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## CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME OF CONGRESS AND GANDHI : ROLE OF E.V. RAMASAMI IN TAMIL NADU

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### ABSTRACT:

In the early part of his public life, E .V. Ramasami (E.V.R.) adopted the goals of Congress as his goals. He made full use of his formative period to build his image in Congress and became a leading exponent of Gandhi's Constructive Programme of spreading khadi and temperance in Tamil Nadu. In that period he devoted his life completely to the temperance campaign, the spread of the khadi and the removal of untouchability. He gave public speeches in colloquial Tamil and managed to awaken the conscience of ignorant people. He was well supported by Rajaji, Gandhi's



lieutenant. Rajaji's personal relation and influence among non-Brahmin elites and his leadership in the Non-Cooperation Movement in Tamil Nadu helped E.V.R. to rise in the hierarchical set up of Congress in a speedy way in Tamil Nadu. In 1920, by dint of his ability, E.V.R. assumed the Presidentship of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. Realizing his sincerity and his extraordinary work in spreading the ideals of Congress, T.V. Kalyanasundaranar, a prominent Congress leader, amazed and highly praised E.V.R. As a selfless social activist and tireless fighter for socio-economic changes among the bottomline people. His valuable services were well utilized by the Congress in Tamil Nadu.

**KEY WORDS:** *E.V.Ramasami, Khadi, Prohibition, Erode, Tamil Nadu, Congress, Gandhi, Rajaji.*

### INTRODUCTION

E.V. Ramasami Naicker (1879-1973), known as 'Periyar' ( Meaning : Great Man) the title was bestowed upon him by the women of Madras in a women's conference for his dedicated service to the society. Indeed, his ideology was explicitly and forcefully secular, rationalist, anti-religion and anti-caste tendency. <sup>1</sup> During his life period, E.V.R was a tireless crusader for the social order and activist against the economic disorder.<sup>1</sup> Rajaji wanted to strengthen the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and expressed his interest in attracting E.V.R. to Congress. E.V.R. gained a lot of influence and popularity in those days. Furthermore, Rajaji thought that E.V.R.'s entry into the Congress would also draw the support of the other prominent non-Brahmin leaders. Therefore, Rajaji and P. Varadarajulu Naidu turned to E.V.R. and urged him to join Congress not only to achieve political liberation of the country, but also to fight against the social disorder prevalent in society. Eventually, following Rajaji's advice, E.V.R. joined Congress in late 1919.<sup>2</sup>

E.V.R. was drawn to Congress by Rajaji's words that social reform was imperative and could only be achieved through Gandhi and Congress.<sup>3</sup> E.V.R. participated in Congress activities in the hope that social reform and national liberation would be successful at the same time. <sup>4</sup> Liberation of the motherland , restructuring society, eradication of untouchability, implementation of prohibition and spreading the khadi were the Congress's main ideals which were agreed E.V.R.<sup>5</sup>

At a Calcutta special session of Congress, Gandhi's plan of non-cooperation against British Government was agreed in September 1920. After a long discussion, in the ordinary session of the Congress which was held under the presidentship of C. Vijayaragavachariar in Nagpur in December 1920, the plan was accepted with popular support. The plan consisted of constructive and positive programme. The constructive programme that attracted the E.V.R. included the promotion of Swadeshi, particularly the revival of hand spinning and weaving, the promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity, and the ban on the use of liquor.<sup>6</sup> Sincerely and tirelessly, E.V.R. worked to spread the ideals of Congress. Gandhi's plan of non-cooperation also attracted him greatly and he actively participated in it.

In response to Gandhi's call to boycott government offices and courts of law during the Non-Cooperation Movement started in 1920, E.V.R. decided to destroy promissory notes and bonds and mortgage documents which could bring his family a huge sum of fifty thousand rupees.<sup>7</sup>

### PROHIBITION CAMPAIGN

Liquor consumption was in vogue for a long time in India and the revenue from the sale of liquor was high throughout the country during colonial rule. Since it affected the health, morals and economics of ordinary people, the Congress decided to fight this evil in society. The temperance campaign was vigorously organized to highlight the evils of drinking, and picketing liquor shops was made as part of the constructive programme of Congress. The campaign was in full swing in the entire country.<sup>8</sup>

When Gandhi visited Tamil Nadu, he stayed at the home of E.V.R. on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1921. Three days earlier , Gandhi adopted a loincloth at Madurai. He worked for the growth of the khadi industry, the eradication of untouchability and the implementation of the prohibition as part of the constructive programme of Gandhi and the Congress in Tamil Nadu.<sup>9</sup>

In the rural area of Coimbatore, the dominant members of Gounders, aided by members of the urban Congress, led an anti-liquor agitation. V.C Vellingiri Gounder, a founder leader of the Gounder Caste Association along with N.C. Ramaswami Iyengar and E.V.R. organised volunteer groups for picketing liquor shops and prevented the annual auction through which shops were leased.<sup>10</sup>

