

E.V.RAMASAMY – A SOCIAL REFORMER OF TAMILNADU

N.Tamilmani, Ph.D., Research Scholar (Part Time), Reg.No.20123151081012, PG Department of History and Research Centre, S.T.Hindu College, Nagercoil – 629 002, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamilnadu, India

Dr.B.Suresh Kannan, Assistant Professor, PG Department of History and Research Centre, S.T.Hindu College, Nagercoil – 629 002, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

Throughout Tamil Nadu and even far beyond the borders of India and beyond, the honorific Periyar denotes the name of the great social reformer of the 20th century, Erode Venkata Naicker Ramasamy, popularly known as Thanthai Periyar. Periyar believed that women in all countries of the world were oppressed and exfoliated to fulfill the desires of men. The social reform society must be destroyed, women must be freed from limited responsibilities, i.e. housework, cooking, children, education. He also added that women should give up all kinds of subversive practices. Physical strength must be improved to take over the passive activities of men. He also encouraged women to join the army and other military activities to show their potential and capabilities. According to the social reform in the development of Periyar civilization, inventions, discoveries, social transformations, cultural revolutions, protection, wars, peaceful exchanges, technological innovations, agricultural development, space, the hidden people behind the development should always be remembered and socialized so that the upcoming promising generations. E.V.R as a social revolutionary involved in localized issues like caste discrimination, religious hegemony, human exploitation, inequality, alcoholism, education, political hypocrisy and so on. A revolutionary but a follower of non-violence, he emancipated the people of Tamilnadu as well as the world society with his bold progressive ideas and ideals that tended to reshape and reformulate cultural and social reforms.

Keywords: E.V.R Periyar, social reform, revolutionary, social justice, self respect movement, social reformer, casteism

Introduction

E.V.Ramasamy (E.V.R.) who is a social reformer and followers of E.V.R. often referred to as a revolutionary and by his opponents as a reactionary and an aberration, he founded an ethnic movement in the southern states of India, which later became limited in its functioning to Tamilnadu only. . Once called the arch-enemy of the existing social order, he is now described as a symbol of progress for the Tamil community. He created definitive changes in society with his thinking and ideas. In this article an attempt is made to evaluate the methods developed by the social reform E.V.R. for the upliftment of Tamil society.

Social Justice

Kelson, while defining Social Justice, observed:

“What does it early mean to say that a social order is just? It means that this order regulates the behaviour of men in a way satisfactory to all men so that all men find their happiness in it. Social justice is social happiness. It is happiness guaranteed by a just social order.”

“Legal Justice” is justice channelized, controlled and conferred by law. “Social Justice” is the product of social injustice and seeds to remove social disability by birth, which causes social and economic inequality. Social Justice not only provides for a just society, but removes all patent sources of disunity and disharmony. It has a vital social content intended to promote public welfare. Thus, Social Justice is of great social value in providing a stable society and in securing

the unity of India. It seeks to give the necessary adventitious aids to the underprivileged so that they may have the equal opportunity with the more advanced in the race of life. It is a bundle of rights; in one sense it is carved of other rights; in another sense it is a preserver of other rights. It is the balancing wheel between haves and have-nots.¹

Social Justice in the Indian context may be defined as the right of the weak, the aged, the destitute, the poor, women, children and other underprivileged persons, to protection by the state against the ruthless competition in life. It gives the necessary advantageous aids to the underprivileged so that they may have the equal opportunity with the more advanced sections of the society, in the race of life.² When there was no Constitution, much less a Directive Principle in the Constitution and when the concept of social justice was unknown in this country, there appeared in the horizon of Tamil Nadu a Missionary, a born crusader against social inequalities and injustice and a known and confirmed heretic, who thundered that a caste-based hierarchical system is a social anachronism and dinosaur of a by-gone Vedic age that deserves to perish. The social revolutionary who so thundered and raised his voice against social injustice is none other than E.V. Ramasami, the Father Figure of Tamil Nadu and popularly known to the entire Tamil Nadu and the neighbouring southern states and reverentially addressed as "*THANTHAI PERIYAR*".³

