

Comrade of the Working Class V. Subbiah 1924-54

V. Balachandar

Research Scholar(Ph.D.), Department of History, St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science (Autonomous) Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 May 2019

Keywords

Comrade, working class, Leader.

Corresponding Author

Email:balachandaraja[at]gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The People's Leader Comrade V. Subbiah a great humanitarian who has sacrificed his entire life for the welfare of the oppressed people of French – Indian Territory of Pondicherry. V. Subbiah lit the freedom fire among Pondicherrian and converted the movement into French – India freedom struggle. The political and social life of People's leader V. Subbiah started his public life with the service to scheduled caste. In December 1927, V. Subbiah attended the Congress Mahasabha meeting at Chennai headed by Dr. Ansari and became a freedom fighter. In the year 1933, he started 'Harijana Seva Sangam' on 17th February 1934, he invited Mahatma Gandhiji to Pondicherry While working in 'Harijana Seva Sangam' Freedom, Equality and Fraternity which are the democratic principles of French Revolution were denied in the French colony of Pondicherry in India. V. Subbiah happened to meet Jawaharlal Nehru in 1936 who induced him to go to France to launch a complain of the 30th July 1936 massacre.

After July 30 massacre in 1936, Subbiah intensified the struggle for liberating Pondicherry. A peculiar feature of Pondicherry liberation movement is that it was organized and presided over by the working class people. He was a peerless leader who converted Pondicherry liberation movement as people's movement a per the advice given by him V. Subbiah also started working for labour and national liberation movement and wished to start a new political party.. So during August 1937 he invited the leaders from different walks of life to start the political party in the name of Mahajana Sabha and Communist party in Pondicherry. This attempt to through light on the dynamic leader 'V. Subbiah the working class in Pondicherry. Thus V. Subbiah is a peerless political leader and patriot of 20th century.

Introduction

Soviet Union had a Lenin, China had a Mao Tse Tung, South Africa had a Nelson Mandela, India had a Mahatma Gandhi, and like this a man for Pondicherry is Comrade V. Subbiah. Subbiah was born on 7.2.1911 to the parents Varatharaja Naidu and Bangaru Ammal. In his student hood days, he organized 'Khadhar Cup' revolt against French and British imperialistic governments¹. In the year 1927, he visited Cuddalore along with his fellow students and had conversation with Mahatma Gandhiji who visited Cuddalore at that time².

In December 1927, Comrade V. Subbiah attended the Congress Mahasabha Meeting at Chennai headed by Dr. Ansari and became a freedom fighter³. In the year 1930, Comrade V. Subbiah started an association called "Indo-French Youth Club". In the year 1933, he started 'Harijana Seva Sangam' On 17th February, 1934 he invited Mahatma Gandhiji to Pondicherry. While working in 'Harijana Seva Sangam', He felt pathetic on seeing the plight of labourers and revolted against labourers working as slaves in French Cotton Mills⁴. He decided to struggle for their liberation. During the year 1934, V. Subbiah met comrade Amir Hyder Khan who had a plan of starting communist party in Chennai and Pondicherry along with comrade Sundaraiah through whom he was familiarised to communist ideology⁵. In the year 1934 he started the newspaper Swadhunthiram which helped to organize the workers politically. P. S. Mani, a history scholar has pointed out that 'Swadhunthiram' is the first Marxist magazine started in Tamil⁶.

Under the leadership of V. Subbiah, the workers were united. Workers from all the three cotton textiles mills in Pondicherry involved in massive struggle demanding right for trade union, wages hikes and right to work for 8 hours a day. In this struggle, 12 workers were shot dead by the French Police on 30th July, 1936. This was the heroic struggle against the authoritarian rule of French Imperialist forces. Consequently, the right to work for 8 hours was implemented in Pondicherry for the first time in Asian Continent. After July 30 massacre in 1936, comrade V. Subbiah intensified the struggle for liberating Pondicherry. A peculiar feature of Pondicherry liberation movement is that it was organized and presided over by the working class people. From 1936 to 1954 V. Subbiah experienced several hardships like underground life, living in exile, punishments including imprisonment, attempts to murder him, and burning his house. He was a peerless leader who converted Pondicherry liberation movement as people's movement.

Freedom, equality and fraternity which are the democratic principles of French Revolution were denied in the French colony of Pondicherry in India. V. Subbiah happened to meet Jawaharlal Nehru in 1936 who induced him to go to France to launch a complain of the 1936 massacre⁷.

