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Voices for Egalitarian Society

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Abstract—Periyar E. V. Ramasami Naicker is a social reformer far ahead of his times in Tamil Nadu. He wanted men and women to live with dignity and have equal opportunity to develop their faculties. To secure this, he was against all types of discrimination and advocated social justice and a rational outlook. His voices are echoed for an egalitarian and casteless society where equality of status of all the people including women is ensured. Dravidians are inspired by him, and they emulate his courage, which came not from bravery but from a deep commitment to Self-Respect, which gained Periyar the world's adulation.

Keywords---Brahmanism, discrimination, egalitarian, social reform, untouchability, upliftment.

Introduction

The 139th birth anniversary of E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) was celebrated in many parts of Tamil Nadu on 17 September 2018 with great fanfare. However, some acts of vandalism on his statues were reported in Chennai and Dharapuram in the Tiruppur district. Periyar (1879 – 1973) is regarded as a great crusader against the caste system, superstitions and empty rituals. He was considered a proponent of rationalism, women's emancipation and upliftment of the downtrodden. Both the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu – the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam(DMK) and the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam(AIADMK) – claim their ancestry through him, and no politician in Tamil Nadu can dare criticise him. He started the Self-Respect Movement and created the Justice Party, which later became the (Dravida Kazhagam (DK). DMK was an offshoot of the same (Kottayam, 2018; Rajaraman, 1988).

Thanthai Periyar has left us. An exemplary statesman who had dominated Dravidian politics and Tamil politics, culture and civilisation for several decades had achieved a lot. This discourse attempts to try and delineate the qualitative merits of that stream in Dravidian politics, and Tamil Nadu politics as a whole,

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which included him and which he helped to develop. Periyar is a doyen of the political history of Dravida Nadu.² We cannot analyse the intrinsic strength of Tamil Nadu politics without the association of Periyar. Throughout his life, both as an individual and as a social leader, Periyar has been noted for his humanity, his compassion for the non-Brahmins and his commitment to the Self-Respect Movement. He is known for having a radical and less formal approach to reformation and development (Nath, 1981; Baliga, 1960).

The conquest of South India by the English East India Company took place in two stages. The first phase spans from 1744 to 1763 during which period the French power was eliminated. The Tamil region came under British rule between 1792 and 1801. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Tamil Nadu became part of the Madras Presidency, with Madras as its headquarters. Fort St. George became the centre of East India Company's administration. The history of the Madras Presidency was initially that of Madras city itself. This Presidency had its beginnings in a few isolated trading settlements along the coast. The Madras state was carved out of the composite Madras Presidency on 1 November 1956. An Act of Parliament, on 14h January 1969, officially renamed the Madras State Tamil Nadu. The present state of Tamil Nadu thus evolved from the Madras Presidency (Hardgrave Jr, 1969; Separatism, 1969).

Social reforms

The social setting refers to the then existing social stratification and status of women in the Hindu society of Tamil Nadu. In fact, it was a socio-religious system in which social institutions were tainted with religious bias and the prescriptions of social rules had religious sanction. The most important feature of social reform movements in India has been the struggle against inequality based on birth and sex and untouchability. Social reforms widened the scope of social transformation as catalytic agents of advancement and progress in society (Arasu, 1928; Sen, 1974; Irschick, 1976). The various achievements in the field of social reform in modem India so far have been the result of the western impact and native enterprise. British rule in India affected Indian society in various ways. Its impact was different from what India had experienced through previous aggressions. Earlier invaders were overwhelmed by the superior Indian culture, and they blended into the native fabric. However, the arrival of the British paved the way for social reform movements. These reflective effects were either foisted on this country by the alien British rulers for their selfish ends or introduced after unceasing endeavours by national social reformers (Sams et al., 1985; Farndale et al., 1986).

