



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

VOLUME - 11 | ISSUE - 6 | MARCH - 2022



TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY : SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT IN RAMNATHAPURAM DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The Self Respect Movement, started by E.V. Ramaswami was a Social Reform Movement in Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu. This movement was aimed at gender equality and upliftment of the Downtrodden people. It sincerely devoted its works to remove the social ills connected with women, like child marriage, unequal marriage, sati, widowhood devadasi system etc. This movement occupied a central place in the Tamil society from 1920s to 1940s. Many women participated in this movement and also chaired many meetings and conferences of this movement. Self-Respect



marriages reduced the role of the priestly class in Tamil society. This movement strongly opposed the role of Brahmins in social and cultural domains. This movement confined its activities in social domains. The non-Brahmins of the Justice Party also supported this movement. The Ramanathapuram District played a remarkable role in the Self-Respect Movement. Even some Setupathis actively involved in this movement and spread social awareness among the people in Ramanathapuram District. It opposed the Brahmin dominated Congress party.

KEYWORDS : Equality, Self Respect Movement, Non-Brahmin, Caste System, Gender Equality
E.V.Ramaswami, Ramanathapuram.

INTRODUCTION

Tamil Society in the early Twentieth Century was very hierarchical and until the 1930s membership in the bureaucracy largely reflected groups at the top of the hierarchy. The Ramnad Country may be regarded as a cosmopolitan part of South India where narrowness born of race, caste, and other considerations are not so great as may be found in certain other parts.¹ Division of people horizontally according to occupation is not peculiar to Tamil Society alone.² Bhaskara Sethupathi's successor Shanmugha Rajeswara Sethupathi actively supported the Justice Party and also promoted the Self-Respect Movement.³ In this paper an attempt is made to trace out the main aspects of the Self-Respect Movement which is also called as first fight against human indignity. This paper deals with the contribution the Self-Respect Movement towards the social changes in society in terms of women welfare. This movement not only attacked the caste system prevailed at that time but also advocated for gender equality.

The Tamil Country, in the Seventeenth and subsequent centuries, consisted of many vertical and horizontal groups (endogamous and exogamous) due to various factors, regional, religious and racial.⁴ A society, in which everything was controlled by religion, never provided a congenial atmosphere suitable for innovation and change. On the other hand, when the relationship between men and God becomes purely personal and where religion is not all-pervasive, the society would be more congenial to innovation to change.⁵ According to the Census of 1911, a Naicker village was inhabited solely by one caste except for the Paracheri and few families of the artisan classes which were necessary for every village. One note-worthy thing was the absence of a single Brahmin family there. The Naickers had a priestly class among themselves and so did not need of the services of the Brahmins for their religious functions.⁶ The caste was the basis of Tamil society. To maintain the caste system, intact, birth was made the basis of it.⁷ The Kallars, the Maravars, and the Akamudayars were local people largely confined to Tirunelveli, Madurai, and Ramanathapuram Districts. They were amalgamated into a single caste on account of their traditional propensities and similarity of occupations.⁸ While the Justice party was serving some of its major objectives, E.V. Ramaswami Naicker who was an enthusiastic Congress worker in the early twenties of the Twentieth Century, broke away from the Congress complaining that the Congress had become a Brahmin dominated organization. He accused Gandhi for supporting *Varnashrama* principles and even chided his fellow non-Brahmins in Tamil Nadu for supporting a Congress Party dominated by the North. Thus he introduced a new dimension to the Brahmin-non-Brahmin situation. The Brahmin, Sanskrit, *Manudharma*, etc. had been already put into one basket and thrown overboard. Now a few more were to follow. Hindi which was a late medieval version of certain Prakrit of the genetically modified and it was written in the Devanagiri script which was anathema to them. E.V. Ramaswami himself fought with the Government of Madras on several occasions on the Hindi issue. He upheld the cause of the non-Brahmins and was deadly against Brahminism and turned atheist. He started the Dravidar Kazhagam which had a thin political layer over a fairly plain social programme of seeking self-respect for the non-Brahmins.⁹ With the fall of Justice Party, once again the supremacy of the Brahmins flourished. Just to protect the Tamil people and Tamil language, E.V. Ramasamy started a movement by which the supremacy of the Brahmins must be subdued and awakening must be created among the illiterate Dravidians who lived in the home land like slaves. Their awakening was expected by the way of self-respect and socio-religious change.

SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

Dissatisfied with the Congress leaders, E.V.R. left the Congress party. As E.V.R. was a selfless leader, he gained much popularity among the people. The leaders of the Justice Party invited him to join in their party. Being a sincere patriot, E.V.R. expected Congress party that it would promote the interests of the non-Brahmin and downtrodden people by giving communal representation. Acting quite contrary to his expectations, the Congress was on the control of the influential Brahmins who neglected the social welfare of the common people. Hence E.V.R. started a new organisation 1925, known as 'Self Respect League' which in due course emerged as a movement aiming at the upliftment of the common people. Self-Respect Movement was also a liberation movement. The utmost main aim of this movement was to cultivate self-reliance and rational thinking among the common people. To achieve this goal among the Tamils, this movement patronised Tamil renaissance in opposition to Brahmins' patronage to Sanskrit. E.V.R. expected socio-political awareness among the downtrodden people through this movement as it had attracted the common people very much. It spread slowly and steadily throughout Tamil land within a short period.