Condition of the Working class (1924-34)

As per the advice given by him V. Subbiah also started working for labour and national liberation movement and wished to start a new political party. So during August 1937 he invited the leaders from different walks of life to start the political party in the name of Mahajana Sabha.

The years 1924-25 were very bad years. In February 1924 Rodier Mill declared a lock out, throwing hundreds of people out of job⁸. After a few months the lock out was lifted and the management agreed to take in only those who were prepared to submit to the new negotiations of the mill. Although all workers reported for duty, the management appears to have refused to take back a few workers. The workers pressed their solidarity for those victimised by contributing some money for their maintenance. In August, the management declared another lock out and shortly after announced the dismissal of a large number of workers. Mudaliarpettai Mill (Gaebele Mill) also seems to have followed suit. In the meanwhile the distribution of rice was stopped. The workers therefore clamoured for the intervention of the government. Shortly after, Rodiers agreed to arrange for fortnightly distribution of rice but Gaebele Mill did not, leaving hundreds of its workers in the lurch. In savana, work was carried on with frequent interruptions.

From that on till about the year 1931 there prevailed a simmering current of discontent. As workers were unorganized and most of them uneducated, they had to submit meekly to their miserable condition. They worked for 12 hours or more for wages from 12 annas to 14 annas per day⁹. They lived under constant threat of dismissal for any action not to the liking of the management. Surprisingly the lot of the working class had not till then attracted the attention or sympathy of political factions, as politicians themselves were often in sympathy with the mill management. But the victories won by workers in France and Italy spurred the workers in Pondicherry to clamour for similar rights. There was a growing realization of the disadvantage of disunity among them. A new cadre of labour leaders was slowly in the making. They came forward to champion the cause of the working class. This was a period of great ferment. In March 1931, workers in the weaving department of Savana went on strike in protest against a reduction of their wages¹⁰.

Harijana Seva Sangam (1933)

The members of the 'Harijana Seva Sangham' which was organized in 1933 went and worked among factory workers – mostly Harijans. Those prominent among them were S. R. Subramanian, R. L. Purushothaman Reddiar, Ansari Duraisamy, Ku. Sivapragasam, Annousamy, K. Sundarraj and V. Subbiah¹¹. Through their speeches and writings created an awareness of the miserable conditions of the working class and urged upon the administration to intervene on behalf of the workers. The management argued that because of the worldwide depression there was little demand for their products and to cut down the production. In that process they dropped surplus labourers. Workers realised that their strength lay in their unity. The administration failed to take notice of the condition of workers in three mills. The workers met secretly to organize labour union and set up various committees which functioned secretly. In 1935 the workers went on strike demanding a reduction of working hours and the right of collective bargaining. The management yielded but suspended 100 workers. They went on strike to protest against the management which was a success.

V. Subbiah in 1935 August organized a labour union congress which was attended by hundreds of cotton mills workers. V. V. Giri and S. Gurusamy also attended the same in Pondicherry. The French Govt. was disturbed and feared their unity and forbade the conduct of the labour union congress and ordered all the leaders to leave Pondicherry immediately. The same congress was conducted in Cuddalore at the border area of Pondicherry. A number of resolutions were passed in the labour union congress which was forwarded to the leader of AITUC Mr. M. N. Joshi. He sent the same resolutions to the labour unions existing in France through International Labour union and took it to the attention of the Government in France¹².

July 30th Massacre 1936

The Govt. appointed rowdies to disunite them. In June 1936, the workers of three cotton mills united to form a 'Joint Action Group' to conduct a general strike¹³. They withdrew the strike call, as the French Governor Solomiac promised to fulfil their demands in a month. But the government cheated by not fulfilling their demands. Once again the workers went on sit in strike. This is considered as the heroic struggle in the history of Pondicherry Trade Union Movement. This struggle started on 23rd July, 1936. The government started oppressing the agitating workers¹⁴.

The French government planned to shoot down comrade V. Subbiah thinking that he is hiding inside Savana Mills. On July 30, 1936 the French armed police marched with artillery guns towards Rodier Mills. It closed all the entrance gates and started bombarding the agitating workers. The manager of the mill Mr. Marshland shot down one of the workers, which forced other workers to retaliate¹⁵.

The French military force retreated and took position in Cuddalore road near Savana Mill. The mill workers, Savana Mill by standing on the walls started hitting at the police with stones and iron rods. In this great struggle of the workers, the bullets emerging out of artillery guns of French military killed 12 workers¹⁶. This sad event shook not only India but also France.

