

Historical Importance of the Role Played by Jaffna Youth Congress on Jaffna Politics on the 1920S And 1930S

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Abstract - The Jaffna Youth Congress emerged around the early 1920s in Jaffna as an anti-colonial formation. This organization was mainly comprised of educated middle class Tamil youth. It organized various protest activities, boycotts and national cultural programs in the Jaffna peninsula and agitated against imperialism. The members were also strongly against the backward social customs that prevailed in Jaffna society. While emphasizing equality and promoting liberal policies, the Jaffna Youth Congress strongly espoused national unity, ethnic harmony and justice for all the people in the country. Eventually, they focused on achieving ‘PurnaSwaraj’ (Complete Freedom) from British rule. In respect of that, this research mainly intends to find out the historical importance of the Jaffna Youth Congress to Jaffna politics during the 1920s and 1930s period. The data collection mainly depended on secondary sources. This research convincingly revealed that the Jaffna Youth Congress acted as a significant force in the socio-political scene of Jaffna during that period. The Youth Congress played a remarkable role in comparison with the main contemporaneous independence movement in the country’s mainstream politics. This latter movement was led by a multi-ethnic, westernized, elite class group that was willing to be a subservient partner under British Dominion rule and never demanded complete freedom, unlike the Jaffna Youth Congress. The Jaffna Youth Congress followed rather radical political methods, but the elite politicians preferred to adopt a conventional political approach. Whereas the Youth Congress insisted on equality based social concepts the elite group showed a lack of concern about the neglected bottom layers of society. Besides, even though all ethnicities were represented in the elite group’s mainstream politics, harmonious relations did not exist between the Sinhala and Tamil elite politicians. Both groups worked towards constitutional privileges focusing on their own ethnic interests. Even though it was just a young Tamil group from the North, the Youth Congress showed great maturity by laying strong emphasis on the importance of ethnic harmony. This is remarkable because that was the most critical historical era during which the grassroots causes of ethnic tensions that later ravaged the country emerged.

Key words - Radical, Tamil, Unity, Youth Congress

1. INTRODUCTION

In the earlier part of the 20th century, elite class politicians were the dominant group in the Ceylon independence movement [1]. They represented every ethnicity in Ceylon but were highly westernized, were mostly Christian and believed that British rule was a blessing for Ceylon and its people [2, p.117]. Therefore, the independence movement headed by them focused primarily on constitutional reforms and eventually aimed for nothing more than Dominion status under British colonial rule. They never struggled for ‘PurnaSwaraj’ (Complete Freedom) and their outlook precluded any radical activities [2, p. 814]. In the meantime, a segment of educated but radical youth in the South who were from the middle class was highly disappointed with the nature of the current political movement that was led by the elites. Therefore, they formed many small anti-colonial radical youth organizations in several different areas, mainly around Colombo and the South in the second decade of the 20th century [3]. Its main objective was to achieve ‘PurnaSwaraj’, to redevelop the national heritage and establish national unity, etc. [4]. In the meantime, educated middle class Tamil youth also came forward in Jaffna to achieve more or less the same targets as the radical youth movements in the South [5, Chapter 2]. Among those Tamil youths, C. Sundaralingam, C. Balasundaram, Handy Perinpanayagam, V. Muthukumar, K. Nesaiya, and S.C. Sithamparanadan were the most notable persons. Many of them were educated in Jaffna College and this shaped their anti-colonial, anti-imperialistic ideology, even from their school days. As a first step, the Jaffna youth formed the Jaffna Student Congress in 1924 and then renamed it the Jaffna Youth Congress in 1926. The Jaffna Youth Congress rapidly became popular among the educated middle-class youth, especially the young graduates of the Jaffna University, those from Indian Universities and the newly founded Ceylon University College, as well as high school students. . In respect of that this research mainly intends to find out the historical importance of the Jaffna Youth Congress to Jaffna politics during the 1920s and 1930s period.

11. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This research is mainly qualitative one. The data collection mainly depended on secondary sources. Mostly books, research papers, monographs, theses and dissertations were used. Additionally, newspapers of that era and leaflets distributed by the Youth Congress were skimmed through to gather any pertinent information.

11.1. THE ROLE OF JAFFNA YOUTH CONGRESS

Several radical political sessions were organized by the Congress in various places around Jaffna. Most of the radical speeches delivered during those sessions had the direct aim of developing an anti-imperialistic ideology and instilling awareness of their self-dignity among Tamil youth. Every session was organized to build up a feeling of national consciousness through different means including the use of symbols, so as to influence the young participants into adopting an anti-Western stance.

