

THE ROLE OF SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT IN THE WAR FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CASTE ANNIHILATION IN INDIA



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Abstract

Discrimination is rooted in the history of many countries of the world, but in India it is quite different, more acute, divinely sanctioned and hence deeply intertwined in the social fabric via the Caste System. Applying Root Cause Analysis, the Social Scientist Periyar advocated Self-Respect in the individual, as an antidote to eradicate this discrimination. Caste tyranny robbed the dignity of the individuals via religious systems, beliefs & practices, and the only way to restore dignity, is by enlightening the spirit of self-respect, which is in turn possible if one turns into a rationalist critically examining the above discriminatory systems. The Dravidian Model aims to remove discrimination at every level and deliver Social Justice at every level. This paper explains the methodology of Periyar and the Dravidian Movement and succinctly summarizes the operational mode of the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in fighting for our rights - education, cultural, scientific temper & development.

Essay:

Social Justice in other countries of the world consists in removing inequality of income and wealth alone and ensuring even distribution of

economic wealth and power. But in India - in my country - it is used in a very different context. In India, it consists in weeding out outmoded social system and freeing people from the tyranny of

caste, loosening of the bonds of custom, tradition and superstition which kept them under subjugation and preparing them to fight for a just social order.

The caste system resulted in gross unjust discrimination and inequality in society. It gave rise to inequality and, awful indignity, leading to economic backwardness and social imbalance. It hampered even growth and progress of the society.

Caste is discrimination by birth; it is fortified by the divine sanction with the support of religion and rituals. The institution of caste is immutable. Let me quote from the Report of the All India Second Backward Classes Commission, popularly known in India as Mandal Commission:

Para 4.4: "The Rig Vedic hymns of 'Purusha Sukta', which contains the earliest reference to Chatur Varna, also states that after the primeval sacrifice, "his mouth became Brahmins, two arms were made into the Rajanya (Kshatriyas), his thighs in Vaishyas; from his two feet the Shudra was born." (Rig Veda 10:90)

It is only in India that this concept got formalized into a cast-iron mould.

Para 4.5: "No social institution containing so large an element of inequality and discrimination towards

majority of the people can survive that long in a complex and subtle scheme of scripture, mythology and ritual, that Brahminism succeeded in investing caste system with a moral authority that has been seldom effectively challenged even by the most ardent social reformers. How religion and mythology were used to weave this magic cobweb of caste!"

The social revolutionary E.V.Ramasamy (1879 - 1973) of South India, popularly known as Thanthai Periyar and Baba Saheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891 - 1956) from North India were doughty warriors who fought valiantly against the cruel caste system tirelessly throughout their life. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy started his mission as a fighter for social justice with the realization that this social injustice was perpetuated by the Varna caste system. Unless and until the caste system is eradicated social justice would not become a reality.

Hence, he started a non-political movement called Self-Respect Movement for the eradication of discrimination. He started to treat this malice from its root, killing the germs from its origin. He waged battles not

on streets, but in the minds of the people aggrieved, offended and often dehumanized. He gave a clarion call to unite them and assert their human rights and dignity.

For thousands and thousands of years, majority of the people - sons and daughters of the socially stigmatized, economically deprived, politically voiceless and culturally opiated were subjugated by the supremacy that has been institutionalized by the upper caste Brahmins.

The annihilation of caste system is not an easy task but warrants an ardent battle that too in the minds of people who have been engulfed by the slavery of their minds. Self-Respect Movement of the South and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Movement in the North; both are two sides of the same coin of the revolt against all sorts of oppression, of course without losing their individuality.

In Tamil Nadu it was Thanthai Periyar who originated the battle with a social perspective and plan of action. It was the battle for social justice when the concept of Social Justice was unknown one hundred years ago in this country. The seed for Social Justice he sowed in this soil has grown well and yielded

its fruits. We want this plant of Social Justice to branch out its growth in other parts of India and the world.

