



K.L.S. SANTHANAM AND LABOUR UNIONS IN KANYAKUMARI – A STUDY

C.R. SELVAN¹, Dr. M. SHYLA KUMARI²

1. *Ph.D Scholar, Department of History, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, (Manonmanium Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamilnadu, India)*
2. *Assistant Professor, Department of History, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, (Manonmanium Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627012, Tamilnadu, India)*

ABSTRACT

The Trade Union Movement in Kanyakumari is not of recent origin. The District was carved out from erstwhile Travancore – Cochin and given to Tamilnadu in the year 1956 based on the policy of formation of linguistic states. Before 1956 Kanyakumari was part of Travancore region. Trade Union Movement started well before the formation of the state and even before securing independence to India. This movement was started in Kanyakumari in 1942. There are numbers of great leaders who worked for the labourers and the most important among them were 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 for the welfare of the working class. All these leaders belong to the Kanyakumari District.

Key words

Labourers, Leaders, Trade union movement, Travancore, Welfare.

1. INTRODUCTION

K.L.S. Santhanam was the popular labour union leader in the southern region. He formed numerous labour unions in Kanyakumari. He also gave guidelines and ideas to the members of the unions. Many labour unions have acknowledged K.L.S. 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 Industrial Revolution, several industries blossomed, both public and private. The workers employed in industries either fought for their salary or demanded a like 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.¹

1.1. ORGANIZATION OF HAIR CUTTING LABOURERS UNION

K.L.S. Santhanam was organized hair cutting labourers Union in Kanyakumari in 1957. Before that there was no unity among those people and they were not given proper fees for their work. They wanted to go each and every door step for their work. In such a situation they assembled under K.L.S. Santhanam and formed a union under his presidentship.² Later he handed over the charge of the union to the workers and it is catering to the needs of the members very well. In response to their agitations at last the government accepted their demands and formed a welfare board. Through the Tamil nadu Manual Workers Act 1982 (Tamil Nadu Act 33 of 1982) the Governor of Tamil nadu hereby constituted a Board to be known as The Tamil Nadu Hair Dressers Welfare Board to provide social security and welfare measures for the manual workers engaged under item 45 of the schedules Employments under the Tamil nadu Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Work) Act 1982.³

1.2. GUNNY SHOP WORKERS UNION

K.L.S.Santhanam was organised another union called Chakku Thunnal Thozilalar Union in 1954. He was also the founder president of this union. During the agitation for their rights the Kottar police arrested K.L.S. Santhanam and imprisoned for one and a half month. His father's death and his participation in the funeral in police custody happened because of this agitation.⁴

1.3. FUNCTION OF KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT ESTATE WORKERS UNION

Kanyakumari District Estate Labourers Union was functioned from 1957 in Thadikarankonam. In the beginning Sam Nathaniel the popular labour union leader was the president followed by R.K. Ram, another great trade union leader. K.L.S. 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. Kulashekaram Louis Deva Sahayam and Madhavan headed Estate Labourers Union.⁵ In latter days due to political and personal reasons each leader started separate unions.

1.4. LOAD MEN WORKERS UNION

K.L.S. Santhanam established Load men Workers Union in Thisayanvilai in 1957. 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 their regularities in the wages. But the hotel authorities complained to the police



that the agitators were promoting untouchability. Police arrested K.L.S. Santhanam and lodged him in the Naguneri sub-jail for more than ten days.⁶

1.5. NAGAMMAL MILL WORKERS UNION

Nagammal Textile Mill was the first of its kind to come up in Kanyakumari district, which was commissioned in the year 1955. Pioneer Kumarasamy was the founder of the mill. He was a great industrialist of the Kanyakumari. The capacity of the mill was 12,600 spindles and the turnover in terms of production was about 5000 bales of yarn. About 450 persons were employed in the mill. The mill workers were ignorant about the working hours per day and wages. They did not have the organizational or collective strength. K.L.S. Santhanam and J.Hemachandran organized a labour union in Nagammal Mill in the year 1959. It did benefit for the workers. The management used to avoid 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.⁷ 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.

1.6. KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT BANK EMPLOYEES UNION

All India Bank Employees Union the oldest and largest national trade union centre of bank employees in India was founded on 20 April 1946 at Calcutta. They were being paid paltry wages with no regulated service conditions at all. It was a rule of hire and fire. Bank employees were groaning but did not have the necessary courage to form unions. They saw the workers in the factories fighting and making some progress in the terms of wages and betterment in service conditions. Bank employees also gathered some courage here and there and started to organize themselves into unions in a sporadic way. Some protest actions and strikes were undertaken but the disputes were referred to tribunals and employees did not get justice or satisfaction. Hence unrest and dissatisfaction amongst the employees continued to increase and many unions were formed during the period. With the advent of AIBEA on the scene, this gave fillip to the formation of unions in different banks. With the formation of unions, there were innumerable agitations, struggles and strikes in the banks. Banking was a State subject at that time and hence there were number of tribunals and awards. The growing discontentment amongst the bank employees was sensed by the management and the authorities and banking was made a central subject. Thus from 1946 to 1966 nearly two decades were the periods of organizing unions and fighting before the tribunals.

