

Periyar, a crusader against the Hindus

E.V.Ramaswami @ Periyar was an atheist and a staunch critic of Hinduism. He used every opportunity to condemn the Hindu Gods and ridicule Hindu customs and traditions, while keeping a steady silence on Islam and Christianity. He is notorious for organizing a procession in Salem in Tamil Nadu with big cutouts of “Ram”, “Sita” and “Hanuman” garlanded with slippers. While former Tamil Nadu chief ministers late C.N.Annadurai and M.G.Ramachandran, who were once close supporters of Periyar, had parted company with him later because of his unjust and unethical policies and behavior. Karunanidhi on the other hand had always been and still continues to be an admirer of Periyar. It is also relevant to note in this connection that Periyar is considered as a demi-God by all present-day Tamil fanatic groups and secessionists in Tamil Nadu. Furnished herewith please find a note giving a brief profile of Periyar and the origin and rise of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu.

A brief profile of Periyar

Erode Venkata Rama Sami Naicker @ Periyar was born on 17th September, 1879 at Erode in Coimbatore district of Madras Presidency (Tamil Nadu). Periyar’s mother tongue was Kannada. He dropped out of school at the age 12. He got married to Nagamma at the age of 19. In 1904 he went on a pilgrimage to Varanasi. The immoral activities, begging, floating of dead bodies in the holy river, etc, that he saw there and the discrimination against low caste people that he experienced there created a revulsion in his mind against Brahmins and Hinduism and transformed him into an atheist. He was briefly associated with the Congress party from 1919 to 1925. He had participated in the Vaikom satyagraha in Kerala in 1924, seeking entry of Harijans into temples.

In 1925, after leaving the Congress party in protest against the party’s alleged pro-Brahmin bias, Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement (SRM) in Tamil Nadu and propagation of the philosophy of self respect became his full time activity. A Tamil weekly called ‘Kudi Arasu’, started in 1925 and an English journal ‘Revolt’ started in 1928 were used by Periyar to propagate his self-respect philosophy, which was dedicated to give the non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian past. In 1929, he announced the deletion of his caste surname Naicker from his name. He had always asked his non-Brahmin followers to shun all social and religious practices based on superstition and fight against all social inequalities and unjust customs and practices imposed by the Brahmins that resulted in denial of justice and a dignified life to the non-Brahmins. On his initiative, the first conference of the Self Respect Movement was held at Pudukotai in May, 1929. It was followed by several such conferences. The self-respect movement had the support and sympathy of the Justice party from the beginning. Between 1929 and 1932, Periyar had also visited Malaysia, Europe and Russia to study the political systems, social movements, etc, in those countries.

The Justice Party

The Brahmins who constituted only about 3.2% of the population in Madras presidency (Tamil Nadu) had totally dominated the social, political, economic and educational fields in Tamil Nadu for long. Because of such Brahmin domination in all spheres of life and also because of the perceived harassment and discrimination against the non-Brahmins, there was some resentment and anger among some sections of non-Brahmins even in the later part of the 19th century. With the spread of education, this communal divide between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins caused by the caste prejudices and disproportionate representation of Brahmins in government jobs, grew further and began to get more verbal expression in the early part of 20th century. As a result of the growing resentment against the Brahmin domination, a new political outfit called the South Indian Liberation Federation (SILF) was formed by some prominent non-Brahmin leaders at a meeting held on November 20, 1916. The SILF also published a non-Brahmin Manifesto in December, 1916. As this outfit had published an English daily called 'Justice' propagating its ideology and view points, gradually this new outfit came to be known as the Justice Party.

In 1916, Annie Besant, who headed the Theosophical Society, got involved in the Indian Independence Movement and she founded the Home Rule League. Besant was based in Madras and most of her political associates were Brahmins. She considered India as a homogeneous entity bound by similar cultural traditions, values and characteristics. Besant's association with Brahmins and her vision of a homogeneous India based on Brahminic values brought her into direct conflict with the Justice party. The non-Brahmin manifesto of the Justice party published in December, 1916 voiced its opposition to the Home Rule Movement. In turn, the Home Rule periodical 'New India' condemned the "Non-Brahmin Manifesto" and predicted its premature death. The Justice party newspapers derisively nicknamed Besant as an 'Irish Brahmini' and The Tamil language mouthpiece of the party described Home Rule as Brahmins' Rule.

