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INTERVIEWS

Agrarian Issues, Local and National Extracts from Conversations with P. Ramamurti

V. K. Ramachandran*

P. Ramamurti was at the centre of the Left-oriented section of the Congress and subsequently of the Communist Party in Tamil Nadu from the 1930s. Although his arena was India as a whole, his knowledge of Tamil Nadu and its contemporary political history had a special richness, built as it was on a vast fund of personal experience.

I was a research student in the early 1980s, working on agricultural labour and doing fieldwork in the Cumbum Valley, which covers approximately the present Uthamapalayam taluk in Theni district (then a part of Madurai district). Although my focus was on the contemporary economy, I was also interested in the history of the region. I interviewed PR three times on matters relating to the Valley: on June 13, 1982, May 1, 1983, and after the general election of 1984.

In the first two interviews, I asked PR about the political milieu of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in the Valley, and about the agrarian movement in the region. I also asked about the influence of one of the most prominent landlord families of the region, that of P. T. Rajan (1892-1974). In each of his replies, PR widened the scope and significance of the question.

The Cumbum Valley was an area of Congress-oriented landlords, and one of the questions I asked PR was: if landlords were the bulwark of British rule, how was it that so many were in the national movement led by the Congress? In reply, he made a point of substantial historical and political importance: he pointed out that *the landlord element in the bourgeois-landlord character of the Congress Party had crystallised by 1930*, that is, by the period of the Great Depression and of the Salt Satyagraha and civil disobedience movement.

The paragraphs that follow are extracts from the unpublished interviews of 1982 and 1983, the texts of which I have reorganised under different headings.

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THE INTERVIEW

Political Participation of Landlords in the Pre-Independence Period

When we say “Landlords were the bulwark of British rule in India,” we are speaking, above all, about the statutory landlords — *zamindars*, *inamdar*s, etc. After 1930 — this is the period when the non-Brahman movement was gaining ground, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra — we find more and more non-Brahman landlords extending their support to the Congress.

There were two reasons for this. First, under Gandhi’s leadership, the Congress had assured the landlords that they would not be affected. In the Bardoli resolution and during the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Congress had assured landlords that it did not stand for the cessation of rent payment to the landlords.¹

Secondly, the world capitalist crisis that broke out in 1929 hit the agricultural sector very badly. The landlords did not have any sophisticated understanding of the crisis, they did not know its causes in any detail or depth; but from their own experience they knew that the price of paddy had crashed from Rs 3 per *kalam* to 14 *annas* per *kalam*, and they were very angry with the British.

In the 1930-2 period, during the Civil Disobedience movement, the leadership of the Congress also underwent a change. The Dravidian ideology, and here I mean its anti-Brahman aspect, percolated to the Congress Party as well. In the 1920s, the leadership of the Congress, despite the presence of individuals such as Periyar, Thiru Vi Ka, and Varadarajulu, was essentially monopolised by the Brahman intelligentsia.² By the time of the 1930 Salt Satyagraha, a big chunk of the non-Brahman leadership entered the movement. There was from then on an undercurrent of anti-Brahman sentiment present in the Congress, something that happened in Maharashtra as well. Rich and educated non-Brahmans in the Congress resented the domination by the Brahmins of the Congress movement, and began to push Brahmins out of leadership positions, entering these themselves.

Landlords began to enter the Congress in different parts of the country. Muthurangam Mudaliar (of Nazarathpettai in Chengalpattu), the Bhaktavatsalam family, Omandur Ramasami Reddiar (of South Arcot), members of Gounder families from Coimbatore (for instance, C. Subramaniam and others) came to the Congress. Big *ryotwari*

¹ The Resolution passed by the meeting of the Congress Working Committee at its meeting in Bardoli on February 11 and 12, 1922 said: “Complaints having been brought to the notice of the Working Committee that ryots are not paying rents to the zemindars, the Working Committee advises Congress workers and organizations to inform the ryots that such withholding of rents is contrary to the resolutions of the Congress and that it is injurious to the best interests of the country.” On the class nature of support to the Bardoli no-tax movement conducted by the Congress Party, E. M. S. Namboodiripad has written: “In the forefront of the Bardoli struggle were those who would turn against the struggle the moment it turned against the landlords and moneylenders.”

² PR refers here to E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), T. V. Kalyanasundaram (1883-1953), and P. Varadarajulu Naidu.

landlords in your Cumbum Valley also joined the Congress: in Gudalur, Ponniah Gounder; in Kamayagoundanpatti, Sakthivadivel Gounder; in Uthamapalayam, the Karutha Rowther family. When these *ryotwari* landlords came to the Congress, they brought small landlords into the Congress Party with them. Among the statutory landlords in Tamil Nadu, who generally stayed out of the Congress, Dr. Subbarayan was an exception, as was [my notes are unclear here] Mudaliar of Salem, an *inamdar*.

