
Ever Vibrant Revolutionary (EVR) Periyar and Ever Remembered Revolutionary Bhagat Singh

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Abstract

Historical events reveal how Periyar EVR viewed the ideals of Bhagat Singh and his supreme sacrifice during the Indian freedom struggle. Periyar had taken a strong stand that unless the Varnashrama Caste System is abolished, there will be no equality in the society. Economic growth and development will not reach all sections of the people in a discriminatory society. Bhagat Singh too, took the same stand during the freedom struggle.



Through his untiring work in the short span of his life, Bhagat Singh upheld rationalism and socialism. In a way, he was a great rationalist and a radical humanist. Bhagat Singh & Periyar carried their convictions until their last breath. This essay discusses their shared ideologies and convictions and talks about their guiding principles for an equitable social and economic order.



Introduction: The Path of Periyar

Born on 17.9.1879 and died on 24.12.1973, Periyar E.V.R. lived 94 years and 97 days with his base in Tamil Nadu. He travelled 13,12,000 km throughout the length and breadth

of Tamil Nadu without even bothering about proper transport facilities. By spending 8600 days of his life, he had attended 10,700 meetings and spoke for 21,400 hours. Suppose his entire speeches are broadcasted, the tape would continuously run for 2 years, 5 months and 11 days. He had published

71 books in addition to 114 pamphlets. He was the only revolutionary in the entire Indian sub-continent who had challenged the accepted, conventional and customary beliefs which were deeply entrenched in the Indian society.

When he died in 1973, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi condoled his death by stating that “One of the few social reformers in India who had fought against the accepted beliefs of the society.” Madam Gandhi fully realized how it was difficult to change the minds of the people and make them to accept modern values by keeping away ritualism and religious fundamentalism. It was still more difficult to challenge the fantasies of ritualism of a wider divergence.

Suppose a single founder propagates a system of faith, it is very easy to give counter arguments and challenge it. But, the Hindu system of scriptures is multifold that interpret social and religious ideals according to personal convenience of the writers. From the beginning, these scripts and scriptures had insisted a hierarchical social system based on class and caste - the Varnashrama Dharma, which is cruelly inhuman and abundantly unjust in its form, substance and practice. This Varnashrama Dharma has not changed its exploitative content, colour and character even today.

Therefore, from Marx to Mark Twain, many had wondered about

the Indian society and its innumerable beliefs. Marx penned an article on the British Rule in India in the New York Daily Tribune, June 25, 1853. He had rightly recognized the divergent beliefs and views in Hindustan. “Yet, in a social point of view, Hindustan is not the Italy, and of Ireland, of a world of East. And, this strange combination of Italy and of Ireland, of a world of voluptuousness and of a world of woes, is anticipated in the ancient traditions of the religion of Hindustan. That religion is at once a religion of sensualist exuberance, and a religion of self-torturing asceticism; a religion of the Lingam and of the Juggernaut; the religion of the Monk, and of the Bayadere.”

Marx wrote on July 22, 1853, in the same daily that “Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Moguls had successfully overrun India, soon became Hindu-ized.” The accurate depiction of events by Marx has been continuing even today. In the southern part of Tamil Nadu, many minority communities still believe in astrology, palmistry, and numerology and take decisions according to the timings of the brahminical calendar. While initiating marriage alliances within this minority religious communities, the caste, being the dominant Hindu institution, becomes the deciding factor.

Having realized fully, the trick and conspiracy of the Hindu Sanatanic people and the extent of damage that they have caused to wisdom and knowledge for over centuries, Periyar resolved

to challenge them without accepting power, position and honour during his long journey of the social reform movement. His illuminating declaration reveals his will and commitment and his humility and equanimity as follows:

“I, E. V. Ramasamy commit myself only to the service of converting the Dravidians on par with other communities of the world and abreast them with knowledge and self-respect.

I do not know, whether I am qualified or not, to do such services; since nobody came forward to do so, I made myself committed to rendering service for this cause. Since, I have no other ambition except this and I devise plans and ideology based on rationalism, I think I am qualified to do this service. I consider this is just sufficient to do social service.”

Periyar associated himself with the Congress in 1920 and sincerely accepted the constructive programme of Mahatma Gandhi. He propagated the principles of Khadi, wore Khadi and sold Khadi in the street. He had led agitations for the implementation of the prohibition policy and even destroyed hundreds of coconut trees on his own farm not bothering about the huge financial losses.

In 1924, the Kerala State Congress Committee for Untouchability had

organized an agitation for the entry of the backward class and untouchables into the Vaikom Mahadevar temple and the public roads around the temple. Accepting the call from the organizers of the agitation, he went and participated in the agitation along with his wife Nagammal, sister Kannammal and two of his colleagues. Though all of them were arrested and kept in prison, the agitation was successful in the end, and the public roads were thrown open to all communities.

This was the first successful event in history that had challenged caste orthodoxy and broken the stronghold of caste supremacy. This was the prelude to the major struggle launched by Dr. Ambedkar against untouchability in 1927.

