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Tribulations Of Political Prisoners: An Inhumane Behaviour By Police During Salt Satyagraha In Madras Presidency

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Abstract

Indian people suffered a great torment under British administration were one of the important vicious act was the salt tax, formulated during 1882. Gandhi as a leader trailed millions of people against the British, by indulging their minds with National spirit consciousness and weaponised the salt as the central theme. Due to this circumstantial crisis, British in order to obliterate the rise of Nationalism they arrested and imprisoned the Political leaders at the nascent stage. British in order to stabilise their power introduced a strict and vigorous administration reforms by enforcing a separate police department to prevent Indians from taking salt. In this research, the researcher has specified the role of salt police officers and their inhumane behaviour against the salt satyagrahis in Madras Presidency during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Keywords: Civil Disobedience Movement, Political Prisoner, Police reforms, Tribulations and suffrages, Madras Presidency.

Introduction

The emergence of British administrative system in Indian state was a great agony where Indian society was stumbled and collapsed by the British judiciary system. Their system affected the citizens in all aspects, socially, economically and politically. One such important law that affected everyone equally was the salt tax. During 1882 by the law Indian Salt Act, British in order to economically stabilize themselves in the state affairs, taxed salt commodity from being bought, sold or manufactured in the state, where salt became conspicuous consumption. There were strict laws enforced, where an attempt to take salt were punished severely. A separate police department and Salt revenue department was introduced to safeguard the salt zone areas. These department officials were given direct powers to arrest, beat or fine the picketers at their own will, that led to rise of anger, humiliation and hatred among the people against the power.

The salt tax continued to prevail during the Non-cooperation Movement. After the non-cooperation movement's failure, Gandhi as a leader had no other go to take salt as an important weapon to fight against the British administration and led several marches all over the state. To nullify the salt marches British came up with arduous judicial system and severely punished the salt satyagrahis with strict Judicial norms. The police officials under the British power were arrogant and inhuman that caused several bloodsheds and mass killings of commoners and also the political leaders.

Impact of 1857 Revolt

The 1857 revolt was a turning point in the British administration, where it shattered a distinct relationship between British power and the Madras Indian officials. After the event multitude level of sepoys and police officials from Madras province were dismissed from their jobs. British in order to stabilise their power and to overcome the situation, appointed thousands of British officials to the posts and limited Indians entering into them. A separate police system was revived where a new act was propagated namely Madras Police Act of 1888.¹ By this act the police officials were classified under hierarchical divisions and given privileges of certain powers, functions and duties. Due to formulation of Salt march by Gandhi during 1920, British used police system as a weapon against the waging satyagrahis.

The vigorous salt law of British

Salt law was enforced in Madras state during 1882 by the power in order to tax on this important commodity, it was significant act that permitted the Government a monopoly over production of salt in salt zones.² This law prohibited people from manufacturing, collecting and even selling salt on communal bases. This law viciously made Britishers the upper hand, and people in order to use salt need to buy them at an exorbitant and extravagant price, that put a great burden on the economical weaker society.³ To substantiate the necessity of British to put salt law in India was due to its essentiality. Where each and every citizen of nation rich or poor need salt which is an essential dietary feature. So, in order to keep Indian people under

British monopoly, they have enforced severe laws to arrest the satyagrahis under various penal sanctions. The laws are, an attempt to sell, collect or manufacture salt is punishable, another law notably is Inland customs act of 1875,⁴ with this act the salt which sold without Officials approval is illegal, and legally officials opined, if people are found with salt Petre in any means of transportation including vessels, packages, conveyances is liable for confiscation and are detained.⁵ This strict laws triggered the masses into nationalism and they mobilised a mass movement against this salt law in form of a movement.

Formation of Civil Disobedience Movement in Madras Presidency

After a great agony and a failure of Non- Cooperation Movement, Gandhi as a leader in order to attain swaraj, came up with new political ideology and trailed people into National spirit consciousness. He going by Gramscian theory introduced war of Manoeuvre, which is a direct opposition against the Government and pulled the masses into a political advancement in social organisation. During 1930 after the rejection of Gandhi's two of eleven demands, his vision perceived on to one important suffrage, which was salt tax. Salt tax was one of the important taxes formulated during 1882, by which people of India can not buy, manufacture or sell the salt without paying a huge sum of taxation to British. Gandhi focusing on this important commodity established a movement against the Government called "Civil Disobedience Movement".⁶

The movement widely stirred the masses all over the state, in every nook and corner country, promulgating the idea of salt march. When Gandhi led the movement in the North in the name of Dandi march, the Southern provinces of Madras Presidency, led the march in the name of uppu satyagraha under the leadership of C. Rajagopalachari.⁷ The salt march was propagated in may parts of Madras state especially in Vedaranyam. Rajaji standing as a strong pillar of this movement⁸ headed with support of many political leaders including G. Ramachandra Iyer, Varadarajan, Annamalai, T.S.S. Rajan, Kalayanaraman, Rukumini Laksmipathy and many more. They initiated a collective action against these repressive laws like salt tax, forest right law and chaukidari law by playing a significant role in mobilising the masses and challenging the British authority.⁹ These initiatives highlighted the unity among different groups and their determination to resist colonial policies, despite the risks of arrest and repression.¹⁰

The salt marches were established in various places in and around Madras that reached the masses in planting the seed of national spirit consciousness. The Devanapatnam satyagraha was led by Nainappa pillai, Sholinganallur satyagraha was initiated by Sankara Iyer, Rameshwaram satyagraha was formulated by N.S. Ramaswamy Iyer, Tuticorin satyagraha by S. Palaniyandi Mudaliyar, Vedaranyam was led by Rajaji and also marches were set up in various regions like Veppalodai and Uvari.¹¹ The civil disobedience movement in Madras state, particularly in the coastal regions, was part of the larger movement. This movement involved various forms of protest, including boycotts of British goods, the refusal to pay taxes, and establishment of local self-governance. The salt tax also inspired political leaders in the coastal regions to produce their own

salt and challenge British laws.¹² Leaders in the region organised rallies, mobilised rural, spread self-reliance and nation spirit consciousness. The movement faced harsh repression from British officials, but significantly contributed to overall struggle for independence.

