



A MOVEMENT OF PERIYAR E.V. RAMASAMI FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND GENDER EQUALITY IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT :

The demand for social justice and self-respect emerged due to a very sensitive historical background and social disorder. The Brahmins were regarded as the high privileged class due to the practice of caste system and the Hindu Varnashrama Dharma. They were inherited with the ability to learn as they were capable of oration of Vedic hymns for generations together. They dominated the government jobs after the establishment of British rule in India. The other castes were could not utilize the prospects of education which were in some cases possibly denied to them, and they involved in manual labors. The Sudras and Panchamas were branded as people who were only suitable for manual labor. These people were not only deprived of education but also pushed to the position of suppression and exclusion. The Varnashrama Dharma laid the source for the cause of the sufferings of countless scores of communities and people.



In this period, when the oppression against lower castes was rampant and when the Brahmins and other higher castes were at the most dominant level, there emerged a social crusader who raised his voice against the injustice of the caste system and Varnashrama Dharma and lived for the cause of the annihilation of social ills.. This relentless crusader became champion for the cause of social justice and self-respect for everyone. He was no other than E.V. Ramasami Naicker, popularly known as 'Thanthai Periyar'.

KEYWORDS : Social Justice , Equality, Rationalism, E.V.Ramasami, Women, Self –Respect Movement, Vaikom.

CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The fundamental concept of social justice and self-respect is to secure the pride and dignity of an individual in the society. Treating a fellow human being as “untouchable” is a dreadful crime in terms of social justice.¹ The essential traits and the foundation on which social justice rested upon are equality of status, equality of opportunity, equality of treatment and developmental facilities to all, and equality of results.

SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT

E. V. Ramasami (E.V.R.) led the Self Respect Movement to combat the social discrimination and prejudices in the society. He endeavored to establish an egalitarian casteless society. An egalitarian society is one where all people are treated equally and have the same rights and privileges in life.²

Initially, when E.V.R. was in Congress, he made an effort to initiate the idea of communal representation in Congress but failed to do so as the Congress was also predominated by Brahmins. Hence,

E.V.R. left the Congress in antipathy.³ He then began to support the Justice Party to implement the communal representation in government service. The Non-Brahmin Movement of the Justice Party got a new strength after the arrival of E.V.R.

According to Nicholas B. Dirks, an American Scholar, caste was a sacred institution in India. Idolatry and superstition are like the stones and bricks of a huge fabric, and caste is cement which pervades and closely binds the whole.⁴ Indeed the people could not act as uniform group in a society where caste play a major role. E.V.R. understood it well. The inequality and subjugation is the part of casteism which causes social injustice. Every caste had to more or less follow the traditional occupation of their caste and the people who had to do manual labor under upper caste people were condemned to be always under their domination.⁵

The main hindrance to unity, according to E.V. R., was casteism and he believed that social development was achievable only when there is an eradication of casteism. He propagated that social justice will be unbelievable idea unless there is a social order based on equality of status and equality of opportunity to all. His self-respect movement's main purpose was to achieve a society where there are no social inequality and no dominance of privileged class.⁶ E.V.R.'s self respect movement aimed at removing the social inequality prevailing in the society as well as the caste-based social status of Brahmins and their dominance in all spheres of public life.

E.V.R. FOR THE REMOVAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Individual human rights do not emerge from someone's generosity, but from a colossal sense of self-respect and it does not allow intolerance and discrimination based on caste or sex. Untouchability and practices related to it are the greatest offences to human rights and humanity. The self-respect movement launched by E.V.R. is based on this philosophy of human rights started at a time when the concept of human rights was unknown to India. E.V.R. wantonly spread his ceaseless propaganda emphasizing that untouchability constitutes an intolerable assault on the dignity and worth of a person and an egregious violation of human rights and the Government should provide opportunities for their economic and social empowerment and that is the most valuable tool to combat untouchability. At the Congress conference held at Thiruppur in 1922, E.V.R. backed a resolution that untouchables should be allowed into the Hindu temples. But the resolution was defeated by the upper caste Brahmins who were then controlling the Congress.⁷

