

A Re-Reading on E.V.R, Periyar A Rationalist Thinker and a Revolutionary Warrior for Social Justice

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Abstract

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, also known as Ramaswami, EVR, Thanthai Periyar, or Periyar, was a Dravidian social reformer and politician from India, who founded the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. He wanted thinking people to realize that their society was far from perfect and that it is in urgent need of reform. Periyar wanted the Government, the political parties and social workers to identify the evils in society and boldly adopt measures to remove them. This paper portrays Periyar a Social reformer, rationalist thinker and a revolutionary warrior for social justice.

Key Words: Self-Respect Movement, Non-Brahmin, Downtrodden and Vaikom Veeran.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, also known as Ramaswami, EVR, Thanthai Periyar, or Periyar, was a Dravidian social reformer and politician from India, who founded the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. He wanted thinking people to realize that their society was far from perfect and that it is in urgent need of reform. Periyar wanted the Government, the political parties and social workers to identify the evils in society and boldly adopt measures to remove them.

A good part in the social life of recent history of Tamils on the social life is marked by fights rising out of the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin state of affairs. Even during the Pallava rule, the Brahmin has been demanding a superiority position in Tamil society. The superiority even over the ruling class was not to speak of the traders and the downtrodden. The Brahmins were conventionally a literate community always familiar to hold secretarial and administrative posts in royal courts, and naturally endowed and influential with considerable resilience in their social actions and quite adjustable on changing times.

There were three main non-Brahmin groups in Madras Presidency.

1. The Non-Brahmin Caste Hindus;
2. The Muslims;
3. The Indian Christians; these were apart from the 'downtrodden', which were authoritatively called the Adi-Dravidas. Among these, the Muslims had no particular eagerness for scholarly pursuits of literate occupations; they recollected the old days, when they were the ruling class in this country and remained frustrated. The Indian Christians were mostly from the lower communities among the non-Brahmin caste-Hindus and suffered the same incapacities, which their compatriots, who remained within the Hindu fold, suffered.²

Among the Non-Brahmin Hindus, the upper castes like the Mudaliars, the Pillais, the Kongu Vellalas, the Chettiars etc. sensed the Brahmins were occupying an excessively large number of public and

administrative posts and positions. To that extent the majority non-Brahmin community was left without those exploitations. It is demonstrated from the speech of M.C. Rajah, the leader of the Depressed Classes states that, “The depressed classes feel that they are facing a crisis that unless they can secure adequate statutory guarantee for their full satisfaction of the rights and privileges of full citizenship now, they will forever be doomed to occupy a dishonored position”.³

The roots of the Dravidian Movement may be traced back to the anti-Brahmin conflicts of the early part of the century in Madras Presidency. One of the most active and most cherished political leaders South India is E.N. Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, the Great Sage. He went first to Vijayawada in Andhra State. Then he proceeded to Hyderabad and Kolkata. The attainment of Rationalist thought, while Periyar reached Kassi (Varanasi), a noted sacred town of Hindu pilgrimage on the bank of the river Ganges. There he could not receive to free meals easily at Kasi Mutt, which completely fed Brahmins forbidding other Hindu castes.⁴

Having starved severely for some days, Ramaswamy found no other better way than to enter a Mutt, with the appearance of a Brahmin who wearing a thread on his bare chest. Due to his moustache betrayed him. So, the gate-keeper not only entertained his entry but also pushed him offensively to the street. At that movement, as the meal was over the dining of the Mutt. The leaves with food left over were thrown at the street. The intolerable burning of starvation for the past few days forced Ramaswamy to strive with the street dogs in eating the remnants of food in the leaves. While eating that food, the eyes of Ramaswamy observed at the letters carved at the truth that the Mutt entirely occupied by the uppermost caste viz., Brahmins, had been built only by a rich merchant of Dravidian race from Tamil Nadu.⁵

The disgrace imposed by the Brahmins at Kasi upon him without the least mercy, made a deep wound in the heart of Periyar and it inflamed powerful abhorrence towards that Brahmanas and their creation of Various Gods. Though Kasi (Varanasi) has been much admired as the most “holy town” by the Brahmins, the worst ugly scenes of immoral behavioral activities turned Periyar to despise that so-called holy town. Therefore, a re-thinking on his renunciation led him to return to his family life. On returning to Erode, his father deputized all his trade rights to this second son and retitled his major commercial concern under the title: “E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker Mandi”.

