



E. V. RAMASAMI AND NON-BRAHMIN DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT IN TAMIL REGION

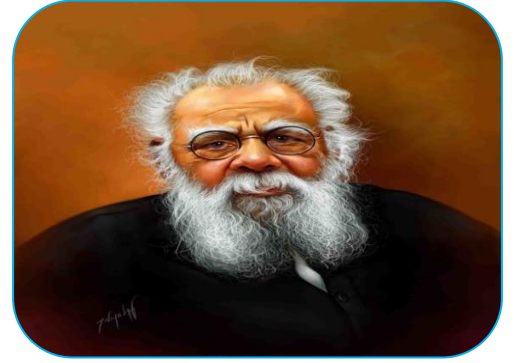
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ABSTRACT

The world has witnessed the emergence of distinguished intellectuals, valiant fighters, esteemed leaders, honorable individuals, insightful thinkers, prominent authors, influential politicians, progressive activists, celebrated writers, compassionate figures, and others alike. Among these transformative figures, one notable radical reformer who left a lasting impact was E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, affectionately known as 'Thanthai Periyar'. His contributions extended beyond mere reform; he embodied the image of a visionary, with his reforms breathing life into his ideals. Fearless and unyielding, he stood as a symbol of iconoclasm and rationalism in the modern era.



KEY WORDS: E.V.Ramasami (E.V.R.), Congress, Non-Brahmin Movement, Self-Respect Movement, Vaikom, Justice Party, Dravidanadu, Tamil Nadu

INTRODUCTION :

E.V.R. received accolades from UNESCO on 27th June 1970, being hailed as 'Periyar the visionary of his time; the Socrates of South East Asia; the Pioneer of Social Reform Movement; the adversary of ignorance, superstitions, meaningless customs, and unfounded traditions'.¹

Born on 17th September 1879, in Erode, Tamil Nadu, E.V.R. was the son of Venkatappa Naicker and Chinnathayarnmal. Despite his limited education up to the 3rd standard, his profound comprehension skills allowed him to excel as a social reformer later in life. Growing up, he witnessed numerous societal challenges related to caste, community, and religion. His friendships with Marudiah Pillai, P.V. Manicka Naicker, and others exposed him to the prevalent social evils of the time. E.V.R. was quick to identify and condemn the harmful practices masquerading as religious traditions and rituals in society, particularly criticizing the Vedas and Puranas. By the age of 25, he had completely abandoned all religious faiths.²

E.V.R. IN CONGRESS

The Jallianwalabagh Tragedy prompted his decision to join the Congress in 1920. Initially, he began his political journey as a councilor of Erode Municipality. He established a strong bond with

Rajaji, who was serving as a councilor of Salem Municipality at that time. This connection eventually led him to get involved with the I.N.C. As a member of the Congress, he advocated for the use of Khadi and campaigned for prohibition. With E.V.R.'s dynamic leadership, the Khadi movement gained momentum in Tamil Nadu. He encouraged his family members to wear Khadi and personally sold Khadi clothes on the streets. In 1921, he actively participated in the protest against the opening of arrack shops and willingly faced arrest. However, in 1925, he parted ways with the Congress due to disagreements over communal representation.³

Non-Brahmin Organisation

The Madras Non-Brahmin Association was established in 1909, and three years later, in 1912, the Madras United League was initiated by government servants who were Non-Brahmins. In 1913, the association underwent a name change and became known as 'The Madras Dravidian Association', gaining prominence among Non-Brahmin leaders. Subsequently, in 1916, the South Indian People's Association was founded, which launched three journals: *Justice* (in English), *Andhraprakiska* (in Telugu) and (Dravidian) (in Tamil).⁴ Eventually, the South Indian People's Association transformed into the South Indian Liberal Federation, serving as the political party for Non-Brahmins. It was named the Justice Party, inspired by the English daily newspaper, the '*Justice*'.⁵

Justice Party

The emergence of the Justice Party can be attributed to the Non-Brahmin Movement, which aimed to uplift the non-Brahmin community rather than harbor any hatred towards the Brahmins. This party gained popularity, except for a brief hiatus from 1926 to 1929. E.V.R. joined the Justice Party and advocated for the concept of self-respect. He assumed the role of chief organizer in 1927 and eventually became the party's leader on 29th December 1938.⁶ However, his strong anti-Brahmin stance led to a significant clash with the other leaders of the Justice Party.