The origin and emergence of social reform movements are directly linked with the introduction of western education, which developed a new scientific thinking, rationalism and humanistic approach. The reform atmosphere helped the Indian elite and later the masses to discard many anachronistic rites and practices, leading to a more secular and rationalistic outlook. The social reformers appeared from time to time, and they initiated reforms that influenced the social structure and the life of women. The social setup, which prevailed in India, appeared reactionary and conservative in tone. Caste rigidity divided the society into watertight compartments. Child marriage was encouraged, with its attached

superstitions. The lot of widows appeared miserable. Women's education, in general, was not attempted, and it was frowned upon. Social reformers, led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandrasen and others, worked to eliminate distinctions that had driven wedges among the people of the country. They preached social equality between man and woman (Bao et al., 2006; Young, 1996). Modern social legislations of the twentieth century were largely inspired by their teachings and also due to the works of religious reform bodies such as Ramalingaswamy's Samarasa Suddha Sanmargha Sangham, the Brahmo Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the Ramakrishna Mission and Social Reform Movements such as Depressed Class Movement and the Temple Entry Movement. The impact of the social reform movements was seen in the breakup of caste barriers, loosening of the grip of religion, education filtering down to the lower strata of society and women, the rising conscience against child marriage and the liberation of women in general and widows in particular from the debased and cursed serfdom in the name of tradition and religion.

The impact of the West, especially in the political and social field, played a vital role in the establishment of organisations and the rise of a critical press. The first Indian newspaper in Madras, the Crescent, appeared in 1884. Swadesamitran, the first Tamil weekly, was issued in 1882. The Madras Hindu Social Reform Association was founded in the year 1892, to fight against social evils such as child marriage and ban on widow remarriage and to promote female education. This was followed by the establishment of the Adi- Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1892. The Widows Home was founded by Veeresalingam in the year 1898. One important aspect of political life, in the Madras Presidency, was the evolution of social reform activity which generated political controversy. Much of the social reform activity in Madras city and the Tamil Districts were led by Marathispeaking Brahmins such as K. Srinivasa Rao. Both social reform and Hindu revivalistic activity in the Tamil Districts helped the non-Brahmin caste-Hindus to an increased awareness of their social and political position. The drive for political power and administrative positions and economic security further widened the Brahmin - Non-Brahmin divide. This breach was greatly aggravated by Annie Besant, in the few years following her political entry, in 1914. As the champion of Home Rule for India and with her theosophical bias, she emphasised the Brahminical past of India. This led to opposition from non-Brahmins, and serious social conflict and political dispute were the results. However, it was this scenario that was conducive to the genesis of social legislation (Johnson et al., 2009; Vehrencamp, 1983).

Periyar E.V.Ramasamy - a socio-political leader

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (E.V.R.) (1879 – 1973) was a crusader against social inequality and injustice in Tamil Nadu. He advocated human rights and fought against the social ills of his times. He played the role of a 'Father Figure' in Tamil Nadu, for a half-century, and he was reverently addressed as 'Thanthai Periyar'. E.V. R. initiated the struggle for human rights in Tamil Nadu. He worked hard to usher in an egalitarian and casteless society where equality of status of all the people was ensured. The title, Periyar, was formally conferred on E. V. R. by women when they gathered in a conference in Chennai in 1938, for his invaluable service in promoting their welfare. He spread the ideology for the emancipation of

women and worked for their empowerment and securing their rights. Women's emancipation was imperative for making an egalitarian society and for the liberation of the nation (Bros & Couttenier, 2015; Gorlov et al., 2019). The movement believed that free, liberal, rational and scientific education alone could break the bondage from which the women suffered. He created an awakening in the Tamil society for equal educational and employment opportunities for women and worked for the equality of women with men (Apostolou et al., 2007; Mattisson et al., 2014).

Periyar predicted that unless social and communal justice was attained, and human rights assured to the neglected, marginalised and weaker sections of the society, the nation would not enjoy the fruit of political independence. To Periyar, human rights included women's rights, children's rights, the rights of the oppressed people and the rights of the workers. He considered the abolition of the caste system as the way to attain social equality. Till the attainment of social equality, he advocated communal reservation to all communities in public services in proportion to their population. In this regard, he strongly opposed the social fabric of the elite minority dominating over the majority people. In short, Periyar was a great social revolutionary, champion of the underprivileged and forerunner of the human rights movement in Tamil Nadu. Periyar was a practical leader and his service to the nation was multidimensional. He had absolute courage and a clear plan of action. His Self-Respect Movement was the blend of social equality and equal rights to all. He single-handedly struggled against the deep-rooted social maladies in Indian society. He very boldly attacked the existence of discrimination based on birth, caste, sex and so on. His attack on society was based on reason, intelligence and scientific approach. In short, the work of a hundred or two hundred years of reform was accomplished in a period of twenty years by Periyar (Zharovska et al., 2021; Kumar, 2021).

