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Periyar In Congress Campaign

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Abstract:

In the beginning of his public service and political career, Periyar E.V.Ramasami Naicker. adopted the goals of Congress as his aims. He fully utilized the period for building up his image in the Congress and became one of the chief exponents of Gandhi's Constructive Programmes in Tamil Nadu. He fully dedicated his life for the Temperance Campaign and Khadi Movement and the removal of Untouchability. He made public speeches in colloquial Tamil and succeeded in arousing awareness among ignorant people. He was well backed by Rajagopalachari, the lieutenant of Gandhi. Rajagopalachari's support and his individual influence among the Non-Brahmin Leaders and his active role in the Non-Co-Operation Movement, helped E.V.R to rise quickly in the hierarchy of Tamil Nadu Congress. In 1920 itself, he became the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress. Seeing his sincerity and tremendous work in spreading Congress Ideals, T.V. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, a prominent Congress Leader was astonished and highly praised E.V.R. The Congress Organisation was much pleased with his services as a selfless Social Worker.

ATTRACTION TOWARDS CONGRESS

Periyar E.V.Ramasami Naicker 's acquaintance with the Congress can be traced to 1908 when he used to visit Congress Conferences.¹ E.V.R. was engaged in the National Movement from 1915 onwards. His services in the Coimbatore District Congress Conference, held in 1915, were commendable.¹ E.V.R. attended the Madras Session of the Indian National Congress, held in 1914, under the Presidentship of Bhubendranath Bose.³ Thereafter, he participated in a meeting which was organised by the supporters of Annie Besant to protest against the action of the Government of Madras in levying security on her newspaper, New India.⁴ Perhaps his first involvement with politics, was this meeting.⁵

IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY ASSOCIATION

For a while the Congress was in a mood to induct Non-Brahmins of prominence to check the growth of the Justice Party. As a consequence, the Madras Presidency Association (M.P.A) was started in September 1917 to promote the welfare of Non-Brahmins, without compromising from the Congress Policy.⁶

E.V.R. donated rupees one thousand to the Madras Presidency Association.⁷ E.V.R., who attended the inaugural meeting of the Association was in full agreement with the aims, and particularly with its efforts to secure representation for Non-Brahmins in public bodies.⁸ In the meeting, Kesava Pillai was elected President and E.V.R. was elected as one of the Vice-Presidents.⁹

When Mahatma Gandhi announced to observe April 6, 1919 as the Day of Satyagraha in protest against the Rowlatt Act, E.V.R. helped to convene several meetings in all the District Centres.¹⁰

The exit of E.V.R. from the Chairmanship of Erode Municipality in 1919 and from most of the positions he was holding, was a turning point. He had joined Congress within weeks of giving up his Municipal Chair.¹¹ Afterwards he was engaged in Congress Work full time.

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The Second Annual Conference of the Madras Presidency Association was held at Erode during October 11-12, 1919, under the Presidentship of Lord Govindass. Thiru. Vi. Ka got the friendship of E.V.R in that Conference.¹² It was attended by Non-Brahmins from all quarters of the Presidency and it was successfully organised by E. V.R in grand scale.¹³ When the Amritsar Session of the I.N.C. was held in December 1919, E.V.R, along with some of the Non-Brahmin Leaders attended it.¹⁴

ENTRY INTO CONGRESS

Rajagopalachari wanted to strengthen TNCC and wished E.V.R to enter into the Congress, for E.V.R. possessed both wealth and popularity. Moreover, Rajagopalachari thought that E.V.R's entry would influence other Balijas.¹⁵ Hence, Rajagopalachari and P.Varadarajulu Naidu influenced E.V.R. Both of them urged E.V.R to join the Congress not merely to achieve political liberation for the country but also to fight against the social inequalities prevalent in society. Eventually, on Rajagopalachari's advice, E. V.R. joined the Congress towards the end of 1919.¹⁶