Self-Respect Movement

In 1925, he initiated the Self-Respect Movement (S.R.M.) with the objective of achieving equal representation in all aspects of public life. The distinguishing characteristic of the S.R.M. became anti-brahminism, and it operated as a non-political organization.⁷ The S.R.M. openly made vehement attack on the conspiracy by the priestly class of Brahmins.⁸ C.N. Annadurai joined the movement in 1930 and became a disciple of E.V.R. Starting from 1931, E.V.R. attempted to introduce an economic programme to the S.R.M. He traveled to Russia in 1932 and infused a socialist orientation into the movement.⁹ This ideology quickly spread not only in Tamil Nadu but also in Kerala, Maharashtra, and other regions. However, when E.V.R. proposed aligning the S.R.M. with political ideologies, it faced opposition. In response to the Congress government's imposition of compulsory Hindi education in schools, E.V.R. led an anti-Hindi agitation from 1938 to 1940. Subsequently, on 17th September 1949, he established the 'Dravidar Kazhagam' (D.K.) and demanded a separate Dravidanadu. The Self-respect theme underwent various transformations between 1935 and 1937, prompting E.V.R. to advocate for social reforms, criticize the caste system and religion, and incorporate socialist ideals into his economic program. E.V.R. drew inspiration from Western models, particularly Anglo-American, while organizing Self-Respect propaganda. He also successfully promoted and conducted Self-respect marriages.

Vaikom Satyagraha, 1924

The Vaikom Satyagraha played a significant role in the historical struggle against untouchability, ultimately leading to the enactment of the Temple-entry Act. Vaikom, located in modern-day Kerala, was deeply affected by the social issue of untouchability, with its residents being prohibited from walking on the streets of the Siva temple, which was reserved for the upper class. E.V.R. actively fought against this social injustice and successfully eradicated the practice of untouchability in Vaikom. As a result, the low caste individuals were granted access to the Travancore temple, which was previously

dominated by the higher caste. Due to his instrumental role in achieving social equality for the lower caste people in Vaikom, E.V.R. came to be known as the 'Vaikom *Veerar*' (Vaikom Hero).¹⁰

Sheranmahadevi Gurukulam issue

E.V.R.'s stance against the Brahmins was further solidified by the situation at the Gurukulam in Cheranmadevi, Tirunelveli district. The Brahmin students were given better food and accommodations, with separate dining areas for Brahmin boys. E.V.R. and Dr. Varadarajalu Naidu fought against this injustice at the Gurukulam. As the Secretary of the T.N.C.C., E.V.R. refused to pay the remaining Rs. 5000 until a common mess system was established. However, V.V.S. Iyer managed to obtain the check from the Joint Secretary, K. Santhanam without E.V.R.'s knowledge. This incident led E.V.R. to realize the communal nature of Brahmins, prompting his decision to leave the Congress.¹¹

Kanchipuram Congress Session

The divide between E.V.R. and Brahmin leaders in the Congress widened following the Gurukulam issue. The breaking point came at the Kancheepuram Congress session in November 1925. At the Conference, E.V.R. presented two resolutions advocating for communal representation for non-Brahmins in public services and representative bodies. These resolutions were rejected, leading E.V.R. to leave the Congress and join forces supporting communal representation.¹²

Dravida Nadu

Since 1940, E.V.R. introduced a new aspect to the history of Dravidanadu. Jinnah also provided his full support in the establishment of Dravidanadu.¹³ In the midst of the Quit India Movement in 1942, E.V.R. initiated the Quit Aryan's campaign and emphasized that peace would not prevail in the country until India was divided into three main parts, namely Pakistan, Aryastan, and Dravidistan.¹⁴ The Justice Party was rebranded as Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944. E.V.R.'s vision of Dravidanadu was rooted in the beliefs of the Dravidian Non-Brahmins who spoke the four Dravidian languages: Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The primary goal of Dravida Kazhagam was also to establish Dravidanadu.¹⁵

To conclude, E.V.R. was a prominent figure in the Non-Brahmin Dravidian Movement, revolutionizing the Tamils and Tamil Nadu with his progressive ideas. He is often referred to as the 'Grand Old Moral Rebel' and hailed as a fearless warrior against the oppressive Manu system. Described as the 'Rama of Twentieth Century' and 'The Morning Star of the Dravidian Renaissance', E.V.R. was recognized as the greatest opponent of Brahmin dominance by C.N. Annadurai. Periyar was not just an individual, but a pivotal era and a significant turning point in the history of Tamil Nadu, accomplishing the work of 200 years in just two decades. His influence permeated all levels of society, as he staunchly adhered to his beliefs and rejected any form of subjugation. Embracing many of Ingersol's ideas and identifying as a Marxist, E.V.R. drew inspiration from Martin Luther, with his followers likening him to the European reformer. His efforts to reform Tamil letters and language were a bold stance against Sanskritization, while his advocacy for rationalism and opposition to religion solidified his position as the prophet of Tamil Nadu.

END NOTES AND REFERENCES

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