E.V.R. organized one of the most impressive temperance campaigns in the Madras Province in 1921.<sup>11</sup> In November 1921, he launched a successful temperance campaign at Erode. It was praised by none other than a great person like Gandhi. According to Gandhi, only Erode acted bravely in matters of temperance. Hence , Ramaswami Naicker was sentenced with a month's prison life.<sup>12</sup> For their anti-government activities around one hundred people were arrested and put in prison for a brief period under the Indian Penal Code section of 188 at Erode.<sup>13</sup> For E.V.R., this was the first time of imprisonment. <sup>14</sup> Following E.V.R.'s path, his wife Nagammai and his sister Kannammal had actively participated in the temperance campaign and were sentenced to prison terms.<sup>15</sup>

When on his release from prison, he resumed picketing, the Delhi administration sent C.Sankaran Nair to Gandhi to request him to stop the picketing of toddy shops, Nair referred to the tense situation at Erode, to which Gandhi replied that the stopping of the Picketing was on the hands of the two European ladies , Nagammai and Kannammal. It was no longer on his hands.<sup>16</sup>

There was an overwhelming response to the campaign.<sup>17</sup> The authorities found it impossible to prevent the rioting of the agitators. Anticipating a serious situation, it decided to revoke the prohibition order issued under Article 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this lifting of the ban was carried out only at Erode.<sup>19</sup>

## KHADI CAMPAIGN

Gandhi advocated the use of khadi (hand-woven) fabrics for creating a sense of patriotism among Indians. Undoubtedly, spinning and weaving were originally intended as a means of economic improvement of the poorest sections of society. It had acquired political and ethical importance.<sup>20</sup>

E.V.R. gave up his expensive clothes and started wearing khadi clothes. He paid attention to wearing a rough khadi.<sup>21</sup> Thiru.Vi. Kalyanasundaranar's observation that E.V.R. discarded symbols of wealth such as expensive clothes, gay life, etc., for the good of the nation and wore simple clothes like a poor man.<sup>22</sup> E.V.R. compelled his wife Nagammai and all family members wear khadi clothes. He did not even forgive his old mother.<sup>23</sup> E.V.R. realized that wearing khadi could give a boost to the country's artisanal industries and barely worked against British economic interests by boycotting their fabrics.<sup>24</sup>

To spread the khadi, E V.R. continuously toured many parts of Tamil Nadu. He visited with a chakra. He took the khadi fabrics with him and sold them.<sup>25</sup> Selling clothes for a rich man as a street vendor was really good social service.<sup>26</sup>

For spreading khadi successfully E.V.R played a remarkable role in Tamil Nadu.<sup>27</sup> With an impressive way, E.V.R had spoken about khadi with examples, native spirit and statistical data.<sup>28</sup> By illustrating the low price of raw cotton with that of the high price of the finished product, E.V.R. underscored the excessive exploitation of the British. His clarion appeal for the use of khadi appealed the people a lot and they responded really.<sup>29</sup>

In the Coimbatore District, both at Erode and Tiruppur, the handloom industry was thriving and khadi also played a leading role, becoming a hub for handmade and khadi yarns.<sup>30</sup> For this achievement, the priceless services of E.V.R was mainly responsible.

The All India Spinners Association established its branch in Tamil Nadu, E.V.R. became its President and in that capacity he served till 1926. By his activities, he was able to control the retail prices of khadi and also worked to for the increasing sales of khadi.<sup>31</sup> At Erode, the Khadi Vastiralayam of the Tamil Nadu Congress operated under the supervision of E.V.R.<sup>32</sup>

The Non-Cooperation Movement was the first organized national agitation against British imperialism that exploited the wealth and labour of the ignorant Indian masses. As part of the movement, during 1921 and 1922 there were campaigns against the consumption of liquor in many parts of Tamil Nadu. The campaign had received overwhelming support from the people of Tamil Nadu. The temperance campaign was seen as a way to embarrass the British government and a way to improve the condition of economically and socially disadvantaged people who were heavily dependent on liquor. E.V.R. was the main temperance agitator in Tamil Nadu. He along with the group of congressmen, in addition to giving speeches on various platforms, had actively staked out toddy and arrack shops peacefully at Erode. As a reward for his activities, E.V.R. served a severe prison sentence, and women in his family also participated in the agitation campaign. In the Khadar Movement as an anti-British Congress programme, E.V.R. was arrested again in early 1924. From his home town, E.V.R. managed the main khadar depot. Thus, in organizing Congress activities, E.V.R. almost spent and devoted his life to participate in and promote the Constructive Programme in Tamil Nadu.

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