



SELF-RESPECT CULTURE AS AN ALTERNATIVE CULTURE IN TAMIL NADU SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT:

The Self-Respect Movement was launched by E.V. Ramasami (E.V.R.) at Erode in 1925, in a social atmosphere charged with intense discrimination and social exploitation. During the 1930s and 1940s, it developed as a powerful social movement in Tamil Nadu, firmly rooted in a social philosophy that was soon flanked by a political agenda. The goal of the movement was a casteless society, liberated from the oppression of Brahmanical Hinduism. Rationalism and atheism were the keywords in the struggle to make way for an egalitarian, anti-Brahminical and anti-Hindu social order. Disillusionment with Gandhi and Congress, fascination with a socialist agenda throughout the 1930s in association with Singaravelu Chettiar's ideas, and alignment-non-alignment interspersed with flirting with the Justice Party were all part of the political line of the Self-Respect Movement.



KEY WORDS: E.V.Ramasami, Self-Respect, Self-Respect Marriages, Nadar, Devadasi, Kudi Arasu.

INTRODUCTION

E.V.R. had identified five principles as the foundation of the Self-Respect Movement. These were: (i) God must be abolished, (ii) Religion must be abolished, (iii) Congress must be abolished, (iv) Gandhism must be abolished, (v) Brahmanism must be abolished.¹

The first Self-Respect Conference was held in Chengallpattu in 1929. More than six thousand people attended, half of them were ordinary people from distant places. The food at the conference was prepared and distributed by low caste Nadars.² A few resolutions were unanimously adopted in this Conference. They were

1. Restrictions imposed on people in the name of *Varnashrama* should be removed. The classification of the society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudra and Panchamas is highly questionable and should be removed. Untouchability is an offense to human civilization and national progress and therefore must be removed. Every person should have the right to walk any path and make use of any tub or well or choultry anywhere. People should avoid wearing caste marks on their forehead or body.
2. People should not spend money in temples and should not recognize intermediaries or *pujari*, i.e., the purohit system should be abolished. The intrusion of Sanskrit or any of the North Indian languages in matters of worship and prayer must be removed. People should be discouraged from building new temples, mutts, choultries or Vedic schools. People should drop caste titles on their names. Common funds should be used for educational purposes and to create job opportunities for the unemployed.³

At the second Self-Respect Conference held in the following year at Erode under the presidency of M.R. Jayakar, bolder steps were taken and the worship of idols in temples was strongly discouraged.⁴

At the Virudhanagar Conference of 1931, in addition to re-emphasizing the ideas expressed in previous conferences, resolutions were passed encouraging inter-caste marriages.⁵

In a well-attended meeting of the Self-Respecters at the E.V.R. residence in 1932, a clear division emerged between radicals and conservatives. While the former were in favor of actively entering politics, the latter were reluctant to do so.⁶

SELF-RESPECT MARRIAGES

An important step towards promoting the Self-Respect Movement was the spread of self-respectful marriages. These were special types of reform marriages, based on the principles of contract and equality in society, performed without the presence of Brahmin priests and without the observance of Orthodox rituals. They included inter-caste and intra-caste marriages and even widow marriages.⁷ However, most of the marriages were arranged marriages and intra-caste marriages. In Maharashtra, the Satya Sodhak Samaj under Phule also introduced a special type of reformed marriage system, but unlike the Self-Respect Movement, it could only perform some of these marriages and that too under Phule's own supervision. In this regard, the success record of the Self-Respect Movement was much greater.⁸

Although the exact number of self-respecters who have married widows is not known, some early E.V.R.'s associates claimed the number was several thousand.⁹ Kunchitam Gurusami, a powerful leader of the Self-Respect Movement, claimed that between 1929 and 1932 more than 8,000 self-respect marriages were performed in Tamil districts.¹⁰

A significant number of self-respect marriages took place in the Thanjavur, Trichi, Madurai and Ramanathapuram Districts of Tamil Nadu. This reformed form of marriage became especially popular among the Nadars who had suffered from the refusal of Brahmin priests to participate in their ceremonies due to their low social rank. Thus, when the Self-Respect Movement supported the boycott of Brahmin priests at non-Brahmin marriages, the Nadar community found ample reasons to associate with it.¹¹

