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Thantai Periyar – Fighter for Social Justice

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Abstract

As a rationalist and ardent social reformer, Periyar advocated forthfully, throughout his life, that women should be given their legitimate position in society. He brought a new change by criticizing the superstitious beliefs. Periyar was a fearless leader of the Nationalist Movement in India. He was gravitating towards the Justice Party.

Keywords: Social reformer, Movement, Women, Superstitious beliefs, Conference, Tradition, Culture.

Introduction

"Even as India was fighting British domination hundred years ago, there was another India fighting for liberation from perhaps an equally various hegemony within." – Kavitha Muralidharan.

The history of communal strife in Tamilnad is sui generis and is interwoven with its politics. A good part of the social life of recent Tamilian history is marked by conflicts arising out of the Brahmin and Non-Brahmin situation. From vedic times the Brahmin has been claiming a certain primacy in society, primacy even over the warrior not to speak of the merchant and the peasant. The Brahmins were traditionally a literate community always accustomed to hold secretarial posts in royal courts, and naturally endowed with considerable resilience in their social behavior and quite adaptable to changing times.

There were three major non-Brahmin groups in Tamilnad: 1. The Non-Brahmin Caste Hindus; 2. The Muslims; 3. The Indian Christians; these were apart from the 'untouchables', who were officially called the Adi-Dravidas. Among these, the Muslims had no particular avidity for scholarly pursuits of literate occupations; they remembered the old days when they were the rulers 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 disabilities which their compatriots who remained within the Hindu fold suffered. Among the Non-Brahmin Hindus, the upper castes like the Mudaliars, the Pillais, the Chettiars etc. felt the Brahmins were occupying a disproportionately large number of public positions and to that extent the majority non-Brahmin community were denied those opportunities.

It is evidenced from the speech of M.C.Rajah, the leader of the Depressed Classes who said, "The depressed classes feel that they are facing a crisis that unless they can secure adequate statutory guarantee for their full enjoyment of the rights and privileges of full citizenship now, they will for ever be doomed to occupy a degraded position".

This general condition of the Depressed Classes was further confirmed by Margaret Speigel, the disciple of M.K.Gandhi. Addressing a public meeting on Triplicane Beach on 7th May 1933, she said, "Mr.Gandhi is tired of life. His followers have driven him to despair. They have pretended to work for the removal of untouchability, but worked only on words, not deeds". The roots of the Dravidian Movement may be traced back to the anti Brahmin conflicts of the early part of the century. Following World War I, there emerged one of the most dynamic and colourful political leaders South India had ever produced, E.N.Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar, the Great Sage .

Early Life

Periyar E.V.Ramaswamy was born on September 17th 1879 at Erode town in Tamilnadu. His father Venkatanacker was a popular rich merchant ardent devotee of Hindu religion (A Vaishnavite). His mother was Chinnathayammal alias Muthammal. His elder brother was EV. Krishnasamy and had a younger sister Kannammal Ponnuthoy. He was sent to small primary school normally run at a House pial in those days. His school career ended within five years. So he entered in to his father's trade. He used to hear Tamil Vaishnav religious Gurus talks on mythologies at his house, enjoying their hospitality. As a boy, he started questioning the contradictions and illusions in the fables of Hindu deities spread by the Aryan race ie., Brahmins for subjugating Dravidan Race .

Marriage Life

Periyar married Nagammal and 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 he had no children. He undertook "renunciation" of family because of the harsh reprimand by his father. He went first to Vijayawada in Andhra State. Then he proceeded to Hyderabad and Kolkatta.

Kaasi Enlightens his Rationalism

Periyar reached Kassi (Varanasi), a noted sacred town of Hindu pilgrimage on the bank of the River Ganges. There he could not get free meals easily at choultries which exclusively fed Brahmins forbidding

other Hindu castes. Having starved severely for some days, this handsome young man Ramaswamy found no other better way than to enter a choultry with the appearance of a Brahmin wearing a thread on his bare chest. But his moustache betrayed him. So the gate-keeper not only prevented his entry but also pushed him rudely to the street. At that movement, as the feast was over inside the choultry, the leaves with food left over were thrown at the street. The unbearable burning of starvation for the past few days forced Ramaswamy to compete with the street – dogs in eating the remnants of food in the leaves. While eating that food, the eyes of Ramaswamy looked at the letters carved at the truth that the choultry exclusively occupied by the highest caste viz., Brahmins, had been built only by a wealthy merchant of Dravidian race from Tamil Nadu.