From 1966, it has been an era of consolidation. Bank unions were recognized by the management and in each bank many policy issues on recruitments transfers and promotions were regulated by mutual agreements. Along with the struggle for improvement in wages and service conditions, AIBEA also campaigned for nationalization of banks. After years of continuous efforts and struggle, AIBEA achieved its objective when major fourteen banks were nationalized in July, 1969. Subsequently in 1980 another set of six Banks were nationalized. AIEBA has always been governed by its twin policies –concern for the progress of the banking industry and concern



for the betterment of the interests of banking staff. K.L.S. Santhanam was responsible for the formation of the Kanyakumari District Bank Employees Union along with the All India Bank Employees Association in 1967. Sambath, the union leader in Madurai and Joseph, the leader in Coimbatore came to Kanyakumari and met K.L.S. Santhanam to organize Kanyakumari District Bank Employees Union. The twelfth conference of the Tamil Nadu Mercantile Bank Employees Union was held at Madurai on 23 September 1990. K.L.S. Santhanam participated in that conference.⁸ Tamilnadu Mercantile Bank Employees and the State Bank of Travancore Employee selected K.L.S. Santhanam as their legal advisor for their activities.

1.7. KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT RICE, OIL, FLOUR AND SAW MILL WORKERS UNION

The Kanyakumari District Rice, Oil, Flour and Saw Mill Workers Union were started in 1958. The registration number of that union was 2424/04-02/1958. In the early periods the union was organized by Jeevanantham. R. Somu was the secretary of that union. In 1960 to 1965 K.L.S. Santhanam was the president of the union and it was affiliated to the AITUC. Under the leadership of Santhanam the union workers made many agitations against the management demanding basic amenities. Rice had been made manually by the labourers. The mill owners introduced machine for rice manufacturing. According to Santhanam, the introduction of machinery was a great threat to the manual labourers. He led a march from Kottar to Trivandrum. Muthukaruppa Pillai led the procession. Even though union could not prevent introduction of machinery in rice, oil, flour and saw mills, the agitations had helped the labourers to large extend in protecting their jobs.⁹ Later the union was rechristened as *Varthaka Thozilali Union* and K.L.S. Santhanam became its president.

1.8. MANAVALAKURICHY MINERALS STAFF ASSOCIATION

The Indian Rare Earth Limited, Manavalakurichi, is the only major industry of Kanyakumari, which is industrially a developing district. On 18 August 1950 Indian Rare Earth Limited was incorporated as a private limited company jointly owned by the Government of India and Government of Travancore-Cochin with the primary intention of taking up commercial scale processing of monazite sand at its first unit namely Rare Earth Division, Aluvain Kerala for the recovery of thorium. It separated the various components from the sand. The most important being monazite contained approximately 9% thorium and 0.3% uranium. When the State was reorganised the above concern was taken over by the Government of Tamil nadu in 1956. It has provided employment for about 200 persons and in 1988 it has provided employment for about 805 persons. But the working condition of the workers was ruthless. The issues were related to fixation of basic wage, dearness allowance, bonus and stoppage of the sub contracting. A meeting was held on 20 February 1994 under the guidance of Comrade N. Sreekandan Nair at Manavalakuruchi to form a new union called Technical Employees Association. According to the resolution passed by the union a seven member committee was formed. They formed the rules and regulations and unanimously selected the president, secretary and members on 10 April 1994. K.L.S. Santhanam was selected as the president of



that union. Then they applied for the registration under the Indian Trade Union Act 1926 (Reg.No.316/KK). The association was registered and got Government affiliation. On 5 December 1994 the first meeting of the Mineral Company Technical Employees Association was held at Manavalakuruchi. The union flag was hoisted and special address was delivered by K.L.S. Santhanam, president of the union. The *Sathyagaraha* in front of Indian Rare Earth Ltd. (IRE) on 7 February 1997 demanded to end the administrative mismanagement. Again in 1999 under the leadership of K.L.S. Santhanam a protest meeting was held at Manavalakuruchi in front of the main gate of IRE Union members belonging to all parties participated.¹⁰ They demanded:

- i) To solve the problems of tradesmen and workers who were affected by promotion criteria followed.
- ii) To implement pay commission agreement for longer period and,
- iii) To fix the monthly interim relief at 50% of the salary.

A series of meetings and strikes were held by the association in this regard. The retired labourers of Manavalakuruchi started the Retired Labours Contract Workers Society in 2004. K.L.S.Santhanam was the legal advisor of the society.

