

Dr. T.S. SOUNDARAM AND ERADICATION OF UNTOUCHABILITY**Dr. N. Neela* and K. Thenmozhi******Head and Associate Professor, Dept. of History****M.Phil Scholar (FT), History,**Sri Meenakshi Govt. College for women, Madurai - 625002***Abstract**

This paper attempts to highlight the enthusiasm shown by the social reformer Dr. T.S. Soundaram, in eradicating untouchability through Madurai Temple Entry Movement. To uplift the Harijans and to propagate untouchability, Dr. T.S. Soundaram took efforts vigorously with the guidance of his mother Lakshmi Ammal through Hindu Women's Association and Tamilnadu Harijan Sevak Sangh. Among the marks of untouchability to be removed was the prohibition against Temple-Entry by the Harijans. Apart from Gandhi's appeal, Dr. T.S. Soundaram with leaders like A. Vaidyanathalyer and other women volunteers advocated the removal of this social disability from the Hindu Society. The Temple-Entry was considered the climax of anti-untouchability campaign. She with the cooperation of the general public involved in the Temple-Entry propaganda by the way of conducting meetings, involving door to door canvass, issuing pamphlets, etc. After the investment of her laborious works for years together, the Harijans Temple Entry was achieved peacefully on July 8th 1939. In this Movement, she faced opposition from the Sanatanists. With the able measures of A.V. Iyer and others, Dr. T.S. Soundaram emerged as a key person in passing the Untouchability Act in the Madras Legislative Assembly.

Keywords: *untouchability act, folk, temple-entry, community, Hindu society*

If ever a person with limitless kindness, compassion, sympathy and ever helpful nature walked on the earth, it was Soundaram Ramachandran. She was loved, admired and almost worshiped universally as Mother - Amma. It is an attempt to bring out the social service nature of Dr. T.S. Soundaram towards the Harijans. This paper deals with the enthusiasm of Dr. T.S. Soundaram in eradicating the social evil, 'untouchability' through the Temple-Entry movement in Madurai. The concept of eradication of untouchability as the most significant one of Soundaram's principles. Upliftment of Harijans became her life's mission. She worked hard for the welfare of the community.¹

The Indian Hindu Society is well known for caste system. On the basis of Manu Sastras, the whole structure of the Hindu society has been broadly divided into four major categories called Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras.² While the people of the first three categories were able to enjoy the social privileges and the benefits, the fourth category was deprived of everything. These people were also treated as untouchables and they simply eked out their lives in an inexplicit social agony. The coming of the Europeans and subsequently the English education created a new kind of social awakening among the educated folk of the Hindu society. The emergency of social religious reformers in the 18th

and 19th centuries caused for the introduction of many legislations to wipe out the age-long social evils such as the practice of sathi, child-marriage, etc.³ While these legislations had little impact over the people at higher level, the socio-economic conditions of the Sudras, otherwise called untouchables and depressed classes were more or less remained unchanged.⁴

The depressed classes or the untouchables were economically weak and also were denied of certain social and religious rights.⁵ They were not allowed to take water from common wells. Gandhiji held that the practice of untouchability was a blot on Hinduism and asked the people to remove it from the Hindu society.⁶ However no appreciable progress was made in this regard until the establishment of the 'All India Anti-untouchability League' in 1932 in Delhi. Its name was changed into 'Servants of Untouchable Society'.⁷ The Tamil Servants of Untouchable Society was formed on 20th November 1932. Dr. T.S. Soundaram became one of the members of that organization.