Doctrines of Self Respect Movement

The doctrines of this movement found expression in the speeches of E.V.R. between 1926 and 1973. This movement insisted self-respect, opposed the supremacy of Brahmins and instigated people against the domination of the Brahmins. The Self-Respect Movement of E.V.R. based on same aims and principles was registered legally in 1925.¹⁰ The principal aim of this movement was to create awakening among the illiterate people who were under the clutches of high castes. This movement was very

particular about bringing self-respect through self-thinking and relief from slavery in the life of people. It strongly opposed the unwanted traditional ceremonies and superstitious practices which were patronised by the orthodox Hindus. This movement also wanted to change the present social system which was a defective. Hence, it persisted in the demand for the equal rights to men and women, and rich and poor. Equal right to women was its aim and by doing so it aspired to remove the low status accorded to the women in male dominated society. The movement wanted to bring change in the marriage system and severely criticised and opposed child marriage. Moreover, it encouraged love marriage; inter caste marriage and re-marriage of widows. This movement also demanded the government to register these marriages in the registrar's office under the civil law. Aiming at promoting the welfare of the people, this movement appealed the government and wealthy people to establish and maintain rehabilitation centres for the orphans and widows and enhance the number of educational institutions.¹¹

Tamil Notions of Equivalence and the Antecedents of the Self Respect Movement

Tamil egalitarian ideas were partly rediscovered in Nineteenth-Century by Christian missionaries. Missionaries used the texts as a way to claim validity for their message in indigenous terms. They also aided the spread these ideas by focusing the attention of educated and uneducated Tamils on this particular selection of Tamil texts, as well as the anti-Brahmin or egalitarian ideas which they contained. When the Self Respect Movement developed in the late 1920s, it reflected many Christian missionary initiatives, and the aspects of movement stood for united both the revivalist and nativism aspects. One of the goals of the Self Respect Movement was that the nativists should get rid of foreign Brahmins. The other goal was to restore Tamil society to a presumed pristine state of true equality. Dominant leader E.V. R. used his Tamil weekly '*Kudi Arasu*' to arouse directly popular support for the movement. In the late 1920s, the Self Respect journals began to publicize the ideas. In 1920s, the *Kudi Arasu* Press, owned by E.V. R., published a collection of songs from Ramalingaswami's *Tiruvarutpa*, edited by a biographer of E.V.R. named Sami Chidambaranar. Ramalingaswami's hostility to the British administration made his message particularly meaningful to those, such as self-Respecters, who sought to bring about a rebirth in society. It was able to silence much hostility to Self Respect ideas in the early 1930s in a meeting at Sivagangai, Ramnad District, by quoting Ramalingaswami that "all are one community".¹²

The Development of the Self Respect Movement in Ramnad:

In its early days, the Self Respect Movement was largely the work of one man, E.V. R. Between 1925 and 1929, E.V.R. organized more gatherings or meetings for the Self Respect Movement and speeches were given in Tamil. Many people from locality participated in the meetings. The main goals of this movement were to eliminate Brahmins from positions of power and to destroy Hinduism and the caste system. E.V.R. encouraged the growth of newspapers supporting the Self Respect Movement as a way to widen his influence in Karaikudi, Ramnad District which was the Centre of three reformist journals in 1930. The following were the reformist journals between 1929-1931: the *Sandamarudam* weekly, the *Kumaran* weekly and the *Ooliyan* weekly. The popular and monetary support for E.V.R.'s objectives was such as to generate many newspapers.¹³

Self Respect Movement and Social Mobility in Ramnad

However, E.V.R. needed assistance from the rich to attain his goals. He continued his search for local wealth and individuals who would articulate the ideas of self-respect. In 1930 and 1931 he was partly successful in the Ramnad District. Though the atheistic pronouncements of the self-respect conferences and literature of E.V.R. lost support among the people, he still retained much sympathy among the Nadars of Ramnad. The Self Respect Movement offered Nadars of Ramnad a chance for recognition and assistance from the ministerial machine. In the early 1930s the Self Respect Movement was also used by a few important Agamudaiyars, an important peasant community centered in Ramnad District to exert pressure for the modification of what they considered degrading temple practices. For

instance, S.Ramachandran, an Agamudaiyar Vakil (lawyer) from Sivagangai and formerly chairman of the Sivagangai Taluk Board participated in both Self Respect and Agamudaiyar caste activities. R. Krisnammal, the wife of S.Ramachandran also participated in Self Respect work and in 1932 she became a member of the Sivagangai Taluk Board.¹⁴ Likewise, certain members of the Nattukottai Chetty merchant community from Ramnad District also participated in the Self-Respect Movement. Perhaps the most important was S. Murugappah Chetty, from Devakottai in Ramnad District, with a long history of social reform activity behind them, participated in the Self Respect Movement.