1.9. KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT CO-OPERATIVE MILLS WORKERS UNION

The Co-operative Movement can be defined as a “Voluntary movement of the people carried out democratically by pooling together their resources or carrying on the given activity, with the purpose of achieving or securing certain benefits or advantage which given to people cannot get individually and with the purpose of promoting certain virtues and values such as self-help, mutual help, self-reliance and general goods of all.” The Co-operative Movement in India is one of the largest movements in the world. This movement has made tremendous progress in every aspects of the Indian economy. 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 9 December 1965. In 1967 K.L.S. Santhanam became the president of the Kanyakumari District Co-operative Spinning Mills Limited Labourers Union. P. Perumal was the secretary of the union. They conducted agitations to provide minimum wages and allowance. Later due to political differences he was removed from the leadership. Then he started Kumari Mavatta All Co-operative Workers Union. It was affiliated with A.I.T.U.C and Tamil Nadu Co-operative Workers Sammelan [Reg. No. MDS. 927].¹¹

1.10. SUPER MARKET CO-OPERATIVE WORKERS UNION

Santhanam started Super Market Labourers Union in 1968. Under his leadership, all the workers joined together and fought for their demands. The negotiations which were conducted before the Kanyakumari District collector, Tirunelveli Regional Joint Registrar of Co-operative Societies and Kanyakumari District Labour Officer ended in failure. Finally the negotiation meeting was arranged in Chennai on 2 April 1980. The meeting was presided over by the Tamil Nadu State Co-operative Registrar. In that meeting K.M. Sundaram AITUC leader of the

International Conference on Multidisciplinary approaches in Social Sciences, Humanities and Sciences

Sri S.Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur, Tamil Nadu, India

(MASHS-18)



14th December 2018

www.conferenceworld.in

ISBN:978-93-87793-61-3

Tamil Nadu State Co-operative Societies Union, K.L.S. Santhanam Kanyakumari District AITUC leader and K. Thanumalayan, Kanyakumari District Co-operative Workers Union participated.¹² As a result the workers received many benefits such as:

- i) The salary was increased from Rs. 25 to 35
- ii) For the daily wage workers wages were increased
- iii) The above said wages were calculated from 1 July 1979 and distributed before 30 April 1980
- iv) According to the government rule the surrender leave was given as 15 days for one year and 30 days for two years.
- v) Casual leave was increased from 12 days to 15 days
- vi) Earned leave was increased from 60 days to 90 days
- vii) Travel allowance was sanctioned
- viii) The management got back the order 8/79 dated 10 October 1979 which increased the work load of the workers
- ix) Weekend holidays and other holidays were given to the watchers according to the rules and regulations
- x) The increments which were stopped were given back to the workers
- xi) Assistants became permanent according to their qualifications
- xii) Promotions were based on seniority and
- xiii) Strike period was considered as the earned leave. The management didn't take any revenge against the workers who participated in the strike.

Tamil Nadu Co-operative Societies Workers Federation of AITUC conducted a procession in Chennai under the leadership of K.M. Sundaram On 18 April 1981. M.Ambikapathi, MLA and K.L.S. Santhanam vice presidents of the federation also participated in that procession. At the end of the procession a memorandum was given to the Chief Minister and to the Minister of Co-operation. Kanyakumari District Co-operative Societies Worker's first conference was held on 24 March, 1981 at Nagercoil. The conference was organized by K.L.S. Santhanam as the president of Kanyakumari District Co-operative Workers Union and the vice-president of Tamilnadu Co-operative Societies Workers Federation. The public meeting was inaugurated by K.M. Sundaram. The conference magazine was released by M. Ambikapathi. The flag was hoisted by M. Appadurai, MLA and the president of Tirunelveli District Co-operative Workers Union. C. Ponnaiyan, the Minister of Co-operation was the chief guest of that conference.¹³

1.11. BHAGAVATHY SUPER MARKET LABOURERS UNION (1968)

K.L.S. Santhanam founded the Bhagavathy Super Market Labourers Union 72 with Registration number 28/KKM in 1968. Bhagavathy Super Market employees got all their benefits under the president ship of K.L.S. Santhanam through agitations. The Bhagavathy Super Market Labourers Union was the only union which got wages

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for the strike period in Tamilnadu during that period. Satyagraha was started in front of Bhagavathy Super Market on 2 March 1989. Though the management and union signed an agreement on 30 June 1988 the management failed to implement the provisions agreed upon. The union again agitated on 8 March 1989.¹⁴ From 15 March 1989 they organized indefinite strike and police arrested K.L.S. Santhanam and the union members and put them behind the bars. He was jailed for one and half months. A case was registered as Santhanam tried to commit suicide for the striking staff. Next agitation was on 12 December 2005. There were 105 permanent labourers in the super market. In 2003 Tamilnadu Government introduced 38% dearness allowance to the Government and Government aided department workers. But Bhagavathy Super Market management did not give any allowance to those workers. It caused another agitation led by K.L.S.Santhanam.¹⁵

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