

SELF-RESPECT AND RATIONALISM: ENDURING RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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Abstract:

A layman could think in a curious manner what happened hundred years ago and what would happen after a hundred years. During the span of hundred years anything would increase or decrease or even disappear. Self-respect as an idea would survive till men continued to think rationally. Rooted in rationalism, Self-Respect Movement waged a critique of tradition and provided a space for human treatment which aimed ultimately to give up the practices of inhuman treatment in social, cultural and political spheres. The achievements are the results of the combined efforts of individual, society and polity. They imply both psychological change and legal enactments on the part of the individual and the state respectively. This paper addresses these issues with contemporary relevance.

Keywords : *Rationalism, Self-Respect, Dravidian Ideology, Tradition, Social justice.*

Introduction :

Man needs to associate himself and to be associated with his fellow men. Social and political life for generations witnessed frictions in such kind of relationship. Discrimination became a common mode of exhibiting social inequality in terms of several categories. In India caste remains one such category of discrimination and social inequality since ancient times. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy formulated his idea of

self-respect embedded in rationalism to remove such discrimination. His idea was developed into a movement. It became a political force to bring out social justice in Tamil Nadu. The self-respect movement in its one hundred years of long service has brought out several changes and attained achievements in social and political spheres. The movement still has certain space to achieve both at individual and social levels. The contemporary relevance of the movement would explain the space.

Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement: A Retrospective

Periyar EVR spent almost seven years with the Congress from 1919 to 1925. In fact, he was attracted to the Congress and Gandhi when Rajaji came close to him. At the same time, he began to express the need for representation for the non-Brahmins. Periyar supported Gandhi's agitations to free India from the British. His involvement in the Congress activities made him the elected Secretary of the Coimbatore Congress Conference in 1914.[1] Subsequently he joined the Madras Presidency Association, an associate body of the Congress Party which was in favour of communal representation.[2]

Periyar made some arrangements before leaving Congress officially. It was mainly due to the conflict with the Brahmin elites in the Congress. Though the non-Brahmin or Dravidian outfits were in vogue since the late nineteenth century and the Justice Party tried to articulate the non-Brahmins interests, Periyar was able to appear as prominent leader to attack the Brahmanism. His idea of self-respect includes a broader rationalistic perspective with a solid scheme for Dravidian advancement. He launched the Self-Respect Movement in December 1925. It was an anti-Congress, anti-Brahmin, but pro-Dravidian and dynamic social movement based on scientific humanism,

secularism, rationalism and atheism. Its main objective was to establish a casteless and classless society. Its policy was to oppose the domination of high castes; its social policy to eradicate casteism and its economic policy was to establish Samadharma.[3] In order to spread its ideas, he started a Tamil weekly called Kudi Arasu which created an awakening among the people. Later, Periyar participated in the Satyagraha at Suchindrum near Nagercoil in 1926 to allow the low caste Hindus to walk in the streets and roads around the temple.[4] The Suchindrum Satyagraha suddenly came to an end with the formation of new roads for other castes. Next year, he convened the First Non-Brahmin Conference in Madurai to oppose Brahmin suzerainty vehemently.

Periyar continued to form several Self-Respect Leagues all over Tamil Nadu, to spread the principles of Self-Respect Movement. In 1927, he became the editor of the Tamil daily Dravidian published by the Justice Party. In the same year, he removed his caste title Naicker from his name.[5] He did it to reveal his opposition to casteism. Meanwhile, he also had the chance to meet Gandhi in Bangalore and discuss Hinduism with him. At that time, Gandhiji stood for Varnashrama, nationalism and swaraj while, Periyar stood for the demolition of these. As a rationalist, Periyar advocated Self-Respect Marriage which was revolutionary in

nature. He suggested that it must be conducted without the assistance of any priest of religion.[6] To spread the principles of Self-Respect Movement, he started an English rationalist weekly called Revolt which began publication on 7 November 1928. Wishing to convey his vision to the common man, he convened the First Self-Respect Conference at Chengalpattu in February 1929.[7] His speeches and resolutions in this conference reflect different facets of his Self-Respect Movement. Subsequently, the second and third Self-Respect Conferences were convened at Erode and Virudhunagar in 1930 and 1931 respectively to propagate his ideas of rationalism and revolution.[8] In the first Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalpattu in 1929, a Resolution was passed to guarantee social equality and freedom from economic exploitation to all castes and creeds. The leaders of the Justice Party participated actively in it. The Conference heralded the formal inauguration of the Self-Respect Movement, though EVR began immediately after he left the Congress in 1925. Meetings were held all over Tamil Nadu. Meetings highlighted his rationalism and exposing the domination of Brahmin and the perpetuation of social evils.