Even Brahmin leaders like C. Rajagopalachari, who had a passion for social reform, couldn't help but admire the efforts involved in self-respect marriages. On the occasion of one of these marriages, which he attended at Courtalam in Tirunelveli in 1936, C. Rajagopalachari expressed his admiration. He said that he was very impressed with this marriage. Everything went fine. His friend E.V. Ramasami Naicker said this was a marriage without a priest. He disagreed with him because E.V.R. himself was a priest. He could say this countless times. Surely this wedding was far superior to any other Orthodox marriage. It was his ambition that in the future Ramasami would perform such marriages in large numbers for the good of the people.¹²

The first self-respect marriage took place at Palghat in 1925 in the presence of the E.V.R. himself. It was an inter-caste marriage. The bridegroom was the sub-editor of the *Kudi Arasu*, a Brahmin by birth, while the bride was the daughter of a devdasi.¹³

In the formative years of the Self-Respect Movement, a large number of these marriages were celebrated with a glitter of fantastic rituals and non-Brahmin priests officiating over them.¹⁴ By the 1930s, rational marriages were conducted, neglecting the use of orthodox rites, the presence of priests and even tying the *thali* (sacred thread) around the bride's neck.¹⁵ In October 1939, the Tamil Marriage (Women's) Conference was held in Chennai and in which a resolution was passed which insisted the need for the removal of Brahmin priests in marriages and other ceremonial occasions, and for simplicity and economy in marriages.¹⁶ The main virtue of self-respecting marriages was that they defined women as persons rather than potential wives or mothers. Furthermore, such marriages had built women as equal subjects with equal rights to property and power inside and outside the home. They were not mere additions of men and bearers of their seed. It is significant that self-respect marriages prepared women to view motherhood as a choice rather than their destiny.

In the early years, the legal recognition of these marriages was a contesting issue. Therefore, to ensure the legality of marriages, some of these marriages were registered from 1932 onwards.¹⁷ Indeed, in 1953, the High Court of Madras declared self-respect marriages illegal. Subsequently, the Special Marriage Act of 1955 validated them under the condition that they were registered under the Act.¹⁸ However, the bias in the legal system in favor of Hindu marriages persisted, as even without registration, Hindu marriages to a priest's participation they were valid, while all reformed marriages had to be registered. It was only in 1967 that legislation adopted during the D.M.K. government ensured that self-respect marriages gained legal recognition.¹⁹

The social character of self-respect marriages was basically elite or middle-class and urban in nature.²⁰ During the 1930s and 1940s, it was pointed out that nearly 40 percent of self-respect marriages took place in rural areas and the rest in urban areas and semi-urban regions.²¹

A small percentage of the marriages were inter-caste marriages or widow marriages. When marriages were between castes, families came from thriving commercial communities or wealthy landowners.²² These marriages were confined mainly to members of the Hindu community. What Christian and Muslim marriages were less expensive and ritually less elaborate than Hindu marriages. The members of these communities had expressed some sympathy as long as the movement had not challenged their religious beliefs since the beginning of rationalism.²³

From traditional customs to Hindu law, from atheism to communism, all had drawn attention in the lively debates and discussions of self-respect. Using simple language and common analogies, E.V.R. easily transformed the unknown into the familiar, an art that many of his followers had successfully mastered.²⁴

EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

The Self-Respect Movement had spread the idea of gender equality in the full sense. It included the areas of education, property, job and, of course, marriage and family. It encouraged widows to remarry, supported raising the minimum age for marriage for women, their right to divorce, their equal conditions of union in the context of the marriage contract and within the family. The devadasi system was condemned, along with all forms of prostitution and child marriage.²⁵

