

Towards a Re-Appraisal of the Dravidian/Non-Brahmin Movement

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When the Non Brahmin manifesto was released for public debate and scrutiny in Dec. 1916. Annie Besant, editor of New India and the patron saint of the Home Rule Movement. Lost no time in denouncing the contents and underlying political message of the Manifesto. She characterised it as one inspired by 'short sighted and narrow minded people' and termed it 'mischievous and unpatriotic' (NI, Dec. 20). She was convinced that the 'Non Brahmin Movement', which promised to emerge in the wake of the Manifesto, would strengthen the British Civilian in their obduracy and resistance to Home Rule and serve their purposes of 'divide and rule'.

sought to bring about "disharmony and disunion" and asserted that "as long as India gains Home Rule it is but of secondary importance whether Brahmins or Non Brahmana Hindus or Muslims gain prominence. We are children of one Mother and our interests, as those of our country, in the first instance is our sense of unity" (Ibid). Annie Besant's ire was such that she announced the columns of her newspaper would, henceforth, be closed for discussion on the subject at hand!

However a protracted debate was fought out through the columns of New India for well over a year, following the publication of the Manifesto, with Brahmin and Home Rule spokesmen as well as "prominent" Non-Brahmins denouncing the fledgling movement and Non Brahmin adherents, sympathisers and intellectuals defining its rationale, its relevance and import for the "Non-Brahmin" communi-

laying bare his political "inconsistencies", his "opportunism", and "unabashed" advocacy of a political and social cause merely on the basis of a felt personal wrong. Dr. Nair, she insisted, was a mere "intellectual acrobat" who could not have the genuine interests of the non Brahmanas in mind, for he was chiefly concerned with unleashing a "spurious and superficial campaign of hatred". (New India, June 26, 1917). Annie Besant's arguments proved forceful in that her readers soon joined her in seeing the Non Brahmin movement as being composed of those "who were swayed by selfish desires and were infuriated by failures" and who sought to "transform their private injuries into public wrongs". (see N. C. Ramasamy Naidu, New India, July 10, 1917).

New India's arguments, hypotheses and political philosophy were all geared towards the singular objective of demonstrating, simultaneously, the necessity of Home Rule and the undesirability of what it termed, "communal politics". The paper and its editor served to universalise and render consensual (as we shall indicate in the sections to come) what were clearly particular (Brahmin) perceptions of political liberty. The idea of Home Rule was problematised by non Brahmin ideologues, chief among whom was Dr. Nair. While the idea of a unitary Hindu-(Indian) community was felt to be untenable by a host of non Brahmin intellectuals. The non Brahmin Manifesto thus, sought to interrogate the complacent, seemingly self-evident terms of political discourse as constructed by the Home Rule Movement. It is not surprising therefore, that an imperious, dominant and hegemonic community whose political ideology suddenly seemed internally inconsistent should turn against the arguments and observations of the Non Brahmin Manifesto. The sustained

and self-congratulatory hegemony of many decades had to now look to its defenses and it did so in a series of moves that were calculated to disarm and eventually blame the victims (the nature and status of this "victimisation" will be argued in the sections to come).

Our concern, at this stage in our argument, however is not so much with this historical polemicalising as with its reflections in the critical discourses that have grown around the non Brahmin movement. Interestingly enough these discourses, share the assumptions of New India publicists and arrive at astonishingly similar conclusions regarding the nature and aims of the non Brahmin movement. It must be noted here that critical scholarship and analysis of the non-Brahmin movement have been chiefly pioneered by Anglo-American scholars. These scholars, their "empiricism" notwithstanding, have been prone to substitute "ideology" for "hard facts", such as when they present, "facts" always already constituted as judgements and evaluations. David Washbrook, and to a lesser extent, Christopher Baker both of whom have attempted to situate the politics of non Brahminism in a matrix of structural changes in the economy and transformations in the administrative complex of the Raj, insist that the Non Brahmin movement was civilian-inspired was but an instance of "elite" competition for scarce goods.

