



PERIYAR MOVEMENT, A SOCIAL REFORM.

P. Justin Antony* Dr. K. Suriyan*

*Research Scholar, Center for Study of Social Exclusion & Inclusive Policy (CSSE& IP), Bharathidasan University, Trichy,

**Center for Study of Social Exclusion & Inclusive Policy (CSSE& IP), Bharathidasan University, Trichy.

One of the most significant features of the 20th century is the rise of many movements. These movements have resulted in various issues becoming mainstreamed in society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and the list go on. Yet, none will forget E.V.R. Periyar. Thanthai Periyar or E. V. R. (Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy), was a businessman, politician, Indian independence and social activist, who started the Self-Respect Movement or the Dravidian Movement and proposed the creation of an independent state called Dravidasthan comprising South India.

EVR is also the founder of the socio-cultural organization Dravidar Kazhagam. He wanted thinking people to realize that their society was far from perfect and that it is in urgent need of reform. Periyar wanted the Government, the political parties and social workers to identify the evils in society and boldly adopt measures to remove them.

The enormous privileges given to the Brahmins by the Vedas were sacrosanct as long as they went unchallenged. The challenge rose in Tamil Nadu like a whirl wind, spearheaded by an iconoclast who questioned the Vedas and the gods as well. He took apparently extremist positions on some issues, but the fundamental nature of the social revolution he brought was clear even to its victims. Let us see about the 'living' visionary.

"I have lived in a pursuit of a vision, both personal and social.

Personal: To care for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is gentle; to allow moments of insight to give wisdom at more mundane times.

Social: To see an imagination the society that is to be created, where the individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them. These things I believe, and the world, for all its horrors, has left me unshaken".-Bertrand Russell.

Periyar means a great man. Not only great, different too. He looked beyond his nose. He walked on unusual and unused paths. He thought distinctly and differently. He was a deviant. He was not reflecting public opinion, because he was not a politician dependent upon public support. Rather he aroused the people, built and created public opinion.

Though Periyar had a limited schooling for about five years during his boyhood between six and ten, with the advent of the self-respect movement in 1925, he rose from the dust and reached the heights. Even as early as 1890 its seeds had been sown in the innocent mind of the boyish E.V.R. It was then just an instinct with the boy to question the authority of social custom and practices. He continued questioning the authority, validity and justifiability of the religious rites and rituals, and the ancient scriptures. This was the first stage in the evolution of self-respect philosophy.

To rebel, to question and to deviate were all innocent acts for a 10-year-old boy, but that formed the earliest base for a dynamic philosophy to emerge through a movement in 1925.

The second stage (1898-1904) in the evolution of his philosophy was his personal practice and observance of the principles which were born of his own instinct and innate qualities of inquiring spirit, dynamic action and social deviance. Much against the wishes of his affluent parents, E.V.R. loved and married Nagamma who hailed from a poor family. He broke into her observance of all religious rites and rituals and other practices like fasting and thus polluted their sanctity. He erased from her mind the sanctity attached to 'thaali' which she wore as a sacred symbol of her marriage and chastity. He persuaded her to discontinue her ritualistic visit to temples and even adopted a crude technique in forcing her out of it. He was the first man in Tamil Nadu to attend all conferences with his wife and to take her to all public meetings even. Nagamma ultimately became a much respected public woman as she had participated in a number of public campaigns and even courted arrest for promoting public causes.

In the third stage (1904-1905), at the age of 25, he acted impulsively being provoked by his father, and momentarily decided to forsake the worldly pleasures. He undertook northward pilgrimage up to Banares. He became a Hindu sage, a saintly beggar. He got annoyed at the empty-mindedness of the Hindu sanyasis and corruption of the Brahmin priests and got disgusted at the cheap prostitution of the pilgrims. The holy city of pilgrimage was vulgar, immoral and corrupt. EVR was not impressed by the Brahmin pandits whose muddle-headedness he exposed by his reason and logic. This is the third stage in the evolution of self-respect philosophy.



Removal of Untouchability (1920-1925)

Periyar was probably the only Indian social revolutionary who found the sudras and the untouchables as being the real proletariat. To quote Periyar, “we are all labourers not only due to circumstances, but also due to birth, law, God and its creation. These institutions forced us to remain labourers. So the labourers are Dravidians”.

