ROLE OF E.V. RAMASWAMY IN TAMIL NADU POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to highlight the role of E.V. Ramaswamy in Tamil Nadu politics. He is known as the 'Father of the Dravidian movement'. He rebelled against gender and caste inequality in Tamil Nadu. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, commonly known as Periyar, is a name that resonates deeply in the socio-political landscape of Tamil Nadu. He born in 1879, Periyar embarked on a journey that would transform not just him but an entire society. His political significance is monumental – he restructured the Justice Party into DravidarKazhagam in 1944, laying the groundwork for the Dravidian Movement. E.V.Ramaswamy, one of the great thinker, philosopher and social theorist of twentieth century. His ideas has influenced the politics and society of India and his social thoughts are still relevant today. He was one among the pre-colonial social theorists, challenging the non-egalitarian, unequal ideas of Hindu society by developing alternative discourse of social thinking. Periyar's political and social activities were restricted within the geographical boundary of erstwhile British Madras province and in the princely state of Travancore, Cochin, but his thinking was evolved internationally and acknowledged all over the world.

Key Words: E.V.Ramaswamy, Periyar, Dravidian movement, The Self- Respect Movement, Dravida Kazhagam, Congress and Justice party.

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Introduction

E.V.Ramaswamy had a dream for egalitarian civil society. Mahatma Gandhi's constructive political programmes, such as Khadiprogrammes, picketing toddy shops, boycotting shops selling foreign clothes, temple entry programmes for untouchables had influenced Periyar. As a result of this he joined Indian National Congress in 1919 and also took the membership of Madras Presidency Association. According to E.V.Ramaswamy, "movement for access to public spaces, campaign for women empowerment were all aimed at challenging Brahminical dominance".

He joined the temple entry movement in Vaikom in Kerela. Famously known as "Vaikom Satyagraha", and supported by Gandhiji. Due to his great leadership qualities and courage he received the title of " VaikomVeerar" and "Periyar" (which means 'great man') from his followers. "Agitative" technique of Gandhiji greatly influenced Periyar. In between 1920-24 E.V.Ramaswamy was personally involved in the non-cooperation movement and constructive development programmes.

E.V.Ramaswamy and Congress

The Congress organisation and propaganda slowly gained effectiveness. A group of Congressmen led by S.Sathyamoorthy and his allies proposed that Congress should invade Legislatures. On May 1, 1934, Delhi announced the general election. In 1937 general elections, the Congress defeated the Justice party and formed its ministry under C.Rajagopalachari. But in 1939, the Madras Ministry resigned along with other Congress ministries in other provinces because of Britain's attitude towards India in the Second World War. Even during its short term in office its record of Legislative activity was quite impressive, It passed the Debt Relief Act, the Temple Entry Act, the Sales Tax Act, and the prohibition Act. These show the zeal with which the Congress ministry went about governing the province. During the war, the constitutional machinery was done, away with and Madras was ruled directly by the Governor with the help of official advisers.In 1938, E.V.Ramaswamy the leader of the Self-Respect Movement was elected the leader of the Justice Party who had been in the political scene of Tamil Nadu from the early years of twentieth century.

From 1907, E.V.Ramaswamy took an active interest in the Indian National Congress. He took interest in Municipal affairs. He was an elected Chairman of Erode Municipality. C.Rajagopalachari. andE.VRamaswamy were the best friends. C.Rajagopalachari was quick to realise that E.V.Ramaswamy would admirably suit the purpose of defeating the Non-Brahmin Movement. So he encouraged E.V.Ramaswamyto take a leading role in Congress activities. E.V.Ramaswamy was actually given the promise when he enrolled himself in Congress in 1919, that the Congress was in agreement with the principle of communal representation advocated by the Non Brahmin Movement. Further, he was led to believe that 50% of the Government jobs would be set apart for Non-Brahmins and that the Congress had no intention of contesting the general election.[1]

