



ROLE OF K.L. SANTHANAM IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LABOUR MOVEMENT IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Labour movements were formed with the outspoken intention to protect the single working man against the tyranny and neglect of the bourgeoisie, in all branch industries. Their objects were to fix wages and to deal with employers as a power, to regulate the rate of wages according to the profit of the latter, to rise when opportunity offered, and keep it uniform in each trade throughout the country. The Labour movement in Kanyakumari is not of recent origin. The District was carved out from the erstwhile Travancore–Cochin and given to Tamil Nadu in the year 1956 based on the policy of formation of linguistic states. Before 1956, Kanyakumari was part of the Travancore region. K.L.S. Santhanam was born and brought up at Orumankulam in the district of Tirunelveli. In 1947, P. Kasi Udayam, a Trotskyite who worked among the Bolshevik group in Sri Lanka, came back to Nagercoil and started ‘Nagercoil Nagarasuddhi Thozilalar Sangam’ (Scavenger’s Union). K.L.S. Santhanam joined Kasi Udayam and started his trade union life at the age of fifteen. In 1951, K.L.S. Santhanam joined the Socialist Party. During 1952-53, he became the secretary of the South Travancore Socialist Youth League. In 1953, K.L.S. Santhanam visited the Kanyakumari district with Kavilaur Prabhakaran Nair for propaganda meetings where he spoke in Malayalam frequently. K.L.S. Santhanam was very much associated with the merger movement of Kanyakumari with Tamil Nadu. A conference of the Tamils was convened in December 1945 at Nagercoil. Tamil leaders Sam Nathaniel, K. Nagalingam, R.K. Ram, G.S. Moni, and K.L.S. Santhanam graced the function. K.L.S. Santhanam conducted a number of agitations to safeguard and highlight the genuine interests of the workers of various categories, such as scavengers, saltpan, haircutting, transport, cooperative, head load, and estate. K.L.S. Santhanam was the popular labour union leader of the southern region. He formed several labour unions in the Kanyakumari district.

KEY WORDS

Labour movements – Bourgeoisie - K.L.S. Santhanam - Kasi Udayam – Hemachandran - Agitations – Indebtedness - Labour unions – Guidelines – Safeguard - Labour Courts –Tribunals - Industrial Dispute Act.



Introduction:

The labour movement is the offspring of the factory system, which was ushered in by the Industrial Revolution. Employees of various trades joined to present a collective front in negotiations with employers and provide a measure of security for their respective members. Labour movements were formed with the outspoken intention to protect the single working man against the tyranny and neglect of the bourgeoisie, in all branch industries. Their objects were to fix wages and to deal with employers as a power, to regulate the rate of wages according to the profit of the latter, to rise when opportunity offered, and keep it uniform in each trade throughout the country. Intellectuals, social theorists, and political activists have defined trade unions variously. The first person to write about trade unions was Karl Marx, who conceived labour organisations as the instruments of working-class struggle against capitalist oppression.

Origin of Labour Movement in Kanyakumari District:

The Labour movement in Kanyakumari is not of recent origin. The District was carved out from the erstwhile Travancore–Cochin and given to Tamil Nadu in the year 1956 based on the policy of formation of linguistic states. Before 1956, Kanyakumari was part of the Travancore region. The trade union movement started well before the formation of the state and even before securing independence to India. The history of the trade union movement started in the year 1942 in the Kanyakumari district. Several great leaders worked for the labourers, and the most important among them was the Com. Jeevanantham, undisputed master of the working class. Thiyagi C.P. Illango gave voice for the national freedom as well as for the welfare of the labourers, and G.S. Mani dedicated his life to the welfare of the working class. All these Leaders belong to the Kanyakumari District.