Early Life and Character of E.V.R

Periyar parents priest Venkatappa Naicker and take care of Chinna Thayammal. He has an only elder brother Krishnaswamy and two sisters Kannamma and ponnuthoy. In 1929, he has the unique name of Naicker, which indicates the name of his caste. He attended education for only five years. He then joined his father in his operations. His married Nagammai age 19. and his death in 1933, in Nagammai after few years back he married in 1948, in Maniammai. Periyar started his political career as a Congress worker in his birthplace Erode. He fell out with Gandhi over the issue of separate boarding for Brahmin and non-Brahmin undergraduates at Gurukkulam, a Congress-backed college owned with the help of nationalist chief V.V.S Iyer at Cheranmahadevi near Tirunelveli. On the request of mother and father, Iyer provided separate food for Brahmin college students, which Periyar opposed. Gandhi proposed a compromise, arguing that while it might now be a sin for someone not to dine with someone else, he might rather respect their scruples. After failing to bend the Congress to his opinion, Periyar resigned from the birthday party in 1925 and allied himself with the Justice Party and the Self Admiration Movement, which was hostile to the Brahmin rule in social existence, especially bureaucracy. The justice party had supported reservation for non-Brahmins inside the forms a decade ago and after coming to the energy inside the Madras Presidency, issued an order to enforce it. Periyar's reputation developed beyond the Tamil site as part of the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924, a mass movement demanding that lower caste persons accept the right to use the public road in front of the famous Vaikom temple.⁴

Periyar participated in the agitation along with his wife and was arrested twice. Later he could be referred to as Vaikom Veerar (Hero of Vaikom). During the 1920s and 1930s, Periyar combined social and political reform and challenged the conservatism of the Congress and the mainstream national movement in the Tamil region. He reconstructed the Tamil identification as an egalitarian ideal, transformed with the help of the caste system into an initially uncontaminated one, and contrasted it with the Indian identification promoted with the help of the Congress. He claimed that the caste changed to imported to the Tamil place with the help of Aryan Brahmins who spoke Sanskrit and came from North India. In the 1930s, while the Congress ministry introduced Hindi, he drew a parallel with the Arization procedure, arguing that it had turned into an attack on Tamil identification and self-esteem. Under his leadership, the Dravidian movement became a struggle for caste and the promotion of Tamil national identification. In the 1940s, Periyar started the Dravidar Kazhagam, which promoted an unbiased Dravida Nadu comprising Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada audio systems. The Dravidian linguistic circle of kin became the muse on which he completely based his idea of a national Dravidian identity. These ideas were instrumental in shaping the political identity and tradition of the Tamil regions of the Madras Presidency and still

resonate in Tamil Nadu today. Periyar died in 1973 at the age of 94. Studying Periyar's thoughts, reforms and writings in various magazines and periodicals published and himself studying various compilation books by various scholars on the subject of the content of Periyar's views on social thought, the present study identifies about ten important issues of social maturity through which Periyar constantly converses, writes and works for the obsolescence of society.⁵

Periyar's Ideas and Actions

A born revolutionary on occasion and also in situations where he analyzed Periyar's qualities, he appeared to be situational. Kasi's incident was one that gave him a violent change of mind and also made him think deeply about the social setting in the atmosphere. The Indian national movement produced a number of revolutionaries. In the same way, E.V.R as a social activator and reformer was motivated by the complex social set-up of Tamil Nadu, namely the dominance of Brahmins in all spheres of human life. A questioning mind is also a precipitating factor. Situations are a common occurrence. But rising to the occasion requires a keen mind.

Solvates included the young generation with his voluminous questions in Athens. This questioning attitude cost him his life. He was poisoned to death just because of his questioning mind. But he did not worry about his own life. He called all the people by their names and knows the ins and outs of his behavior and attitude Mahatma once visited Erode and was impressed by the stubborn personality of E.V.R. Periyar futuristic vision related to democratic society almost attracted global personalities. Atheist ideology has many followers, but Periyar's action-oriented ideology predestined it.⁶

Self Respect Movement and Social Justice

Periyar started the self-respect movement to remove social inequalities prevalent in the Hindu society and strived hard to usher in an egalitarian casteless society where there was equality of status to all the citizens. The disproportionately large number of posts held by Brahmins in Government and their dominance in Government sphere gave rise to the formation of the Justice Party and the implementation of the communal G.O giving representation to all communities in Government service proportionate to their numbers in the population. Periyar, who tried in vain to make the Congress accept the principle of communal representation in Government service, left the congress organization and gave full him, supported the *JUSTICE PARTY* for the implementation of the communal representation in Government service. The self-respect movement strove for equality of status and the Justice Party for the communal G.O for conferring equality of opportunities. These were the two fronts organized by Periyar to originate the battle for social justice in Tamil Nadu.⁷