Now the octopus of caste system and its virus germs are entering unabated even in this part of the globe (North America), by monopolizing the education opportunities, grabbed by the privileged at earlier times. This must be prevented. Otherwise, the disease will permeate and claim its toll in other countries too!

Even though humans are born free, everywhere they are in different kind of chains. In the caste system there is no 'humanity' and 'human rights' or sympathy or empathy because it is a dehumanized system which acknowledges only two kinds. One is 'super-human', the other is 'sub-humans'. Even in graveyards and cemeteries this social atrocity and stigma steals their dignity and degrades them.

Unless adventitious aids are given to the under-privileged, it would be impossible to suggest that they have opportunities equal with the more advanced people. This is the reason and justification for the demand of social justice.

The under-privileged citizens of the country should be given a preferential treatment - compensatory justice - in order to give them an equal opportunity with other more advanced sections of the community. There can be equality only among equals, but not among unequals. The demand for Social Justice arises because of the age-old, prevailing social injustice in the ruling caste domination!

Caste tyranny robbed the dignity of the individuals. The only way to restore it, is by enlightening the spirit of self-respect which is possible only by being a rationalist.

Rationalists' approach will always remake human beings as persons without fear. Rationalism and Self-Respect ideology delink humans from the shackles of pessimism, superstitions and apathy. It causes emancipation of humanity. It gives self-confidence and develops in them a scientific approach to solve life's problems. They will not sit in isolation and be passive spectators to the perpetuation of social injustice.

The clarion call of rationalism and self-respect is to stand erect on one's own feet and fight the life's battle with courage and without fear! Rationalism

and self-respect dispel the darkness of ignorance and fear and inculcate a deep sense of optimism towards humanity. It is only Rationalism and Self-Respect that could conquer and control fear and restore freedom of thought and the faculty of creative thinking.

When Thanthai Periyar started his social movement, his simple philosophy was based on 'Everything to Everyone' (அனைவருக்கும் அனைத்தும்); no one should be discriminated against or deprived of anything, all are equal and there is no place for anyone to claim against "All are equal". No one could claim "I am more equal than others".

Social Justice and Self-Respect philosophy assure not only the rights but also dignity without any gender bias. Social Justice should also go together with gender justice. The philosophy of Periyar has been practiced by the political rulers in stages. Public opinion has been mobilized by Periyar Movement to influence the rulers irrespective of their political color.

The Dravidian Model State Tamil Nadu under the able and inspiring dynamic leadership of Chief Minister Hon'ble Muthuvel Karunanidhi Stalin declared September 17, Thanthai

Periyar's birthday, as Social Justice Day. On that day, Social Justice oath is being affirmed by all the personnel including bureaucrats.

Our Methodology:

Caste annihilation is an open revolt by Periyar Movement. It is not a sectarian organization. It is devoid of violence, it appeals to all people through mass public meetings and creates social awareness of the problem, then and there. It influences the political rulers on what is to be done for this missionary task.

The fighting mode of Periyar Movement for the cause of Social Justice and human rights is different from normal methodology. Every initiative and action plan of the movement is focused on attaining human equality and equal opportunities to all, eliminating the element of denigration of any form. It is aimed at dispensation of Social Justice to the deprived and simultaneously fighting for the annihilation of caste system. Some of such struggles and agitations that led to the manifestation for the cause are:

- In the Indian Constitution, the mention of caste endures. There is one Article (provision) that

'untouchability is abolished', which is one form of indignity inflicted on the toiling sections of the society. The other forms also still endure.

- In 1957, Periyar appealed to the rulers to remove the word 'caste' from the Constitution, suggesting the provision for due amendment as 'caste is abolished'. The rulers did not amend. Periyar launched a massive agitation to burn, symbolically, the copies of Constitution pages which had provisions that stick to 'caste'. Nearly 10,000 people participated in the agitation; about 3,000 courted arrest and underwent imprisonment ranging from 3 months to 3 years.
- The struggle still continues in other forms to enlighten the public about the menace of caste system.
- A few years back, the so called 'honor killing' was committed on the couple who wedded inter-caste; one from socially dominant caste and another from a deprived caste. Even many political parties and social organizations were unable to enter the village of crime. The DK very boldly conducted a massive conference on 'Caste Annihilation' inviting the organization leaders

mostly from deprived communities. The DK condemned the crime and stressed that it is actually an 'Arrogant Killing', stigmatized with caste prejudice - and not 'honor killing'.

