Role of women in National Movement: A Study on Thillaiyadi Valliyammai

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Abstract

The colonisation of western powers had lot of impact on the socio-economic and cultural life of the common people in various parts of the world. In India the worst affected were the peasants. The Indians settled in various parts of the world in various colonies also suffered due to various inhuman acts and working conditions. There were many leaders representing to secure the rights of the Indians suffering in various colonies. One such leader and worth mentioning was Thillaiyadi Valliyammai of Tarangambadi. She was Indian born in the soil of South Africa, fought and lost her life for the rights of the depressed sections of people including the Indians. This article pictures the role of Valliyammai in the national movement.

Keywords: Thillaiyadi Valliyammai, South Africa, M.K.Gandhi, Johannesburg, Negros, National movement.

Introduction

The colonisation of western powers had lot of impact on the socio-economic and cultural life of the common people in various parts of the world. In India the worst affected were the peasants. The Indians settled in various parts of the world in various colonies also suffered due to various inhuman acts and working conditions. There were many leaders to rise to secure the rights of the Indians suffering in various colonies. One such leader and worth mentioning was Thillaiyadi Valliyammai of Tarangambadi. She was born in the soil of South Africa, fought and lost her life for the rights of the depressed sections of people including the Indians.

British utilised the native people of South Africa the Negros to involve in mining works. Mining of precious stones was an important occupation of the Negros. But they were not paid for the efforts of work they have been doing. As a result of this attitude of the British there were arguments and quarrels between the British capitalist and working labours.

The British where not able to tolerate the revolts of Negroes. Hence decided to bring labour from other colonies from various parts of the world. They hoped the colony people would be well versed in plantation of commercial crops such as sugar cane and other crops. This is how the workers landed up in various parts of the world as plantations labourers, also known as the indentured labourers.

Indentured labourers

During the British rule in India the people faced abstraction of excessive taxes from land owners. In rural areas the land lords began to lose their lands due various land revenue measures adopted by them. The British colonial policy slowly and steadily forced the landed peasants to labourers. These labourers were compelled to search job for their living. Hence they were forced as labourers in factories and plantations throughout the globe. As a result of this the Indians were contracted from 1834 onwards to various plantation fields of the world. 1834 marked the abolition of slavery. (nationalarchives:2019)

The first four Indians taken to Natal was in 1849, before the introduction of indentured labour was passed in 1851 in a meeting of citizens at Durban School hall, has been reported in Durban Observer, 17 October 1851. Before this the Indians has been taken as slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries. It is stated that more than 50% of the slaves at the cape were from south India and Bengal. (sahistory:2019)

The indentured labourers did not sign any agreement but merely put their mark to denote they understood their wages as prescribed by Natal Government as 10,11,12 shillings for consecutive first, second and
the third years according to the Natal Act No. 14 of 1859. The Natal Laws of 13, 14, and 15 were passed for the indenture labour from India into Natal. Law 13 was on the Immigration agent – only a registered agent was to bring indenture labour thorough the ship. Accordingly any master of the ship could be fined £50 for abuse and ill treatment of the immigrant. Law 14 consists of 43 clauses on various aspects of rules and regulations governing the immigrants, their wages and condition of service, it is like a contract between the master and the servant mandatory for five years. It has to be signed by the employer, employee the immigration agent and the resident Magistrate. Law 15 is on the planter agree to pay the cost. Other laws related to the immigrant Indian labourers were the Coolie Consolidation law of 1869 (Law in 1870), Law 12 of 1872 to protect the Indian Immigrants, Law 19 of 1874 related to Medical fees of Indian Immigrant. (sahistory:2019)

In addition to these laws, there were many laws that has taken the basic rights of the Indians settled in Africa. It was during this condition that Thillaiyadi Valliyammai including Mahatma M.K.Gandhi and many other leaders happened to visit Africa for various reasons and involved themselves in the fight for the deprived sections including the Indians.