“These labourers are all sudras and they are all Dravidians. It is by law, shastras and Divine creation these labourers are destined to remain sudras. There is no Brahmin in these categories of labour industrial workers, cart-pullers, sweepers, scavengers, washer men, barbers, pot makers, and the like”.

Periyar argues that a proletarian revolution is possible only after restoring self-respect to the Sudras by abolishing the caste system.

This period is the sensational one which belongs to the fifth stage in the evolution of his thought. The propagation of Khaddar among the masses, campaign for the removal of untouchability, Vaikom Satyagraha (due to this Vaikom Satyagraha he was very affectionately called by the people as “Vaikom Veerar”), Seranmadevi Gurukula struggle, support for the Hindu Religious Endowment Act and fight for communal representation were the leading events connected with E.V.R.’s role as a nationalist. He was disgusted with nationalism as it became a convenient cloak for strengthening Brahminism. The Khaddar Board was dominated by the Brahmins. The Seranmadevi Gurukula was run by the Brahmin nationalists to preserve and practice Varnashrama Dharma. It was a religious dogma, a social practice and a cultural differentiation. “God created the universe; but the Brahmin created God”, are according to scriptures. With such a divine safeguard and religious sanction the Brahmin exploited the masses for centuries.

Critical Analysis of Gandhism (1925 – 1930)

The sixth stage is concerned with E.V.R.’s critical analysis of Gandhism. The Khaddar programme was a social, political and economic measure. It should have gained self-respect for the individual, created self-confidence in him for challenging the British and attaining economic self-sufficiency, but it turned out to be an enterprise for Brahminical opportunism and domination. This frustrating reality forced E.V.R. to lose faith in Gandhism. The self-respect movement born during this period, though carried the Gandhian message with it, gave it up in due course. It gave a new message. “Man is born free; self-respect is his birth right. Self-respect and Varnashrama Dharma cannot go together. Self – respect precedes Swaraj. It is a pre-requisite of Swaraj. Social reform becomes a functional programme for this movement”. This is the new message given by E.V.R. in order to strengthen the thoughts and livelihood of the people.

The self-respecters gave up their caste titles and caste marks. They gave up God, religion, purohit and rites from their family functions. They gave up untouchability and abstained from the practice of temple-going and put an end to any expenditure on the worship of God.

All history attests that man has subjugated women to his will as means of promoting his selfish gratification, to minister his sexual pleasures, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to the ranks she was created to fill. This is a men’s world. Women are outsiders. There is no part of the world exclusively for women. The 21st century has been dawned, but women do not seem to have been emancipated.

Manu, the ancient law giver gave the eternal Dharma Shashtra full of rules of conduct and regulations binding all the varnas but providing safeguards to Brahminical hegemony with privileges and exemptions to Brahmins while warning dire consequences for the Sudras, should they violate the rules and regulations which, condemning them to absolute slavery, deny education and all mundane facilities. Like Sudras, the women too were subjected to all hardships which they should undergo without protest failing which they would be forced to suffer humiliations of the worst type.

In the 5th chapter of Manu’s book, out of 169 slokas, more than 20 of them are related to women, particularly being offensive and demeaning the women folk. Few of them are –

- The woman is a house wife managing the home, but cannot do anything with free will (147).
- Women cannot re-marry (162).
- A 30 year old male can marry 12-year-old girl (94).

E.V.R. focused on women as women, got into the women’s world as its insider and fought for their total emancipation. He realized that the liberation of women could not be achieved through mere upliftment of their education, by broadening their job opportunities and modernizing their living. It is neither the educated women, the working women nor the modernized



women who is a symbol of gender equality and women's rights. The cause of the enslavement of women lies elsewhere, and detecting the cause Periyar worked out a strategy to realize the feminist goal.

The final stage (1935-1973) is a long period, almost 40 years. This period witnessed E.V.R.'s role in his major campaign and fight for recognition of communal representation and for the protection of interests of backward classes and scheduled castes & scheduled tribes, etc.

The self-respect philosophy is rationalist, materialist and atheist on the metaphysical side. Its operational part is social, its single objective being the removal of caste. There is no self contradiction between its metaphysical side and operational part. On the operational part E.V.R.'s stand is social revolution.