In other words Non Brahmin dissent is seen as a product of a fortuitous conjuncture of historical events rather than as a counter hegemonic response that emerged out of a particular historical conjuncture. Baker and Washbrook reduce history to happenings and seem reluctant to inquire into its logic, its pattern of movement and change. Christopher Baker notes that the

ties. The detractors of the movement (with whom we are chiefly concerned at least, for now) were puzzled and bewildered by what seemed to them incomprehensible, erroneous notions of Brahmin autocracy and Non Brahmin ineptitude. The Tribune of Lahore stated, "To our knowledge there is no such community as Non Brahman or non-Buddhist or non-Hindu or non-Jews and nothing can be more ludicrous than to form a new community on the basis of excluding a small community the one small but important caste of Brahmins..." Quoted in New India, (Dec. 30, 1916). The Times of India endorsed the Tribune's views and rejected the possibility of a non Brahmin community functioning as a "single homogenous group, capable of common or united action" (Quoted in New India, Jan 2, 1917). A prominent Vokkaliga of the day, General Secretary of the Vokkaliga Sanga proclaimed it "self destructive to call oneself a non Brahmana". He, further, noted, "After all, aren't we all Hindus and has not a great Congress leader who is a Brahmana remarked: 'Let anybody even Pariahs get what we are fighting for...Why should we envy the Brahmanas? They have reached where they are by their industry...It is also the case that non Brahmana officers are scarcely more helpful to Non Brahmanas', (New India, Jan. 9, 1917). There were other arguments, rebukes, aimed at those non Brahmins who sought to better their lot by what The Ceylonese termed 'Girding at the Brahmanas'. The Ceylonese urged Non Brahmanas to the path of "organised self-help" and suggested the movement be "entirely defensive" in its methods and aims (From New India, Jan. 19, 1917). The Ceylonese was not alone in criticising the "anti-Brahmanas" tenor of the Non Brahmin Manifesto. Kesava Pillai, prominent Home Ruler warned that caste feeling was not confined to

Brahmins alone and pointed out that the 'caste spirit' affected non-Brahmanas as well. (New India, March 19, 1917). Numerous letters to the editor of New India also expressed their dismay at the rancour against a "small community" which seemed to pervade all Non Brahmin protestations. Such expressions of righteous dismay were mirrored faithfully in the editorials and columns of New India, as Annie Besant and her team of talented journalists (who were also devout Home Rulers) gave time and coherence to Brahmin (and Non Brahmin) responses to the new philosophy of dissent.

It was suggested that the Non Brahmin Manifesto was the handiwork of Civilian who needed to work out a new politics of divide-and-rule, now that the Muslims and Hindus had come together, in the aftermath of the Congress-League pact. Annie Besant was so convinced that the new movement was but a "crusade of hate" that she did not stop to enquire into the phenomenon of an over-Represented Brahmin bureaucracy. Obsessed as she was by the image of the penurious Brahmin priest and lowly paid (but highly educated) Brahmin clerk, she turned the non Brahmana arguments around and noted that if the non Brahmins were endowed with "fewer clerkships" it was because they had wilfully desisted appointments in the services. The non Brahmanas, she argued were known to prefer "trade and commerce" to the pursuit of learning and besides they counted among their ranks, zamindars and rajahs, both of whom had no use for jobs in the services. (see New India, April 18, 1917, April 28, 1917). Annie Besant was particularly annoyed by the movement's strident and most vocal representative, Dr. T.M. Nair. She assembled a political biography of the man with the clear and avowed intention of

"polemic" of the movement had an "obvious" appeal for those educated non Brahmanas who looked on the services and the literate professions as their "traditional careers". Besides non Brahmins were beginning to feel" the brunt of the stronger administrative machine, staffed at the subordinate levels largely by Brahmins", many of whom displayed a certain caste arrogance when they insisted Brahmins were better equipped for appointments and posts in the services. Baker further argues that this competitive anger and resentment "fitted well over certain latent social and cultural divisions in different parts of the province". Thus scrambles for higher ritual status among Brahmin and non Brahmin "literate aristocracy" in Tirunelveli, tensions between Brahmin Mirasdars and non Brahmin tenants in Tanjore, between agriculturalist sat sudras and sacralist Brahmin pundits in the Krishna Delta were now played out in a politico-public sphere. But, observes Baker, these instances of local competition had no necessary material basis at the provincial level. Non Brahmin elites might have particular problems with Brahmin elites but, on the whole Brahmins were, except when they were rich and powerful, "employed in occupations that were necessarily menial — as cooks, scribes and religious functionaries — and could be purchased by the wealth of other castes...". These other castes, were not, in the least, anti Brahmin and in fact accepted the Brahminical codes and recognised the superior ritual claims of the Brahmins in their everyday lives. Non-Brahminism in this context was but a convenient myth that served to dissolve, at least temporarily, the contradictions which lay at the heart of its politics.

