

Evolution of Periyar Movement in Tamilnadu

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Abstract: The Tamils of the pre-Aryan age had their own pattern of religious and social institutions, language and literature. Aryanisation of the south was doubtless a slow process spreading over several centuries. 'The concept of caste as defined in the Rig-Veda with its four-fold system was unknown in Tamil society. The emergence of Brahmins and their dominance in the Tamil society was a long process. Many factors led to their domination in the Tamil society. It is necessary to trace the rise and growth of Brahmins as an important socio-political caste. Anti— Brahmin and egalitarian movements similar to the Self-Respect Movement date back at least a millennium in South India. Social mobility would have enabled the non-Brahmin castes to compete for higher ritual position in society. Congress conferences in Tamilnadu and on each occasion the rebuff which non-Brahmins felt that they had provoked them to deeper hostility. In 1924, he got an opportunity at Vaikom, where a conflict arose over the right of untouchables to use certain roads outside a temple in erstwhile Travancore State. The movement propagated the social and economic discontent among the backward castes and at the same time it enlisted their massive support.

Keywords: Periyar, Non Brahmin movement, Anti-Brahmin and Egalitarian Movements, Communal Representation, Self-Respect Movement.

The Tamils of the pre-Aryan age had their own pattern of religious and social institutions, language and literature. Aryanisation of the south was doubtless a slow process spreading over several centuries.' The Aryans migrated from north to south with their religion, culture and social stratification based on the four-fold caste system. The Aryan theory of mankind divided into four varnas, or group of caste, such as Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra was wholly foreign to the Tamils of the San gam age. In the Sangam period, references are found about the existence of Aryans living in separate quarters, practicing endogamy and engaging in literary pursuits. The concept of caste as defined in the Rig-Veda with its four-fold system was unknown in Tamil society. Purananuru, a Sangam work informs that one's social status in Tamil society was not inherited but based on its merit. It points out the existence of the social hierarchy concept of high and low of the Sangam age. The concept of ritual purity and impurity was found in the post-Sangam work, Chilappathikaram. The grammatical treatise of the early Tamilaham, Tolkappiyam contains references to the four fold system. But the commentators of Tolkappiyam admitted this classification as varna or jathi. By the time of Manu, the Hindu law giver, the social stratification of Indian society in general, was perfected and given a legal sanction and religious acknowledgement. The date of Manusmirithi is still an enigma to historians.

Anti-Brahmin and Egalitarian Movements

Anti— Brahmin and egalitarian movements similar to the Self-Respect Movement date back at least a millennium in South India. Social mobility would have enabled the non-Brahmin castes to compete for higher ritual position in society. Non-Brahmin priests tried to displace them from their high ritual position by their scholarship. Tamil ascetics most of whom lived between the fifth and tenth centuries of the Christian era. The Brahmins' social and religious position in south India, was, however less important for politics in Madras Presidency. Political and social domination of the Brahmins was challenged only in 1916 by non-Brahmins of South India as evidenced by the rise of the South Indian Liberal Federation popularly known as Justice Party. 33 But the activities of the Party were confined largely to the educated and rich non- Brahmins and bulk of the non-Brahmin masses remained untouched by them. The political and social awakening was created among them by Periyar. As a consequence, though the British sought to give due representation to all caste groups in the government services, Brahmins held the largest number of the higher appointments available to Indians. Out of 390 higher appointments in the Educational Department, 310 were held by Brahmins; in the Judicial Department, 118 out of 171 and in the Revenue Department 394 out of 679. Though Brahmins in Madras presidency numbered less than one and half a million out of a total population of forty two million, the caste, possesses seventy percent, of all graduates in arts seventy four percent, of the graduates in law ,seventy one percent of all the graduates in engineering and seventy four percent of the graduates in teaching. Justice Party demanded that communal representation was the only solution by which equality between Brahmin and non-Brahmin could be achieved, and thereby promote the co-operation between castes and races and Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 sought to ensure this scheme. The Justice Party would accept any system of reform of home rule, provided it granted communal representation for the interests of the country is preserved.