Thillaiyadi Valliyammai

Thilliyadi Valliyammai’s parents were R. Munuswamy from Pondicherry, Dupla Colony and Mangalam or Janaki was from Myladuthurai. After marriage they settled at Thillayadi with weaving as their main occupation. The impact of British rule was felt in every industry and occupation. The agricultural peasants, weaving, handicrafts, cultivation of traditional commodities and the method of cultivation also were drastically changed. The self-sufficient society was converted as commercial groups. Weaving and handicrafts in India began to fail as a result of industrial revolution, as western goods reached every nook and corner of India. The native people opted for attractive western cloths and rejected the native products. Its impact also effected the parents of Valliyammai. As many other handloom and handicrafts lost its importance many of them abandoned their occupation so as the parents of Valliyammai too did. People started hunting for job for livelihood and thus the migration process started.

Due to their poverty stricken condition parents of Valliyammai agreed to the agents to be shipped to South Africa as labourers and they reached Johannesburg City and started living by running a small shop. In 1898 Thilliyadi Valliyammai was born, as she grew, she was admitted in a girl’s school for her childhood education. She keenly watched the happenings around her and the ill treatment given to the native Africans and the indentured labourers from India. Indians to live in South Africa has to pay a £3 Poll Tax. The labourers also faced other discriminations such as, denial of voting rights, entry was restricted to certain areas and they are not supposed to travel with the whites and were not to turn towards the schools where the whites studied. The dwelling areas of the Indian origin labourers were converted as slums as usual with no basic facilities. As a result of insanitary conditions the spread of various diseases were uncontrolled. The British where empowered to ill-treat and insult the Indians living there, and were insulted in public places.

Arrival of Mahatma M.K.Gandhi

In such scenario M.K.Gandhi reached South Africa in 1893 he came to complete the cases of Dada Abdulla’s Company in a year. But his intention of coming back in one year was not materialised as he wanted to help Indians living in South Africa to get back their rights. He wanted to help them with his knowledge of law and hence stayed back for 22 years for the cause of Indians in Africa. M.K.Gandhi initiated the non-violence (Ahimsa) protest movement in 1896 September 11 at Johannesburg. More than 3000 people gathered for the meet with M.K.Gandhi, this laid the foundation stone for all movement of M.K.Gandhi in India. (GunasekaranT.Stalin :2000)

Act 25 of 1891

The stipulation entitled to indentured labourers and have a gift of crown land and full citizenship rights granted as per the Natal Coolie Law of 1859 was introverted in 1891. The aim behind this is to dampen the defrayal of Indians in the province.

Accordingly a) They cannot obtain the citizen right of the South African Republic (Transvaal), b) they cannot be owners of fixed property in the Republic c) They shall be Registered if they settle with the object of trading. d) The Government shall have the right for purposes of sanitation, to assign to them certain streets, wards and locations to live in. This provision does not apply to those who live with their employers.
1907 (“The Black Act”) Colonial Secretary, General Smuts introduced The Asiatic Law Amendment Act, 2/1907 (“The Black Act”), therefore all male Asians were to be registered and finger printed; and to carry certificate (pass) at all times and to be shown to police on demand. Act 2/1907 was to be operative from 1 July 1907. (sahistory: 2019).

There were continuous protest opposing the £3 Poll Tax, Transvaal bill and the Black Act. With the help of Gokhale in 1912 there was an agreement between M.K. Gandhi and General Smuts accordingly the black law introduced by General Smuts was agreed to be removed in a year but even after the completion of one year it was not repealed. In continuation of these acts, in 1913 March 14th the Cape High Court Justice Searle gave a judgement stating all marriages that has not been done with the formalities of the present state would be considered illegal. This judgement was most effective to the Indians at South Africa, as most of them got married on the formalities of their own country and based on their own traditions. All these marriage relations was to be considered as illegal, their wife was not a legal person and even children born to Indian parents did not have property rights as they were also considered as illegal. There was lot of frustrations among the Indians living in South Africa for all the acts passed by the whites, there were lot of protest all over. M.K. Gandhi tried to unite all these Indians through organising meetings and protest. All these meetings where attended by Valliyammai and her mother. She was influenced by all the speeches of various personalities and leaders. To put an end to the inflow of Indians the British sized all their identity cards and asked them to register with their finger prints, all these atrocities where unavoidable. (GunasekaranT.Stalin: 2000)