Washbrook, like Baker and in a tone and manner curiously reminiscent of New

India debates, notes that the non-Brahmin movement was necessarily anti Brahminical. The non-Brahmin professional-publicist, now in the vanguard of a movement that had clear material interests at stake, had to be "anti-Brahmin, or at least anti-Vedic, if he were to make the constituency his own". Washbrook also observes that all talk of a "non Brahmin community" must be seen for the ideological fiction that is. For, communal solidarities in the Madras Presidency were often undercut by cross communal patronage networks that implicated Non Brahmin patrons and Brahmin clients as well as Brahmin patrons and Non Brahmin clients in mutual material transactions of great pertinence. Moreover, argues Washbrook, communal organisations could rarely develop into long lasting political organisations of import and relevance beyond their immediate locales. If at all communal organisations solidified into a "permanent" form this was because they sought to transform a particular grievance into a generalised one; in other words such organisations "shifted the discipline in which the Associations worked from the historical, in which it explained why it had come together to the Sociological in which it described the social factors which underlay its unity... its rhetoric (now) was based on the existence of a congruence between categories of political action and categories of common socio-economic or cultural position. That these categories rarely were congruent and that most members of the Association behaved as though they rarely were, were matters to be ignored...". Communal solidarities, then, were nurtured by publicists who never really created effective constituencies of their own, in spite of the much vaunted myth of Non Brahminism. The movement remained caught in a vortex of material interests which no ideology could disguise or explain away.

Washbrook's surmise, then, is, the Non Brahmin movement acquired the political resonance it did because it rallied itself against the Home Rule Movement and, hence, served the British Civilian well. Not only did Non Brahmin ideologues draw their fire from governmental notions and ideas of Brahmin tyranny but the Madras government proceeded to cite the Non Brahmin quotations of the process of self government through Home Rule. Thus, concludes Washbrook, "the pattern of governmental initiative and subjects response had become so complete that a closed circle of argument, quite apart from outside reality had been formed.

Washbrook sees no merit in the "social premises" and justifications that may be said to constitute basis for Non Brahminism. He concurs with new India's Brahmin readers in their opinion that if Non Brahmins are not represented in an adequate measure, commensurate to their numbers, in the services, it is because they have rarely sought such posts in the past, being immersed in agriculture and commerce. Their present dissatisfaction was thus wholly a political response, orchestrated by publicists and moulded by interested patrons and "magnates" and "rural bosses" who discovered in the emerging ideology new modes of constructing old networks of patronage. For Washbrook, these old networks necessarily required newer forms of articulation since the impending reforms of 1919 and the effects of the earlier Minto-Morley reforms had brought about certain shifts in power at the local level which had to be, therefore, accommodated at the provincial level. Henceforth, power was, to be exercised less directly on the basis of landed power, commercial wealth and ritual basis and more on the basis of these interests being represented effecti-

vely in local and provincial administration. Thus patronage-publicist networks had to be articulated on a more durable basis and an ideology which promised to bind and cement ties on the basis of "primordial sentiments" was but reassuring.

By identifying Non Brahminism and the Non Brahmin movement with its chief protagonists and their immediate material interests and by positing a simple cause-and-effect relationship between private interests and public acts, Baker and Washbrook display a curious inability to relate ideology and material interest except in the most obvious manner. Annie Besant and her readers were equally quick to conflate interest and ideology but at least they were engaged in defending achieved positions of hegemony and, hence, for them, "truth" was an instance of partisanship. Washbrook not only refuses to consider the autonomy of ideology and its ripple effects but even considers the play and function of ideology as marginal to those material interests ostensibly justified and theorised by ideology. It is significant, though, that he has to "account" for his problematic silence on this issue. In a revealing paragraph he confesses, in a somewhat embarrassed fashion, that in spite of the persistence of patron-client networks and the continued primacy of material interest, there existed conditions in which cultural sentiment became an independent mechanism of control". However he does not specify what these conditions were that excited ideological consensus. It is evident that he has come up against his own theoretical limits here; and while he tries to resolve this theoretical and, in a sense, political impasse in his narrative half heartedly, the gaps and slashes in his argument seem apparent. Baker is a little more sensitive to the

significance of ideology but he too wishes to see it as determined, in the last instance, by self interest. Besides, argues Baker, non Brahminism could not really sustain itself as a viable ideology because its cultural interpretations were often varied and because it retained a "fundamental ambivalence in any social or cultural opposition to the Brahman". Thus, asks Baker "were those opposed to the Brahmanas asserting that the position occupied by the Brahmanas was irrelevant and thus worthy only of criticism or neglect, or were they arguing that they, rather than the Brahmanas, should take over the position of social and ritual pre-eminence?". Having posed a crucial question Baker does not spend much time on the terms and conditions that structure and direct ideology in general or on the particular modes of construction of Non Brahmin ideologies.