Vaikom, a temple town in the erstwhile Travancore state was a fortress of upper caste oppression against Ezhavas, Panchamas, Vanniyars and weavers who were labeled as untouchables. These so called untouchables were not only prevented from entering the streets but also made ineligible for appointment as court staff, inspector or constables in the police station. Madhavan, an advocate of the Ezhava community, was not permitted inside the court situated in the Raja's palace in Thiruvananthapuram. In response to this, some Ezhava community leaders and Kerala Congress Committee leader Kesava Menon started a Satyagraha in Vaikom against this inhuman practice. The Travancore Government suppressed the resistance by detaining the nineteen protagonists including T.K. Madhavan involved in the agitation and there was no one else to prolong the Satyagraha. The Satyagraha was in danger of becoming a failure. In a last effort, the detained Kerala Congress leaders wrote from prison to E.V.R., then a Tamil Nadu Congress leader and who had already made a name for himself as a reformer against untouchability, superstition and religious bigotry.⁸

E.V.R. instantly proceeded to Vaikom without any hesitation. He began his intense battle in his usual, sharp style against the cruel practice of banning the lower caste from entering the streets of the temple. He violated the prohibitory orders put forth by the government and therefore arrested. But he allowed his wife Nagammai and sister Kannamal to continue the struggle and they roused the public consciousness greatly in favour of the struggle.⁹ The movement had gained immense support by the time he was released after a month. He even ignored a letter from Rajaji of Congress which advised E.V.R. not to create any disturbance in Vaikom. E.V.R. sustained the agitation and was rearrested and sent to six months

rigorous imprisonment. In this critical situation, the Maharaja of Travancore passed away and on his death, all the satyagrahis including E.V.R. were released from prison.¹⁰

On request from Rajaji, M. K. Gandhi arrived at Vaikom and after a prolonged discussion the Rani offered to throw open the roads to all the communities if the agitators did not claim right to enter the temple. E.V.R. did not give up the demand for temple entry but gave an assurance that there would not be an agitation for a while. Ten years later in 1936, the temples in the Princely State of Travancore were thrown open to all the lower castes fearing that they would convert into Islam. As a rationalist, E.V.R. believed that as long as temples exist in the country, they should not be used as tool of caste discrimination.¹¹

Thus on invitation, E.V. R had arrived at Vaikom and had given a a new lease of life to a sagging movement. He was jailed twice , and was the only person to be punished for rigorous imprisonment. From available sources, It is known that he visited Vaikom seven times. Of the 114 days that he devoted to the struggle , he languished in prison for 74 days. Apart from being the only leader form outside the State to be invited to the victory celebrations, he was even asked to preside over it.¹² Needless to say that Thiru.Vi.Kalayanarasundara Mudaliar , the great Tamil journalist and labour union leader, called him the Vaikom Veerar (Vaikom Hero) in his newspaper, *Navasakthi* at the time of the freedom struggle and later in biographical work, *Enathu Vazhkai Kurippugal*.¹³

E.V.RAMASAMI FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality and justice is connected with the execution of legal and constitutional endorsement to establish equality rights, status and opportunities of women without any prejudice and discrimination. It represent the empowerment of women in political, social, economical setup and to attain self-respect, self-sufficiency, freedom, choice and most important of them all, security to women.

The first approach of E.V.R. in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women was to pass resolutions in the first provincial Self Respect Conference in 1929. These resolutions stressed a women's right to property and inheritance of her parents and deceased husband, right to divorce and remarriage, widow's remarriage, prevention of child marriage and right to employ birth control practices. E.V.R. desired that women should be employed in police and military to bring about economic and social empowerment.¹⁴

SELF-RESPECT MARRIAGES

In the year 1928, E.V.R. brought in the concept of self-respect marriage where the marriage honored without Brahminic rituals and *mantras*. These self-respect marriages underscored the equality of wife and husband in marriages. E.V.R. considered a marriage between a man and woman as a partnership, based on the compassion towards each other and not because of the rites and rituals involved in the traditional marriages. He declared that the virtue of chastity should be imposed on both the husband and the wife contradictory to traditional way where chastity was a convenient and efficient way to suppress and subdue women. E.V.R. also campaigned for women to have a choice to conceive and bear children.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