E.V. Ramaswamy fully believed in these assurances and went on pressing for acceptance of his resolutions on communal representation at various committee meetings and conference of the Congress held every year, at Tiruchirapally in 1922, Madras in 1923, Thiruvannaimalai in 1924 without avail.[2] Finally E.V.Ramaswamy attended the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee Conference at Kancheepuram in 1925, ready for a show down with the Brahmins. At this conference he submitted two resolutions recognising the principle of communal representation for Non-Brahmins in the public services and representative bodies. These resolutions were disallowed on the ground that they had already been rejected by the subjects committee. At this point E.V.Ramaswamy and several other Non - Brahmins in the conference walked out.[3]E.V.Ramaswamy lingered on in the Congress- for a month or more, acting as a member of the khadi Board. In 1925 he left the congress and found himself free to start an organisation of his own.[4]

While in the Congress, E.V. Ramaswamy had gained recognition and fame in the Madras Presidency by his picketing of liquor shops in 1922 for which he was imprisoned and kept in Coimbatore jail. Further, he had played a

leading role in VaikomSatyagraha in 1924. A conflict arose over the question of untouchables using certain roads outside a temple in Vaikom in Travancore State. E.V.Ramaswamy arrived in Vaikom on April 13 he was imprisoned for a month in Travancore. After his release he began the agitation, again he was arrested and this got him a sentence of six months. Finally the prohibitory order was removed by the Travancore Durbar. E.V.Ramaswamy got at lot of acclaim and was given the title. The Hero of Vaikom.[5]

Another incident in which E.V.Ramaswamy was involved was the agitation against the separate dining enforced for Brahmin students at the Gurukulam in Shermadevi, Tirunelveli District, established in December 1922, by V.V.S.Iyer. As a result of Non-Brahmin pressure, V.V.S. Iyer resigned the post as the Head of the Gurukulam in May 1925.[6] The publication of KudiArasu as a weekly was registered on January 19, 1923 and the first issue was published on May 3, 1925. Through the weekly, E.V.Ramaswamy carried out incessant propaganda to arouse Dravidian people from age long stupor and infused in them a true sense of human dignity and self respect. He wrote and published nearly two hundred books which form the backbone of Tamil literature in the field of free thinking and rationalism in 20th century.

After his exit from the congress in 1925, he started working for the destruction of the congress. He began to attack congress programmes in a relentless manner. In doing this, he contradicted himself, for the policies he attacked were those he had canvassed passionately earlier. He attacked Khadi, and Prohibition on the Ground that the States were incurring heavy losses by their enforcing prohibition.[7]

Self - Respect Movement

The Self- Respect Movement and Justice Party ran on parallel lines, for both worked for the upliftment of Non-Brahmins. The first Self-Respect Conference was held at Chingleput in 1929. The Justice Party leaders participated actively in it. The conference heralded the formal inauguration of the Self Respect Movement, although it originated as soon as E.V.Ramaswamy came out of the Congress in 1925. The Resolution passed guaranteed social equality and freedom from economic exploitation to all castes , and creeds. From 1927 onwards, E.V.Ramaswamy interested himself in propagating the tenets of Buddhism and in expounding the teachings of Thirukkural. He was also a forerunner in the advocacy of women' s education and championing the cause of women for equal rights.[8]

E.V. Ramaswamy was attracted by the Bolshevik, revolution of Russia and its beneficial effects on the Proletariat. From 1931 he frequently wrote in Kudiarasu about this social revolution. In 1931 he visited Greece, Turkey, Africa, Germany, France, Portugal, England and Ceylon. In Russia he attended the May Day Celebration of 1932 and was introduced as the leader of atheistic thought from India.[9]On his return from Russia he busied himself with meetings with workers of the Self-Respect Movement, and explained to them the novel features of the Socialist State. In this M.Singaravelu, the first communist in South India was of great help to him. E.V.Ramaswamy had also supported the Railway workers' strike in 1927 - 1928. Singaravelu helped in opening the eyes of several Self - Respect workers to a wide horizon and to a New Order in which the toiling people's- liberation would guarantee them. abolishing of all social injustices and establish a society without the horrors of caste in social administration.[10]

