

## Justice Party - Torch-bearer of reform



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*In the centennial year of the Justice Party, its service to the downtrodden and its objectives to strive for an egalitarian society need a fair appraisal*

It is indeed remarkable that 2015, a year that witnessed much of a ballyhoo against reservation, is also historic for the Justice Party, an organisation that sowed the seeds of social justice in the socio-political conscience of the country. It now quietly marks its centennial (1916-2015).

What the Justice Party sowed a century ago has grown into a mighty banyan tree called caste-based reservation which the elite, the erudite and the privileged now want to be axed. However, at the grass-root level, and away from the cacophony of television debates, reservation as an idea still finds resonance, especially among the underprivileged.



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The results of the Bihar elections have only reinforced this; the right wing's call for a review of the reservation system was one of the reasons that did the Bharatiya Janata Party in.

The South Indian Liberal Federation, also referred to as the Justice Party, may be alien to the present day generation. It is a slice of history that has been conveniently or rather deliberately forgotten about in present day political discourse which glosses over the social reforms initiated by the party. How many thinkers and intellectuals who swear by democracy know that the Justice Party was a progressive movement that introduced women suffrage in April 1921 in the then Madras province? And this just a year after the princely state in Kerala?

How many of those who fight for women's rights now are aware that the Devadasi system was abolished by the Justice Party government, which was formed in 1920? A political party in the opposition was so vociferously opposed to this idea that its distinguished members indulged in a war of words with the social reformer, women's rights activist and writer, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, in the Legislative Council. But the brave lady and a firm Justice Party had the last word.

### **First steps towards change**

The party, which devoted itself to the upliftment of women and the marginalised, was formally launched on November 20, 1916, in Chennai. Its three founders were Dr. T.M. Nair, P. Theagaraya Chettiar and Dr. C. Natesa Mudaliar. After winning the first direct elections held in the Madras Presidency, it initiated several egalitarian moves like issuing a government order for the public utility of water from ponds and wells. Till then certain sections, like Adi Dravidars, were denied access to public water sources.

The Justice Party government formed an admission council to regulate admission to colleges, putting an end to seats being cornered only by upper caste candidates. In retrospect, it was a move that enshrined meritocracy and democratised the admission process. In the field of medical education, the government also took full control of the Medical Department, which until then was under the control of the British; it did this by appointing Indians.

The government took medical education to the common man by striking off the criterion of "knowledge of Sanskrit" from the conditions of eligibility. As a vast majority of the population hardly had the opportunity to learn even basic Sanskrit, they were shut out of medical colleges despite being talented and educationally accomplished. The dichotomy was removed by the Justice Party, which opposition party leader Sathyamurthy thought was buried "500 feet under the ground" when it faced an electoral debacle.

The Justice Party sprouted roots again in 1967 in the form of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and after the electoral mandate to rule the State. When DMK leader and Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai was asked how the party managed to win an election within 10 years after it decided to contest polls, he told the reporter that the DMK's victory was just a continuation of the Justice Party's victory; to him, the Justice Party was "his grandfather's party".

## Contemporary relevance

Though history might record the Justice Party as having wound up in 1944, the fact is that it continues to live on as a movement upholding social justice. Over the years, the ideals for which it stood for continue to enchant leaders across the political spectrum. These ideals were what paved the way for the Central government to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendations.

As opportunities grow for the downtrodden as a result of the reservation system, we need to look at history afresh. The first order, then known as the communal GO on reservation, was issued by the Justice Party government, even though the British had earlier identified that most jobs in government were going to certain castes. It was the Justice Party that first thought about distributing jobs among various castes. Despite its short stint, it worked towards the development of various marginalised sections, offering them a plethora of grants and aid that are too exhaustive to list.

Being active at a time when the mainstream media was more hostile to its ideology than now, the South Indian Liberal Federation ran its own English newspaper called *The Justice*. It had other publications too. Politically, it did not wind up but underwent a change in nomenclature. But this caused many of its detractors to write it off. It evolved into the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) after Periyar E.V. Ramasamy took charge in 1944. Of course, he took the DK on a new course, enlisting the masses and making it a relevant movement. But the predecessor to the Justice Party went by the name Madras Dravidian Association, which played a historic role in the education of children from marginalised communities.

The Madras Dravidian Association, which was started by Dr. Natesa Mudaliar, ran a Dravidian home, which was a hostel for students from marginalised communities who came to the city to pursue higher education.

In the centennial year of the Justice Party, its service to the downtrodden and its objectives to strive for an egalitarian society need a fair appraisal. Its stellar role should be recorded for posterity. Its mission is still not complete and its principles have more powerful detractors now than when it was formed.

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