For a long time, it seemed that the newspapers were produced mainly for men and ignored women. But Kudi Arasu paid much attention to the

women's needs. The editor encouraged women journalists like Neelavathi and Ramamirthammal, by publishing their articles. Since 1930, Kudi Arasu published many articles on communism and socialism. On the economic front, the articles aimed at the cancellation of all national and private debts and sought nationalization of all properties. It wanted to improve the conditions of the workers and peasants of the land by securing for them seven hours' labour and increased wages. He set the primary aims of the movement to dislodge the Brahmins from positions of power and destroying the caste system. It worked for unity among people, irrespective of caste and creed. It aimed to establish a casteless society.[9]

In 1931, EVR visited Russia and attended the May Day Celebration of 1932, and he was introduced as the leader of atheistic thought from India. For sometimes, apart from rationalism and anti-Brahmanism, he began to pronounce socialism and feminism in his speeches and writings. Singaravelu, a socialist leader, came close to EVR at that time. Singaravelu gave the opening address in the conference of Self-Respecters, in Madras, in December 1931. He informed the Self-Respecters that only a Socialist Society can be free from caste discrimination, religious distinctions and economic disparities. Further, Singaravelu wrote a series of articles in Kudi Arasu on socialism,

science and on moral beliefs. A new programme was drawn up and placed before the meeting of the Self-Respect workers, in Erode, in December 1932. It suggested the foundation of a political party of Self Respecters called Self-Respect Socialist Party of South India. [10] Self-Respect Movement conducted atheistic and rationalistic propaganda and opposed the pervasive influence of irrationalism and exploitation by one community over the others. It became very active in its propaganda against god, religion and superstitious beliefs.

It was during the second quarter of the Twentieth Century that the compulsory introduction of Hindi, in selected schools, triggered the Anti-Hindi Agitation. EVR and his men were arrested and imprisoned. While EVR was in Bellary Jail for his participation in the Anti-Hindi Agitation the Tamil Women's Conference was held at Wall Tax Theatre in Chennai on 13 and 14 November 1938 under the leadership of Neelambigai Ammaiyar. In this Conference, the title Periyar was conferred on EVR in absentia for his invaluable service to promote the welfare of women and their rights.[11]

Women issue is another important feature in his thought. EVR spread the ideology of emancipation of women and worked for their empowerment and their rights. It was imperative for ushering in an egalitarian society and for the liberation of the nation. The Movement believed that free, liberal, rational and

scientific education alone would break the patriarchal bondage from which the women suffered. He created an awakening in the Tamil society for equal educational and employment opportunities for women and worked for the equality of women with men. He vehemently criticized the practice of Devadasi system. The dedication of young women, as devadasis to Hindu temples, degenerated into prostitution inside and outside the precincts of the temples. As they were misused by the priests, he demanded its abolition. He condemned the barbarous practice of child marriage and advocated widow remarriage. According to him, the practice of child marriage arranged at the girls' tender age led to early widowhood. The child became a widow before it understood the meaning of 'widow' and demanded widow remarriage. He also stressed the need for property rights for women on par with men. Marriages should be treated as contracts which could be broken by mutual consent. To prevent the spread of Aryan culture, he organized Self-Respect marriages without thali, the sacred knot around the girl's neck. Brahmin priests were never allowed to conduct these marriages, which were freed from religious rituals. The Self-Respect Movement strongly advocated divorce, women remarriage, abortion and equal rights for women. The Self Respect marriage included inter-caste marriage, widow remarriage

and marriage by consent. Thousands of Self-Respect Marriages were conducted which ushered in a new era of women liberation.

Periyar says, "In a highly civilized state there can be no room for laziness. If there are some lazy people, they cannot impair the efficiency of the State. Those who do not labour shall not eat, will be the rule of the future... What is deemed to be mean, and dirty work nowadays will cease to carry such a notion in the future. Scavenging, Sweeping, dishwashing, etc., will all be the job of the machine... In as much as there will be dignity of labour what is now considered low and dirty will rank high in the future and there will be competition for such unique work in the name of social service and public esteem." [12]

His interest in politics per se was secondary. His main concern was social reform. Politics is the game of those who, among other things, aspire for power, Periyar was against fighting elections and capturing power. He insisted a feeling of self-respect and brotherhood in the society. He believed that the feeling of self-respect would create awareness about the existing discrimination based on birth thereby the people would raise high. This would make the caste disappear in the long run. He said that freedom and self-respect are closely related. He said, "Those who are for freedom today are neglecting the self-respect and

human dignity of man. This is nothing but absurd. Without self-respect there will be no good of freedom." [13] He further added, "It is the self-respect ideal that commands feelings of freedom. The freedom of self-respect prevails strikingly. But the freedom of real lovers will not be clear even to himself. Even if he understands, it may be only in the case of particular thing." [14]

Conclusion

The need for and importance of the concept of self-respect propagated by Periyar during his lifetimes is still relevant today. Though several rational and reformative ideas of Periyar have been put into practice both at the levels of individual and the state, there is still enough scope to bring out certain changes. It is up to the individual and society to bring out such changes despite the government promulgated laws. For instance, the growing attachments to superstition and caste identity remain strong. Thus, the relevance of the self-respect movement would continue in future as well.

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Dr. R. Saravanan is an Assistant Professor of History at Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Madras and multiple postgraduate degrees in Education, Management, and Journalism. A prolific scholar, he has authored 9 books and over 100 research articles. To date, he has guided one Ph.D., 14 M.Phil., and 25 M.A. students. Beyond academics, he is an award-winning NSS Programme Officer, recognized by the Government of Tamil Nadu for his distinguished service in social leadership.

