

## PERIYAR'S VIEWS ON UNTOUCHABILITY IN THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL REFORMER

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### ABSTRACT

Periyar Ramasamy was known as the Voltaire of South India. He was atheist, social reformer, rationalist, prolific writer, effective speaker and an original thinker. He worked for downtrodden people. He started self-respect movement, Anti-Hindi agitation. He opposed the caste system of India. Thandai Periyar was a crusader for social justice. He was born in an affluent family on 17th September 1879 at Erode in Tamil Nadu State. His father was Venkatappa (Naicker) a rich popular merchant and his mother was Chinathayammal. His school career ended within five years. He entered his father's trade. His parents were deeply religious and they frequently arranged religion discourses with great devotion, even in his early teens Ramasamy displayed a keen rationalistic tendency and ridiculed the pundits who gave the talks by pointing out the contradiction in their statements and also their incredible exaggerating. He married Nagammai, aged 13 he reformed his orthodox wife and sowed rationalistic views in her mind. He became the father of a female child, who expired within five months and thereafter had no children. He undertook "renunciation" of family because of the harsh reprimand of his father. He went first to Vijayawada in Andhra State. Then he proceeded to Hyderabad and Kolkatta.

**KEYWORDS:** Atheist, Social Reformer, Rationalist, Prolific Writer, Effective Speaker and an Original Thinker

### INTRODUCTION

In the annals of the Presidency of Madras the period between 1916 and 1922 was important because of the series of events that took place affecting the social and political life of the people. The elections for the provincial councils in late 1926 were significant, for the electoral alliance formed by the Independent group and the Swarajists enabled them to unseat the Justice Party and terminate its six years of diarchic rule. Consequently, the period witnessed the installation of Dr. Subbarayan's Independent Ministry in the province. Again the preparations for constitutional changes, the effect of which was to change British policies in the entire Indian subcontinent, resulted in feverish activity among the politicians. Gandhi's salt Satyagraha which was looked upon in some quarters as yet another step in the march towards political freedom, caught the imagination of his followers in Madras, and they staged the historic march from Tirichurapally to Vedaranyam in April 1930 to break the salt laws. In addition to these historical events the period witnessed the foundations of the Self-Respect League, which was to emerge as an important organization dedicated to eradicate some of the then existing social practices and cultural beliefs that prevailed among certain caste groups in the province.

Ramasamy Naicker had no specific plans as Justice Party was achieved and V.R. Naicker was in the congress that left the Tamilnad Congress in 1927. Many of his colleagues, including Rajaji, wanted him back to the Congress fold. Naicker himself had no political ambitions at this stage as he was not for starting a new political party. Nor was he

interested in joining the Justice Party, which had been defeated at the elections and striving hard to stage a come-back. However he made some probing into the possible acceptance of his social views by the leaders of the Justice Party so that he could decide whether or not to cast in his lot with them. "From 1926 and the first half of 1927, Naicker Ramasami Naicker attended all the important meetings of the Justice Party in Justice Party had being much influenced by the Satya Shodhak Samaj of Maharashtra, established by Mahatma Joyti Rao Phule in 1873, and letter spread to the other states, Where the Brahmin had established itself. The Satya Shodhak movement branch was established in 1911 in Kolhapur after mahatma Joyti Rao Phule, by then Ch. Shahu Maharaja of Kolhapur Who consolidated the movement spreading to the other areas in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu areas falling under the Bombay and madras presidencies. This resolution was, however, later withdrawn at the instance of Justice Leaders," "who were concerned more with drawing up plans to recapture political power after their election defeat"<sup>5</sup> than with indulging in polemics against Brahmins. Naicker sensed the prevailing mood in the Justice Party and decided not to join forces with it, as this would obstruct his own plans to bring about social changes in the Tamil society.