These crucial silences in the political narratives of Baker and Washbrook derive from an uncritical use of sources and from the lack of a theory of power and its changing forms and modes in the second half of the nineteenth century. Government records, private papers of eminent personalities, and contemporary newspapers — A variety of sources have been put to good use by Baker and Washbrook in their attempt to re-construct the polity of late colonial South India. Newspapers have been scoured for information on political events, activities and opinion. Washbrook and Baker have especially worked the Hindu archives to their advantage but they have not considered it important to interrogate the politics and cultural-social premises of The Hindu's journalism. This seems a serious methodological lapse, considering that newspapers and journals of those times actively constituted opinions, intervened in public debates, often in a partisan spirit and proved to be important weapons in polemical wars. Further Baker and Washbrook deploy what seems,

at first, a variety of empirical instances to underscore a theoretical point but on closer examination these instances reveal themselves to be isolated ones that barely explain the complex social and political formations of the day. For instance several examples of "cross-communal" patron-client networks are furnished to "prove" the ubiquity of this phenomenon and to indicate that the Brahmin-Non-Brahmin divide was largely fictitious. Likewise, instances of "self-interest" are given to point at the materiality that shaped and structured ideological intent. But the fact that a "pariah" won a municipal election, contesting from a predominantly Brahmin ward or the fact that prominent justicites "stood to gain" by undermining Brahmin hegemony in the services do not really demonstrate particular articulations of interest and ideology. Neither do they help us grasp at the relationship between social, political and economic spheres in a caste-bound polity where events that are played out in any one of these spheres need not produce identical effects in the other spheres. A "pariah" (or a Nadar), may be tolerated in the Municipal Council but the community of "pariahs", will still be denied access to public streets and wells. Non Brahmin elites seek to challenge particular and entrenched Brahmin interests but the conflicts are mediated less by competitive utilitarian notions of gain that they are by perceptions of dominance and subalternity. What proves Washbrook and Baker's theoretical undoing is their inability to theorise these perceptions of dominance and subalternity. They do not provide a means through which we may grasp at the logic of Brahminism as an ideology and its relationship to socio-economic structures as those obtained in colonial-caste society. Besides they rarely take cognizance of what non Brahmins

say about themselves or about the nature of Brahmin power.

It is our intention here to "recuperate" these strategic silences, though not with the aim of "perfecting" the extant critical work. Instead we intend constructing an alternative narrative of the emergence and significance of Non Brahminism. It seems important that we record and analyse what non Brahmins at the turn of the last century and in the early decades of this century were saying about themselves, their relationship to Brahmins and the so-called depressed classes; such self perceptions, we have learnt, constitute an important body of "knowledge" in a caste society where the power of the word and the prerogatives of speech and hearing have been determined by and remained the privilege of Brahmin and upper caste literate. Rosalind O' Hanolan in her remarkably perceptive work on the Non Brahmin Movement in Maharashtra has observed that an initial breach in the ranks of a caste was made when protestant missionary debates drew the religious and the orthodox to the streets and desecralised and demystified the words and content of the scriptures. Non Brahmin self perceptions were made possible, argues O' Hanolan, by the emergence of a public sphere of debate in Maharrati society and these self perceptions in turn served to deconstruct Brahmin myths of superiority.

It seems important to "make the Non Brahmin speak". Critical debates about Non Brahminism in Tamil Nadu have not succeeded in crossing the historiographical threshold marked out by Baker and Washbrook. The work of Eugene Irshchick may be considered somewhat exceptional in this respect but his impressive array of facts are not matched by theoretical rigour or sophistication and as such do not help in "producing" a theory of Non Brahminism. The ghost of Annie Besant still presides over contemporary popular

debates regarding the significance of the Non Brahmin movement as Brahmin apologists continue to thunder against the Justice party's elitism, political opportunism etc. The significance or otherwise of the Non Brahmin movement is also being presently concluded by those who protest that it failed to accommodate dalit aspirations. While the so-called depressed classes constituted an important flank of the movement in its early days, contradictions between non Brahmin "clean" castes and the depressed classes began to surface almost soon after. The legacy of Non Brahminism in Tamil Nadu has not always and consistently favoured dalits. Tamil Nadu's political history of the past twenty five years has seen the consolidation of generalised Non Brahmin hegemony, but contradictions between upper caste Non Brahmins and dalits have not been considered pertinent to the ultimate forms, aims and direction of this hegemonic process. The marginalisation of dalits has, thus, resulted in a devaluation of the Non Brahmin legacy and further complicated the question of the movement's significance.