- In respect of compensatory justice in the form of reservation in education and employment for the historically denied and deprived communities, DK had enabled 3 Constitutional amendments not only to sustain the prevailing dispensation but also to enhance the quantum of compensatory justice. Indian Constitution was amended in 1951, 1994 and 2006. The total reservation of 69 per cent for the deprived is the unique achievement on Social Justice by the initiatives of DK in Tamil Nadu.
- Despite its atheist strategic mode in propaganda for human equality, DK fought for appointment of trained Archakas in temples hailing from all the castes which is being monopolized by Brahmin priests. Due to the continuous struggle, trained Archakas from all castes have been appointed. The atheist

movement, DK fought and achieved the rights of believers. Atheism is the functional mode of DK. But fighting for the cause of believers is human right. That is the unique mode in the methodology of DK.

The cited struggles are only few and illustrative. All these struggles are devoid of violence by mobilizing public opinion through continuous propaganda and focusing the issue to the rulers for its implementation. "If public opinion marches forward, law comes limping behind."

DK always fights for our rights - education, cultural, scientific temper & development. Thousands of youths respected our call and joined our movement. If and when necessary, we launch peaceful public agitations on a mass scale which attracts the government that enacts law. It is a question of human right, and removal of the shameful stigma on the untouchables and other deprived communities.

The war for Social Justice and caste annihilation continues and has to be continued. The inhuman injustice has been infused for many centuries.

The remedy for this malady is also a yearlong process, crossing a few generations. Periyar founded DK to take up the cause continuously generation after generation. Success is definite but it is staggered. The ideological opponents are particular only about their privileges. Achievements could be possible through the enlightenment of the deprived and plunge into action. DK's missionary task is this and it will continue with further acceleration.

Long Live Periyar! Long Live Periyar Ideals!

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References:

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About the Author:

Dr. Veeramani (or Aasiriyar as he is fondly addressed, meaning ‘The

Teacher’) is the President of the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), the Parent Organization of all Social Reformation in Tamil Nadu. Great social & humanist reformers of the century like EVR Periyar & CN Annadurai have adorned this seat at the DK. He is also the Secretary of the Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution (PSRPI) and serves as the Hon. Chancellor of the Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology (PMIST), deemed to be University.

Veeramani is a Social Worker and has pioneered various efforts in the cause of Social Justice, Rationality, Self-Respect, Tamil Language and the Dravidian Movement. He is always active in social campaigns and agitations in support of the socially discriminated people. He is a relentless fighter for social justice, reservations in educational and job opportunities for people belonging to the backward and downtrodden sections of the society, espousing the cause of Women's Rights and Women Empowerment, and democracy in the political sphere.

Dr. Veeramani is a Recipient of the CIDA - Award of Excellence (Canada International Development Agency),

awarded in contribution towards Environmental, Health, Poverty alleviation and Women Empowerment activities in joint collaboration with College of the North Atlantic, Newfoundland, Canada. He is also the first recipient of the Periyar Award for Social Justice from the Government of Tamil Nadu.

Veeramani has widely travelled as a globe trotter delivering lectures on various topics in humanism at many conferences and seminars held in USA, Canada, EU, UK, Russia, Japan, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri

Lanka and other countries. He delivered the G.U. Pope Memorial Lecture at the House of Lords, Westminster Palace, London in Jan 2004 and participated in the International Peace Congress Convention in Copenhagen – Denmark. Dr. Veeramani is an Honorary Associate of the Rationalist International and a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and also the British Humanist Society, England, UK. Periyar International USA has instituted an annual award, named in his honor and its first recipient was the former Prime Minister of India, Mr. VP Singh.