### **LIFE AND STRUGGLE OF PERIYAR E. V. R**

"The enormous privileges given to Brahmins by the Vedas were sacrosanct only as long as they went unchallenged. The challenge rose in the Tamil country like a whirlwind, spearheaded by an iconoclast who questioned the Vedas and the gods as well. He took apparently extremist positions on some issues, but the fundamental nature of the social revolution he wrought was clear even to its victims. The political perspectives of Tamil Nadu and with it much of India, were altered with a seeming finality by Ramasamy Naicker. (1879-1973)"

### **TEMPLE ENTRY**

Few people feel uneasy with me, but I will not change my policies or principles. Even among the gods, they teach us differences. For example, everybody can touch the Hindu God Pillayar. Anyone can pray to him. In the Kasi temple in Uttar Pradesh, anyone can pray even in the sanctum sanctorum. But the cruel rules prevailing today in the temples in our place are: this man should not go inside, this man should not pray, only man of this community should pray, that too in a particular language and so on and so forth. For these social differences and ill treatments, we spend a lot of money and lose our self-respect. [Hero of Vaikom, 1923]

### **UNTOUCHABILITY**

Things like untouchability, unseeability, not talking, not coming close has not left anyone in our country. Not only is it customary for a person to say that one below him [in the caste hierarchy] is untouchable and unseeable, and the same person is untouchable and unseeable to one above him, but all these people taken together are untouchable and unseeable, and unapproachable to the Europeans, which is the caste that rules us. In this manner, to talk of eradicating untouchability is shameful. It is not only about the emancipation of the Panchamas, it is not only about removing their difficulties, but it is about removing the disgrace and atrocities inside each one of us: the notion of untouchability. When this is said, they feel surprised: "Ah! Removal of untouchability! Can the Panchamas be allowed into the streets? Are they to be touched? Are they to be seen?"

When they say that some people should not walk in the streets and that some people should not be seen, we must think of what these people feel in their hearts and on what basis they say such things. People of other religions like

Muslims, Christians and Parsis can walk in the streets. A pig, dog, cat, rat can walk in the street; these can be seen while eating or at other times. The Hindu Tamil Iyer who was born and brought up in Tamil Nadu, and who has made Tamil Nadu his own for thousands of years, is told by another: 'You should not walk in the streets, don't come in front of me.' How can a human being digest this? This is the philosophy of the Vaikom Satyagraha and the Gurukulam struggle. Remember that only based on this philosophy, Mahatma Gandhi carried out a Satyagraha in South Africa, and the Kenyan Boycott of Imperialism Day was celebrated. It is the foremost duty of non-Brahmins to abolish untouchability. Only the advancement of the Untouchables and the non-Brahmins is the advancement of the nation. Only the sorrow of the Untouchables is the sorrow of the non-Brahmins who form 97% of the population. Only by the abolition of the untouchability, the non-Brahmins can be saved or redeemed. Only after the abolition of untouchability, our nation can achieve real Swaraj (Self-rule). So, all people who are worried about the abolition of untouchability and those who are called Untouchables should come to Kancheepuram, conduct the conference and derive its advantages.

### **COMMUNAL REPRESENTATION**

More than the communal representation for non-Brahmins, the communal representation for Untouchables is very important—we will say this even from the gopuram of the temples. They have not attained development in education, or employment, or in other streams of public life in proportion to their population in the society. As a result of this, these people who are one-fifth of the nation forget the welfare of the nation; in search of the Government's grace, they go and fall into another religion and sprout as our enemies. The selfish do not worry about this. It is not just to say that it is betrayal of the nation. If the responsible public ignores it, I will say that it is a greater sin. If this society had been given communal representation at least some 25 years ago, will we have this kind of difference of opinion, lack of unity, British tyranny and Brahmin cruelty in our country even today? The man who should not walk in the street, the man who should not be seen, the man who should not know his own religion, the man who should not see his own god: can such categories exist in India? Everyone with a social outlook must think about this. They need to implement this in the state conference and bring it into force because it is the duty of the patriots.

### **GENESIS OF THE SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT**

What prompted Periyar to take up with missionary zeal a cause that was not easy to promote even among those who needed it most is generally known. But what sustained his interest is a mystery. It was the steadfast devotion to the cause. That was the greatness of E. V. Ramasami Naicker which made him a Periyar "a great man," a Tantai "father" and a Thalaivar "leader." Periyar was born and brought up in an extremely orthodox household. In his early boyhood, he was exposed to a rigid orthodox way of life strictly governed by traditional prescriptions and scrupulously attached to conventional ritual-ridden activities. Periyar, recalling his boyhood remarked that "the Hindu orthodoxy practiced by his ancestors and the theological discourses perennially conducted in his house turned him to be an agnostic." Small incidents of caste discriminatory treatment experienced while he was yet a schoolchild seemed to have made a lasting impression so derogatory to his sense of "self-respect" as to drive him to be a determined speaker after an egalitarian society. Giving his own reason for becoming a staunch opponent to religious practices, Periyar had observed that in every circumstance and in every manner he was different from his "association and surrounding" and never became a victim to his surrounding in any field. He stated that the general belief that association and environment mould a person's life, ideals and methods, which was also found true in experience, had been disproved in his case.