Thus while big statutory landlords remained outside the Congress — take the case of the British India Landowners' Association, whose president was the Maharaja of Burdwan, and in which the Maharaja of Darbhanga played a leading role — *ryotwari* landlords entered the Congress in a big way.³ Bengal was an area with big statutory landlords. However, it was from Bengal that the largest number of youth went to England to study. Many of these youth were attracted to the freedom movement and the Congress. In fact, many of the terrorists came from educated middle-landlord families, even terrorists of the 1904-5 period.

The point I want to stress is that by 1930, by that period, the Congress had emerged as the representative of capitalists and landlords; it had acquired the character of a bourgeois-landlord party.

Caste and Ryotwari Landlordism

Though there were some Brahman big landlords — Kunniyur Ayyar is an example — the biggest landlords under the *ryotwari* system were from non-Brahman castes. In the early stages of *ryotwari*, after Munro, rowdy elements, from families of which the local *tehsildars* and other revenue officials were afraid, grabbed as much land as they could. These people grabbed the land and coerced, frightened, and bribed the revenue officials to register the land in their names, which the officials did.

Upper-caste non-Brahman families, belonging as they did to more aggressive and belligerent sections, asserted themselves thus at this time. For instance, the Vandayar family, according to what is said, sent a horse out — as at an *aswamedha* — and told the revenue officials to recognise the limits of the horse's wanderings as the extent of their *ryotwari* property.

The Political Milieu of the Cumbum Valley in the 1930s and 1940s

The Cumbum Valley was essentially a Congress-oriented area, one where the Justice Party did not have much impact.⁴ The Congress candidate, Sakthivadivel Gounder of Kamayagoundanpatti, won from that constituency to the Central Assembly repeatedly: the Congress won in the Valley in 1936, 1937, and 1952.

³ Here PR referred to the entry of Kamalapati Tripathi's family into the Congress in the United Provinces.

⁴ The collaborationist Justice Party, formed in 1917, was dominated by upper-caste Hindu non-Brahmans.

Remember that the elections of the 1930s were fought in the aftermath of the great world capitalist crisis of 1929-34. This crisis affected the agrarian economy deeply, and levels of indebtedness among the peasantry increased tremendously. It was in this context that the Congress fought the election. The Congress put forward an agrarian programme, albeit a restricted one, that included demands such as the abolition of *zamindari* and *inamdar* (forms of statutory landlordism), and demands relating to the cancellation of rural debt. These agrarian demands were combined with the demand for political independence from British rule. In our campaigns among the people, it was these demands on which we the radicals in the Congress — the section that became Communist — focussed.

What did the Justice Party have to offer the people against this? They were pro-British landlord elements that had nothing to offer the people, and the people rejected them decisively.

Though the election was fought by a restricted electorate — there was a literacy criterion in order to qualify for the vote — the voters, middle and rich peasantry and other sections, voted overwhelmingly for the Congress and against the Justice Party.

Periyar had, of course, by that time given up the Erode programme and was in collaboration with the Justice Party.⁵ The social reform movement led by Periyar had a profound impact on the Scheduled Caste population of many rural areas: this was particularly true of Thanjavur and Tiruchi, and parts of Coimbatore. This movement, to the best of my knowledge, did not have the same profound impact on Scheduled Caste sections in the Cumbum Valley as it had in these other areas.

On P. T. Rajan⁶

In 1952, P. T. Rajan (PTR) was the lone Justice Party member in the Assembly. He first stood from Madurai against me (I contested from jail) and lost. He then contested from, I think, Uthamapalayam and came to the Assembly.

He was a good man personally, of a philanthropic nature, and tried to help people — help with jobs or to get them out of scrapes.

I knew him well. In 1946, the question of recognition of the union of Madura Mills was referred to arbitration by Judge Rajagopal, then Sessions Judge of Ramnad at Madurai and later of the High Court. One day when I was coming out of court, about

⁵ In December 1932, E. V. Ramasamy, “along with M. Singaravelu, P. Jeevanandam and other leading socialist-inclined Self-Respecters, drafted and published the Samadharma (Socialist) Programme, popularly known as the ‘Erode Plan’” (quotation from the website of the Centre for Periyar Studies, Bharathidasan University).

⁶ P. T. Rajan (1892-1974) was a major landlord, barrister, public figure, and Minister in the pre-Independence Madras Presidency. His family had vast land holdings in the Cumbum Valley. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly from a Cumbum Valley constituency.

half a dozen goondas hired by the leader of the opposing union came to kill me. They were armed with daggers. PTR was nearby; he immediately told his juniors to surround me, and they took me to safety in PTR's chambers.

At the arbitration proceedings, I said that our union was ready to face a secret ballot, and if we lost the vote, we would wind up our union and join the other union. PTR, who was the lawyer for Madura Coats, immediately got up and said "That is a very good proposal." From behind him, Sir James Doak, General Manager of the Company, nudged him and asked angrily, "What are you saying?" PTR turned around and said, "How can you ask me to oppose such a democratic proposal?"