Periyar and Congress

Towards the beginning of 1919 Periyar made his final decision to join the Tamilnadu Congress, although he formally became a member in early 1920. At this stage, the Congress set before it, grand ideals such as amelioration of the condition of the masses, removal of untouchability and prohibition. These ideals of the Congress Party attracted Periyar. By joining the Congress organization, he could realise his ideal of bringing about a new social order .39 He himself stated that he joined the Congress with the belief that it would serve the cause of society and that it would plead for independence only after the abolition of

untouchability and caste disparity. Another quarrel between non-Brahmins and Brahmins arose when a resolution was introduced by a Brahmin member at the Tamilnadu Congress Committee meeting at Tenkasi in Tirunelveli district on 6 July 1922, recommending that the All India Congress Committee should help raise fund for a Tamil University at Kallidaikurchi. Two Vellala Congress men opposed this resolution as likely to exacerbate the ill-feeling between Brahmin and non-Brahmins in the district. At the meeting a Brahmin delegate shouted Mahatma Gandhi ki jai. A.Masilamanipillai, a Vellala, in retaliation shouted, Brahmna-kurumbu (Brahmin mischief) following which there were many angry demonstrations. Periyar's radical outlook enabled him to support the progressive policies of Justice Party. Though he was a Congress leader, he welcomed the resolutions of the Justice Party on Hindu Religious Endowment Board with a view to put an end to the age-old monopoly and exploitation of the Brahmins in the managements of Hindu temples. Likewise, in 1924, he appreciated the Justice Party Government Order to implement the policy of communal representation in education and employment.

Vaikom Agitation

Periyar invariably involved himself in public agitations on many occasions. His involvement became for the first time a test of his ability to fight social inequalities without unduly affecting the sensivity of the groups directly or indirectly. In 1924, he got an opportunity at Vaikom, where a conflict arose over the right of untouchables to use certain roads outside a temple in erstwhile Travancore State. It was the first satyagraha for the removal of the practice of untouchability and it was organized and conducted mostly by Tamiian satyagragies. In this campaign, Periyar's wife and sister participated. The agitation stemmed from an incident that took place between some Brahmins and Madhavan, an advocate of a lower status, of the Ezhava caste. He came to attend the court in connection with a client's case. The court was located inside the compound of the palace of Maharaja. While a religious function was in progress in honour of the Maharaja Sri Moolam Thirunal's 51 birthday in the same compound. The orthodox Brahmins, afraid of pollution even from the mere approach of a non caste Hindu and forbade his entry. To protest against such inequalities in society the Congress leaders started agitation. Their decision to take out a procession of untouchables on a prohibited road was conveyed to Gandhi on 12 March, 1924.

At the outset, the Travancore police authorities made it their policy to arrest only the Congress leaders who staged satyagraha in protest against the rule forbidding the untouchables to use the public roads. To start in this, they arrested two Malayalis, K.P.Kesava Menon, a Nair, editor of Mathurabhumi and T.K.Madhavan an Ezhava, editor of the newspaper Deshabhimani; later, they arrested George Joseph, an Indian Christian lawyer trained in England, on a charge of stirring up trouble. The arrested leaders realised that in the absence of proper leadership, the satyagraha would fail, so they appealed to the Congress leaders in the neighbouring Presidency of Madras to render their assistance. In the meantime George Joseph and Kesava Menon wrote personal letters to Periyar, who was then the President of the Tamilnadu Congress, requesting him to take over the leadership of the struggle. Periyar accepted the request and arrived in Vaikom on 13 April 1924 and began to harangue his audience. His speeches were highly emotional and his provocative attack on orthodox religion attracted thousands of people. His ferocious speech can be seen from the following passage: They argue that pollution would be the result if the untouchables passed through the streets leading to the temple. I ask them whether the Lord of Vaikom or the presence of untouchables. If they say that the presiding deity at the Vaikom temple would be polluted, they could not be God, but a mere stone fit only to wash dirty linen with. 55 Indian dhobis (washermen) beat the clothes which they wash on flat stones, in order to help remove the dirt.' However within six days of his arrival at Vaikom, he was arrested and sentenced to one month imprisonment in Travancore. After his release he began the agitation and was court arrested and put in jail for six months, but he was released two months earlier on the death of the Maharaja. After his release, he returned to his home town Erode, but the government of Madras arrested him for an anti-government speech he had made at the height of the khaddar campaign. He was released within six months, and he was in Travancore when Gandhi met the Maharani, in March 1925 for talks regarding the Periyar E.V.Ramasami, Vaikom issue. 57 In the meantime, the sathyagraha campaign received much popular support from several parts people of Travancore as well as from all over the country. On Rajagopalachari's suggestion, Gandhi went to Vaikom and met the Maharani on 12 March 1925 58 in order to end the satyagraha peacefully. Apparently the meeting failed to resolve the issue, for the Satyagraha continued until the prohibitory order was revoked in October 1927 and the roads were thrown open by the Travancore Durbar to the untouchables.