The disgrace inflicted by the Brahmins at KAASI upon him without the least mercy, made a deep wound in the heart of Periyar and it inflamed intense hatred towards that Aryan race and their creation of innumerable Gods. Though Kaasi (Varanasi) has been acclaimed as the most "sacred town" by the Brahmins, the worst ugly scenes of immoral activities turned Periyar to abhor that so-called holy-town. Consequently, a re-thinking on his renunciation led him to return to his family life. On returning to Erode, his father delegated all his trade rights to this second son and renamed his major commercial concern under the title: "E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker Mandi" .

Periyar in Congress

Periyar joined in the congress. He thought that the Indian National Congress was a fit organization for realising his ideas. He was a fearless leader of the Nationalist Movement in India. He became the leader of the Non-Brahmins. He was elected as the secretary of the Madras State Congress Committee in 1921 and as its President in 1923. Periyar was imprisoned two times and joined in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Thus he was a nationalistic minded politician.

Periyar in Vaikom

In Vaikom, a small town in Kerala state, then Travancore, there were strict laws of untouchability in and around the temple area. Dalits also known

as Harijans were not allowed into the close streets around and leading to the temple, let alone inside it. Anti-Caste feelings were growing and in 1924 Vaikom was chosen as a suitable place for an organized Satyagraha. Under his guidance a movement had already begun with the aim of giving all castes the right to enter the temples. Thus, agitations and demonstrations took place. On April 14, Periyar and his wife Nagamma arrived in Vaikom. They were met with arrest and imprisoned for participation. In spite of Gandhi's objection to non-Keralites and non-Hindus taking part, Periyar and his followers continued to give support to the movement till it was withdrawn. 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 Seramahadevi in the Tirunelveli district out of Indian National Congress funds. Periyar noticed the segregation of the Non-Brahmins from the Brahmins by providing drinking water and food in separate places. Periyar protested against this anti-social practice and resigned the secretaryship of the Madras State Congress in 1925. A State Level Congress-Conference was held at Kanchipuram, where Periyar moved a resolution for reservation in Government services for Non-Brahmins. But that was not allowed and so he left the Indian National Congress.

Periyar and Justice Party

Periyar was gravitating towards the Justice Party. Though not actually a justicite he was aligning his creed unofficially with that party. He attended all important meetings of the Justice Party in order to acquaint himself with its activities. The Justice Party lost the elections but made no attempt to bring new life to the party after the election defeat. The Justice Conference held at Mayavaram in Tanjore district the following May 1927 was named as Self-Respect Conference

Self Respect Movement

There is a popular belief that the Self-Respect Movement carried on the traditions of the Justice Party. This belief is simply not true. The Self-Respect

Movement is a child of the Congress. But the claim of Thiru.Vi.Ka, was different. In his Autobiography called 'Thiru. Vi. Ka. Valkkaikurippukal', he remarked:

"E.V.R's Self Respect Movement was born out of my 'Sanmarga' (Path of Truth). There was ninety percent concordance and only ten percent difference existed between them".

In 1925, he organized the "Self-Respect Movement", designed as a Dravidian uplift movement, designed as a Dravidian uplift movement, seeking to expose the Brahmin tyranny and the deceptive methods by which they controlled all spheres of Hindu life. He attacked 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 ceremonies requiring the priestly services of the Brahmin. He denounced 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 described as "totally inhuman".