To raise the ghost of Non Brahminism as it existed nearly a hundred years ago, to return its silences to history and to delineate the contours of that history, to uncover the contradictions it could not resolve, to consider, in short, its ideological viability — these constitute the basis of our study. Non Brahminism survived the political demise of the Justice party and the opportunism of some of its leaders, and proved catalytic in the non-Brahminisation of Congress. The emergence of the Self-Respect movement and the Dravida Kazhagam signified its ideological vibrancy and, in a sense, its coming of age. We intend considering these by and by, but our initial efforts will be towards reconstructing the historical conjuncture that saw the birth of what seems to us, in retrospect, an undoubtedly ruptural event of immense significance.

Summary of Discussion

The Chairman, Mr. S. Guhan, before presentation of the paper observed that the theme of the paper on the Dravidian Movement was not to be viewed solely from the point of view of its political dimension but also must be seen as a movement for social reforms and preservation of cultural identity.

The author while presenting the paper mentioned that enough literature was available on the Dravidian movement (DM), a term which was used synonymously with the Non Brahmin Movement (NBM). However, critical and scholarly analysis of the NBM was lacking from the Indian social scientists and even the existing studies were circumscribed by the framework of the Anglo-American scholars. The basic lacunae of the NBM was its lack of identity, failure to take cognizance of women's issues and aspirations of dalits as part of its discourse. The NBM was also seen as a strategy worked out towards a new politics of divide and rule by the British after the Congress-League pact united both the Muslims and Hindus together.

The Anglo-American scholars considered the politics of NBM within a matrix of structural change as envisaged in the economy and transformation in the admini-

nistrative set up of the British Raj. The NBM was chiefly pioneered by civilians at the instance of elites. The author also felt that the NBM was a product of a fortuitous conjuncture of historical events rather than a counter-hegemonic response that emerged out of a particular historical matrix.

Christopher Baker's contention of NBM was anti-Brahminical and anti-vedic and as such they could not sustain itself as a viable ideology because its cultural interpretations were often varied and retained a fundamental ambivalence in any social or cultural opposition to the Brahmin. Washbrook held that NBM was based on their premise of not being represented in adequate measure in the services due to their preoccupation and employment within Agriculture and Commerce.

The author having evaluated the Anglo-American tradition concluded their inability to theorise perceptions of dominance and subalternity as they do not provide a means to grasp at the logic of Brahminism as an ideology, and its relationship to socio-economic structures as in the case of colonial caste society.

The Chairperson, carrying the critical remarks of the author about the Anglo-

American scholarship on the Dravidian Movement to the present times, remarked that the Indian social scientists opposing the Mandal commission too spoke the same language of the Anglo-American scholarship.

During the discussions that followed the presentation, on the relevance of the Doctrine of Varnashram it was pointed out that the NBM's notion on the issue was ambiguous though its ideology was basically anti-Brahmin and anti-Sanskrit (vedic) and confined to Tamil Nadu. In reinforcing the author's argument on the question of Dalits winning elections, it was pointed out that these were only exceptions and could not be generalised.

Another participant observed that after the times of Periyar, there has been a considerable dilution of focus on the social evils of caste system. Periyar considered the elimination of the caste system and of Brahmin domination as part of a movement of social

reform. But his followers like C. N. Annadurai and others shifted the focus from social reforms to power politics and elections.

On the question of the future of the NBM it was mentioned that though they lacked an identity of their own, the movement spearheaded particularly by Periyar focussed on social power and politics of the caste system and laid emphasis on the PMK reforms. The recent growth of the PMK itself was seen by a section of audience as a manifestation of the NBM's resurgence.

The author while responding to the queries mentioned that the alliance of the Brahmins with the colonial state had produced a modern power structure which crystallised traditions in different forms. The impetus to these traditions was expedited with the use of mass media and printing in various forms.