Periyar and other Progressive Leaders

Continuing his battle against injustice, inequalities, irrational beliefs and dogmas in all forms, Periyar fought for social equality and gender equality, to establish a social order with fraternity and universal brotherhood. Periyar had supported all the progressive leaders across many countries and continents. The Kudi Arasu volumes edited by Periyar EVR had recognized the importance of universal thoughts and values. Whenever the ideas of revolution were found, Periyar EVR had immediately published the thoughts of the great leaders. The works of Karl Marx and Lenin

were published in Kudi Arasu. Periyar had a discussion with great leaders and thinkers. He held discussions with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on many social issues. Similarly, he had discussions with the Muslim League leader Jinnah. After meeting them, Periyar EVR had sought the help of the both leaders to oppose the imposition of Hindi in the provincial governments. Periyar had stated that he was going to organize again an anti-Hindi agitation of similar to that of 1938. Dr. Ambedkar and Jinnah had extended wholehearted and full support to organize another anti-Hindi agitation (Ref: My Bombay Tour – Kudi Arasu, 28.1.1940). This incident reveals how Periyar EVR had established a cordial relationship with the great leaders of India.

Periyar on Bhagat Singh

Periyar EVR's considered views on Bhagat Singh are still relevant to India. Many senior congress leaders including Mahatma Gandhi kept silent when Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Batukeshwar Dutt trials took place in the court. However, Jinnah spoke in the Central Assembly condemning the brutal behaviour of the British government. He had added that "Do you wish to prosecute them or persecute them?... Mind you, sir, I don't approve the action of Bhagat Singh, and I say this on the floor of this house. I regret that, rightly or wrongly, youth today in India stirred up, and you cannot - when you have three hundred and odd millions of

people, you cannot prevail such crimes being committed, however much you deplore them and however much they are misguided. It is the system, that damnable system of government, which is resented by the people. You may be a cold-blooded logician: I am patient cool-headed man and calmly go on making speeches here, persuading and influencing the Treasury Branch."

In spite of the opposition from the moderate leaders and people of the country, the death sentence was pronounced by the court to Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Dutt. Jinnah had condemned the court verdict by stating that "I say that no Judge who has got an iota of a judicial mind or a sense of justice can ever be a party, to a trial of that character and pass the sentence of death without a shudder and a pang of conscience."

Periyar EVR in his characteristic way took a stand and propagated the revolutionary ideas of Bhagat Singh. Periyar spoke and wrote about Bhagat Singh's sacrifice after his execution. He had averred that "Bhagat Singh was a true human being. I strongly felt that his principles were very much needed for India. His strong faith in socialism was correct. Further, he was not a believer in god and stood against all the superstitions and bigotry of religions."

Periyar EVR asked Pa. Jeevanandham to translate Bhagat Singh's famous

book “Why I am an Atheist?” into the Tamil language. This was published by the Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution’s publications. This edition has been reprinted several times over the last 80 years.

Periyar’s condemnation of Gandhi for the sake of Bhagat Singh

Periyar EVR even went to the extent of strongly condemning Gandhi for his indifferent attitude at the time of the hanging of Bhagat Singh. He had questioned Gandhi’s statement that *“Everything is left with god and god is guiding him in the struggle for freedom. Is it acceptable? There is not much difference between Brahminism and Gandhism. Had not the execution of Bhagat Singh happened, Gandhism would have attained this much eminence. Bhagat Singh gave his life to the cause of socialism, even to the entire world. The unique position of sacrifice in history was given to Bhagat Singh. Therefore, we have to appreciate and congratulate Bhagat Singh from our hearts and head. Nobody could attain his position in the freedom struggle.”*

Sarcastically, Periyar EVR said that the *“British government should execute four freedom fighters in every province so as to reach the revolution at a faster speed in the society”* (Ref: Editorial, Kudi Arasu, 29.3.1931).

When Bhagat Singh was brought to the hanging yard in the prison, he kissed the hanging rope. *“Don’t believe fate; Don’t be afraid of the accusations of the rich. We will win everything through our wisdom.”* This is the statement of Bhagat Singh. How true it is? Thus, Periyar EVR wrote in the Kudi Arasu’s sub-editorial dated. 5.4.1931.

The saga of Bhagat Singh

Bhagat Singh still stands tall and is remembered as a great revolutionary of all times. Bhagat Singh was born to Vidhyavathi and Kishan Singh on September 27, 1907 in the village of Banga in Lyallpur. His uncle Ajit Singh was also a freedom fighter. They established Indian Patriot Association to assert and protect farmers' rights in the British repressive regime. Therefore, it was quite natural for young Bhagat Singh to learn the basic tenets of agitation in his family atmosphere itself. The Ghadar Movement was very popular during his school days and left a strong impression on his mind. Kartar Singh Sarabha, a great freedom fighter, who was hanged to death in the Lahore conspiracy case, was his mentor at the age of 18. The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919, had deeply provoked his nationalist sentiments. Bhagat Singh went to Jallianwala Bagh, paid his respect to the martyrs, kissed the earth and took an oath to fight against the ruthless British Raj. After leaving the DAV School

in Lahore in 1921, he went and joined the National College in Lahore. He met his future comrades-in-arms like Sukh Dev, Bhagwati Charan Vohra and Yasphal. He was deeply involved in the day-to-day affairs of the freedom movement. When his father Kishan Singh asked him to marry as per the family's wishes, Bhagat Singh refused and wrote a letter stating that:

“Respected Father,

This is not a time for marriage. The country is calling me. I have taken an oath to serve the country physically, mentally and monetarily. Moreover, it is not a new thing for us. Our whole family is full of patriotism. After two or three years of my birth in 1910, Uncle Swarn Singh died in jail. Uncle Ajit Singh is living a life of exile in foreign countries. You have also suffered a lot in jails. I am only following your footprints thus date to do this. You will kindly not tie me down in matrimony but give me your blessings so that I may succeed in my mission.”

He returned to Lahore in 1926 and formed the Naujawan Bharat Sabha along with Sukh Dev, Bhagwati Charan Vohra and Ram Krishan Kamlesh Mohan. He went to Punjab and joined the editorial board of Kirti, a journal. This Kirti espoused the cause of the farmers who faced a lot of hardships under a suppressive British regime.

The great leader of the Freedom Movement, Punjab Kesari Lala Lajpat Rai led a huge procession on 30th October 1928 in Lahore, at the time of Simon Commission's visit to India. The demonstration was very peaceful and orderly that Lahore ever witnessed. However, the British police officer Scott became so mad and ruthlessly attacked Lala Lajpat Rai. Lala Lajpat Rai died on November 17, 1928. The death of Lala Lajpat Rai shook the entire nation. When the issue was raised in the House of Commons by the members of Parliament of the Labour Party, the arrogant reply of Lord Winterton had provoked the entire nation. Basanti Devi, widow of C.R. Das, another great freedom fighter from Bengal raised this issue vociferously. She added that: “Does the youth and manhood of the country still exist? Does it feel the burning shame and disgrace of it? A woman of the land demands clear answers to it”.

Since Bhagat Singh was one of the prime organizers of this procession, he had decided to avenge Lala Lajpat Rai's death by killing the police officer Scott. But, by mistaken identity, Bhagat Singh and his friends killed Saunders, a junior police officer who worked under Scott. Several posters were pasted on the walls stating that “Saunders is dead, Lalaji is avenged”. Most of the posters were written by Bhagat Singh in his own handwriting. A notice was circulated on behalf of the Hindustan Socialistic Republic Army which Bhagat Singh and his

colleagues organized. The notice read: “Bureaucracy beware, Tyrant government beware. Today the world has seen that the people of India are not lifeless, their blood has not become cold, they can lay down their lives for the country’s honour, the proof of this has been given by the youth, who are ridiculed and insulted by the leaders of their own country. We are sorry for shedding human blood, but it becomes necessary to bathe the altar of revolution with blood.”

Conclusion

These historical events reveal how Periyar EVR viewed the ideals of Bhagat Singh and his supreme sacrifice during the freedom struggle. Periyar had taken a very strong stand that unless the Varnashrama dharma is abolished, there is no equality in the society. Economic growth and development will not reach all sections of the people in a discriminatory society. Bhagat Singh took the same stand during the freedom struggle. Through his untiring work in a short span of his life, he upheld rationalism and socialism. In a way, Bhagat Singh is a great rationalist and a radical humanist.

Periyar EVR and Bhagat Singh carried their convictions until their last

breath. Their ideologies and convictions will ever remain as the guiding principles for an equitable social and economic order.

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About the Author

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Prof. Naganathan, served as the Vice-Chairman of the State Planning Commission, Tamil Nadu during 2006-2011 and has chaired many high-level policy making committees offering recommendations to Government of India and States of the Indian Union. He was on the Expert Panel to advise the Government of Tamil Nadu on matters relating to rain water harvesting & ground water recharge, Protection of Heritage monuments in Tamil Nadu and Implementation of Equitable Education System in the schools of Tamil Nadu.

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Dr. Naganathan has travelled widely and presented papers in various conferences held in China, England, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Canada, USA, Russia, Greece, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan. He was awarded the Shastri Indo-Canadian Fellowship in 1995 to conduct research on Comparative Federalism in the University of Montreal, Canada.

Dr. Naganathan has published the work: Das Capital and Surplus Value in 6 volumes (translated into Tamil by K.R. Jamadakani, a multilingual scholar and Freedom fighter). Few of his books in English are: New Dimensions of Fiscal Federalism, Dravidian Political Economy, Indian Economy: Light in Darkness, Tamil Nadu Economy: Trends and Prospects, and Dialectics of Federalism in India: An Analysis of Socio-Economic and Political Factors. Some of his books in Tamil are: Needhiya? Niyayama?, Neruppu Porigal, Valarchiya? Veezhchiya? He has published many articles covering a wide range of subjects from Political economy, Social justice, Social equality, Democracy, Cultural nationalism, Constitutional law, Federalism and Public affairs.

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