Most important thing was that the Jaffna Youth Congress laid much emphasis on national unity. This was in sharp contrast to the contemporary elite class Sinhala and Tamil leaders who were at loggerheads with each other over disagreements on constitutional rights [6]. Being aware of the dispute, the Jaffna Youth Congress repeatedly requested both groups of elite class leaders to come together and form a common platform and build up a strong united front against imperialism. They invited some Sinhala youth like P.S. Kularathna, who was the principal of Ananda College, Colombo, J.K.W. Perera, A.E. Gunasingha, and S.W.R.D. Bandaranike as speakers at several of their sessions [7]. The Jaffna Youth Congress encouraged the Sinhala and Tamil people to learn the language, culture, history, heritage and traditions of both communities [8, p.22]. Newspapers like the Ceylon Patriot, Hindu Organ, Morning Star and Eelakesari (in English, Eelam Digest) provided moral support and significant publicity for the Jaffna Youth Congress. More than three hundred youth participated in the first session that was held in 1925, but in 1931 the participation exceeded a thousand [8, pp. 24, 25].

The equality based principles that were espoused by the Jaffna Congress gave a radical and liberal outlook to the organization, which won it many followers. They were strongly against gender discrimination, caste injustices, the dowry system etc., which were widely prevalent in the current Tamil society. Contemporary elite class Tamil leaders who were mostly from the dominant Vellalah caste hardly paid any attention or made any effort to address the issues faced by the bottom layers of Tamil society. But the Jaffna Youth Congress worked hard to eliminate these problems

and further, paid much attention to organize and mobilize the Tamil youth to rebel and fight against the imperialism. They viewed and treated all languages, religions, castes and nationalities of Sri Lanka in the same way under their equality based ideology [8, pp.6.7.11].

During that same period the Indian independent movement had been very active and vigorous, focusing strongly on 'PurnaSwaraj'. Jaffna youth who were easily exposed to its direct influences became more radical as a result [8, p. 12]. Being impressed by that, they invited some Indian leaders who were at the forefront of the independence struggle like Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, SathyaMurthi and Kamaladevi as guest speakers at Youth Congress meetings. Listening to those speeches inspired the Jaffna youth and provided them with significant moral support, further reinforcing their anti-imperialism ideology.

Jaffna Youth Congress launched its most aggressive program when it organized a boycott movement against the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931, for the reason that this constitution did not offer PurnaSwaraj [9, pp.46-51]. However, in the latter part of the 1930s the position of the Congress gradually became very weak. Elite class politicians who wielded more power created various kinds of obstacles and posed certain threats against the Youth Congress [10]. Eventually, its popularity waned and the membership declined, causing the Youth Congress to become very weak. The elite politicians gradually took over and led the politics of the Tamil North in the subsequent years (Hindu Organ, 07.09.1933).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The Jaffna Youth Congress represented a significant socio-political force in the Jaffna history of the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas the contemporary elite class Tamil politicians had been adopting a Westernized, pro-British Raj, non-radical and conservative stand, the Jaffna Youth Congress represented a radical, anti-imperialistic stand in that era, in Jaffna society. Even as the elite Tamil politicians did not connect sufficiently with the lower strata of Tamil society, the Youth Congress played a significant role by following an equality based ideology, while connecting with each and every group of the society. They aimed for 'PurnaSwaraj', which was a new trend in the prevailing political arena of Jaffna. During the first half of the 20th century, the harmonious relationship that had existed previously between Sinhala and Tamil elite class leaders gradually broke down, and this proved to be the first landmark registering a drastic change in this longstanding ethnic relationship of Ceylon.

Even at this critical juncture, the Tamil Congress played a prominent role to maintain the ethnic unity and harmony among Sinhalese and Tamils. Though they were young, the Tamil Congress youth understood the importance of ethnic harmony for achieving sustainable development of this multi-ethnic country, which idea the contemporary Sinhala and Tamil elite politicians seemed unable to grasp. The Jaffna Youth Congress actively functioned over a nearly ten-year period, which was a relatively short period indeed. But even within this limited time frame those youth made a mark by pursuing many admirable ideals, by setting a good example and playing a colorful role in the Jaffna politics of that period.

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