Periyar utilized this opportunity to demonstrate his capacity to fight for social justice on behalf of the untouchables in Kerala. He got the most glory and he was lionised as 'Vaikom Virar', the hero of Vaikom by the Tamil speaking population of the Madras Presidency. 60 Further the Vaikom issue indicated the orthodox Brahmins stubborn opposition to the liberalization of Hindu social customs and evils. 61 It is said that Mr.Gandhi the local orthodox caste Hindu opposition leaders had a talk at the residence of Indanthurithi Nambuthiri. He discussed with them for over three hours and made practical proposals with a view to bringing the struggle to a speedy termination. These alternative proposals were arbitration, a referendum, an examination by select pundits of the Sankara Smritis. The opposition omits did not choose to accept any of these. Gandhi's talk with the orthodox leaders ended in failure.

Gurukulam Controversy

In January 1925, Periyar received complaints from the students of the gurukulam, including from the son of O.P.Ramasami Reddiar, former Chief Minister of Madras, that separate dining was enforced for Brahmin and non- Brahmin students. It was further stated that the quality of the food served to the non-Brahmin students was different. 67 Even separate water pots were kept for them. 68 A committee from the Tamilnadu Congress was thereupon appointed to look into the matter ' 69 and in April 1925 Varadarajulu Naidu began a campaign against the gurukulam and the Brahmin domination within the Congress .70 The non Brahmins in the Congress too opposed such an inhuman and discriminatory practice. The fact finding committee of the

Congress learnt that V.V.S.Ayyar himself had given permission to two Brahmin boys to dine separately, on the insistence of their parents. The gurukulam incident merely proved the opinion existing in some quarters that non-Brahmins could not accept any social justice even at the hands of such liberal minded Brahmins as V.V.S. Ayyar. P.Varadarajulu Naidu told in a public meeting at Salem that before the Tamils sought equality or freedom from foreigners they should establish complete equality with the Brahmins in the matter of inter-dining and save the non-Brahmins from the age-old social discrimination. V.V.S. Ayyar's action of disallowing non-Brahmin boys to eat with the Brahmins was a direct challenge to the non-Brahmins and this was the time for the Tamilians to vindicate their honour. The matter was taken up to Gandhi by the Tamilnadu Congress Committee when he was in Madras in 1925. V.V.S.Ayyar's supporters also met Gandhi and they pointed out that inter-dining was not in practice either in society or in educational institutions managed by the Government in Tamilnadu. However, a compromise resolution was agreed on by which the committee recommended that all organisations partaking in the National Movement should follow a principle shunning gradations of merit based on birth. Those who opposed this view contended that nearly ninety five percent of the entire contributions for the establishment and maintenance of the institution came from non-Brahmins of the distinct understanding that it would train youths on non-sectarian lines for national and social service.

There was no option: either he should return all the donations received from the Congress and from non-Brahmins or he should agree to change the character of the institution forth-with. But Gandhi advised that the two Brahmin students should be allowed to dine separately, as it had been agreed to already, but in future no such restrictions should be encouraged or imposed in the gurukulam. Gandhi's interference in the gurukulam controversy also did not solve the problem.