Ambedkar's demand of separate electorate for the depressed classes⁸, Gandhiji's epic fast⁹ and consequently the Poona Pact¹⁰ all in 1932 had opened a new page in the social history of India. Gandhiji felt that untouchability can only be removed when the majority of the Hindus realized that it was a crime against God and Man. He founded the HarijanSevakSangh in 1932.¹¹

As far as Tamilnadu is concerned, T.S.S. Rajan, a wealthy Brahmin from Trichirappalli was nominated as the President of TamilnaduHarijanSevakSangh.¹² He served for 3 years and formed its branches in all the districts. A. Vaithianathalyer, a veteran HarijanSevak became its President in 1935.¹³ Likewise a number of versatile and Gandhian stalwarts like Dr. T.S. Soundaram, N.N.M.R. Subbaramana of Madurai, SardarVedarathnamPillai of Vedaranya, T.S. Avinashilingam of Coimbatore, Bashyamlyengar of Madras and many more took in-charge of the works for scheduled caste upliftment.¹⁴

Dr. Soundaram did yeoman service for the removal of untouchability. She became the member of the Hindu Women's Association which was founded in Madurai and her mother Lakshmi Ammal was its President.¹⁵ The association did extremely useful work for the upliftment of the Harijans. On the encouragement of Lakshmi Ammal, Dr. T.S. Soundaram worked vigorously. She thought that compared with Men, Women could work immensely in eradicating this evil.

She did a lot to ameliorate the living condition of the Harijans and addressed number of crowded gatherings on Madurai and laid the anti-untouchability campaign.¹⁶ Dr. T.S. Soundaram with other women volunteers like S. ThayAmmal, R. Lakshmikantham, V. Akilandeswari, N.M.R.S. Parvathavarthini, N. Lakshmiarathi, Dr. PitchaimuthuAmmal and Meenakshi Ammal visited the slums to render their services to the Harijans and their children.¹⁷ They cleared the surroundings of the slums, brought soaps and oil and gave bath

to the slum children.¹⁸ They started a day-and-night school for giving education to the Harijan children and gave bannians& towels and slates at free of cost. Messrs. Chari & Ram Co. offered scholarships to the Harijan students. The volunteers made anti-alcoholic propaganda by conducting public meetings. They provided neat dresses to the poor Harijans and were brought around the four Chithirai Streets for bhajans. They arranged for them inter-communal-dinings (samabandhibojanam).¹⁹ A team led by Lakshmanaperumalpillai and his wife made village-to-village visits along with T.S. Soundaram and other selfless devoted women workers and made effective propaganda for sanitation and hygiene in the Harijan colonies of Madurai region.²⁰ Dr. T.S. Soundaram and other women workers went to each and every house in Madurai and preached about the demerits of untouchability.²¹

Dr. T.S. Soundaram did a pioneering and remarkable work with A. Vaithianathalyer in the Temple-Entry proposal. In 1932, an opinion poll was conducted among the high caste Hindus in Madurai, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram and Srirangam. In all these four places, the people of Harijans entry into the temple. In Madurai, about 5732 caste Hindus were approached and among them 4746 persons expressed their stance in favour of Temple-Entry.²² It revealed that nearly 80% of the caste Hindus were there for Harijans' Temple-Entry. In MaduraiMeenakshiAmmanTemple, election was conducted in the Board of Trust in 1939. All the six seats of the Board were won by the supporters of the Temple-Entry.²³ Thus in Madurai, which had hitherto been considered as a strong hold of orthodoxy, the campaign in favour of the Temple-Entry became very strong under the inspiration of Dr. T.S. Soundaram.

The Tamilnadu Harijan Sevak Sangh workers including Dr. T.S. Soundaram under the leadership of A. Vaithianathalyer planned to launch a vigorous campaign for Temple-Entry in Tamilnadu. They held public meetings in many places.²⁴ TheSangh decided to hold a provincial conference towards achieving their goal. Accordingly this conference was held in the Madurai on 13th July 1939 at the Victory Edward Hall. Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru, Vice-President of the All India HarijanSevakSangh presided over the conference.²⁵ The Conference passed many important resolutions. A Temple-Entry propaganda committee was constituted in Madurai under the leadership of A. Vaithianathalyer and Dr. T.S. Soundaram undertook laudable efforts to win the public support.