The first non-Brahmin conference was convened by the Justice party at Coimbatore on 19th August, 1917. It was followed by several such conferences in different parts of erstwhile Madras Presidency. These conferences marked the arrival of the Justice party as a non-Brahmin political organization. After the establishment of a diarchial system of administration in Madras presidency as per the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms introduced through the government of India Act of 1919, the justice party won the first direct elections held in the presidency in 1920 and formed the government. The diarchial period in Madras presidency extended from 1920 to 1937, encompassing five elections. The Justice party formed four out of five ministries and was in power for 13 out of 17 years. The reservation of jobs on caste lines was first introduced in India by the Justice government of Madras presidency in September, 1921. However in the 1937 elections, the Justice party suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Indian National Congress, from which it could never recover and it started losing political influence. The Congress which formed the next ministry under the leadership of C. Rajagopalachari introduced compulsory Hindi education. The Justice party then joined with the Self Respect Movement of

E.V.Ramasami @ Periyar to oppose the government's move on Hindi. The resultant anti-Hindi agitation brought the Justice party effectively under Periyar's control. The anti-Hindi agitation in which several justice party volunteers were arrested had given a big boost to the fortunes of the party. The slogan "Tamil Nadu for Tamilians" was first raised by Periyar while leading the protest against the introduction of Hindi in schools. Periyar had charged that the introduction of Hindi was a dangerous mechanism used by the Aryans to infiltrate the Dravidian culture and it would halt the progress of Tamilians and destroy their culture. Indoctrinated by such propaganda, the Tamils were convinced that acceptance of Hindi in school system was a form of bondage. The language fanaticism had always played a very important role in guiding the Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu. It was also a factor responsible for the recurrent anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu in 1948, 1952 and 1965.

Periyar took over as president of the Justice party on 29th December, 1938. Under his leadership, the party became a strong advocate for the creation of a separate Dravidistan. The 14th annual confederation of the party held in December, 1938 had passed a resolution pressing for Tamil people's right to a sovereign state. In 1939, Periyar had organized a Dravida Nadu conference for the advocacy of a separate sovereign and federal republic of Dravida Nadu. The demand for Dravidistan was repeated at the 15th annual confederation of the party in August 1940. When the Cripps Mission visited India, a Justice delegation led by Periyar had met the Mission on 30th March, 1942 and demanded a separate Dravidian nation.

Dravidar Kazhagam

During the 16th. annual confederation of the party held in Salem in August 1944, it was decided to rechristen the Justice party as Dravidar Kazhagam and a resolution was also passed to this effect. C.N. Annadurai, a close lieutenant of Periyar, was chosen as the general secretary of the party. The Dravidar Kazhagam vehemently fought for the abolition of untouchability, worked for the women's liberation and promoted women's education and widow remarriage. The popularity of Dravidar Kazhagam continued to rise steadily, especially among the urban communities and students. For Periyar's supporters, Hindi and all ceremonies associated with Brahmins became alien symbols that should be eliminated from Tamil culture. Periyar was also against participation in the electoral politics as he believed that such deviation from their chosen path will dilute their fight against social evils. However there was a strong section of his supporters who were not averse to joining electoral politics. This section also resented some of the extremist views and acts of Periyar like hurting the sentiments of believers by insulting the Hindu Gods, inciting hatred against Brahmins and his insistence for a separate Dravida Nadu. This group led by C.N. Annadurai, who were waiting for an opportunity to part company with Periyar, got a perfect opportunity soon when the 70-year old Periyar Ramasami married a 30-year old woman, Maniamma, on 9th July, 1948. Protesting against the unethical behavior of Periyar, Annadurai and his supporters left the Dravidar Kazhagam en-masse and they founded a new political outfit in 1949 called the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK).