With the gurukulam controversy, Brahmin, non-Brahmin conflicts brewing, Periyar came to the Tamilnadu Congress Conference at Kanchipuram in November 1925 ready for a showdown with the Brahmins, and against their dominance in Tamil society. P.Varadarajulu Naidu maintained that before Tamils sought freedom from the foreign yoke they must strive to attain complete equality with the Brahmins in the inter-dining. He condemned V.V.S.Ayyar and the incident in the gurukulam was not only a breach of conduct but was an attempt to bring up the non-Brahmin children in an atmosphere of inferiority.

Though Periyar and Varadarajulu Naidu differed in political philosophies, they held identical views on the gurukulam issue. Periyar's speech at Salem in April 1925 confirms this view and he said for the first time 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. 79 T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar who was considered by his contemporaries as a balanced person than Periyar appealed V.V.S.Ayyar to change the character of the institution. 80 But V.V.S.Ayyar was very strong in his conviction and acted on communal lines. Periyar in his capacity as the secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress refused to pay the remaining amount of Rs.50001- to the gurukulam, unless the common mess as demanded by the non-Brahmin community was conceded. However, V.V.S.Ayyar got the amount as cheque without the knowledge of Periyar from the joint secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress, who happened to be a Brahmin. This was perhaps the first cheque since Periyar became the secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress to be issued without his signature. Periyar was infuriated over this incident and said that the time had come to declare an all-out war on the gurukulam. Since then Periyar addressed many public meetings in various parts of Tamilnadu and he brought home to the public the caste discrimination practised by the gurukulam and appealed to the non-Brahmins to withhold further financial support. He was responsible for economic sanctions against the gurukulam. But V.V.S.Ayyar not merely turned a deaf ear but also criticised him for lending support to a malicious campaign in Tamilnadu.

Demand of Communal Representation

The communal animosity aroused over the gurukulam controversy, evoked keen interest in the Tamilnadu Congress in the Madras Presidency. To consider the council entry, the Tamilnadu Congress met at Kanchipuram on 21 November 1925. Periyar's main object of participating in the Kanchipuram Conference was to get a mandate from the Tamilnadu Congress on the question of communal representation. This was accepted in principle but was refused on several occasions. 93 Since 1920, Periyar had attempted to move this resolution in the Tamilnadu Congress Conference demanding communal representation or proportional representation for non-Brahmins in government jobs and education. In the Tirunelveli Conference in 1920, Periyar moved a resolution that a certain percentage of seats should be reserved for non-Brahmin castes in the legislative body and in the public services. 94 The resolution was adopted by the subject committee, the Chairman Srinivasa Iyenkar, who characterised the resolution as one detrimental to national unity. 95 In 1921, when Periyar moved this resolution Rajagopalachari, had given tacit approval for it but had pleaded with Periyar not to make it an issue in larger interests of national unity. In the next Conference at Tiruppur in 1922, the debates were marred by personal attacks by extremists from both Brahmin and non-Brahmin groups. Periyar did not press this issue on the advice of P.Varadarajulu Naidu and George Joseph, in the view of the Salem Conference. In 1924, at Tiruvannamalai though he was the President of the Conference, he was not able to get a majority for his resolution, because of Srinivasa Iyenkar, who had undermined his efforts. 96 The Kanchipuram conference of the Tamilnadu Congress was held in 1925. Bearing the failures, Periyar decided to get his most disputed resolution passed at any cost. His endeavour proved to be his last attempt to remain in the Congress. He attacked the Brahmins in the Tamilnadu Congress Committee on the eve of the Kanchipuram conference in his newspaper Kudi Arasu. 97 As expected by him, the resolution came up for discussion. When the resolution of council entry was taken up for discussion, S.Ramanathan insisted that the allied question of communal representation should also be discussed. Thereupon the committee considered the resolution of Periyar on proportional representation on the basis of population strength for the non-Brahmin communities. 98 S.Ramanathan, who moved the resolution opposed Gandhi's interpretations of varnashramadharma, which had no relevance to the social life of Tamils. The rigidity with which the caste system controlled the social life was unacceptable to many progressive and of the changing values in society. Ramanathan himself had an experience of the iniquities of the caste system in his college days, when he had been to a picnic with