The movement of Temple-Entry was gaining ground in Madurai since 1932 and by 1939 the whole atmosphere was quite conducive to carry out this reform. Shriman Narayan, Mahatma Gandhi, the atomic man²⁷ and Dr. T.S. Soundaram along with fellow workers publicized the arguments in the form of leaflets and slips every day. Wall-posters every vehicle with the following matter: "Harijans are Hindus and please give them Temple-Entry"²⁸. Public meetings became very common and not a day passed without at least 2 or 3 meetings in each and every corner of Madurai town.²⁹ Dr. T.S. Soundaram and others like N.

Halasyam, ThiagarajaSivam, L. Krishnaswamy Bharati, Krishna Kanthu, P.K. Ramachary and Managala Pattabi Ramaiah delivered stirring speeches among the women folk. She carried out house-to-house propaganda and met the leading people of all the communities.³⁰ She also approached the Executive Officers, Archahas, Sanathanists and other servants of the temples and explained to them the need for Temple-Entry. The wonderful event of Temple-Entry by non-caste Hindus in Madurai at last happened on 8th July 1939. On that day, at 8.45 am, a batch of non-caste Hindus, numbering six made their first entry into the famous Meenakshi Temple under the leadership of A. Vaithianathalyer with Dr. T.S. Soundaram and her fellow workers.³¹ The six members were P. Kakkan, Member, Madurai District Board, Swami Muruganatham, Alambatti, Madurai District, Muthu, HaijanSevalaya worker, Madurai, V.S. Chinnaya, Mathichiyam, Madurai, V.R. Poovalingam, Virattipathu, Madurai and S.S. Shanmugam Nadar, Municipal Councilor, Virudhunagar. R.S. Naidu, the Executive Officer, A. Chidambaram Mudaliyar, Member, Devasthanam Committee, Perishkar, the Superintendent, who was supervising the worship work in the temple and other servants of the temple were present at the entrance and received the Temple-Entry team. Nobody raised any objection or protest when they entered the temple.³² A number of people witnessed this wonderful event. The news of this event spread at once like forest-fire.³³ The hearts of millions of Hindus must have excited with joy on reading the news of the peaceful realization of non-caste Hindus' Temple-Entry into the great Meenakshi Temple, Madurai.³⁴ This Temple-Entry was a great landmark in the campaign against untouchability. It was a remarkable reform in the Hindu religion as it brought about equality among the worshipers of the God. A great change had come over the land without violence and bloodshed. Dr. T.S. Soundaram executed the program remarkably peacefully.³⁵ The Temple-Entry in Madurai may be called as 'bloodless revolution'. By leading the Temple-Entry movement, she gave a historical victory to Madurai in the annals of the Hindu religion.³⁶ Gandhiji described this event as a miracle.³⁷

The entry into the Meenakshi Temple paved the way for the opening up of the other major temples to non-caste Hindus. Dr. T.S. Soundaram took efforts with A.V. Iyer in opening the other temples. The Kallazhagar Temple was opened on the same day, viz., 8th July 1939. Koodalazhagar Temple was opened for it on the next day. Following that, Srivilliputhur Sri Andal Temple, Tanjore Pragatheeswar Temple³⁸, Thenur Sri Sundaravalli Amman Temple (in 1949), Thiruvudagam Sridaganathar Temple (in 1950) and Cholavandan Sri Janakai Mariamman Temple³⁹ were also opened. The Madurai Municipal Council passed a resolution rejoicing over the peaceful and successful entry of the non-caste Hindus into the temples and congratulated Dr. T.S. Soundaram for her efforts to accomplish it.⁴⁰

Dr. T.S. Soundaram was responsible indirectly for passing of the Untouchability Act by participating in the remarkable Madurai Temple-Entry. The Temple-Entry authorization Act of 1947 was felt and improved and an all-round comprehensive Act.⁴¹ On the implementation of the Act of 1947, 148 temples including that of ThirupathiVenkateshwaraTemple were opened.⁴² There was much opposition from the Sanathanists and there appeared phenomenal improvement in the social position of the untouchables.⁴³

