



NON-BRAHMIN AWKENING : A CHAPTER ON E.V.R AND CHERANMADEVI GURUKULAM AFFAIR IN TIRUNELVELI

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ABSTRACT:

While in Congress organization, E.V.Ramasami (E.V.R.) Periyar stood for the cause of the non-Brahmins. He waged a crusade against social discrimination and constantly demanded communal representation. By dint of his ability, he was acknowledged one of the important leaders of the Tamil Nadu Congress. From a Congress volunteer, E.V. R. raised his position as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. E.V.R made long tours and his eloquence increased his name and fame. . He was the Secretary of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (T.N.C.C.) and he remarkably worked to improve the membership and image of the Gandhian Movement. As a congress leader, E.V.R was against social disparity and stood for social acceptance of the downtrodden people . In his speeches he almost insisted a casteless society aiming at equal opportunities to all. The Cheranmadevi Gurukulam issue illustrated his fighting spirit against social ill in the Tamil society.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, Rajaji, E.V.Ramasami, V.V.S.Iyer, Varadarajulu Naidu, Cheranmadevi, Gurukulam, Congress, Brahmin, Non-Brahmin, Thiru.Vi.Ka.

INTRODUCTION :

V.V.S. Iyer's popularity as a militant freedom fighter . He was a well known swadeshi nationalist leader also and founded an ashram in December 1922, at Kallidaikurichi in Thirunelveli District, in the name of Bharathwaja Ashram and called it a "Tamil Gurukulam".¹ Later he shifted it to Cheranmadevi, a town in the same district and started a monthly literary journal called *Bala Bharathi*. The institution was started with the object of imparting religious education to youth, inculcating in them the spirit of patriotism and infusing in to them a passion for a social service.² V.V.S Iyer was entrusted with the job of fulfilling the objectives of the Gurukulam. The institution received for its upkeep donations from all communities, private individuals and institutions. V.V.S. Iyer's Co worker, Mahadeva Iyer, raised a donation of Rs.20,000 from Nattukkottai Chettiars of Malaya. The T.N.C.C. on its part had agreed to donate a sum of Rs.10,000 from its "National Educational fund" and paid Rs.5000 as its initial contribution.

In January 1925, complaints were received by the T.N.C.C. authorities that separate dining was enforced for Brahmin and Non Brahmin inmates of the Gurukulam. One of the complaints was made by a student, who was a relative of O.P. Ramaswami Reddy. For a while, E.V.R., was the Secretary of T.N.C.C. and P. Varadarajulu Naidu was the President and both were taken by shock about the Gurukulam affair and appointed a committee to enquire the allegations.

The Committee confirmed the allegations and said that V.V.S. Iyer himself had given permission to two Brahmin boys to eat separately in another place on the request of their parents. This evoked a

stout protest from the Non-Brahmin members of the T.N.C.C. as well as from those who donated liberally.

The Brahmin and Non-Brahmin conflict which had been brewing in the Madras Province exploded into the Congress and various views started flowing. Many Non-Brahmin leaders of the Congress party took strong exception to this incident and wanted V.V.S. Iyer to do away with this practice. The Justices wanted to exploit the chaos situation and they fanned the feelings of the Non-Brahmins. One writer in *Tamil Nadu*, commented that the Gurukulam incident merely proved the opinion existing in some quarters that the Non-Brahmins could not expect any social justice even at the hands of V.V.S. Iyer.³

V. V.S. Iyer issued a statement stating that the two Brahmin boys 'were permitted to eat separately to keep up the assurance given to their parents and thereafter "no student would be given such an exemption." The Congressmen including Brahmin members like S. Srinivasa Iyengar and Rajaji did not support the action of V.V.S. Iyer but were equally of the opinions as not to make a big issue of it.