Periyar's Philosophy

His Philosophy did not differentiate social and political service. According to him, the first duty of a government is to run the social organization efficiently, and that the philosophy of religion was to organize the social system. Conditions appeared to him such that the government was not for the people, but, in a "topsy-turvey" manner, the people were for the government. He attributed this situation to the state of the social system contrived for the advantage of a small group of people.

Therefore, Periyar was of the view that for the progress of the people in the country, great social changes were necessary and a good government could be formed only after making those changes. He thought that under the existing social system, there was and there could be no means of removing the hardships of the people even to a small extent, regardless of who came to power. In his real life he was a victim of caste discrimination.

Development of the poor

Periyar, like other visionaries, had an eye on the development of the poor. One of the areas of focus was in the upliftment of villages. In a booklet called Village Uplift, Periyar plead for rural reform. It should be stressed in this context that rural India still forms the largest part of the Indian subcontinent in spite of the ongoing process of urbanization. Thus, the distinction between rural and urban has meant an economic and social degradation for the rural inhabitant. Periyar wanted to eradicate the concept of "village" as a discrimination word among places just as the concept outcast among social groups. Periyar advocated for a location where neither the name nor the situation or its conditions imply differences among people.

With the same aim in view, Periyar wanted farm laborers to be called "partakers in agriculture" and be paid 60 percent of the income, while 40 percent would go to the landowner. In his booklet on rural uplift of 1944, Periyar gave an action program for modernizing villages which mentioned: mechanization of agriculture, that is, ploughing, sowing, digging wells, and harvesting by machines; reformulation of agricultural land to facilitate mechanization and separation of land unsuitable for this for growing other crops; marketing of agricultural products, through farmers' cooperative so that the proceeds would go to the agriculturists; combining villages as a small town for provision of a school, hospital, park, cinema, drama, reading room, library, radio station, roads, bus transport, police station, an educated judge, and shops; organizing mobile exhibitions; establishing appeals courts and providing for field camp of officers for redressal of grievances; and establishing small industries.

Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement wanted to reduce Government salaries because they spoiled men's purity. He explained that they want industries producing things necessary for public welfare to be state-owned. Furthermore, cooperative societies should be introduced to remove the brokers and moneylenders that come between farmers and consumers. Farmers must be helped to get rid of their debts. Litigation and conflicts on account of rules should be reduced and death taxes fixed. Periyar also believed that local boards, municipalities, and cooperative managements must be given more power.

In his rural uplift, he puts every stress on education as the sure way to rational thinking and action which would lead to the abolishment of injustices in society, economic as well as social. Periyar came up with a fourteen-point program which were as follows: "the landless agriculturists should be safeguarded from exploitation by landlords and money lenders, where the government should do everything to see that agricultural workers are not deprived of their scroll land holdings for defaulting payment of rent; co-operative societies and banks should be formed to save the farmers from the exorbitant rate of interest collected by pawnbrokers and money lenders; to reduce the number of cases arising out of the dispute of the ownership of land the Government should itself possess all clear land documents; the laws pertaining to agriculture should be so framed that the actual agricultural laborers get reasonable returns for their labor, and to prevent landlords and middle-men from cornering away the bulk of the agricultural products; like railways, post and telegraphs, waterways and electricity which are now under the control of Government, the other public utilities and services should be taken over by the Government;



insurance schemes should be undertaken by the Government itself and to be extended to workers as in the case of other people; legislation should be so framed as to increase the income of public as well as the workers with a view to upgrade their standard of living under income ratio; children should be given facilities for education within the target period; considering the baneful influence of toddy and other kinds of drink, the government should work towards total prohibition before a specified period of time; the evils of untouchability, discrimination based on birth, superstition and blind belief should be done away with; State Government appointments should be apportioned according to the percentage of population of people and political aspirations; land tax should be levied progressively taxing the rich more and leaving the poor from the rigorous clutches of tax; opportunities to get revenue in the case of local bodies and co-operatives should be enlarged and the management should be vested with the Government servants; and the motto of the public administration should aim at efficiency and a good administration with reasonable expenditure.

On the core, it is not simply a movement, but unity of humane movement. “Which doctor asked for high caste blood?” Let us draw inspiration from E.V.R. and fight for human power, respect, and livelihood.”

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