



E. V. Ramaswami: Self-Respect Movement

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Introduction.

India has been home to many great individuals, each leaving an indelible mark in their fields. Erode Venkatappa Ramaswami, better known as Periyar (1879-1973), has a complex legacy. Periyar is celebrated as an illustrious leader of South India in Indian politics. Under his leadership, "the first Self-Respect Conference near Madras (now Chennai) in 1929 resolved to eliminate caste descriptions from the names of its supporters. Consequently, 'Naicker' was dropped from his name, and he became E.V. Ramaswami (E.V.R.). He was affectionately given the title 'Periyar' by his admirers and followers, signifying 'Great Father' or 'Great Sage' in Tamil"¹, reflecting his esteemed status in Tamil Nadu and Indian politics. Initially a nationalist and follower of Gandhi, he became a prominent leader of the anti-Brahmanism movement in the Madras Presidency. He dreamed that if Congress and Hinduism supremacy could be eradicated, then the path of emancipation would be paved for the people of all castes of the country. Periyar founded the "Dravida Kazhagam, successor to the Justice Party in 1944, advocating for a 'sovereign, Independent Dravidian Republic' and Independence Day is a day of mourning for the symbol of southern slavery. He was a social reformer, playing various roles as a reformer as a Communist"². Amid his calls for social justice, he addressed race, caste, class, gender, language, urban-rural divide, and Tamil nationalism. Born into a Naidu family in Coimbatore, considered low caste among Hindus, Periyar experienced firsthand the agony of social discrimination. He challenged this discrimination through his exceptional talents, vehemently attacking the caste system, idolatry, and Hindu mythology for perpetuating social inequalities in India. Periyar organized Hindus in South India who endured social discrimination, urging them to stand against injustice and reclaim their Dravidian heritage.

Life Work

"Understanding Periyar begins with understanding his background. He was born into a prosperous business family of the backward Naicker caste in

Erode"³, a town in the former Tamil Nadu. His formal education only extended to the fourth standard, and as a young man, he embarked on a journey across the nation, even spending time living as an ascetic in Benares. During this period, he became disillusioned with the deceptions propagated in the name of religion. Returning home, he demonstrated his business acumen and became involved in public affairs. He performed the duties of chairman of Erode Municipality with great devotion and held the position of an honorary magistrate, among others. "He vehemently opposed social discrimination throughout his public life. He joined the Indian National Congress in 1920; Periyar was drawn to its agenda for abolishing untouchability and empowering the masses. He participated wholeheartedly in the Non-cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and advocated for using Khadi"⁴. He tirelessly championed social justice in each of his roles, with 'service' as his guiding principle. "In 1924, Periyar led the renowned Vaikom Satyagraha in Kerala, where the Ezhavas were denied access to streets surrounding the Vaikom temple because of the low birth"⁵. He experienced firsthand the prejudices within the party when, despite his efforts over six years, his resolution for 'communal representation' at the Kancheepuram Congress was rejected in an open session.

Consequently, he severed ties with the Congress, denouncing it as a stronghold of Brahmin imperialism. Subsequently, Periyar aligned himself with the Justice Party, which he led in 1938 before transforming it into the non-political social organization Dravidian Kazhagam six years later. Concurrently, he initiated the Self-Respect Movement, which was dedicated to social reform and upliftment. "The first Self-Respect Movement took place in Chengalpattu in February 1929"⁶. In 1932, he was deeply influenced by the rationalist, anti-religious, egalitarian social system during his visit to the Soviet Union and its scientific, technological, and economic progress. Upon his return, he established the Self-Respect Communist Party as a political extension of the Movement.

Self-Respect Movement

"In 1925, Periyar launched the Self-Respect Movement to promote the social reform programme"⁷. Its primary goal was to instil a sense of pride in the Dravidian tradition among non-Brahmins in the Tamil region. This Movement aimed to foster unity among non-Brahmins to contest Brahmin superiority. It endeavoured to rally untouchables, women, and youth in the Tamil region toward achieving its objectives. The Movement attracted fervent participation from educated and uneducated individuals in rural