The T.N.C.C. leaders who were dissatisfied with the reply of V.V.S. Iyer, took up the controversy to Mahatma Gandhi, who was in Madras in 1925. Gandhi heard the views of both the sides and suggested a compromise that "since the parents of two students had been given assurance they be allowed to dine separately, but in future such practices should not be encouraged in the Gurukulam". It seemed a clear endorsement to the statement of V.V.S. Iyer.⁴

E.V.R. and P. Varadarajulu Naidu felt disheartened. E.V. R. was more angry because the balance grant due to the Gurukulam, i.e., Rs.5000/- which he had withheld owing to the controversy, had been obtained by the Gurukulam authorities from K.S. Subramaniam, the Joint Secretary of T.N.C.C. who happened to be a Brahmin, without the knowledge of the Secretary, E.V.R.⁵ Both E.V.R., and Varadarajulu Naidu wrote about this social injustice in their official organs of *Kudi Arasu* and *Tamil Nadu*. Both of them went to the extent of demanding the return of all the donations received by the Gurukulam failing which they would resort to Sathyagraha to recover it.⁶

Varadarajulu Naidu undertook a tour in the first week of April 1925. "The Gurukulam affair has demonstrated that just as it is impossible for us to prevent our being disgraced by the whites till we attain Swaraj, it is impossible to prevent our being disgraced by the Brahmins till unity is attained among the Tamils", was his lament. The Gurukulam should stand for the ideal of Indian nationalism and there should be no distinction between man and man. What Mr. Iyer did in the Gurukulam was not only a breach of conduct but he was attempting to bring up the Non-Brahmin Children in an atmosphere of inferiority.

E. V. R. was also vigorous and demanded that the "Brahmin question", should be settled even while the British supremacy lasted in the country, otherwise they would have to suffer under the tyranny of 'Brahminocracy'.⁷

At the height of this issue, Thiru.Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, a trio along with E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu, but believed to be a more balanced man, appealed to Iyer to change the nature of the Gurukulam, so that it could retain the good will of all the Communities.⁸ V.V.S. Iyer was not disposed to take kindly to the counsel of Thiru. Vi.Ka. but felt that Thiru .Vi.Ka was lending support to a "malicious campaign in Tamil Nadu."

As a direct result of non-Brahmin pressure, V.V.S Iyer resigned as head of the Gurukulam on 21st April 1925,⁹ stating "I see symbolically the Tamil Nation attempting to commit suicide. I have only to acknowledge with grief that the poison of communal hate has entered deep into the heart of an important section of Tamil political society".¹⁰ On 28th April 1925, T.R. Mahadeva Iyer was elected the new "Acharya" of the Gurukulam.

But the controversy was not over. The Non-Brahmin Congress leaders felt that since the T.N.C.C. had given liberal financial help to the Gurukulam, the question of inter-dining could be resolved at the T.N.C.C. annual meeting to be held at Trichy on 29th April 1925. In that meeting, some voiced opposition to this proposal because they held the view that the T.N.C.C. had no jurisdiction over matters concerning a private institution. But Varadarajulu Naidu, not only succeeded in raising the Gurukulam issue at the meeting but also exercised his influence as President of the T.N.C.C. to limit the agenda

specifically to the question of inter-dining. During the course of discussion, it became apparent that there existed three different views stated as below:

- I. The first view by E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu was that in an institution supported by the T.N.C.C., no caste distinctions should be shown and either the institution should change the character or return whatever donation received.
- II. Rajaji and others through opposed to caste discrimination in the Gurukulam, wanted the sensitive problem to be solved without outside intervention.
- III. S. Srinivasa Iyengar and Thiru. Vi. Ka. felt that the Gurukulam receiving support from T.N.C.C. should strictly conform to the views of the organisation.

A resolution was moved stating that "this committee regret having paid a grant of Rs.5,000/-. Natesan Chetti moved an amendment to the above resolution "This committee resolves to recover the grant of Rs.5,000/-". Both the resolution and amendment were rejected.¹¹

Rajaji's resolution suggesting to leave the internal management of the Gurukulam to the people who run it, but inter-dining alone should be insisted was also rejected. Yet another resolution moved by S. Ramanathan insisted that "gradations of merit based on birth should not be observed by any organisation participating in the National movement, and a committee consisting of himself. E.V.R. and V. Theagaraja Chetty of Devakottai be appointed to help the Gurukulam implement this principle."¹² This resolution was passed.

