

T M Nair: The voice of workers' rights



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It is surprising that the Dravidian movement, which, as part of its ideology, never allows caste suffixes to proper names, celebrates one of its pioneers, calling him by his caste name: Taravath Madhavan Nair or T M Nair (1868-1919).

Pioneer in medical field

T M Nair studied medicine in England, practiced it in Paris, capital of France, and learnt Greek as the rules mandated it back in the day for pursuing higher medical studies. He launched a medical journal 'Anti-septic' for the first time in Madras Presidency and was a pioneer in medical profession and research. He was instrumental in bringing out a law to crack down on quacks and regulate the profession. About one hundred years ago, he wrote a book on diabetes.

When he was a member of the Madras Corporation Council, he triggered serious discourses on responsibilities and powers of local bodies. It is altogether a different story that he had to resign his post, frustrated with the adverse reactions to his arguments. His insistence on not exempting the places of worship from the service taxes levied by local bodies has very much translated into part of today's rules and regulations. His first book in English was about local administration. Six lectures he had delivered to students of Chennai Law College in those days were later for the first time compiled into a book.

Labourers' working hours

T M Nair is well-known as one of the first champions of class rights. But it is not generally recognized that earlier itself he had lent voice to the workers' rights. Even trade unionists, who recall that Singaravelar had worked jointly with Periyar in the Self-respect Movement, do not discuss and celebrate the role of T M Nair in reducing the labourers' working hours. One of the reasons for it may be that details of his contributions are not available sufficiently in public domain.

During 1907-08 T M Nair was a member of the Factory Workers' Commission. In those olden days, laborers used to work for 17 hours a day in factories. Because of his connections with the European countries, he was identified as a Lancashire supporter.

As the Indian labourers worked for longer hours at cheaper wages, they produced more commodities at cheaper cost than the British factories. Hence, the British factories centered in Lancashire opposed the trend. The Indian factories gave more importance to the indigenous industrial growth rather than to the labourers' physical and mental wellbeing.

As a doctor, T M Nair was well aware of the physical ill-health that the labourers suffered because of their long hours of work and so championed their cause, insisting on reducing their working hours. His meeting with Viceroy Minto on this count was not

fruitful. Subsequently, he met the British Labour Party leader Arthur Henderson and sought his assistance and later, met with India's secretary Marley and represented the labourer's woes to him.

T M Nair's efforts to get the labourers' working hours reduced to 12 hours were of paramount importance.

First three laws

Way back in 1881 India's first Factory Law was enacted. However, it only dealt with child labour issue, prohibiting employment of children below seven years of age and also employment of children in the 7-12 age group beyond nine hours a day. The child labourers must be given an hour's break during their working hours. These were the main provisions of the law.

The second Factory Law enacted in 1891 bothered a little about women too, apart from the children. The law reduced working hours for child labourers from nine hours to seven hours and for women labourers to 11 hours. However, the law had no statutory provisions for men's working hours.

It was only the Factory Law enacted in 1911 which for the first time proclaimed that men's working hours in factories should not exceed 12 hours and they must be given half-an-hour break at the end of six hours.

Nair's contribution

The modern Indian history has a lot to speak about the country's factory laws and also about the political leaders who had fought for the labourers' rights. But it says nothing about T. M. Nair, who had gone as far as England as part of his fight for the rights of the Indian workers.

Right at the beginning of the 20th century in India, Chennai was the nerve-center of labour union activities. It was the labourer

agitations which led to the legal recognition of labour unions. But unfortunately, even in the history of Tamil Nadu labour rights struggle, T M Nair is not remembered.

May Day was for the first time celebrated in India on the Chennai beach to commemorate the enforcement of eight-hour work. But we have forgotten T M Nair, who had earlier been a pioneer in getting working hours reduced to 12 hours.

T M Nair is worth being remembered and celebrated not only as one of the icons of the Dravidian movement but also as a leader of the working class.

July 17 marks T M Nair's memorial day.

Translated by V. Mariappan.