Singaravelu gave the opening address In the conference of. Self Respecters in Madras in

December 1931. He told the Self-Respecters that only a Socialist society can be free from caste, religious distinction, and economic disparity. Further, Singaravelu wrote a series of articles in Kudiarasu on Socialism, Science and on Moral belief.These articles gave him a high standing among the Self - Respect workers. They were enthusiastic about changing the Self – Respect Movement from one of Social reform to a movement with political objectives as well. 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 Sama Dharma Party (Self-Respect Socialistic Party) of South India.[11]

To intensify the propagation of Self - Respect Principles, E.V.Ramaswamy started an English weekly ***Revolt*** in 1928, ***Puratchi*** a weekly in Tamil in 1933 and ***Paguthariv***u a weekly in Tamil in 1934, Paguthariv daily in 1934 and Paguthariv Tamil monthly in 1935.E.V.Ramaswamy keenly watched the working of the Congress Ministry of 1937 and criticised that Brahmins who were just 3% of the total population had occupied six places of high position out of ten in the Ministry. He campaigned vigorously against the closing of 2000 Schools in rural areas for want of funds. He pointed out that when a Veda Padasalai had been opened at a cost of 12 lakhs of rupees, then the comparatively inexpensive schools could still be run.[12]

The compulsory introduction of Hindi in selected schools gave rise to the Anti-Hindi Agitation. Many were imprisoned. At a meeting on the Marina beach at Madras on September 11, 1938, Ramaswamy raised the call of "Tamil Nadu for Tamilians". On July 1, 1939 the first Dravida Nadu Separation Day was celebrated. E.V.Ramaswamy was imprisoned for 2 years. While serving the sentence, he was elected the leader of the Justice Party. At the conference of the South Indian Liberal Federation, held on December 29 & 30, 1938 at Thiruvarur, E.V.Ramaswamy's Presidential address was read by A.T.Panneerselvam.[13] Even here he insisted on a homeland for Tamilians. After the Conference at Salem in 1945, the South Indian Liberal Federation was renamed DravidaKazhagam.

Although E.V.Ramaswamy tried to unite all the Non-Brahmins under a common banner 'DravidarKazhagam' he was not successful. Firstly a split occurred in the Non-Brahmin group into backward and forward Non-Brahmins. A government order of 1947, recognised that' 'backward classes' as a category was separate from 'Non-Brahmins' and eligible for separate terms of recruitment to the public services. The G.O. equated the forward Non-Brahmins and Brahmins.[14]Secondly the Madras Provincial Backward Classes League continued to function independently. Among the communities that joined together in the Backward class association were two prominent castes, the Vannia Kula Kshatriyas and the Mukulathor. Service castes like Acharis, Ambattars and other small castes were also members. The Backward Non-Brahmins felt that the Congress as a body was not sympathetic to the aspiration of the Backward classes. The Justice Party had degenerated into a 'Job hunting party'. The Self Respect Movement which could have brought about a social reconstruction in South India, bad drifted into politics and had allowed itself to be dragged on to the Chariot wheels of the Justice Party. So they felt that it was not, safe for the Backward Non-Brahmins to ally themselves with any political party. Only they themselves could work for their salvation independent of politics.

The politics of the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the Brahmin Non-Brahmin controversy De-Aryanisation was the fashion, the Brahmins stepped down from their high pedestal and tried to identify themselves with the South

Indian Non-Brahmins. Even Tamil language was not spared. Efforts were made to restore Tamil to pristine purity, and remove the Sanskrit influence from the language. The Brahmins also desired to combat the threat of cultural alienation by actively participating in the transformation of Tamil into a more pliable language.[15]Some of the important persons involved in the Tamil Renaissance were E.V.Ramaswamy who wrote in Kudiarasu, ceaselessly in the simple homely language for five decades, and C.N.Annadurai, a lieutenant in his party.