Social reform voice

Even during his boyhood days, Periyar was highly moved by the idea of social reform to remove the evils of the caste system and religious obscurantism that was widely practised in Erode, his native town in Tamil Nadu. To realise his dream of social reform, Periyar wished to involve himself in politics. He enrolled himself in the Congress Party when Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement in August 1920. As a congressman, he strengthened the constructive programme of Gandhi, which included the goals aimed at the amelioration of the subaltern communities, enforcement of prohibition and promotion of Hindu -Muslim unity. In 1922, he was elected to the All India Congress Committee. Periyar came to prominence when he offered satyagraha in protest against the rule of prohibiting the untouchables from using certain roads outside the temple at Vaikom, in Travancore State, in 1924. He was called 'Vaikom Veerar' (Hero). As the champion of the untouchables, Periyar's popularity after Vaikom Satyagraha was on the increase. Thereafter, Periyar fought against segregation practised in the nationally funded organisation called Seranmadevi Gurukulam, near Kallidaikurichi in Tirunelveli, run by V. V. Subramania Aiyer, a Congress veteran.

In order to redress the grievance of the non-Brahmins in general and the non-Brahmins in the Congress Party in particular, Periyar insisted on the

passing of a resolution relating to communal representation in proportion to population strength at the annual meeting of the Tamil Nadu Congress Party, which was held at Kanchipuram in 1925. When his intention was not realised, Periyar severed his relations with the Congress. Periyar launched the Self-Respect Movement and started the Tamil newspaper *Kudi Arasu* (People's Government) in which he wrote a number of articles against superstitious beliefs and caste prejudices. An English daily titled *Revolt* was started in 1928. The First Provincial Self-Respect Conference was held at Chengelput in February 1929. The Second Provincial Self-Respect Conference was held at Erode on 10 May 1930, under the presidentship of M.R. Jayakar. The Third Provincial Self-Respect Conference was held at Virudhunagar. 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 oppressive practice of untouchability, segregation and denial of fundamental human rights (Yasa et al., 2017; Setiawan, 2015).

Next to Johthiba Phule of Maharastra, it was Periyar who took up the cause of women on a much larger scale than any other social reformer. He discouraged arranged marriage because it enslaved women. The better marriage he prescribed was 'Love Marriage'. Periyar believed that if women were educated and took up employment, they can emerge equally to men. In India, when none gave serious thought to the importance of family planning as a principal step for the emancipation of women, it was Periyar who supported the extreme step of removing the uterus, after limiting the family to one or two children, in order to save mothers from the risk of unwanted pregnancies. Thus, Periyar waged an epic struggle to get rid of social evils and establish human rights in the country. His principles and ideologies on human rights have survived the onslaught of time. They are eternal and undying (Wong, 2021; Rinartha et al., 2018).

Periyar constantly spouted venom against Brahmins and Brahminism. No one can deny the fact that Thanthai Periyar is an intellectual. Dravidian Movement members who listened to his talks and writings would vouch for this. He knew so much whether it is politics, religion, Brahmanism, society or so on. Everyone valued him for his contributions and ideology. Those who worked with him in many conferences and public meetings admired his sharp and radical mind. He propagated revolutionary ideas for the social emancipation of non-Brahmins. One of his trademarks was his ability to express his ideas loud and clear. His speeches were respected and accepted by all non-Brahmins because he spoke in Tamil that was understood by everyone. Dravidians are inspired by him, and they emulate his courage, which came not from bravery but from a deep commitment to Self-Respect, which gained Periyar the world's adulation.

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