Consequences of July 30th 1936 Massacre

The French workers gathered together and protested against the outrageous act by condemning the French military. At that time there was a coalition Government in France, including the communist party of France. The French communist parliamentary party leader Gabriel Cherry and Pierre Semar protested in the parliament against the brutal attack.

It is due to this massacre, that the workers and people living in Pondicherry got united together. The massacre received publicity through the newspaper throughout India and was condemned by trade union leaders in Madras and other parts of India. V. V. Giri sent cables to Joughank, General Secretary of the General Federation of labour, Prime Minister of France to immediately intervene and take action.

Protest meetings were held in Madras, Andhra Pradesh and various parts of India condemning the dreadful atrocities perpetrated by the French Government. It was reported in the

press that Chakkerai Chettiyar, while strongly condemning the atrocious act of the French Government observed that a staying strike organised in France recently had concluded satisfactorily to all parties concerned and he wondered why in a French territory like Pondicherry the same kind of settlement had not become possible. A resolution was moved in the meeting by P. Ramamurthy which was reported in the press. On 18th August 1936, the Madras mail published the resolution passed under the leadership of Mr. V. Sankarapani which is as follows.

The popular Front Government of France immediately intervened strongly reprimanded the French Indian Governor, Solomiac and instructed him to lose no time in contacting V.V.Giri and other labour leaders and bring about a settlement in the dispute.

Governor Solomiac sent his envoy to Madras to meet V.V. Giri personally and invite him to Pondicherry for a personal discussion with the Governor. The meeting organized by the Governor passed the following resolutions

- a) There shall be no victimisation of workers.
- b) The term of settlement to all mills to be immediately enforced.
- c) The French, Indian Labour Union shall be allowed to function between Government and employers.
- d) A labour commission shall be constituted.
- e) Application of ratified International Labour office conventions and the French Labour code¹⁷.

After conclusion of our meeting with Governor V. V. Giri issued the following press statement.

"As regards the introduction of labour legislation. I feel thanks to the sympathetic socialistic Government in France, a genuine attempt is made to improve the working conditions in France and to French India with respect to matters like weekly rest, working hours, workmen's compensation, maternity benefits, retirement benefits, trade union recognition and settlement of trade disputes.

"We condemn the shooting down of the unarmed cotton mill workers. We express our deep sadness to the bereaved families".

To quote the press report in "The Hindu" dated 20th August 1936¹⁸.

The governor explained the present position and stated he had himself asked for an enquiry into the recent shooting tragedy by the colonial inspector.

The Governor was extremely apologetic through out the discussion, expressing his deep distress and anguish on the tragic massacre of the textile workers by the French armed police. Reverberations of shooting were heard in the Chamber de Deputes in Paris. The minister for colonies speaking in the chamber on 15th December 1936 confessed: "I saw in the office of the council of ministers a two-year old document on labour legislation. The word premature was super scribed on it. If only these measures had been brought forward earlier, these unhappy events might not have occurred. The coalition government in France ordered an immediate enquiry and took action against the Governor of French India. Senateur Justin Godart came to Pondicherry as a special delegate of the

president of the republic of France to study the problems of workers in French India¹⁹. He addressed the Council General on 21st November 1936 and assured them that he would complete his task very soon and submit a report to the French Government. He acknowledged that the working conditions of Indian workers were far from satisfactory and assured that justice would be rendered to them.

He went to the extent of relaxing all retraction imposed, under law on all public meeting. This provided him the opportunity to hold a series of meeting in all working class villages and educate the workers on the immediate need for building up their unity.

Recommendations of the council General

The recommendation made by Council General was passed on 6th April 1937. The measure bought about many sweeping changes in labour law. Prohibition of child labour, restriction of working hours, recognition of Labour Unions, maternity benefits for women and weekly paid holidays were some of the progressive features²⁰. The Rodier mill union was formed on 23rd June 1937. This discreet hailed as the workers charter, regulated the mode of payment and wages, prohibited the employment of children and stipulated that boys below 18 years should be employed only on production of a fitness certificate. The number of working hours was reduced to 9 per day and was further reduced to 8 hours per day with effect from 1938. Night shift work between 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. was prohibited. The workers came to enjoy a weekly holiday.

It laid down various rules relating to Hygienic, Lighting, Ventilation and Safety measures to be followed in industries establishments. It recognized the registration of labour unions and provided for a system of conciliation and arbitration based on French law²¹.