Rise of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), under the charismatic leadership of C.N. Annadurai and ably supported by V.R. Nedumchezhiyan, M. Karunanidhi and popular cine actor M.G. Ramachandran, became a powerful political force in Tamil Nadu within the next ten years. The anti-Hindi agitation spearheaded by the DMK in 1965 gave further boost to the DMK in expanding its mass base. In the general elections held in 1967, the DMK swept the polls with a thumping majority and C.N. Annadurai became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. Annadurai's untimely death in 1969 due to the dreaded disease cancer, created some internal tension and rivalries within the party as M. Karunanidhi, who was elected as the new chief minister, tried to marginalize M.G. Ramachandran, a popular Tamil actor with greater mass base and support. Following his expulsion from DMK in 1972, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) founded a new party called the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). The Karunanidhi-led government of Tamil Nadu was dismissed by the Union government led by Indira Gandhi in January 1976 on corruption charges. In the state assembly elections held in Tamil Nadu in 1977, AIADMK emerged as victorious and M.G. Ramachandran became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. Ramachandran continued to remain as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu until his death in 1987.

J. Jayalalitha, who had acted as M.G. Ramachandran's heroine in several Tamil films, had joined the AIADMK in 1982. She became the propaganda secretary of the party in 1983. She was made a Rajya Sabha MP in 1984 by MGR, because of her ability to talk fluently in English. After the death of M.G. Ramachandran in 1987, there was a power struggle in the party between the supporters of Jayalalitha and other senior leaders of the party who projected M.G. Ramachandran's wife Janaki as their new leader. Though initially the rival faction was able to marginalize Jayalalitha, in the 1991 elections, Jayalalitha in alliance with the Congress swept the polls and became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. Since then, AIADMK and DMK, the two Dravidian parties, have alternatively been winning the elections in Tamil Nadu. Thus the Indian National Congress, which lost the state elections first in 1967, could never again recapture power in Tamil Nadu all these years.

Dravidar Kazhagam after the split

The split in Dravidar Kazhagam and the formation of a new Dravidian political party called Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in 1949 by the rival faction led by C.N. Annadurai had considerably weakened the Dravidar Kazhagam and popularity of Periyar. However, undaunted by the set back caused by the split, Periyar stood firm on his principles and continued his fight against all social inequalities, caste superiority of Brahmins and Hindi imposition by the Aryan leaders from the north India. In 1956, Periyar organized a procession to the Marina to burn pictures of God Ram and he was subsequently arrested and confined to prison. In 1957, in his speech justifying the demand for an independent Tamil Nadu, he had asked his supporters to burn the constitution of India, holding the government responsible for maintaining the caste system. He was subsequently sentenced to six months imprisonment for burning the Indian Constitution. In 1958, participating in the All India Official Language Conference held at

Bangalore, he had strongly advocated for retaining English as the Union Official Language instead of Hindi. The government of India had banned separatist demands by law in 1957. Despite the ban, Periyar and his supporters had observed a Dravida Nadu Separation Day on September 17, 1960 resulting in numerous arrests. Periyar had undertaken a tour of North India in 1963 to conduct a campaign advocating the eradication of the caste system. He addressed his last meeting in Chennai on December 19, 1973, stressing the need for an action plan for ensuring equality and a dignified life to all sections of the society. Five days later on December 24, he died at the ripe old age of 94.

Periyar's legacy

Even after breaking away from the Dravidar Kazhagam, the new party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) had remained sympathetic to the Self Respect Movement of Periyar and had tried to uphold the ideals and principles of Periyar on issues like Hindi imposition, threat of Aryan supremacy and anti-Brahminism. Periyar spent more than 60 years advocating the right to equality and a dignified life to all sections of the society. He became an atheist only because of the prevalent social inequalities and unjust practices in the society which allowed a miniscule section of the society to enjoy superior caste status as their birth right and allowed them to keep vast majority of other sections of people under subjugation.

Periyar often talked about the richness of Tamil language and exhorted his followers to take pride in the superiority of Tamil language over others. He was highly critical of poet Subramania Bharati for portraying mother Tamil as a sister of Sanskrit in his poems. It was Periyar who led the first anti-Hindi agitation in erstwhile Madras presidency in 1938 when the state government tried to introduce Hindi as a compulsory subject in schools.