areas. Participants in this Movement aimed to reject Hindu mythology that promoted the superiority of Brahmins over non-Brahmins. They launched various symbolic campaigns to challenge Brahminism, often burning Manusmriti on different occasions. Manusmriti was burnt on many occasions. "New interpretation was given to the characters of Hindu mythology. For example, Ravana, the villain of Valmiki Ramayan" ⁸, was portrayed as a hero of the Dravidian race. In contrast, Rama, the hero of Ramayana, was depicted as an unwelcome intruder of the Aryan race. This Movement also tarnished the image of many Hindu gods and goddesses. While these allegations alienated Brahmins, they also faced severe criticism from within the non-Brahmin community. To dismantle the caste system, the leaders of this Movement decided to eliminate caste identifiers from their names. This initiative gained widespread popularity in the Tamil region, prompting many Brahmins, in addition to non-Brahmins, to discard their caste names. The Movement's organizations advocated for gender equality, including women's rights to inheritance and equal consideration in divorce proceedings. To challenge Brahminical religious dominance, "they organized many Self-Respect Movement Weddings which were solemnized in the absence of Brahmin priests"⁹. The Movement also aimed to abolish Brahminical hegemony, promote gender and social equality, and revive Dravidian languages. To impose restrictions on their entry (temples and other restrictions), marginalized castes across India staged multiple Satyagraha protests.

History of the Self-Respect Movement

The Self-Respect Movement originated in Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India, aiming to establish a society where marginalized classes would have equitable access to human rights. In a society structured around caste, where they were deemed the lowest social order, it instilled a sense of self-worth among backward classes. India has far-reaching effects not only within the state but also in countries with significant. "In Tamil Nadu, S Ramanathan spearheaded the self-respect campaign against Brahminism. The program had a significant impact in Tamil Nadu and other countries with sizable Tamil populations, such as Malaysia and Singapore" ¹⁰. The Movement gave rise to several political organizations. Both groups, known for their social democratic principles, enjoy popularity, particularly in Tamil Nadu.

Meaning of Self-Respect Movement.

E.V.R.'s relentless campaign against orthodoxy steadily eroded the Brahmins' power and influence. Motivated by a newfound sense of self-

confidence, people were inspired to challenge the institutional racism perpetuated by the Brahmins. Consequently, inter-caste marriages gained acceptance and legal recognition. After independence, the first state, Tamil Nadu, began to pass Hindu marriage without the presence of a Brahmin priest. Additionally, the exclusive representation of Harijan member's practice of providing on local councils was abolished. Thanks to continuous support from the Self-Respect Movement, hotels' name panels transitioned from "Brahmins Hotel". "As a result of the hotel's continuous support from the self-respect movement, the names panels were to "Vegetarian Hotel" People began to take pride in dropping their caste name."¹¹

Self-respect is the Purpose of the Movement.

The core objectives of this Movement encompassed three primary goals: the elimination of Brahminical authority, the promotion of employment equity for women and marginalized groups, and the revitalization of Dravidian languages, including Telugu and Tamil. Outlined in two pamphlets, "Namathu Kurikkol" and "Tiravitakkalaka Lateiyam," the Movement's proponents articulated the following aims:

*They are establishing a society where individuals from lower and higher castes enjoy equal fundamental civic rights.

*It is ensuring equal opportunities for development and progress for all.

*I am building a harmonious society while completely eradicating untouchability.

*We are striving for a social mass upheaval fostering good feelings among all members of society.

*We establish schools and colleges and provide housing for poor and lost husbands.

*We are discouraging the construction of unnecessary temples, monasteries, and memorials—the self-respect movement aimed to discourage using caste names as personal identifiers and other similarly entrenched customs.

Significance of Self-Respect Movement.

E.V.R.'s continuous anti-orthodoxy campaign gradually eroded the Brahmins' influence. Motivated by a growing sense of self-respect and confidence, people rallied against the social injustices everlasting by the Brahmins. This Movement fostered acceptance of inter-caste marriages and legal recognition of marriages conducted. After independence, the first state, Tamil Nadu, enacted Hindu marriage without a Brahmin priest allowing legislation. Furthermore, the practice of granting exclusive seats

to Harijan members was abolished. Through unwavering support, the Movement facilitated renaming hotel name boards from "Brahmins Hotel" to "Vegetarian Hotel." Individuals began to take pride in relinquishing their caste name.

Role of Women in Self-Respect Movement.