K.L.S.Santhanam and the National Movements:

K.L.S. Santhanam was born and brought up at Orumankulam in the district of Tirunelveli. During his school days, he organized meetings among the students. The subject in the meetings was the freedom struggle and the freedom fighters. He also discussed various subjects related to the common man. He was very active during his early stage to learn more things, even though he was a differently abled person. In 1947, P. Kasi Udayam, a Trotskyite who worked among the Bolshevik group in Sri Lanka, came back to Nagercoil and started 'Nagercoil Nagarasuddhi Thozilalar Sangam' (Scavenger's Union). Santhanam joined Kasi Udayam and started his trade union life at the age of fifteen. When he joined the trade union, he changed his name from Chanthanam to Santhanam and notified it in the Gazette. Since his parents could not approve of his thoughts, attitudes, deeds, and approaches to the trade union activities, they refused financial support during their lifetime.

After the early activities in school and intermediate days, Santhanam ventured into public life. The Congress Socialist Party had great thinkers, intellectuals, and revolutionaries, and he was attracted to their ideology. The party to him was mighty enough to shatter the imperialism of the British through its ideology. He also ended up as a Communist, like most of the socialists of this era. K.L.S. Santhanam lived with a clear conscience throughout his political life. He was with the Socialist Party initially. Later, he transformed himself into a communist under the influence of Comrade P. Jeevanantham, popularly known as "Jeeva", a veteran political leader of Kanyakumari district. Throughout his life, Santhanam has tried to perfect his ideas and ideals following the footsteps of Comrade Jeevanantham.

Joined the Socialist Party:

The formation of the Socialist Party in May 1934 was an important step in the development of socialism in India. The Congress Socialist Party was formed by those younger congressmen who, during their long terms of imprisonment in the civil disobedience movement, came into contact with Marxian ideas. Those who thought alike met together at Patna and Bombay in 1934, and the Congress Socialist Party was launched with Jayaprakash Narayan as its General Secretary. Acharya Narendra Deva, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Yusuf Meherally, Minoo Masani, and S.M.Joshi were the other leaders. The All Travancore Youth League, founded in 1931, functioned in close co-operation with the State Congress in its agitation for 'Responsible Government' was the initiative of some enthusiastic youngsters like Ponnara Sreedhar and N.P. Kurukkal. It functioned as an extremist section in the Travancore State Congress.



The Youth League eventually came to be dominated by young men and women who believed in the Communist ideology. In 1951, Santhanam joined the Socialist Party. During 1952-53, he became the secretary of the South Travancore Socialist Youth League. At that period, Kavilaur Prabhakaran Nair was the president of the Socialist Youth League in Travancore. S. Chandra Sekhar was the secretary of the All India Socialist Youth League. In 1953, K.L.S. Santhanam visited the Kanyakumari district with Kavilaur Prabhakaran Nair for propaganda meetings where he spoke in Malayalam frequently. He also toured Quilon, Alleppey, and Trivandrum, where he also spoke in Malayalam. All India Socialist Youth Wing Secretary S. Chandra Sekhar, who later became the Prime Minister of India, made a nationwide Padyatra in 1952. He visited Kanyakumari and attended a meeting in Nagercoil, where his speech in English was translated into Tamil by K.L.S. Santhanam, receiving appreciation from him.

Participate in the Merger Movement of Kanyakumari with Tamil Nadu

K.L.S. Santhanam was very much associated with the merger movement of Kanyakumari with Tamil Nadu. In 1929, a meeting of the 'State People's Conference' was held at Trivandrum, presided over by Sri. M Visveswariya, a veteran administrator of the Mysore State. This conference demanded the establishment of a responsible Government in the State. The Travancore State Legislature passed the Legislative Reforms Act of 1932, which made the right to vote a prerogative of a few landowners. So the minority communities that did not own much property agitated against this clause. They formed a party known as the Joint Political Congress and pressed their demands by launching agitations. The formation of the State Congress in 1938 set in motion a series of agitations in the state, demanding a responsible Government. The primary object as declared in its first meeting was the attainment of a responsible Government in the State by all legitimate and peaceful means, with universal adult franchise and adequate safeguards for the protection of the interests of the minorities. Eventually, the State Congress split and resulted in the formation of a new party called the 'Youth League', which was founded at Trivandrum. In 1942, the Indian National Congress started the 'Quit India Movement' demanding the English to get out of India immediately, which echoed in Travancore State and particularly in Kanyakumari district, where there was unrest, and as a result, the leaders were arrested and jailed. When India was perambulating towards independence, in many parts of British India and native states, linguistic and parochial movements were gaining ground, which blew out to riotous situations in post-independent India.