The first limb of social justice is equality of status and Periyar sought to achieve it through his self-respect movement. The first salvo for social justice was fired in Tamil Nadu, when Periyar started an all-out campaign in 1924 against the Cheranmadevi Gurukulam, which enforced separate dining for Brahmins and Non-Brahmins with difference in Quality of food. Periyar propagated that the existence of "AGRAHARAMS" and "CHERIES" for Adi Dravidas is apartheid worst than what is practiced against blacks in South Africa and such segregation without any social interaction is negation of social justice. The agitation against separate dining halls for Brahmins and non- Brahmins in Hotels and the removal of separate pots for drinking water to Brahmins and non-Bhramins in the various Bar Associations in Tamil Nadu are nothing but different manifestations of the battle for social justice.

In India, division of society into castes degenerated into a most disastrous blight of all-human institutions. It condemned them to a civilization, which made them feeble, weak and unable to fight invasion and aggression. Caste-based social relations and casteism imposed social status and profession on the basis of birth. People believed that caste has pre-determined their social status and the profession they have to follow for eking out their livelihood. Combined with the caste system and the theory of karma where past actions in previous birth determined the present status in life. People became fatalists and that sapped all their energy and enthusiasm for making efforts

and bettering their status.⁸

On account of casteism the spirit of brotherhood and feelings of oneness is absent in our society. That is the reason we have not developed “community spirit” and a spirit of comradeship in our society. Social service and social awareness were not developed in this country. Casteism has made us to lose respect for human dignity and personality. Periyar saw in casteism the main impediment to unity and progress and firmly believed that social uplift is possible only when the caste system is eradicated. Periyar propagated that unless we bring in social order based on equality of status and equality of opportunity to all, social justice will remain a distant dream. No social justice can be enforced in a society where the social structure maintains, and perpetuates the difference between different social groups with a privileged class at the apex and the oppressed and depressed classes at the bottom. Periyar's self-respect movement aimed at removing the social inequalities prevalent in the society as well as the caste-based social status of Brahmins and their dominance.⁹

The first provincial self-respect conference held in 1929 had an egalitarian basis. One of the resolutions passed in that conference condemned Varnashrama Dharma and the arbitrary division of society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysias and Sudras and Panchamas and repudiated the belief in superiority of Brahmins based on the accident of birth. Another resolution condemned the use of all suffixes and terms connective of caste. Periyar's tirade against casteism has gradually led people to believe that caste barriers are man-made and it affects the homogeneous unity of Tamils as one single entity. The age-long tradition and custom of affixing the caste names to the individual names has now become extinct in Tamil Nadu. The society has now come to accept inter-caste marriages and the taboo and stigma attached to such marriages have now become a thing of the past. Self-respect movement by concentrating its attention in obliterating the caste hierarchy has paved the way for social justice in Tamil Nadu. The Self-respect movement has strived hard to evolve a casteless society where caste will not determine the social status and the rights of persons and act as a barrier for man's progress.

People, who are often critical at Periyar's anti-Brahmanism, overlooked the fact that the traditional social structure based on caste and religion was used by Brahmins to suppress and exploit the masses and resist social change and progress. Periyar's so-called anti-Brahminism is nothing but an attempt to level the society and lay the foundation for a lasting and permanent social justice. Leveling up society is possible either by lifting up the lower classes of Sudhras and Panchamas and makes them equal to Brahmins, or push down the upper class (the high caste Brahmins) and make them equal to the rest of the society. The former method was adopted by saints and religious preachers like Ramanuja, and they all failed. Periyar adopted the later course and succeeded and brought social justice within the reach of the masses.¹⁰

The distinctive and pervasive feature of Indian society is division of people into various castes leading to a compartmentalized society with a vast number of groups maintaining different and diverse styles of life. Low status to be backward classes, scheduled castes and tribes in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy exposed them to invidious treatment, severe social disabilities, and deprivation of educational, social cultural and political opportunities and degraded occupations which had to be followed in a hereditary manner.