WIDOW REMARRIAGE

In the traditional Hindu society, widows were regarded as inauspicious, were despised by their own relatives and were not invited to family functions. In the language of Tamil, there is a specific word to denote a woman whose husband was dead but no word to refer a man whose wife was dead. This signified a strong gender inequality at the roots of the culture and society. E.V.R. was deadly against the widowhood of women and strongly condemned it in the Self-Respect conference of 1929. He encouraged widow remarriage with force and fervor and put it into effect in the case of his nephew who became a widow at her very tender age. He arranged her marriage despite many protests from his conservative relatives. This was performed by E.V.R. very before the enactment of Widow Remarriage Act.

In addition to this, E.V.R. also condemned the child marriages and devadasi system of Hindu

temples. He enlightened the people about the ill effects of child marriages and made the groundwork to eliminate it. E.V.R.'s campaign against Devadasi system enabled the legislation prohibiting the immoral practice.¹⁷

He vehemently condemned *Penadimai* (slavery of woman) and *Pen Ezhivu* (degradation of woman).¹⁸ E.V.R.'s relentless battle against gender inequality and for the development and empowerment of women has earned him the title "Periyar" (the Great One), which was conferred to him by women themselves on a women's conference held at Madras on 13th n November 1938 under the leadership of Nilambikai Ammal, the daughter of Maraimalai Adigal, a great Tamil scholar.¹⁹

PERIYAR'S RATIONALISM

Rationalism is a weapon used by E.V.R. to remove ignorance, religious prejudices and superstitions from humanity. The main aim of rationalism is to make truth accessible to everyone and make everyone to infer their own logical conclusion about the meaning, purpose and conduct of life. E.V.R. understood that rationalism improves the attitude of tolerance for differential views and beliefs. A man of understanding can by no means be aggressive in his thought or action. Caste discrimination or religious intolerance has no place in the mind of a rationalist. Much before the constitution came into force, E.V.R. started the self-respect movement, and rationalism is one of the doctrines of the self-respect movement. The vision and views expressed and the measures promoted by him to propagate rationalism were more or less the outcomes of his own experience, observation and thinking. He did not rely on any authority or belief, ancient or modern for the rationalism propagated by him.²⁰

E.V.R. propagated the idea of rationalism to a large number of masses. He spread the message, practice and benefits of rationalism in a language well understood even by common people. His gathering included both well educated intellectuals and illiterate populace from slums and villages. He brought about a sea change among the people and make them think for themselves by their thought, effort and time. The public meetings addressed by him carried on all his principles and ideals including rationalism to the people.

To conclude, legislative measures of laws and rules can bring in political, economic and electoral reforms but not social reforms. The people's view, beliefs, outlook, thoughts and concepts have to be altered by enlightening the people about the need for social reforms and rationalism. This can only be done only by leaders who command the respect and esteem of the masses by relentless propagation through their speeches, writings and their own practices. E.V.R. was a towering personality and a leader who was influential in causing the social reforms which promoted self-respect, equality among people and gender. His rationalist activities made many contributions to develop women empowerment, empowerment of lower caste, and to promote humanism and to remove ill in society. E.V.R.'s self-respect movement, which in 1944 was transformed into Dravidar Kazhagam, paved the way for the rise of Non-Brahmins to power in Tamil Nadu and got rid of the Brahmin monopoly in government services and cutting them all from the source of power at both provincial and national levels. The rise of non-Brahmins in the educational fields and in Government services paved the way for the decline of Brahmin social prestige in Tamil Nadu. The non-Brahmins began controlling the Congress leadership in Tamil Nadu. He was also one of the few persons in the history of World who fought for the rights, opportunity and empowerment of the women. He preached and also practiced his ideas in the abolition of subjugation the women. He gave respect to women and promoted self-respect in them.

END NOTES

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