In addition to its anti-caste and Tamil nationalist principles, the Self-Respect Movement is widely recognized for its deeply ingrained feminist values. Gender dynamics were consciously separated from Brahminical patriarchy, and women's autonomy over their physical, sexual, and reproductive choices was championed. "For a while, the self-respect movement's founders advocated for women to use permanent birth control"¹². In Periyar's envisioned society, women were granted access to permanent birth control measures. This stance diverged significantly from the prevailing national speech on birth control influenced by leaders like Gandhi, who overwhelmingly condemned birth control. Women were empowered with the right to choose their partners and seek divorce and remarriage. Religious beliefs did not stigmatize Widowhood. "The self-respect movement aimed to drastically alter heterosexual relationships by eliminating gender conventions and hierarchies"¹³. To love through sharing domestic responsibilities and childcare equality and service to society were seen as pathways. Women are attracted to this kind of sense diverse backgrounds in the Movement, including former prostitutes, devadasis, wage labourers, doctors, and teachers. Women activists within the Movement focused on issues directly impacting women, such as against domestic and against drinking for survival and opposing temple prostitution (devadasi system). Despite their primary focus on the rights of all women, the Movement was not limited to these issues alone. For instance, women played an essential role in anti-Hindu self-respect movement agitations of the 1930s, with several prominent activists being arrested for their participation.

Notably, two Dalit women, Veeramal and Annal Meenambal, emerged as prominent leaders within the Movement, persistently advocating for Dalit women's rights. The Movement's founders initially encouraged women to consider permanent birth control, in stark contrast to Gandhi's staunch opposition to any form of birth control for women. One of the most successful phases of the self-respect movement was introducing the ego marriage system. Women actively participated in movements like the Vaikom Satyagraha, which aimed to ensure equal rights for people of all castes in public spaces. She was a renowned social reformer and editor of Kudi Arasu, the monthly journal supporting the Self-Respect Movement.

"Nagammai frequently organized women's associations to oppose toddy shops in Erode as part of an Anti-Arrack movement"¹⁴. Gandhi acknowledged the efficacy of their efforts, recognizing the women's persistence and the occasional outbreaks of violence during their picketing. Some Important Aspects Self- Respect Movement.

"It campaigned against the hegemony of Brahmins as the higher caste to promote the promotion of self-respect for people under India's caste-based system"¹⁵. It asserted that true originality can only emerge once respect is attained. The Movement's primary objective was to achieve equality across all aspects of life. It aimed to eliminate detrimental social practices perpetuated by caste and religion, which perpetuated cycles of discrimination, including caste-based hiring practices and biases against lower castes. The rigidity of the caste system hindered rational thinking, impeding individuals from employing reason, understanding, and perspective. A few other notable points about the Self-Respect movement Brahmins were impacted.

The Movement aimed to foster self-respect among individuals within India's caste-based system by challenging the dominance of Brahmins as the superior caste. According to its principles, individual growth is only attainable when one gains self-esteem.

"The movement's primary objective was to attain equality in all areas of life".¹⁶ It aimed to eliminate harmful societal practices rooted in religion and caste that perpetuated discrimination, including caste-based hiring practices and the marginalization of lower castes.

Under the influence of casteism, individuals were compelled to act irrationally, impeding their ability to think logically and comprehend situations effectively.

Relevance of Self Respect Movement.

He came up with the idea of forming a self-respect movement as a. Achieving his goal, Periyar conceived the idea of establishing a self-respect movement to address harmful social practices entrenched in concepts like dharma and karma, aiming to liberate society from their grip.

*Evolving into a significant anti-caste movement, this Movement has critically examined India's social structure.

*The Movement emphasized inter-caste marriages and advocated for women's bodily autonomy.

*The feminist Movement championed a society where women could make choices regarding sexuality, reproduction, and physical autonomy, marking a pivotal moment for feminism in India.

*The Self-Respect Movement catalyzed one of the most significant societal transformations.

Conclusion.

"Periyar and his collaborators were so strongly opposed to Aryan race, Hindu Dharma and Brahminism that they were inclined to support the 'Two-Nation Theory'.¹⁷ Throughout history, Indian societies have been under the sway of Brahminical ideologies, subjecting people to persistent oppression—several events and movements developed in India as a response to this hegemony. The Self-Respect Movement stands out as a movement that challenged Brahminical authority in Indian society. Indeed, the steadfast ideals and demands of the Self-Respect Movement laid the groundwork for genuine democracy. As the youth of India, we draw inspiration from these overlooked chapters of Indian history, finding the courage to advocate for what we rightfully deserve, guided by the teachings of our leaders.

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