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The caste-based social system gave the Brahmins a high social status. They became the privileged class in India. Their social importance grew from generation to generation. The hereditary high social status and the privileges were preserved and maintained through ages. Periyar felt a privileged class, well entrenched in society is the emanating source for social injustice. The term Self-respect emphasizes the identity and dignity of individual, which were lost and relegated to the background in the caste hierarchy. The self-respect movement gave strength to the weak and hope to the forlorn. For people groping in the dark seeking identity and respectability, against the heritage of unsociability, segregation and denial of fundamental human rights, the self-respect movement gave them new identity and hope.

Periyar's Self-respect movement paved the way for the rise of Non- Brahmins to power in Tamil Nadu and got rid of the Brahmin monopoly as Doctors, Engineers, Lawyers and teachers and cutting them all from the source of power at both provincial and national levels. The ascendancy of non-brahmins in the educational fields and in Government services paved the way for the decline of Brahmin social prestige in Tamil Nadu but it paved the way to usher in an era of social justice for the traditionally backward and depressed classes in the State. Long before the constitution came into force legally prohibiting untouchability, Periyar forcibly propagated through incessant propaganda high lighting that untouchability constitutes an unacceptable assault on the dignity and worth of a human being and an egregious violation of human rights. He advocated that the historical injustice done to these people should be removed and the Government should open the door of opportunities for their economic upliftment and empowerment and that is the most effective tool to combat untouchability, the worst form of violation of human rights. As early as 1922 in the Congress conference held at Thiruppur Periyar sponsored a resolution that Hindu temples must be thrown open to untouchables and the Nadars, a cast that was then considered and treated as untouchables. The resolution was defeated by the upper caste Brahmins who were then controlling the Congress.¹²

Government by legislative action of enacting laws can introduce political, economic and electoral reforms. Social reforms cannot be introduced by legislative action. The out look of the people and the prevailing thought and concept in society has to be changed by educating the people about the compelling need for social reforms. That can be done only by social reformers who command the respect of the people by doing incessant propaganda through their speeches writings and their own conduct of practicing what they preached.

No leader past or present has been instrumental in bringing about so many social reforms as Periyar the great social reformer. Periyar the crusader for social reforms launched many agitations for eradicating blind beliefs, superstitions and rituals to should a new social order and create a casteless society of equals with secularism and rationalism as the basis. The agitations he led are countless. He did not hold any post in Government or wield power vested in him by virtue of his office. He did not seek the help of rich people. The entire work of social reforms was done by him as a leader of dedicated followers.¹³

Periyar and Anti-Brahmanism

Periyar's Self-Respect Movement was based on the principle of intense anti-Brahminical racism, while nominally claiming to be a movement espousing "Rationalism" and "Atheism". Tamil Brahmins (Iyers and Iyengars) were often held responsible through the followers of Periyar for the direct or indirect oppression of lower caste people under the guise of "Brahmin oppression" and led to countless hate attacks on Brahmins which, among other things, started from the wave of forced mass migration of the Brahmin population . Periyar is said to be referred to as "Brahmin killing and burning of Brahmin homes. Later, in connection with Rajagopalachari, who was tried and murdered by a DK member, he "expressed his opposition to violence as a method of settling political differences". "Brahmin oppression" rationalized conspiracy theories and pointed to Brahmins as the enemy against whom radical action was pitted. The legacy of the anti-Brahminism of the Self-Respect Movement was taken up by the later Dravidian parties. Growing anti-Brahminism in

Chennai provided the reason for the caste polarization to decline within the DMK movement.¹⁴

Conclusion

Among the various parts of the human body, it is the tongue that is the most powerful organ. With this powerful weapon, E.V.R expressed his ideas boldly and fearlessly through his continuous propaganda of addressing public meetings. Poets wrote with their poetic imagination of writing wars without weapons, violence and bloodshed, Periyar, a lifelong warrior, turned this poetic dream into reality and won many battles and brought great social reform without violence and bloodshed. Periyar aims to change freedom, impartiality, erasure of concepts and social benefits etc., expansion of downtrodden people and non-Brahmin employment opportunities, all castes ineligible for temple archakars, women's development and equal rights to property, education, social and also contrary to in Hindi followed by Dravida Kazhagam and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu. Periyar, one man, so flattened, so for a change to the systems of early slavery of the present duration in peace now most people followed the ideas of Periyar.

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