M.K. Gandhi commented as part of Indian opinion as “unexpected calamity” to new interpretation of an old law. As to respond a mass meeting was organised at Hamidia Islamic Society hall at Johannesburg on 1913 March 30. It mainly focused on the distress on Searle judgement and demanded the government to recognise and announce the recognising validity of marriages solemnized according to India. (M.K. Gandhi:ervefoundation: 2019)

Hence she decided to take part in the protest organized by M.K. Gandhi, her father was ill and was admitted in the hospital. But Valliyammai was more worried about the Indians living there. She joined with the fasting struggle of M.K. Gandhi along with her mother. This was the first time that women were also included in the protest, as it was more of related with the women and the right of their children. There was a long march on 1913 October 29 from Johannesburg to New Castle. They crossed Charles Town and at New Castle they met the mine workers and asked them to stop work and participate in the march. It was illegal to travel from Natal to Transvaal without prior permission. On the march at Volksrust on 1913 December 22 they were arrested and severely jailed for three months. Valliyammai proudly went to the prison following the others. She was jailed along with other criminals who involved with various crimes and murders. The quality of life at prison was too bad, insanitary conditions and quality less food altogether damaged her health. As a result she fell ill and no proper treatment was given to her. There were suggestions to pay the fine and leave the prison, but she denied doing that. But her health was declining day by day, as to its response she was released before few days of the date of her release. She was let out on 1914 Feb 11, was very week and could not recover and passed on 22 Feb. 1914, on her 16th Birthday, (Jishamol:2006).

She was never worried about her personal life, as she said, she could be happy to be arrested and even die for the sake of her mother country. At Johannesburg a statue is been erected in memory of Valliyammai. Many meetings were held in memory of her at Johannesburg. M.K. Gandhiji said Johannesburg is very famous because it is the birth place of Valliyammai. He also praises her as a person who sacrificed her life for truth and has blind belief in achieving her goal, she is worthy of praise and glory. (GunasekaranT.Stalin:2000) M.K. Gandhi in the journal Indian Opinion writes on Valliyammai as India has lost one of her virgin daughter. He also praised Valliyammai as the first person who fed him with the spirit of sacrifice and freedom. (Jishamol:2006).

As a result of her struggle and various other protests the Government issued a bill in favour of Indians and order for the removal of the Marriage act, and all marriages where legal and where accepted as per law. Indians got a peaceful life after the struggle for a long period of time from 1906 to 1914 hence the sacrifice of Valliyammai did not go in vain. This information has been recorded in the book of M.K. Gandhi : South African Satyagraha.

M.K. Gandhi also records one incident with Valliyammai, when a British tried to shoot him, Valliyammai came in front of him and said to shoot. On seeing this British personnel was shocked hence M.K. Gandhi’s life was once saved by Valliyammai from the British. In 1915 June 16 M.K. Gandhi wrote a letter to his friend...
Johannesburg telling him to erect a memorial at Johannesburg but it could not materialise due to various reasons, recorded in his South African Satyagraha. He further adds, till the memory lasts, and till India is there her memories cannot be removed from the History of South African freedom struggle.

In 1934 M.K Gandhi had tour in Tamil Nadu and addressed in various meetings, in all the meetings he spoke about the patience, strong minded, sacrifice and the national feeling of Valliyammai. He visited Thillaiyadi village when no basic facilities were available, he stated he came to the village just to bow his head to the soil, where all the three members of the same family where imprisoned one after the other for many times and hence lost life. To convert the village as a model village M. Karunanidhi took the initiative in 1969 October 22 the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The cooperative society’s 600th sale shop at Chennai is being named as Valliyammai Maligai. As before going to South Africa the Family of Valliyammai were weavers in village, hence this name suits well. Her hundred birth year was remembered in 1998. At Johannesburg there is a cemetery for Hindus, in the northern corner Valliyammai’s cemetery was broken and lying unnoticed. Efforts were taken by Nelson Mandela and it was renewed in 1997 April 28th, in which South African ministers important personalities and Indian natives living in South Africa participated in large numbers. (Gunasekaran T. Stalin :2000).

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