The problem of Brahmin predominance in administration and politics was curtailed to some extent by getting the communal G.O passed and fixing only the fifth and twelfth places to the Brahmins in the Government jobs. It also got reservation in the legislature and other Government bodies. But the Justice Party did not take any interest in national affairs. It was essentially communal and regional in outlook, Its opposition to the Congress was also based on the Brahmin-Non-Brahmin controversy, not due to policy differences. Further its government was ineffective due to factions and also due to ineffectual portfolio given to the elected ministers in the Dyarchical system.

Anti-Brahmin was the political aim in 1916-1936, it turned to anti-Brahminism from 1935-1963. It helped in freeing the people from the hold of dogmatic scriptures and superstitions. Led by E.V.Ramaswamy, the Self-Respect Movement involved itself in mass campaigns, setting fire to copies of Manusmiriti, Ramayana and many other religious books, desecration of images, blackening of Hindi name boards' and removal of the word Brahmin from Hotel. Name Boards. The Anti-Aryan feeling culminated in the demand of Dravidasthan. Anyway the Anti-Brahmin Movement made the Non-Brahmins rise from their stupor and take an active interest in their position and demand their rights in the society. The Anti Aryan and Anti-Brahmin Movement may have succeeded, but Anti - religious movement of the Self Respecters failed, for Tamil Nadu remained an intensely religious and orthodox Presidency.

The restrictions imposed on trade, the drought in 1918, the shortage of food, the unprecedented rise in prices and the Home Rule agitation seriously affected the life of the people during the period of the Great War I. In the midst of these disturbances Montagu, the Secretary of State, announced the decision of the British Government to take India along the road to self government. This softened the attitude of the Home Rule League but other developments powerfully affected the Politics in the country. Among them were the inadequacy of reforms, the massacre of unarmed people at JallianwallahBagh, the British occupation of the holy places of Muslims in Arabia, the treatment meted out to the Sultan Khalif of Turkey and the widespread suffering caused by War. M.K.Gandhi now brought the discontented Hindus and Muslims together under common flag and launched the Non-Co-operation Movement in February 1919.

The Non Co-operation Movement involved Satyagraha, boycott of foreign goods, courts. Schools and legislature, organization of labour unions and observance of temperance. By a moral pressure upon the foreigners, it was expected that they would be forced to grant Swaraj. To give proper direction M.K. Gandhi himself visited Tamil Nadu and toured the districts. The people boycotted liquor shops, students abstained from classes, labour unions organized strikes and many defied the obnoxious laws or refused payment of taxes. Most of these demonstrations had only a partial success. Yet the demonstrators both by non violent as well as violent means prevented auction of liquor shops at several places. By frequent hartals, business too was partially

paralysed. This caused serious loss of revenue to the Government. At several places police opened fire, in consequence of which there was much bloodshed. Many were arrested and thrown into prisons. In this agitation E.V. RamaswamyNaicker, C. Rajagopalachari, KasturiangaAyyangar, S. Satyamurthi and V.O. Chidambaram Pillai played a leading part. The news papers the Desabaktan, Swadesamitran and the Hindu extended their Co-operation to the movement. However, what affected the intensity of the agitation were the split in Congress Party over the issue of council entry and the abolition of the Khalifat by Kamel Pasha of Turkey. Gandhi was arrested and sent to prison in March 1922. The Congress men now turned to constructive work like the making of Khadar and helping the poor in Villages.[16] A Government report dated 17th April 1925 read. No hartals were held and only 200 people attended a beach meeting. Thereafter the agitators diverted their energies in the making of cloth.[17]

Conclusion

E.V. Ramaswamy represented the new emerging forces in Tamil Society. He was a stout follower of Gandhian methods of struggle against the colonial power. The Self-Respect Movement was a new development and was a revolt against the artificial division of society into varnas. The movement attracted the masses who were hitherto untouched and claimed to fight against social evils like untouchability. The more enduring aspect of the movement was the elevation of Tamil and Tamil culture. Some of the caste rigidities were removed and representation of non-Brahmin communities for which E.V. Ramaswamy fought consistently in liberal services was secured. E.V. Ramaswamy played a significant role in Tamil Nadu politics and society.

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