Tribulations of the Police officials

When the movement pulled the masses into the struggle, British lost control over the Madras state, they in order to tranquilize the opposition, came up with strict laws to arrest the political leaders. To dissipate the mass movement at nascent stage, Britishers introduced salt police department in salt zone areas and mobilised them into every town as watchers to systematically observe political activities of political leaders. At first the police officials raided houses door to door of all prominent political leaders and arrested and fined them under violation of salt act. The political leaders who refused to pay the penalties were tortured by officials, by taking their private properties for auctioning house and auctioned them against their will.

The police officials went to all salt zone areas and seized the pots and broke them into pieces. Buses with armed police officials encircled the salt zones areas and caused several bloodsheds in the process, where the salt satyagrahis in San Thomas beach, Madras beach etc.,¹³ were beaten inhumanly by lathis and cudgels and even shot dead¹⁴. The cities were encompassed by force and fire arms where the officials extensively used fire ammunitions and damaged the places, that led to satyagrahis going through severe physical violence and strong corporal punishments.

The police system during Civil Disobedience Movement were aggressive stakeholders and the allegiance to the social dynamics under the British administration. They propagated the plans accordingly and maintained a high sense of power in using all sorts of arrogance to the satyagrahis and showcased their dominion. The leverages they got under the Government, were the cause effect of this tribulations against the Political prisoners.

Tribulations inside prisons

The salt satyagrahis were arrested and imprisoned at a multitude level, where due to cramming they were imprisoned in huts and prison camps. They were segregated and tagged as “Political prisoners”, and were termed as ‘C’ class prisoners.¹⁵ While ‘A’ and ‘B’ class enjoyed privileges, the political prisoners were locked in a small cell where they were hurdled with other criminal offenders and also stifled them in a tenebrous space.¹⁶ The police officials followed strict norms, where they followed remission system inside prison walls. On basis of remission system, the political leaders were beaten by lathis, cudgels, whipping, physical trampling them with police boots, handcuffed to walls and even shot dead.

They were tortured inhumanly in means of all sort of arrogance including they were forced to eat food consisting of all sort of dust, dirt and even worms, leaving them with diseases spread without medication and healthcare also they were forced to do prison labour etc.,¹⁷ engender their condition even worse. This

remission system was cruel, brutal and unsympathetic behaviour caused political leaders promulgating a hunger strike inside prison walls.¹⁸ British officials to overcome the situation forcefully fed the prisoners and whipped them to adhere the rules. Due to this infliction of sufferings several political leaders including Gandhi opposed the police tribulations by newspapers, letters and speeches.¹⁹

The resistance of Political leaders against tribulations

The police behaviour on the satyagrahis was violent and vicious, Seeing the arduous act of police officials several political leaders condemned the officials about their inhumane treatment. In a political newspaper notably called as sutandira Sangu, they opined that the salt satyagrahis were beaten like dogs in hartals, strikes and prisons. In reporting to this maltreatment political leaders took initiative in formulating an All-parties conference to oppose the tribulations. But this conference was disbanded by, force entering into the forum and displayed arrogance. After this ferocious event a committee was set up to investigate the police arrogance but the committee was nonchalant and was not favourable to the political leaders.²⁰

Even though of this corporal treatment satyagrahis going through, in another dimension the police officials and also the Governors were promoted to higher posts for suppressing the Civil disobedience movement. Gandhi and other political leaders spread the news of inhumane treatment of British officials through their political speeches, newspapers and letters to the public, in order to bring out their buried struggles and sufferings for the freedom struggle into limelight. By propagating the condition of political prisoners, people took a new form of opposition, which is transforming prisons into political space. As going by Gandhi's ideology of prison bloomed as a politicised space where political prisoners indulged national spirit consciousness among people even from prison walls. They transformed their tribulations as a symbol of sacrifice for their nation and wanted to liberate from the hands of white man's burden.²¹

Conclusion

During 19th century, after hideous and arduous events of Rowlatt act, Jallianwala bagh massacre, Hunter commission and failure of Non-Cooperation movement, Gandhi going by Gramscian theory initiated Civil Disobedience Movement as "war of manoeuvre". This movement trailed every citizen of the nation in promulgating national spirit consciousness. In this serious oppositions, they were arrested and imprisoned at a multitude level, where they faced a repressive hardship in the hands of British, which circumstantially pushed them into sphere of choosing different political dimension, this transformed prison walls into politicised space.

They also mobilised their national unity by popularising the freedom struggle with ideology of Gandhi, which primarily focuses on sufferings as ineffable joy and a path to freedom. He in his newspaper Young India, titled "The fear of death" opined that, "all brave men meet death with smile on their lips and there is no room for foolhardiness in this non-violent war, and all must resist these oppressive laws".²² After Gandhi's

trailing message, pulled political prisoners in enchanting “swaraj over suffer”, where they were primarily primed with motto of suffer than to surrender.

The police officials during civil disobedience movement were showcased as an authoritative class. They were arrogant administrators and displayed high sense of power. Their role in safeguarding British power, outraged an anger and humiliation among political prisoner that led to formulation of Civil Disobedience Movement into a very successful mass movement. According to historians including Bipin Chandra opined that this movement played a key role in mobilising diversely populated group in connecting together for promulgating a great resistance against the British, that crumpled the power to a great degree.

ENDNOTE

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