Revitalizing Tamil Society and Women's Welfare:

The women were not treated equally with men. The legal and social equality between the sexes were rare. Likewise, the duties of a woman in the society were different from those of a man. Probably, women spent their times in the houses as housewives. They possessed certain natural feminine qualities such as *nanam*, *madam*, *achcham* and *payirppu*. The social history of India has recorded many social movements for the awakening and emancipation of women. Till the beginning of the Nineteenth Century women were subjected to various hardships based on traditional practices, customs, and superstitions. They laboured under many social disabilities like polygamy, child marriage, enforced widowhood, *sati* (burning of widows), etc. Besides, nurturing anti-caste ideology, the Self- Respect Movement had cherished feminist values in its ambit.. It insisted the women should be given physical, sexual and reproductive freedom in the society. E.V.R.'s model focused on enabling the woman to gain access to contraception as well as permanent birth control. When there was an extensive national opinion on anti-conception medication, E.V. R. Strongly advocated birth control to protect women from their physical weakness and reduce the increasing population. The feminist ideology of the movement propelled women to have an equal right to choose partners, to divorce, and the choice to remarry. The Self-Respect Movement wanted to bring a radical transformation in heterosexual relationships by abolishing gender hierarchy and gender roles. It emphasized the importance of sharing domestic work and child-rearing activities among men and women. One of the primary aims of the movement was to eradicate the devadasi system which was prevalent in the eastern and southern parts of the Tamil Country.

In this devadasi system, a woman between the ages of 7-36 was to dedicate their lives to the temple deity where they performed various arts. In the beginning, the devadasis were in respectable position in the society. During the colonial era, the devadasis were not patronised and they were pushed to involve in the profession of prostitution and they were connected the priests and wealthy patrons and bore many children to them illegally. Moreover, the devadasi system isolated these women from society. Hence the movement promoting the interest of all the women actively engaged in protests to abolish the devadasi system and in this bid, it welcomed the initiatives of S.Muthulakshmi Reddy. The basic motto of the Self-Respect Movement was to bring social changes in society. It took the interests of all the lives from all the strata of the society. It severely attacked the prevalence of the caste system prevalent and gender discrimination. The Self Respect Movement not only took up women's issues as one of its central concerns, but also provided great impetus for women to participate in all its forums and activities.¹⁵ Women activists of the Self Respect Movement articulated themselves on women's issues and their participation in general conferences was also substantial. Women were not ghettoised within the Movement. Frequently, they were assigned the honourable task of delivering the welcome addresses in the self-respect and the general conferences. To cite a few instances, in 1931 Indrani Balasubramaniam inaugurated the Third Self Respect Conference at Virudunagar¹⁶, in 1932, T.S. Kunchitham inaugurated the Thanjavur District Self Respect Conference¹⁷, in 1933, Neelavathi inaugurated the Ramanathapuram District Third Self Respect Youth Conference,¹⁸ in 1934 R. Annapurani inaugurated the Tiruchengodu Taluk Adi-Dravida Conference, in 1937, Meenambal Sivaraj presided over the Tirunelveli District Third Adi-Dravida Conference,¹⁹ in 1938, the Madurai Self Respect Conference was inaugurated by Rajammal,²⁰ and in 1944, Kanagammaiyar Ramasamy inaugurated the Madras Fifth Self Respect Conference.²¹ In the course of the inaugural addresses, these women speakers discussed various aspects of the women's question.

To conclude, the history of communal strife in Tamil Nadu is *sui generis* and is intertwined with its politics. Tamil Nadu played a pivotal role in the Indian Nationalist Movement. Ramanathapuram District stood in the forefront and occupied an important place in the Nationalist Movement. Many freedom fighters and National leaders originated from this district. Many leaders and freedom fighters have sacrificed their lives for our freedom. Some of the heroes were the Marudu Brothers, Srinivasa Iyengar and Muthuramalinga Thever, and others who sacrificed their lives for the cause of the freedom of India. The Self-Respect Movement was also considered as one of the freedom movements, because, it gave a way to fight against the indignity of the humans. The dignity of the humans was misused and caste system was taking the upper hand. It was after the Self-Respect Movement a new life emerged amidst the people who were submerged in the name of caste and religion. The main aspect to think is that it had created a great impact on the growth of women. It changed the entire view about the role of women and their significance in the families. Indeed, the Self-Respect Movement had achieved double dignity with one movement.

END NOTES

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18. T.S. Kunchitham , who was educated upto B.A and L.T, was a schoolteacher. She married the Self Respect Movement activist Gurusamy. In her long association with the Movement she presided over the Madurai Ramanathapuram Youth Conference in 1930; inaugurated Ramanathapuram District Third Self Respect Conference in 1934; presided over the Virudunagar Women's Association meeting in 1936; and inaugurated the Kumbakonam Isai Vellalar Sangam's Sixth Annual Meeting in 1944.
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