## SUYAMARIYATHAI

The term “self-respect” corresponds to the Tamilized form of the Sanskrit word *suyamariyathai*. It is a combination of the words *suya* which means “self” and *mariyathai* which means “respect.” The motive behind the inauguration of the movement was to instill the feeling of Self-Respect among the people and to eradicate all kinds of birth-based inequalities and discriminations. The Self-Respect Movement was dedicated to the ideal of giving the Tamils “a sense of pride” based on their glorious past. Periyar declared that the objectives of the Self-Respect movement were “the establishment of a casteless and classless society with equal rights, free from superstitious beliefs and the eradication of all social evils.” Its aim was also to give complete equality, to women with men including property rights, to promote women’s education and widow remarriage.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Periyar was a champion of women's rights. In several Self-Respect Conferences, which he organized in Tamil Nadu, Periyar advocated man-woman equality, and equal property rights for women. Among other things, he encouraged and supported inter-caste marriages and widow-remarriages. Periyar popularized Self-Respect Marriages by mutual consent, which was conducted without any Brahmin priest or religious ritual. Periyar also supported the abolition of the Devadasi system under which young girls were attached to Hindu temples as sex workers. Periyar described this system as a disgrace to Hindu religion. Periyar's speeches and articles relating to women's rights have been published in the form of a book titled *Periyar on Women's Rights*. In his various speeches and articles contained in this book, Periyar has supported women's education, property rights for women, Self-Respect Marriages, birth control and widow remarriages. Periyar has also expressed his views on love, chastity and "prostitution".

By making parenthood rather than motherhood the decisive factor in the nurture and care of human life, Periyar sought to liberate the female body from the oppressive and suffocating realm of eternal fertility. He and his self respecters encouraged the widespread practice of contraception and entreated women to assume sovereign control over their wombs. Articles appeared regularly in *Kudi Arasu*, *Puratchi* and other Self-Respect journals which examined the implications of the practice of birth control for women's freedom. In several women's conferences convened by Self-Respecters, resolutions urging women to secure their reproductive freedom were passed. While speaking at Self-Respect marriage gatherings, Periyar would counsel women not to make a vocation out of motherhood.

Periyar also linked women's reproductive freedom with the question of their sexual and personal autonomy. In an article on the pioneering work of Marie Stopes and her birth control clinic, he argued forcefully that when pregnancy ceases to be a matter of choice but a condition to be endured at all costs, it not only trapped women in loveless marriages, but also prevented them from seeking out other male friendships or leaving a despised husband for one they loved.

## ANTI-RELIGION AND RATIONALISM

Periyar says, “Without destroying religion we cannot eradicate the problem of unsociability.” Periyar sees religion as the main impediment to social and political progress. This explains the predominance he has given to anti-religion in the presentation of his messages. Periyar himself recorded his early experiences thus: In our house Sanyasis, Pundits, Hermits and Priests commanded respect. Because I did not like them, I made it a point to oppose whatever they said and ridiculed them. Though I had not read the Puranas or other religious books the discourse with saiva or vaishnava pundits constantly

in our house gave me enough information about religious matters and enabled me to question the pundits. In answering my questions, the religious men contradicted one another and sometimes contradicted themselves. It gave extraordinary pleasure to fling at the pundits, their own contradictions and thus perplex them. I believed that, it was this experience, which deprived me of faith in communities, in religion, in Puranas and Sastras and in God.

## ICONOCLASM

Periyar's opposition to the Hindu cult and worship in and outside of temples resulted in iconoclastic actions. "He ridiculed and damaged the images of deities and heroes. He campaigned for burning pictures of them in 1956 and 1971, as his opposition to religious as well as political domination by the upper castes." Periyar called himself an atheist. His atheism seems to mean more a denial of the role of religion in society than a refusal of belief in God. His numerous anti-religious comments characterized religion as superstition leading to ignorance, exploitation and suppression. In his opinion, "no religion is without superstition." Superstition is belief in miracles and supernatural. Religion must be eradicated and replaced by rationalism. For this he stressed on an education that is rational and general, through which one can conquer superstition and ignorance and improve justice and morality in society.

## THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL REFORMER

Periyar was convinced that if man developed self respect, he would automatically develop individuality and would refuse to be led by the nose by schemers. One of his most known quotes on Self-Respect was, "we are fit to think of 'self-respect' only when the notion of 'superior' and 'inferior' caste is banished from our land". Periyar did not expect personal or material gain out of this movement. He used to recall in a very casual manner that as a human being, he also was obligated to this duty, as it was the right and freedom to choose this work. Thus, he opted to engage himself in starting and promoting the movement. Periyar declared that the Self-Respect Movement alone could be the genuine freedom movement, and political freedom would not be fruitful without individual self-respect. He remarked that the so-called 'Indian freedom fighters' were showing disrespect of self-respect, and this was really an irrational philosophy.

Periyar observed that political freedom as conceived by nationalists not excluding even Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru did not cover individual self-respect. To him neither revival of the original spirit of Hindu religion and ancient traditions which formed part of Gandhi's conception of freedom, nor complete liberation from the British rule which was considered by Nehru to be the meaning of freedom or both of them together could ensure individual self-respect or the eradication of social ills from Indian society. In his opinion, the task of fulfilling the need for self-respect would have to be faced whatever be the extent of political freedom gained. Pointing out that even the British monarch in a sovereign independent nation had no freedom to marry a person of his choice and had to abdicate his kingdom; Periyar raised a question whether Gandhi's vision of freedom or Nehru's concept of independence contained even an iota of individual self-respect. Periyar believed that self-respect was as valuable as life itself and its protection is a birthright and not swaraj. He described the movement as Arivu Vidutalai Iyakkam, that is, a movement to liberate the intellect.

The terms *tan-maanam* or *suya mariyadai* meaning 'self-respect' are traceable in ancient Tamil literature considered a virtue of high valor in Tamil society. Vengayam once claimed that to describe the ideology of his movement, no dictionary in the entire world, implying that no other language, could provide a word better than or equal to *suya mariyadai*. Started as a movement (*Iyakkam* in Tamil) to promote rational behavior, the Self-Respect Movement

acquired much wider connotation within a short period of time. Periyar speaking with M.K. Reddy at the First Self-Respect Conference held in 1929 explained the significance of self-respect and its principles. The main principles of the Self-Respect Movement in society were to be: no kind of inequality among people; no difference as rich and poor in the economic life; men and women to be treated as equals in every respect without differences; attachments to caste, religion, varna and country to be eradicated from society with a prevalent friendship and unity around the world; and every human being seeing to act according to reason, understanding, desire, and perspective, and shall not be subject to slavery of any kind or manner. Equality with stress on economic and social equality formed the central theme of the Self-Respect Movement and was due to Periyar's determination to fight the inequalities ingrained in the caste system as well as certain religious practices. Working on the theme of liberating the society from the baneful social practices perpetrated in the name of dharma and karma, Periyar developed the idea of establishing this movement as the instrument for achieving his objective.

## CONCLUSIONS

E.V. Ramasamy was not only a man of words but also a man of deeds. He spoke and wrote many a time about honesty, integrity, propriety and a host of other virtues. The greatness of E.V. Ramasamy was that he never stopped with preaching but also practised what he preached. Moreover, he expected his followers to adhere strictly to his principles. Those who deviate from him would cease to be his followers. His contributions to the mental emancipation were immense.<sup>11</sup> He thought that his movement should continue even after him for which he made some arrangements. He opines that it is not enough that youth have mere enthusiasm and sacrifice. They should also have the analytic power to distinguish between good and bad or else they will become a prey in the hands of selfish people. To achieve this he created selfless volunteers to propagate humanist rationalism. His missionary zeal established a trust in 1952 by the name "Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution". He published cheap edition books, periodicals, etc., to cater to the people of Tamil Nadu under this Trust. He donated a lump sum money to establish an Arts and Science College (EVR College) at Tiruchirappalli, South India, which still exists. He donated sizable amount for improvement of Government hospitals and he started training schools for women and men, a child care centre and a Higher Secondary School for girls. This shows that he practiced what he preached and he preached what he thought.

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