The South Travancore area (the present Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu) had been under the rule Travancore Kings and later was part of the Thiru-Cochi State. The fear that the Tamils living in South Travancore would be reduced permanently to the position of the minority in a predominantly Malayalam-speaking state resulted in the demand for merging the area with the erstwhile state of Madras. The Travancore State Congress, on 18th November 1945, passed a resolution in favour of the formation of a united Kerala state through the merger of the states of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar. The Tamilians, who were predominant in the southern taluks of Travancore, resented the resolution. So the Tamil language, which was recognised as one of the state's official languages of Travancore, was de-recognized, and Malayalam remained as the only official language in the State. This was felt as an insult to Tamils, and they came to lose their hold in social, economic, and political spheres and became a discontent lot. However, the political aspirations of the Tamils, who numbered about 15 lakhs in the predominantly Malayalam region, did not weaken. A conference of the Tamils was convened in December 1945 at Nagercoil. Tamil leaders Sam Nathaniel, K. Nagalingam, R.K. Ram, G.S. Moni, and K.L.S. Santhanam graced the function. A resolution to form a political party to fight for the cause of the Tamils was passed, and as a result, the All Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress was born on the 30th June 1946, with Nesamony as its president. Marshal Nesamony hailed from Palliyadi in the Vilavancode Taluk. He started his life as a teacher after the completion of his degree. Later, he studied law and joined as a lawyer at Nagercoil Session Court. He was made Neyyoor district secretary in 1933 and in the same year was elected to the Travancore Mission Council. In 1959, he became the Vice-President of the Kanyakumari Diocese CSI. In 1943, he was voted to the position of President of Nagercoil Lawyers Association; that year itself, he was also appointed as the chairman of the Nagercoil Municipal Council. He had been a member of the Sri Moolam Assembly of Travancore, the Madras State Assembly, and the Lok Sabha.



On 8th September 1947, around two hundred Advocates under his leadership had assembled at Allen Memorial Hall. Muthukaruppa Pillai was a member of the State Congress who also represented his party. According to him, as the Travancore State Congress was the only organization that represented both Malayalees and Tamilians in the States so a new organization to look after the welfare of the Tamilians specifically was not required. Others argued that the Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress was the only group that worked for the welfare of the Tamils, so all Tamil-speaking people should join to strengthen the same. Both these resolutions were put to a vote. Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress was considered the representative body of the Travancore Tamilians. Under Nesamony's leadership, the organization became popular among the Nadars. Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress gathered people in the southern Taluks to explain its objectives. Their main intention was to form a Tamil state with full autonomy under the Maharaja's authority. In 1947, the All Travancore Tamil Congress held a conference at Iraviputhur in which leaders like S. Thavasi, Chitamparam, T.Nagalingam, and others participated. The Travancore Tamil Nadu Congress continued its agitation for the merger of the Tamil-speaking area of Travancore with the Madras state. Jeevanantham and K.L.S. Santhanam collaborated with the movement as representatives of CPI. Agitation clamouring for the merger spread throughout the region, resulting in police oppression. Almost all the leaders were jailed. Jeevanantham and Santhanam went underground, as has been the practice of communists to avoid arrest. Santhanam himself was in a drain during the Marthandam firing, which was the pinnacle of police repression, and escaped to Valliyoor in a lorry, from where he, along with Jeeva, raised funds to sustain the movement. The Travancore State Congress, then in alliance with the Travancore Tamil Congress, formed a ministry headed by Panampalli Govinda Menon, but this ministry did not last long, and hence President's rule was promulgated in Travancore - Cochin State in 1956.