his Brahmin friends. 99 The conference resolved that as it was necessary for the advancement of the country that there should be more of mutual trust and less of bitterness between several communities. There should be representation in the Legislative Council and other bodies according to the population strength of Brahmins and non-Brahmins. But the resolution failed to get support from the members of the subject committee due to lack of consensus among the various non-Brahmin groups. R.K.Shanmugam Chettiar said, the section that demanded communal electorate is very small. He was forced to bring up the resolution at the main session of the Conference. 101 He felt that the communal representation was the much needed arrangement for the development of the country and for the unity and equality among the people. Srinivasa Iyankar and Rajagopalachari made the communal representation resolution technically null and void. In this political game, Periyar contended, that the non-Brahmins like Kalyanasundaram Mudaliar were used as pawns, because it was a Mudaliar who rejected his resolution on technical grounds. 102

The misunderstanding with K.Santhanam forced Periyar to break away from the Congress Party. When K.Santhanam in his capacity as TNCC secretary appointed a number of persons belonging to his own Brahmin caste to key positions in the All India Spinners' Association. Periyar viewed it, as yet another ruse of the Brahmins to promote their interests in organisations sponsored by the Indian National Congress. To stop this, Periyar introduced a series of changes, which were chiefly aimed at undoing what the secretary had done. But K.Santhanam took the matter to Gandhi, whose interference further incensed Periyar against Brahmins. It hastened his total break with the Congress. 103 And by the end of 1925 Periyar, the most successful Tamil propagandist among the no-chargers in the Tamilnadu Congress had left to form an organisation of his own. Periyar decided to leave the Congress, when he came to the conclusion that Gandhi too was furthering sectarian interests by propagating the cultural values of Brahmins among the masses of Tamilnadu. To Gandhi *varnashramadharma* was a universal law and a law of spiritual economics, designed to set free man's energy for higher pursuits in life. 104 Gandhi spoke in a public meeting at Cuddalore on 10 September 1927, that the Brahmins as the repositories of knowledge and embodiments of sacrifice, and advised them to stick on to their traditions of austerity. He further stressed in the same speech that non-Brahmins in their ire against the Brahmins should not wreck the system of *varnashramadharma*, the bed-rock of Hinduism. Over this speech a storm of discontent developed even among the nationalist non-Brahmins in Madras. C.Kandaswamy, in a letter to *Young India*, commented that Gandhi's speech exhibited his complete ignorance of the Dravidian contribution to Indian cultural traditions and of inner meaning and cause of the present non-Brahmin movement. Periyar's criticism was even more pungent and devastating, for he felt that in the Tamil country it relegated all the caste Hindus to the position of Sudras, which meant in the *Manusmriti*, the Sons of prostitutes. 107 Periyar and S.Ramanathan met Gandhi in September 1927 with a view to modify his stand on *varnashramadharma*. They expressed their deep concern over Gandhi's statements on the Tamil country and pointed out that this would only strengthen the orthodox Hindu position on the question of untouchability and child marriage, the two evils against which Gandhi himself was contending. When their views were diametrically opposed, Periyar expressed to Gandhi that his confirmed belief, the true freedom for India would be achieved only with the destruction of Indian National Congress, Hinduism or Brahminism.

The motive behind the establishment of the Self-Respect Movement was nothing but Periyar's contempt for caste system and its evils. His bitter experiences in the Tamilnadu Congress, had given benefits to the Brahmins and discredit to the non-Brahmins. The movement was dedicated to attain the goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian concept, which also meant denial of the superiority of the Brahmins whom he described as representatives of the Aryans. Unlike the Justice Party, the Self-Respect Movement was popular in its appeal. Though it began as a social reform movement, its effects were felt in the political field also.