Mahajana Sabha : 1937

In August 1937 V. Subbiah started a new political party in the name of Mahajana Sabha. The first conference of the party was held in Pondicherry²². The action plan Mahajana Sabha was charted out. Issues such as abolition of law that gives the extra ordinary power to the Governor, conducting free and fair election, right to speak, right to write, right to form trade union, education for all, eradication of poverty, were prominent in the action plan. It saw good growth. This was a nightmare to the French rulers. So the French adopted some tactics to stop the growth of Mahajana Sabha. The French Governor used Mr. Selvaraj Chettiyar a businessman who was enjoying good rapport among his fishermen community people to split Mahajana Sabha. The Governor induced Mr. Chettiyar to start "Christian cotton mill workers union" with the help of Christian Missionaries in Pondicherry. The Priests Performing Sunday mass at the Church of St. Mary at Oulgaret were making announcement compelling Christian workers to join the Christian Workers Union got irritated by such announcement stopped going to Church. They attended religious sermons in the Church only, when the Priests promised them that there won't be any compulsion from their side to join the union. Similarly, the Governor induced certain leaders of Vanniyar community to start Vanniyar labour union. But the workers did not support the religion and caste based

trade unions. The attempt of the French imperialist forces continuing to break the Union movement, failed miserably²³. As the pressure was mounting on the French government, during the end of December 1937, Governor Guroukcia invited Comrade V. Subbiah and asked excuse for his mistake and requested Comrade V. Subbiah to offer suggestion for setting right the difference of opinion prevailing between the Mahajana Subha and the government. As Comrade V. Subbiah was planning to participate in the Haripura Congress Conference and meet Jawaharlal Nehru during 1938, he informed the Governor not to delay implementing his suggestion further and he should not be held responsible for the development arising out of such a delay. Within a few days, the Advocate General Mont recon requested Comrade V. Subbiah to send the list of Mahajana Sabha members to be appointed as Governing Council Members of the Local bodies. During the first week of January 1938, all the Municipalities and Commune Panchayats were dissolved and it was replaced by the Governing Council, based on the list given by Comrade V. Subbiah.

Conclusion

The name V. Subbiah – The People’s Leader describes the life of a great humanitarian and leader of the working class Comrade V. Subbiah, who has sacrificed his entire life for the welfare of the oppressed people of French – Indian territory of Pondicherry. V. Subbiah lit the freedom fire among Pondicherrian and converted the movement into French – India freedom struggle. The political and social life of People’s leader V. Subbiah started his public life with the service to Harijans (scheduled caste). He started ‘Harijana Seva Sangam’ in Pondicherry an advice of Mahatma Gandhiji. He became a worker’s leader and fought for right to form Union, right to Strike, right to Eight hours work, Maternity benefits, workmen’s compensation, Trade Union recognition and settlement of trade disputes. He has an International out look. This he acquired through the struggles of Mill workers of Pondicherry. He is well known by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, V. V. Giri and M. M. Jothi. He pioneered Various Political formation in Pondicherry including Mahajana Sabha and Communist Party in Pondicherry. Thus Comrade V. Subbiah is a peerless Political leader and patriot of 20th century.

References & Notes

1. R. Viswanathan “V. Subbiah The People’s Leader” New Century Book House (p) Ltd. Chennai. P.1
2. Ibid.,P.1
3. Ibid.,P.1
4. Ibid., P.2
5. Ibid., P.2.
6. Ellai.Sivakumar“Korilla Poar (Tamil)”New Century Book House (P) Ltd.Chennai. P.18
7. V. Subbiah “Saga of freedom of French India”, New Century Book House (P) Ltd., Chennai. P.107
8. Francis Cyril Antony, “Gazetteer of India – Union Territory of Pondicherry year Vol.II 1982”. P.1386
9. Ibid., P. 1386
10. Ibid., P. 1387
11. Ibid., P. 1387
12. Ellai.Sivakumar“Korilla Poar(Tamil)”New Century Book House (P) Ltd. Chennai. P.21
13. Ibid., P. 23
14. Ibid., P. 23
15. V. Subbiah “Sags of Freedom of French India”, New Century Book House (p) Ltd. Chennai. P.83
16. Ibid., P. 83
17. Ibid., P. 89
18. Ibid., P. 89
19. Francis Cyril Antony, “Gazetteer of India – Union Territory of Pondicherry year Vol.II 1982” P.1389
20. Ibid., P.1389
21. Ibid., P.1390
22. R. Viswanathan “V. Subbiah The People’s Leader” New Century Book House (p) Ltd. Chennai. P.21
23. Ibid., P.22