Till 1956, the Kanyakumari district was a part of the erstwhile Travancore state, and the political activities of the people of the state were mainly influenced and guided by the State People's Conference convened at the initiative of the Indian National Congress. The Indian Parliament, based on the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission, passed the State Reorganisation Act in March 1956. The four taluks of Agastheeswaran, Thovalai, Kalkulam, and Vilvancode were grouped to form the new district "Kanyakumari." On the 1st of November 1956, the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu emerged with Nagercoil as its headquarters. Some trade unions started functioning even before the formation of the Kanyakumari district, but after 1956, the trade union movement gathered further momentum under the leadership of K.L.S. Santhanam.

Role of K.L. Santhanam and Labour Movement:

K.L.S. Santhanam conducted a number of agitations to safeguard and highlight the genuine interests of the workers of various categories, such as scavengers, saltpan, haircutting, transport, cooperative, head load, and estate. Santhanam was the popular labour union leader of the southern region. He formed several labour unions in the Kanyakumari district. He also gave guidelines and ideas to the members of the unions. Many labour unions have acknowledged Santhanam as their honourable president and recorded their indebtedness. Labour unions and strikes are the inseparable limbs of an industry or an establishment. With the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, several industries blossomed, both public and private. The workers employed in industries either fought for their salary or demanded a raise in their perquisites like medical allowance, bonus, and other schemes. Though the respective concerns paid adequate attention to fulfill their just demands, occasionally, some of their demands are not totally met. Therefore, every concern of workers, whether it was big or small met with strikes. Labour problems arise when persons sell their services for a wage and work as directed on the premises of an employer. It is a noteworthy feature to state that, though many of the demands were not conceded, some pressing problems and demands were achieved through agitation.

The attitude towards the scavenger community commonly known as Chakkiliyar in Kanyakumari District was not different from the rest of the country. They were treated as untouchables and faced several social disabilities from other sections of society. In 1947, Kasi Udayam came up as the saviour of the scavenging workers by organizing a union to fight for their legitimate rights and for their recognition as human beings. K.L.S. Santhanam joined with Kasi Udayam and fought shoulder to shoulder for the rights



of the scavengers. He was in the tenth standard when he plunged into this movement. In Kanyakumari, the labour union leaders like A.C. Sundaram Pillai, Sam Nathaniel, V. Markandan, Kasi Udayam, Uppalam Rasayya, etc., were the important ones responsible for the formation of the Uppalam Workers Union. K.L.S. Santhanam led the agitations against the saltpan owners for wage increase and for basic amenities like hand gloves, working shoes, etc. Those who depended exclusively on salt processing lived in very poor conditions. There was a lack of basic needs like drinking water, shelter, education, and facilities like gumboots, sunglasses, tools, and health care, etc. Children were brought up on salty land with no activities for growth. In 1957, Santhanam organized hair-cutting labourers in the Kanyakumari district. Before that, there was no unity among those people, and they were not given proper fees for their work. They wanted to go to every doorstep for their work. In such a situation, they assembled under Santhanam and formed a union under his presidency. Kanyakumari District Estate Labourers Union was functioning from 1957 in Thadikarankoanm. In the beginning, Sam Nathaniel, the popular labour union leader, was the president, followed by R.K. Ram, another great trade union leader. Santhanam was the vice-president. With T.P. Perumal as the secretary and N. Narayana Pillai as the assistant secretary, all of them worked hard for the rights of the labourers from the estate owners. In the same period, in Kulashakarm Louis Deva Sahayam and Madhavan headed the Estate Labourers Union. In later days, due to political and personal reasons, each leader started separate unions.