On class issues, landlords of the Congress Party and Justice Party would be one in the defence of landlord interests against the toiling peasantry. It is similar to the situation today. A Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) landlord will stand united with a Congress landlord or Janata Party landlord against the peasantry and agricultural workers; he will not let party affiliations obstruct class unity.

In 1952, at my request, he petitioned Rajaji for the release of Balathandayutham.⁷ Although he would not accept any challenge to his position as a landlord, in some matters he had a sort of liberal outlook: when there was severe drought, he would sometimes write off rents.

The Peasant Movement in the Cumbum Valley

The agrarian movement in Madurai district, and in particular in the Cumbum Valley, was essentially a tenants' movement, a movement of the paddy-cultivating tenant cultivators; it was not a movement of agricultural labourers, and did not draw agricultural labourers into its fold. The main demand of the movement was to lower rent, which at that time amounted to 75 to 80 per cent of the crop.

This movement, whose militant phase began in 1942-4, enveloped the whole Cumbum Valley and spilled over into the adjoining parts of the Periyakulam subdivision, with Uthamapalayam as the centre of the struggle.⁸

Later, the movement declined steeply. The Communist and pro-Communist cadre came from rich peasant and landlord stock. The base of the leadership did not extend to other sections, and that must be counted as the primary reason for the failure of the movement to deepen, considering the militant traditions of that area.

⁷ C. Rajagopalachari (1878-1972), leader of the Indian National Congress, Chief Minister, Madras Presidency (1952-4), and of Madras State (1952-4). K. Balathandayutham (d. 1973), noted CPI leader.

⁸ PR conducted study classes for Communist groups in the Valley in the 1942-5 period.

The agricultural labourers' movement in that area is relatively recent, a movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Organisation of Agricultural Labourers Before 1947

The question of organising agricultural labourers in particular was emphasised for the first time at the Bombay Congress of the Communist Party in 1943.⁹ We had done some work in class organisation, but that was agitational work among the peasantry. We had not taken up agricultural labourers' demands.

From the Congress platform, we voiced the demands of the peasantry in general, with the greatest emphasis on the abolition of statutory landlordism, a demand that was accepted even by the Congress Party as one of its aims.

At the Bombay Congress of the Party, there was something of a competition between delegates from various provinces in vying for quotas for membership among agricultural labourers. I forget the quota that we took, but when we came back after the Congress, none of us (laughs) knew what to do. Then we hit on the plan: "Let us go to Thanjavur." Thanjavur had vast numbers of *pannaiyals* (farm servants) and rack-rented sharecroppers; there was also bondage.

We started in the Mannargudi area. Our first demand (I think the village was Serankulam) was to raise the share of the tenant from the existing 18 per cent of the crop. We won a concession — the shares were changed to 22:78. After this victory, the movement began to spread, and continued to spread through the period of the War, through Thiruthuraipoondi, Thiruvarur, Nagapattinam, Mannargudi, Sirkali, and parts of Mayavaram [Mayiladuthurai].¹⁰ Our movement spread rapidly during the Congress regime and during the period in which the Communist Party was underground.

On Organising Agricultural Labour

With the tremendous increase in the level of agricultural labour in the population, our attention must turn more and more to them. In many areas, there will emerge an almost even division among agricultural labourers into Scheduled-Caste and non-Scheduled-Caste sections. In the recent period, sections of the peasantry have lost their land and become agricultural labourers; many of them are from caste Hindu sections, and although they have lost their land, their links with their caste remain intact. To unify agricultural labourers as a class, then, is an uphill task: it requires that we create in agricultural labourers of different castes a consciousness of an identity of interest against the enemy landlord class.

⁹ The first all-India Congress of the Communist Party of India was held in Mumbai in 1943.

¹⁰ PR's home village was Veppathur near Kumbakonam.

There is an awakening among the people of the Scheduled Castes, and this is the reason that the ruling classes are rousing feelings of caste hatred against the Scheduled Caste masses — look at the increase in anti-Scheduled-Caste atrocities. This is a serious problem for the democratic and Left movement; we must arm our youth and our cadre in the villages for the economic struggle and the ideological fight to achieve unity of the working people, that is, the class unity that alone can break the caste barrier. And this task can be achieved only by the movement under the leadership of our Party.

But of the fact that the people look to us for leadership in this struggle, there is no doubt. We must organise agricultural labourers, we must cement unity among different sections of the rural working people...

GLOSSARY

<i>anna</i>	One-sixteenth of a rupee.
<i>ashwamedha</i>	A ritual of territorial paramountcy, one that included horse sacrifice.
<i>inamdar</i>	Holder of a revenue-free land grant.
<i>kalam</i>	One <i>kalam</i> , or bag, is equal to 58 kilograms of dry paddy.
<i>pannaiyal</i>	Farm servant.
<i>ryotwari</i>	A system of land revenue in British India in which title-deed holders paid land revenue directly to the government.
<i>tehsildar</i>	Revenue collection officer.
<i>zamindar</i>	Statutory landlord.