In 1948, Chief Minister, O.P RamasamyReddiar drafted a Bill to rectify certain anomalies of the Act of 1947 known as the Madras Temple Entry Authorization (Amendment) Bill.⁴⁴ The Bill was published on 8th February 1949.⁴⁵ It pointed out a lacuna in the Madras Act of 1947 that the Right of Religious Worship in certain temples were confined by a section of caste Hindu community and the untouchables had no right to worship in those temples. Therefore, some of the quotes holding this loopholes, justified the refusal of entry of the untouchables in sectional temples.⁴⁶ By seeking this remedy, the Bill sanctioned the entry of the untouchables in all the Hindu temples including those which were constructed for the benefits of particular section of Hindu community. Secondly, the Bill declared all the offences punishable in this section cognizable.⁴⁷ K. MadahavaMenon introduced this Bill on 18th April 1949 in the Madras Legislative Assembly. Immediately, J. ShanmugamPillai, the Harizan Speaker of the Assembly placed it for the consideration of the Assembly.⁴⁸ After the passing of this Bill in the Assembly, K. MadahavaMenon introduced the same Bill in the Madras Legislative Council for its consideration and constructive suggestion on 20th April 1949 and after deliberations, it was passed on the same day. The Governor General gave his assent to the Bill on 17th June 1949.⁴⁹ It became Law known as 'The Madras Temple-Entry Authorization (Amendment) Act, 1949' and was numbered at Madras Act XIII of 1949 and published in Fort Saint George on 28th June 1949.⁵⁰

When the Constitution of Republic of India was commenced in 1950, it attached great importance to the eradication of untouchability.⁵¹ The exclusion of untouchables from public facilities and Hindu temples was declared as statutory offence throughout India, including Tamilnadu. Under the Articles 17 and 35 of the Constitution, untouchability was abolished and its practice in any form was forbidden. Their protection from social injustice and all forms of exploitation was laid down as one of the directive principles of state policy.⁵³ The Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1959 tried to plug the loopholes in the violation of Constitutional Principles. It advocated committees at State headquarters like Madras to be framed for the effective implementation of the Act. The protection of Civil Rights by the Act of 1955 was indeed a charter of liberties for the untouchables. It prescribed stringent punishments for the all the offences connected with untouchabilities

which were made cognizable and noncompoundable. The penalty was considerably enhanced and both fine imprisonment were simultaneously awarded.⁵⁴

Since temples formed the centres of Hindu cultural identity, the depressed and backward sections considered the Temple-Entry as the most important aspect of social justice. They realized that the end of social taboos that had surrounded the temples would set them absolutely free from most of the social restrictions like untouchability. In this endeavour, the inspiration from neighbouring developments helped them greatly to attain this task. No wonder Dr. T.S. Soundaram with A.V. Iyer and others met anti-movement through Sanatanists and placed them in Legislature for legal battle and at last, they were successful in passing of the Protection of Civil Rights Act.

It can be contended that the custom of excluding a certain section of Hindu people from entering the Hindu temples is highly unreasonable, inhuman and unjust and the Temple Entry reform was the result of advanced and well-reasoned public opinion. The reform removed a great wrong of centuries from the Hindu society only after many years of patient and earnest work done by the Tamil Nadu HarijanSevakSangh. This Sangh's workers paved the way for the opening of the people's hearts before the physical opening of the temple doors to the Excluded Classes. The Temple Entry Act of the Government of Madras only succeeded the reform and did not precede it. The Act was not imposed on the people; it only recognized the latter's will. The Higher Courts in India held that the Temple Entry Act was valid in so far as the Constitutional provisions were concerned. The Temple Entry was a much needed reform and the Act passed in 1939 was perfected by another Act passed by the Government of Madras subsequently. By leading the Temple Entry Movement, Madurai made history in the campaign for the removal of untouchability in the country. In appreciation of Madurai's commendable role towards temple-entry Gandhiji visited the Minakshi temple in 1946.

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