In 1957, K.L.S. Santhanam started the Loadmen Workers Union in Thisayanvilai near his native village, Orumankulam. The registration number of the union was 3276/62 in Nagercoil. Under his leadership, the load men workers conducted an agitation in front of the hotel in Thisayanvilai against the irregularities in the wages. K.L.S. Santhanam and J. Hemachandran organized a labour union in Nagammal Mill in the year 1959. It benefited the workers. The management used to prevent the workers from the job to get any benefits. The picketing in front of the company met with success, and legally allowed benefits were granted to the workers. After the split in the Communist Party, the control of the labour union went into the hands of CPI (M) loyalists, and he was forced to leave the union in 1965. From 1965 to 1971, K.L.S. Santhanam was the vice-president of the union. The famous Labour Union Leader R.K. Ram was the president. In later days, this union was split into various unions. At the same time, K.L.S. Santhanam became the president of the Kumari Mavatta Porul Payanikal Pokkuvarathu Goods Loading and Unloading Workers Union. That union's registration number was 300 K.K.M, and it was affiliated with AITUC. After 1956, the transport system of the Kanyakumari district came under the purview of Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation. The Government Bus Drivers' Union was started. From 1963 to 1965, Santhanam worked as the secretary of the union, and R.K. Ram was the president. In 1962, the Motor Labourers Union was started. Santhanam was with the union for more than ten years, along with C. Sankar and R. Somasundaram. In later years, K.L.S. Santhanam himself became the president of the union. The Kanyakumari District Co-operative Spinning Mills Limited, Aralvaimozhi, was one among the seventeen co-operative spinning mills in Tamil Nadu. Formation of the mill was in 1963, and it went into commercial production on 9th December 1965. In 1967, Santhanam became the president of the Kanyakumari District Co-operative Spinning Mills Limited Labourers Union. From 1967 to 1981, K.L.S. Santhanam was the legal advisor of the Upper Kothaiyar Dam Construction Labourers Union.

During that period, Dalawai of Ambasamudram and Pantruti Ramachandran, the former minister of Tamil Nadu, were working along with K.L.S. Santhanam. From 1976 to 1982, Santhanam was the honorary president and legal advisor of the Kanyakumari District Central Co-operative Bank Employees Union. During the internal emergency period when MISA was in operation (1975 – 1977), there were strict restrictions on the labour unions. However, Santhanam conducted so many hunger strikes and got a number of benefits for the workers. From 1970 to 1972, Santhanam was the president of the Kanyakumari District Hospital Employees Union. He conducted an agitation in front of the Catharine Booth Hospital and got benefits for the workers. From 1972 onwards, he became the legal advisor of the Tamil Nadu Mercantile Bank Employees Union. From 1975 to 1980, he served as the president of the Kanyakumari District Railway Construction Labourers Union. Kanyakumari District Printing Press Labourers Union was presided over by Santhanam from 1975 to 1980.



Conclusion:

In such a context, we find the courage of an unsung hero, K.L.S. Santhanam. His battlefields are in front of the arrogant authorities, Labour Courts, and Tribunals. His enemies are the suppressors and oppressors of the working classes. His friends are the toiling masses, underprivileged, suppressed, and oppressed. He has been rendering yeoman service to the working classes in various avenues and has been imprisoned many times for agitating to bring solace and succour to the poor and downtrodden. He won several battles against the leading legal luminaries who appeared against him in the Labour Courts and Tribunals. Though he was not a law graduate, his mastery over the Industrial Dispute Act 1947 and the connected laws, rulings, procedures, and his vast experience and spirit of dedication enabled him to carve out a niche for himself in the legal pantheon amidst the leaders of the Bar in the State. His method of presentation and placing matters before the court is appreciated by all. Till his death, K.L.S. Santhanam's solaces were reaching the beleaguered people in one way or another.

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