Anti-Hindi Agitation

Under the Congress Ministry of C.Rajagopalachari in 1937, the Hindi language was introduced to the South as a compulsory subject in schools. Taking this as an affront to Tamil culture and its rich literary tradition, Tamil patriots reacted with violent protest and Periyar, ready to exploit the opportunity, waved the black flags of rebellion in his first Anti-Hindi Campaign: The agitation against the imposition of Hindi inflamed the non-Brahmins against the Ministry and brought the death of two agitators 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 forward his demand for 'TamilNadu for Tamils'. The slogan of 'TamilNadu for the Tamils' took shape in 1938 when the Tamil Teachers Conference was held at Vellore in North Arcot District. 'TamilNadu Separation Day' was celebrated on 10th September

1939 and the slogan of 'TamilNadu for the Tamils' was echoed with great enthusiasm. The slogan did not attract the major linguistic groups like the Andhras, the Kannadigas and the Malayalees who were living in the composite state of Madras. So, the leaders felt the need of a more broad based demand in order to accommodate and embrace all the linguistic groups. Accordingly, the idea of Dravida Nadu as a separate homeland for the Dravidian people of the south came into being .

Periyar's International Tour

On 15th December 1929, Periyar accompanied by his wife Nagammal and some followers visited Malaya, and inaugurated the Tamils conference. He addressed many meetings at various places like Singapore, Kualalumpur, Taliping, Malacca, Sungeipattani to propagate the principles of Self Respect Movement. On 13th December 1931, Periyar started his journey to Europe from Chennai harbour by ship. S.Ramanathan and Raju of Erode accompanied him. He visited many European Countries like Egypt, Greek, Turkey, Soviet Russia, Germany, England (Britain), Italy, Spain, France, Portugal etc., At Berlin, capital of Germany, Periyar visited several Socialist Associations and offices of Socialist magazines. In Russia (formly Soviet Union) his stay was extended for a lengthy period of three months because he was invited to address many worker's meetings. Being the First Nation of Karl Marx's Communism, established by the great leader Mr. Lenin, the Former Soviet Union (Russia) captivated very much the heart of Periyar. In England Periyar addressed a huge labourers' public meeting with more than 50,000 people. He explained his principles on Rationalism as well as Socialism. Returned to Erode after completing the European journey via Colombo, capital of Ceylon .

Women's Rights

As a rationalist and ardent social reformer, Periyar advocated forcefully, throughout his life, that women should be given 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 realize their rights and be worthy citizens of their country.

Periyar fought against the orthodox traditions of marriage as suppression of women in TamilNadu and throughout the Indian sub-continent. 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 fiercely for this and also advocated for the women to have the right to separate or divorce their husbands under reasonable circumstances. 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 liberation of women. Periyar and his movement have achieved a better status for women in Tamil Society. Today, lots of young women can be found studying at engineering and medical colleges in TamilNadu. His influence in the State departments and even the centre have 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 decline 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 domination 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 puranic stories in the public meetings. He disseminated the self-respect principles through Kudiyarasu, Puratchi, Vidutalai. He also published some books containing 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 .

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. They came out from Dravida Kazhaham party and started Dravida Munnerra Kazhaham. 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 Munnera Kazhaham. Periyar's ambitions were fulfilled by the Dravida Munnera Kazhaham and later by the All India Anna Dravida Munnera Kazhaham Governments. Then DMK Government, made self-respect marriages legal. Periyar led an intensive campaign for the amendment of the Indian Constitution to legalize reservations in educational institutions for Backward communities. Then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru responded 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 enacted the Tamil Nadu Archaka Act. 1970 which entitled even the Adi Dravidians to become priests, but that was not enforced.

Death of Periyar

As his last agitational 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. Due to unbearable acute pain of Hernia disease, Periyar was taken to the Christian Medical College (C.M.C) Hospital at Vellore. The Greatest Original Thinker and the Resolute Rationalist of the World. Periyar breathed his last, putting billions of rationalists, Tamilians of Dravidian race and admirers all over the globe into unbearable agony with ocean of tears. An official State mourning was announced by the Chief-Minister Kalaingar M.Karunanidhi and Gazette extraordinary was issued by the Government of TamilNadu.

Conclusion

"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". – UNESCO Mandram.

In 1972, Periyar was awarded Thamara Patra. Periyar who bagged 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.

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