As the founder of the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar claimed to promote rational thinking, self-respect and self-confidence. In many ways the Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s was simply a popular articulation of views of Bharati and Ramalingasami. Aside from the centrality of the need to restore the pristine role of the Tamil language and Tamil literature, the Self-Respect Movement urged the necessity to eliminate superstition and differentiations based on birth. 2 These goals were to be accomplished by eliminating Brahmin priests, encouraging marriages without the Brahmin priests, between persons of different Tamil castes, destroying untouchability, and raising the degraded position of women. All these should be done before getting the freedom from the British. Marriages in particular should be looked as a contract, which could be broken by mutual consent. Religion and a belief in God should be destroyed, because they are against human equality. Perhaps the most enduring and dramatic of these actions were those seeking what came to be called Self-Respect Marriages performed without the Brahmin priests.'

The *Kudi Arasu* of 18 December 1927 has a picture of Mother India standing beside a map of India on one side and a person weaving cloth by hand on the other side was published. It also contained the motto, long live *khadar* (homespun). The next issue dropped these altogether and Periyar's name was printed without the Naicker caste identification. 17 In 1929 despite his protests against temples and Brahmins, Periyar was made first a member and then vice-chairman of the Erode Temple Committee by P. Subbarayan, Chief Minister of Madras. 18 But Periyar resigned these positions shortly.

Periyar encouraged the newspapers supporting the Self-Respect Movement as a way to widen his influence. In addition to the *Kudi Arasu*, which was a weekly journal published from Erode, the English weekly *Revolt* was published from Erode. The *Puduvai Murasu* (Pondicherry War Drum) was edited by S. Guruswami and carried the messages of Periyar. *Karaikudi* became the centre of three reformist weeklies *Sandamarudam*, the *Kumaran* and the *Nadarkulamithran*. *Paguttarivu* a Tamil monthly from Madras, and *Nagaratootan*, a Tamil weekly were published from Tiruchinapalli. The *Pagutharivu Nurppathippu Kazagam*, was

registered in 1932. To perpetuate the philosophy of Self-Respect, an organisation called the Thinker's Forum was established in Triuchinappalli. The Kumaran, though a caste journal of the Nattukottai Chettis, ridiculed traditional religious practices of the caste, especially those related to marriage.

Social Mobility of the Movement

The Self-Respect Movement made its appeal primarily to the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin castes. But very soon it became a mass movement. Its leaders and propagandists came largely from the Vellala and the Balija Naidu castes. On the other hand the non-Brahmin educated leaders formed associations which acted as instruments for social and political mobilisation. Adi Dravida Mahajana Shabha (1892), Senguntha Mahajana Sangam (1908) Viswakarma Mahajana Sangam (1912), and the Nadar Mahajana Sangam (1919) were the prominent caste associations, which spearheaded to acquire a new social status for the castes they represented.

Periyar sought assistance from the rich to attain his goals. He continued his search for individuals who would articulate the ideals of Self-Respect. In 1930 and 1931 he was partly successful in Ramnad district. W.P.A. Soundarapandian accepted the offer and extended his whole hearted support to the movement. Seeking to draw the mass support of Nadars of Tamilnadu and Kerala, a Self-Respect Conference was held at Chengalput in February, 1929. W.P.A. Soundarapandian in his presidential address, affirmed the philosophy of Self-Respect in rejecting the whole system of caste, as alien to Tamil society. As a result of W.P.A. Soundarapandian's effort, large section of Nadars de-Sanskritised their life style and dispensed with some of the Hindu rituals and performed their religious functions like marriage, without the Brahmin priests. The Self-Respect Movement, however, directed its appeal primarily to the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin castes which were low in the Tamil ritual status including Pallars, Parayars, Vannias, the Nadars, the Agamudaiyars and the Isai Vellalars. The movement propagated the social and economic discontent among the backward castes and at the same time it enlisted their massive support.

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