While the Indian National Congress (I.N.C.) and the Justice Party were sympathetic to the general idea of women's advancement, and the I.N.C. was determined to involve more women in the nationalist movement, the Self-Respect Movement agenda on this topic was much more radical. The education of women was revived as the main element of propaganda in the columns of the *Kudi Arasu* and women writers were encouraged through its columns. The Self-Respect Movement had established and sponsored various non-formal and private institutions and centers to provide education to women in need. In 1933 reading centers were established at Tuticorin and in various parts of Tamil Nadu dedicated to the memory of the late Nagammai.²⁶ In 1935 the League for the Development of Women was founded, with Neelavathi as secretary, with the proposed goal, among the others, to promote literacy among women.²⁷ In 1943, the Women's Literacy League was formed in Kulasekarapatnam in the District of Tirunelveli, on the initiative of K.A. Maniammai.²⁸

As a means of empowering women, the Self-Respect Movement supported family planning as early as 1934. An editorial in *Kudi Arasu* editorial observed that because of the prevalence of faith in matters such as God and religion, women remained submissive to men. Courage and freedom were not the exclusive property of men. Both were equal by birth. The women were used to beget children. This made them dependent on men; Until this was abolished, women could not be truly free. Women could also live without begetting children.²⁹

Women's mobilization was used effectively in anti-Hindi agitation in the period 1938-1939, when their participation in the movement outstripped the participation of women during the nationalist movement in Tamil Nadu.³⁰

In its entirety, when E.V.R. challenged Brahmanical patriarchy, he stood up to reject conventional images of women and femininity. He questioned the values that required women to remain chaste and derive their enjoyment from motherhood. Challenging the Brahmin patriarchy, E.V.R.

presented his own theories relating to marriage, divorce and love, covering the whole gamut of gender relations, so much so that it would not be wrong to claim that in terms of radicalism he anticipated much of the feminist logic how it would gain popularity in India some fifty years later.

END NOTES

1. This was part of the last speech delivered by Periyar on 19th December, 1973 at a meeting held at Theagaraya Nagar, Chennai, before his death. Venu, A.S., (tr.), *Periyar E.V. Ramasami's Declaration of War on Brahminism*, Chennai : Dravidar Kazhagam Publication, 1998, p. 5.
2. Gopalakrishnan, M.D., *Periyar: Father of the Tamil Race*, Chennai : Emerald Publishers, 1996, p. 22.
3. *Ibid*, p. 23.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Ibid*, p. 24.
6. The radicals were M. Singaravelu, A. Raghavan P. Jeevanandam and E.V.R. himself and the conservatives were Sami Chidambaranar, S. Guruswami, Alagiriswami and Ponnambalam. (Saraswathi, S., *Towards Self Respect: Periyar EVR On A New World*, Madras: Institute of South Indian Studies, 1994, p. 57.
7. Chandrababu, B.S., *Social Protest in Tamil Nadu*, Madras: Emerald Publishers, 1993, p. 94.
8. *Ibid*, p. 183.
9. Visswanathan, E.Sa., *The Political Career of E. V.Ramasami Naicker*, Madras: Ravi and Vasanth Publishers, 1983, p. 96.
10. *Ibid*, p. 99.
11. Chandrababu, B.S., *op. cit*, p. 103.
12. *Ibid*, p. 102.
13. *Ibid*, p. 96
14. *Ibid*.
15. Chandrababu, B.S., *op. cit*, p. 96.
16. *Mail*, 16 October, 1939; Arooran, Nambi, K., *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905-1944*, Madurai: Koodal Publishers, 1980, p. 163.
17. Chandrababu, B.S., *op.cit*, p. 97.
18. *Ibid*, p. 176.
19. *Ibid*, p. 104.
20. *Ibid*, p. 105.
21. *Ibid*, p. 99.
22. *Ibid*, p. 102.
23. *Ibid*, p. 104.
24. Chatterjee, *Debi, Up Against Caste : Comparative Study of Ambedkar and Periyar*, Jaipur : Rawat Publications, 2004, p.37
25. Anaimuthu, Ve., (comp.) , *Periyar E. Ve. Ra. Chinthanaigal*, Vol. 1, pp. 105-178.
26. *Kudi Arasu*, 17 September, 1933
27. *Ibid*, 26 May, 1935
28. *Ibid*, 11 December, 1943.
29. Chandrababu, B.S., *op.cit*, p. 119.
30. *Ibid*, p. 120.



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