But the Brahmin members moved a censure motion against Varadarajulu Naidu condemning him for endangering national unity, by promoting communal ill feeling in Tamil society. This resolution was rejected but it served to widen the split within the T.N.C.C. Stung by the censure motion, E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu vowed an all out crusade against the Gurukulam for complete victory. It was in this context, Varadarajulu Naidu stated "Gurukulam is going to be the deciding factor in the national life of the Non-Brahmins, they would no longer accept a position of inferiority in the national institutions."¹³

Varadarajulu Naidu uttered veiled threats of a more serious anti-Brahmin agitation if his campaign failed. "If I win, it would be a glory to both Brahmins and Non - Brahmins, but if I fail, the consequences would be disastrous to Brahmins".¹⁴ Those who were opposed to S. Ramanathan's resolution, resigned from the T.N.C.C. and appealed to A.I.C.C. to intervene. But the latter refused to do so, but confirmed the decision of the T.N.C.C.

E.V.R. and Ramanathan visited the Gurukulam and failed to dispense with the caste restrictions. Finally Kavya Ganta Ganapathy Sastri, an enlightened Brahmin from Thiruvannamalai and V.S. Shanmugam Chettiar, a member of the T.N.C.C. negotiated a reconciliation between the Gurukulam and the group of E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu. At this juncture, V.V.S. Iyer met with a fatal accident at the Papanasam Falls¹⁵ on 3rd June 1925. Though E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu sympathised for the untimely death of V.V.S. Iyer, they did not compromise with the Gurukulam issue. They went on fighting their war of social justice against the 'Brahmin Oligarchy'. But Mahadeva Iyer did not yield. Meanwhile difference of opinion surfaced between E.V.R. and the Congress leaders in the Kanchipuram conference. While E.V.R. was busy in dealing with his Brahmin enemies in the T.N.C.C. he went on with the demand for the handing over of the Gurukulam to a committee of the chief donors, because according to him, then only social justice could be discharged properly. The Gurukulam would be safe only in the hands of the donors rather than the Brahmin Acharyas.¹⁶

In August 1927 Ganidhi advised Mahadeva Iyer to "gracefully and instantaneously give up possession of the Gurukulam to a committee consisting of the chief donors" dearly supporting the demand of E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu. The reaction of Mahadeva Iyer was cold and he ignored all the three letters written by Gandhi. Yet, the Gurukulam ceased to exist after August 1927, and nothing was heard about it afterwards.¹⁷

The Gurukulam controversy did not die and it was a turning point in the Periyar's Movement because after the issue E.V.R. demanded a declaration in favour of communal, i.e., caste based and proportionate representation.¹⁸ The Brahmin and Non Brahmin animosity which existed within the society as under current, obviously exploded into a great social injustice. It was one of the main reasons why E.V.R. quit the Congress in 1927. Likewise it was one of the two reasons why Varadarajulu Naidu

choose to leave the Congress in 1929. Gurukulam controversy was just the tip of the iceberg. Gurukulam existed for a short period of five years (1922-27) and after the controversy in 1925, it was closed within two years (1927). It was an example for the Brahmin unity and the Brahmin mannerism of approaching issues and achieving their ends. E.V.R. who was all along a nationalist never supported the gradations by birth in the society. Even as the stalwart of Madras Presidency Association he was accused of acting as the agent of Brahmin elements of the T.N.C.C. by the Justices.

In the Gurukulam also E.V.R. was not advocating Brahmin and Non-Brahmin differences, but insisted the, theory of equality and denouncing the degradation observed by one caste to another. He was very much infuriated to learn that the cook of Gurukulam was also a Brahmin and the quality of food served also differed.¹⁹ He was not prepared to be cowed down or compromise. He was prophetic when he said "Gurukulam is going to be the deciding factor in the National life of the Non-Brahmins, they would no longer accept a position of inferiority in the National institutions." The letter of Gandhi to Mahadeva Iyer to hand over the Gurukulam gracefully to a committee of Chief donors indicated the victory of E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu because Gandhi felt the justification in their claim. At the same time it was a defeat to E.V.R. and other socially conscious Nationalist leaders that the Gurukulam was not handed over but rather closed. The emergence of Non-Brahmin awakening started only after this issue and E.V.R. was the pioneer in raising the issue of social justice. A budding Scholar, I.Udhayasankar, in his historical work, '*Periyar E.V. Ramasamy: Communal Justice and Social Recognition*' (Chennai: 2006) viewed that "E.V.R.'s social revolution within a Congress turned him to initiate social measures in Tamil Nadu.

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