sure that there will be no opposition to this request which I make on behalf of my community. Your sympathy with my people in their depressed condition, and with their attempts to raise themselves will, I have no doubt, prompt you to give the little relief which I ask for. You know perhaps in a general way, but you have probably not realized through experience what a sad plight my people are in –sunk in poverty and with none of the hope and comforts which make life worth living. It is rarely that our people think of educating their sons, and if a few of them send their children to schools, they withdrew them by the time they reach the first form. And you know the reason why they are withdrawn from school at such an elementary stage. They are not able to pay the school fees, even the half-fee which a benign*

*Government and a sympathetic Council have out of the abundance of their goodness sanctioned. How could they? Take the case of a domestic servant earning Rs.17 a month with which he has to keep alive himself, his wife and two children, or a coolie earning 10 annas a day for 26 days a month. He has to pay a rent of Rs.3 a month and to feed a wife and three children. Even suppose the women earn 4 annas a day. What does it all come to? About Rs.22 a month. How can he manage to educate a son? You may ask: 'Are there not men earning such low pay among the lower middle classes who manage to send their sons to school?'. It should be remembered that they have in more cases than one some ancestral property to fall back on, some well-to-do relatives to help them on etc. our people live a hand-to-mouth existence. If the man or the woman falls sick, the relief they get is from the so wear, with whom they mortgages their cooking vessels or their clothes and to whom they pay usurious interest. ”*

*“I say all this just to give you an idea of the struggle against poverty our people have to maintain. The poor boy who amidst such poverty is sent to school is stopped from school by the time he reaches the first form. Why, because his earning are required for the family.” “Referring to the report on public instruction published by the Government for the year 1917-1918, we see on page 30, Vol.I that the number of pupils belonging to the depressed classes reading in high schools appears as 77. Referring again to the reports published by Government for the year 1918-1919 on page 32, Vol.I, we find the number as 56 and referring to the same report for the year 1919-20, the number of boys reading in the high schools, belonging to the depressed classes, appears as 70. These figures give us an idea of the number of boys, belonging to the community, reading in the high school stage. From this it is obvious that only a very few, say, about a dozen, appear for the Secondary School-Leaving Certificate examination every year. On an average this will cost for the Government only a very small sum. It will be a great help, much appreciated in the darkness and poverty of our house and will point the way of hope and encouragement to some few boys who may up their minds to climb the ladder of education till they attain the degrees of the University.”*

*“If you wish well to my community, you will, I am confident, pass this resolution as gracefully as we shall view your acceptance of it gratefully.” “Finally, Rajah say on “I will be the last person to ask the Government to help the boys, belonging to my community, who are able to pay their school fees. Although concessions in school fees have been granted for poor boys, it is only on the production of a certificate of poverty. The Hon’ble the Minister for Education need not fear that rich boys will apply for this concession, and the Government will not grant this concession unless the boys produced the required certificate of poverty. I plead here on behalf of the poverty-stricken people and not for other, and since the Hon’ble the Minister for Education has given me the assurance that he is going to consider the matter I withdraw the resolution.”<sup>9</sup>*

M.C.Rajah exposed his educational rights on disusing on the Bill to provide for the reorganization of the Madras University, 1922. He say on, "I am sure the Council will not be surprised if I view this question from the standpoint of elementary education which is my special field of work, and of the depressed classes whose interests it is my birthright to defend. Others may view it as it affects the independence of colleges in Madras or the importance of those in the mufassal. Some may consider the question of whether the Bill was revolutionary in character or evolutionary. Some may question the possibility of the Bill achieving its professed aims..... The only thing I know is this: that the party (Justice Party) now in power having succeeded in placing the depressed classes under the trampling feet of the rich and the well-to-do by making their economic and their social progress depend upon the sweet will and tender mercy of local opinion brought to bear upon the District Collectors-having once I say tested the blood of the depressed classes –is hungering for more of their blood-this time by crippling their mental growth and educational progress through the strategic move of a measure intended to benefit the higher and the higher middle classes at the expense of the lower middle and the lower classes. I cannot help looking upon this measure as one step forward towards a new oligarchic goal and one step further away from the realization of democracy in this Presidency. As it is, the Indianization of the services in this presidency will mean more and more the filling of important posts with the friends and followers of the caste-ridden leaders and the exclusion of the depressed classes from schools on the score of deference to so-called respectable public opinion. The process of developing the non-Brahmin movement into an oligarchic and anti-democratic movement will be complete when funds that might be spent on elementary education are spent on university reform.<sup>10</sup>