Periyar believed that as long as Aryan religion, Aryan Vedas and Aryan domination existed, there was need for Dravidian Progressive Movement and Self-Respect Movement. He was concerned about the growing north Indian domination which was not different from foreign domination. That is one reason why he did not support the Indian independence movement and instead wanted the British rule to continue. Periyar wanted a multi-linguistic nation comprising of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam regions of South India. At a separatist conference convened by Periyar at Kanchipuram in June 1940, he had released a map of the proposed Dravida Nadu. The concept of Dravida Nadu was later modified down to Tamil Nadu. He was the first to raise the slogan of "Tamil Nadu for Tamilians". However his separate Tamil Nadu envisaged the merger of all Tamil areas of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) also with Tamil Nadu. Yes, the concept of a greater Tamil Nadu with merger of Tamil-dominated eastern and northern parts of Sri Lanka, which is a demand of many of the present-day secessionist groups in Tamil Nadu, was originally mooted by Periyar. The US and its NATO allies which support all divisive forces in India have also been projecting Periyar as a demy God of Dravidian people only because he was the first to demand an independent Dravida Nadu.

In formulating policies on issues like social justice and self-respect movement, Tamil pride and in opposing Hindi imposition, Periyar had always been the guiding spirit and a role model for all the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, including the AIADMK and DMK, the two main political parties in Tamil Nadu.

A critical analysis of Periyar's life and follies.

Periyar had committed many mistakes and follies in his life, which was responsible for his dwindling support base in the later part of his life. But he showed exemplary courage in challenging the prevalent caste oppression and other social inequalities at a time when the oppressive forces enjoyed all the power and influence and the vast majority of the oppressed sections of people preferred to remain passive and subservient. He opposed and condemned all man-made divisions in the society in the name of caste and class and founded the Self-Respect Movement advocating equality and social justice to all sections of the society. Thus he can be considered as the father of all the present-day social justice movements in the country.

Periyar was a vehement advocate of anti-Brahminism. The dislike for Brahmins was so deep-rooted in him that he was almost blinded by his intense hatred and anger directed at Brahmins. He reportedly used to tell his followers that if they encountered Brahmin and a snake on the road, they should kill the Brahmin first. He wanted the total destruction of the Brahmins and justified it by stating that only if Brahmins are destroyed, caste will be destroyed. There had been some incidents of physical violence against Brahmins by supporters of Periyar who were inspired by his anti-Brahmin speeches. Periyar opposed Annie Besant's Home Rule Movement, mainly because he thought that Annie Besant had a soft corner for Brahmins as evident from the fact that most of her associates were Brahmins. He was not inspired or impressed by Gandhiji-led independence movement, as he considered Gandhi, though not a Brahmin, was always influenced by Brahminism. More over he wanted a separate Dravida Nadu and not a united India.

Periyar had at times behaved like a maverick. He had often talked about the greatness and richness of the Tamil language and its superiority over other languages, including Sanskrit and Hindi. But he had also made speeches castigating Tamil as a language of barbarians and Tamils as barbarians. Incidentally his mother tongue was Kannada. Periyar had talked eloquently about the need for women's liberation and had campaigned relentlessly to promote women's education, remarriage of widows and measures to end all kinds of exploitation of women in the society. But to the astonishment of all his admirers, 70-year old Periyar, whose first wife died in 1933, married a 30-year old woman in 1949, for a second time. Many of his disillusioned supporters who thought that Periyar did not practice what he preached, deserted him, causing a split in the organisation 'Dravidar Kazhagam'.

Periyar was against the concept of God and all religions, particularly against Hinduism. His anger and hatred against Brahmins prompted him to hate Hinduism. To counter the processions taken out by Hindus during Ganesh chaturthi and Ram Navami festivals, he used

to take out processions with Hindu idols like Ram, Laxman and Hanuman garlanded with slippers. Though he claimed to follow peaceful means of protest, there used to be violent clashes between his supporters and believers during such protest programmes. He had written several articles ridiculing Hindu Gods and rituals and even using vulgar language against the Hindu Gods. While the sentiments of millions of Hindu believers were hurt by his such actions and writings, the western press and the church remained highly impressed by his tirade against Hinduism and his demand for a separate Dravida Nadu. No wonder that the UNESCO, acting as a tool for promoting US interests everywhere, duly awarded him with an unprecedented citation in 1970, which described him as “The prophet of the new age, the Socrates of South Asia, father of social reform movement and an arch enemy of ignorance, superstitions, meaningless customs and base manners.