Here it is interesting to understand Periyar and his association in Indian National Congress Party. Periyar associated himself in the Congress Party. He thought that the Indian National Congress Party would appropriate and understand his ideology. He was a Bold leader of the Nationalist Movement in India. He became the front-runner of the non-Brahmins. He was elected as the secretary of the Madras State Congress Committee in 1921 and as its President in 1923 Indian National Congress Party. Periyar was confined two times and joined in the Non- Cooperation Movement. Thus, he was a nationalistic minded politician.⁶

In this connection it is essential to analyze the Temple entry moment of Periyar in Vaikom. Vaikom, a small town in Kerala state, then Travancore, there remained strict laws of downtrodden in and around the entry of the local Temple. Dalits were not allowed into the streets and entering to the temple, let alone inside it. Anti-Caste feelings were rising and in 1924 Vaikom were chosen as a suitable place for Satyagraha. Under his guidance a movement had already started with the aim of giving all castes to enter the temples. Thus, agitations and demonstrations took place. On April 14, Periyar and his wife Nagammai arrived in Vaikom. They were met with arrest and confined for participation. In spite of Gandhi’s opposition to non-Keralies and non-Hindus taking part, Periyar and his followers sustained to give provision to the movement till it was withdrawn.⁷

He received the title Vaikom Veeran, mostly given by his Tamil followers, who participated in the Satyagraha. This great achievement of Periyar earned him the title of the “Hero of Vaikom”. A school on *Guruhulam* style was run at Cheranmahadevi in the Tirunelveli district out of Indian National Congress funds. Periyar observed the segregation of the Non- Brahmins from the Brahmins by providing drinking water and food in separate places in this school. Periyar protested against this anti-social practice and resigned the secretaryship of the Madras State Congress Party in 1925. A State Level Congress-Conference was held at Kanchipuram, where Periyar moved a resolution for reservation in Government services for non-Brahmins. That was not allowed and so he left the Indian National Congress Party.

Here it is useful to portray Periyar and his association in Justice Party. Periyar was sinking towards the Justice Party. Though not actually a justice he was positioning his creed privately with that party. He

appeared all important meetings of the Justice Party in order to inform himself with its activities. The Justice Party lost the elections and he made no attempt to bring new life to the party after the election defeat. The Justice Conference held at Mayiladuthurai in Tanjore district the following May 1927 was named as Self-Respect Conference.⁸

The most important striking Revolutionary movement of Periyar is the Self-Respect Movement. The Self-Respect Movement is a child of the Congress Party. The claim of Thiru. Vi. Ka, was different. In his Autobiography called 'Thiru.Vi. Ka.as *Vazhkkai kurippukal*', here marked: "E.V. R's Self Respect Movement was born out of my '*Sanmarga*' (Path of Truth). There was ninety percent harmony and only ten percent change existed between them". In 1925, he organized the "Self-Respect Movement", seeking to expose the Brahmin tyranny and the misleading methods, by which they controlled all spheres of Hindu life. He condemned Hinduism as the tool of Brahminical control and carried on active propaganda in an attempt to rid the people of Puranic Hinduism and wean them away from the religious superstitious beliefs necessitating the priestly services of the Brahmin. He censured caste observance, child marriage, and enforced widowhood, and attacked the Laws of Manu, which he called the basis of the entire social fabric of caste and defined as "totally inhuman".⁹

It is worthwhile to know Periyar's the Anti-Hindi Agitation. Under the Congress Ministry of C. Rajagopalachari in 1937, the Hindi language was introduced to the South as a compulsory language in schools. Taking this as an affront to Tamil culture and its ironic literary tradition, Tamil patriots responded with violent protest and Periyar, ready to feat the chance swayed the black flags of rebellion in his first Anti-Hindi Campaign: The agitation against the obligation of Hindi inflamed the non-Brahmins against the Ministry and taken the death of two campaigners in police firings, forced the Government to change Hindi from a required to an optional subject in schools. The following year, 1938, while in jail for his Anti-Hindi Campaign, Periyar was elected as the President of the Justice Party. In December 1938, as the newly elected President of the Justice Party, while in prison, E.V. Ramasami put head-first his demand for 'Tamil Nadu for Tamils'.¹⁰