### **M. C. R and Compulsory Education Rights**

He advocated free and compulsory education to Dalit. He advised the people of those classes to educate their children. He considered the British to be the liberator of the lower classes in India. M.C.R, proved himself as a great educationalist. He stated that education is the panacea for all the woes of the community. He evinced a keen and practical interest in the spread of western education. M.C.R served various educational committees. In 1917, nominated by H.E.Lord Penland to the Elementary Education Committee. In 1919, served on the Select Committee of the Elementary Education Bill. He was also a member of the Secondary Education Re-organization Committee, Tamil University, the advisory committee on education, and the Chengalpattu District Elementary Education Committee. In 1924, H.E.Lord Wellington nominated thirty members, M.R.Ry. Rao Bahadur M.C.Rajah, one of the nominees from L'Allegro, St.Thomas Mount in Madras.<sup>11</sup> M.C.R was the first member of the Senate in Madras University belonging to Dalit society. In 1926 he was nominated to the Paddison Hostel Committee. M.C.R with the co-operation of Mr.T.S.Ramaswamy Iyer founded a free

hostel for the benefit of the depressed class's students, the management of which was afterward taken over by the Government. In 1927 H.E.Lord Goschen recognized his wide experience in the educational field nominated him for the second time to the senate of the Madras University.<sup>12</sup>

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1937 M.C.Rajah opposed the introduction of Hindi at the school level in the Madras Presidency. *"I am not against introducing Hindi in the lower forms, but I am certainly against the introduction of Hindi as a subject of compulsory study. It may be introduced as an optional subject. The introduction of Hindi to my mind is not intended for economic or for social or for religious reasons. It carries with it more of a political odours. The main question is whether to make our provincial vernaculars the important subject of study for our boys or to bring in a foreign language like Hindi and make it a compulsory subject? English, Sir, is foreign; so also Hindi is foreign to us. Stress should be laid on our vernaculars. What I would like is to give a chance to Hindi by introducing it as an optional subject and then try if it will go down the throats of our people or not, or if it is acceptable to our school-going population. Language, Sir, is the vehicle of thought. What kind of thought are we going to develop in our children? Is it the Hindi thought or our vernacular thought? English has opened our eyes to the whole world and has created a sense of national unity. Tamil literature has got an ethical and practical ideology. Tamil, Sir, is the language of the Tamil people and the Tamil homes. Hindi cannot at any time become the Language of the Tamil people and Tamil homes. The introduction of English has already become. English stands in a unique position. English has been a unifying force."*<sup>13</sup>

M.C.R a staunch Gandhi supporter since 1932, he became a member of the executive council of the **Harijan Sevak Sangh**. The North Arcot District Harijan Conference was held on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1933 with M.C.Rajah, as the President and adopted resolutions supporting temple-entry.<sup>14</sup> He won the election in 1937 from Madras, where the local Congress, in recognition of his service, did not put up any candidate against him.<sup>15</sup> But in 1938 when he proposed to move a Temple Entry Bill, the Congress premier, Rajagopalachari, asked him to withdraw it. When he refused and moved his bill in due course, the premier himself stood up to oppose it on the ground that he would later propose another bill in the same line, but only for Malabar and not for the other districts. The bill was then defeated, with all Congress members, including the dalits, voting against it.<sup>16</sup> When Rajah complained to Gandhi, the letter advised him to 'trust C.R. (Rajaji) to do his best..... Go to him, reason with him and if you cannot persuade him, bear with him. That is my advice'. But his advice failed to convince a frustrated Rajah. About a month later he wrote to Gandhi in despair: 'I wish your followers in general and your chief representative in this Presidency in surrounded by sycophants, he lamented,

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who behaved well in his presence, but quickly forgot their promises and obligations when away from him.<sup>17</sup>

On 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1939 (General discussion of the budget for 1939-1940) M.C.Rajah discussing on budget allotment of scheduled caste, he want to increased money for Chidambaram Nandanar School and hostel. Continue he discussing; *“Regarding the question of educational facilities to the depressed classes, the Hon. the Minister has stated that the students were altogether exempted from paying fees in the Government Arts and Professional Colleges. Is it not true that these students are already in receipt of half-fee concessions or full-fee concessions from the Labour department? The real effect is that he is now only exempting these students from the payment of the other half-fee that too in respect of those who are paying half-fees, and this will mean nothing in the case of those that are in the enjoyment of full-fee concession. The extent of the benefit will be apparent if we remember that there are only half-a-dozen students in the whole of the Province who have been benefited from this concession. Therefore, it is not as if the depressed classes have been given very special concessions costing considerably to the Government.”*<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

M.C.R started his career as a teacher and decided that modern education could be the primary factor in changing the living conditions of the Dalit. He started a school and spread education among Dalit society. In order to claim political rights for dalit society, he led the Adi Dravida Mahajana Shangam and picturized the educational environment and poverty of the Dalit people to the attention of the British government and got many special concessions for the education and social welfare of these people. The government made him a member of the Madras Legislative Assembly. This made M.C.R to voice the condition of dalit society in the Legislative Assembly. The friendship with Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi made M. C. R a great national leader across Tamil Nadu.

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