The slogan of 'Tamil Nadu for the Tamils' took shape in 1938 when the Tamil Teachers Conference was held at Vellore in North Arcot District. 'Tamil Nadu Separation Day' was celebrated on 10th September 1939 and the slogan of 'Tamil Nadu for the Tamils' was reverberated with great eagerness. The slogan did not attract the major linguistic groups like the Andhras, the Kannadigas and the Malayalees, who were living in the compound Madras Presidency. So, the leaders felt the need of a more broad-based demand in order to accommodate and embrace all the linguistic groups. The idea of Dravida Nadu as a separate homeland for the Dravidian people of the south came into being.¹¹

As a rationalist social reformer, Periyar advocated forcefully, throughout his life, that women should be assumed their legitimate position in society as the equals of men and that they should be given good education and also the right to property. He was keen that women should understand their rights and be well-intentioned citizens of their country. Periyar fought against the orthodox traditions of marriage and suppression against women in Tamil Nādu and throughout the Indian sub-continent.¹²

Periyar fiercely stood up against this abuse meted out against women. Women in India also did not have rights to their families' or husbands' property. Periyar fought violently for this and also advocated for the women to have the right to separate or break up their husbands under sensible conditions. While birth control remained taboo in society of Priyar's time, he advocated for it not only for the health of women and population control, but for the deliverance of women.¹³

Periyar and his movement have achieved a better rank for women in Tamil Society. Today, lots of young women can be originate studying at engineering and medical colleges in Tamil Nadu. His effect in the State departments and even the center has made it possible for women to join police departments and having posts in the army. Periyar was engaged in strenuous propaganda against child marriage and now the Government has fixed the minimum age for the marriage of girls to be eighteen. The disagree of the Justice Party became inevitable. By changing the name of the Justice Party, Periyar convened the first conference of the newly formed Dravida Khazhaham at Salem on 1944. He insisted for the unification of the Tamil, Telugu, Malayala and Kannada speaking people for getting Dravida Nadu. D.K. Party was in high spirits; Many branches were opened; attacked the power of the Brahmin, attracted the students and brought a new change in the society by criticizing the superstitious beliefs. Periyar criticized the meaningless ideas, superstitious

beliefs and unbelievable Myths stories in the public meetings.¹⁴

He disseminated the self-respect principles through Kudiyarasu, Puratchi, Vidutalai. He also published some books holding the social evils and the ways to eradicate them. He also encourages Tamil Script reform and suggested to adopt the Roman script to ensure easy learning.¹⁵

In 1948, at the age of 72, Periyar married Maniyammai who was only 28. This evoked to opposition of his close followers like C.N. Annadurai., E.V.K. Sampath and others.¹⁶ They originated from Dravida Kazhaham Party and started Dravida Munnerra Kazhaham(D.M.K) Party. Periyar never cared for this split in his party. He carried on his propaganda and did not like to participate in the election, but he supported either congress or Dravida Munnerra Kazhaham (D.M.K) Party. Periyar's ambitions were fulfilled by the Dravida Munnerra Kazhaham Party and later by the All-India Anna Dravida Munnerra Kazhaham(D.M.K) Governments. Then DMK Government, made self-respect marriages legal. Periyar led an intensive campaign for the amendment of the Indian Constitution to authorize reservations in educational institutions for backward communities.¹⁷ Then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru replied to his suggestion and amended to Article 15 of the Indian Constitution by the addition of clause (4). This was the First amendment. The DMK Government endorsed the Tamil Nadu Archaka Act. 1970 which entitled even the Adi Dravidians to become priests, but that was not enforced.¹⁸

As his last agitation social service, Periyar convened the 'Conference for Eradication of Social Degradation' with extreme enthusiasm at Periyar Thidal, Chennai. Many historic resolutions were then passed. On the 2nd day of that Conference, Periyar made a clarion call to all Tamilians to strive hard for the abolition of casteism and social degradation imposed by Brahmins. At Thiyagaraya Nagar, Chennai Periyar delivered his last but immortal speech (the Swansong) like an ever- memorable dying declaration.¹⁹

The Concluding Part states that "Periyar, the Prophet of the new age, the Socrates of the South East Asia, Father of Social Reforms movement, archenemy of ignorance, superstition, meaningless customs and base manners". In 1972, Periyar was awarded Thamara Patra. Periyar who caught a relentless battle against these social discriminations till the very end of his life, died in 1973. After his death, Annai Maniyammai became the President, but she also dies in 1978. Then the party general body elected K.Viamani as the Life General Secretary with all powers of the president of the Party. Thus E.V.Periyar worked for the upliftment of downtrodden and devoted his life for the social Justice.²⁰

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