E.V.R was drawn into the Congress by Rajagopalachari's words that social reform was a must and it could be achieved only through Gandhi and Congress.¹⁷ E.V.R. was involved in the Congress Activities, hoping that Social Reform and National Liberation would be realised by the Congress simultaneously.¹⁸ Freedom of the Country, Reconstruction of Society, Eradication of Untouchability and Enforcement of Prohibition, which the Congress advocated were in harmonised with his own views.¹⁹

CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME OF CONGRESS

On September 1920, a Special Session of the Congress was convened at Calcutta to approve Gandhi's Scheme of Non-Co-operation. After heated discussion, in the Regular Session of the Congress, which was held under the Presidentship of C. Vijayaragavachariar at Nagpur in December 1920, the Scheme was accepted with greater support. The scheme comprised of constructive and positive programmes. The Constructive Programme, which attracted E.V.R, included the Promotion of Swadeshi, particularly the revival of hand spinning and weaving, Promotion of Hindu-Muslim Unity, Prohibition of the use of Alcoholic Drinks and the collection of a crore of rupees for the memorial of Tilak.²⁰ E.V.R. was very sincere and tirelessly worked for the growth of the Congress. Gandhi's plan of Non-Co-Operation was very much appealing to him and he actively participated in the above programmes enthusiastically.

TEMPERANCE CAMPAIGN

Consumption of Liquor was prevalent in India and the revenue accruing from the sale of liquor was high all over the country. As it affected health, morality and economy of the people, the Congress decided to fight against this social ill. The Temperance Campaign was vigorously organized by propagating against the evils of drinking and by picketing before liquor shops as part of the Non-Co-Operation Movement. Throughout the Nation, the campaign had the desired effect.

In Coimbatore, members of the rural dominant caste, the Gounders, aided by urban Congressmen, led an Anti -Liquor Agitation. V.C Vellingiri Gounder, one of the Founder Leaders of the Gounder Caste Association, joined Congressmen like N.C. Ramaswami Iyengar and E.V.R. 'to organize volunteers for the picketing of liquor shops and preventing the annual auction by which the shops were leased.'²¹

E.V.R. organized one of the most impressive Temperance Campaigns in the Madras Province in 1921.²² In November 1921, he launched a successful Temperance Campaign at Erode. It was commended by no less person than Gandhi himself, as follows: "Erode alone has done bravely in the matter of temperance. Mr. Ramaswamy Naicker has, therefore, been rewarded with one month's simple imprisonment."²³

About a hundred persons were sentenced to short terms of imprisonment under Section 188 of the I.P.C. (Indian Penal Code) for their acts of disobedience at Erode.²⁴ To E. V. R, this was the first occasion of imprisonment.²⁵ Following the footsteps of E.V.R., his wife Nagammai and his sister Kannammal, took up the task of Temperance Campaign, and they were arrested.²⁶

There was an overwhelming response to the Campaign.²⁷ The authorities found it impossible to curb the tide of agitation. Expecting a grave situation, they decided to lift the Prohibitory Order issued under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code.²⁸ Perhaps this lifting could have been effected only in Erode.

KHADI CAMPAIGN

Gandhi advocated the use of Khadi (hand-woven) cloth, thereby creating a sense of patriotism among the Indians. The spinning and weaving were no doubt originally intended as a means of economic upliftment of poor sections of the society. It gained political and ethical significance.²⁹

E.V.R. gave up his costly clothing and switched over to Khadi clothing. He started wearing the rough Khadi.³⁰ Thiru.Vi.Ka. observed that E.V.R. discarded symbols of richness like costly dress, merry making life, etc., for the sake of the nation and wore simple clothes like a poor man.³¹ E. V. R. made his wife Nagammal and all members of the family to wear Khadi Clothes. He did not spare even his old mother.³²

E.V.R. thought that by the use of Khadi, he could give a fillip to cottage industries in the country but also enforce sanctions, however small they might be, against British economic interests by boycotting their textiles.³³

E.V.R. extensively toured many parts of Tamil Nadu to spread Khadi. He visited with a Charka. He carried with him Khadi cloths and sold them.³⁴ A rich man selling Khadi like a hawker, was indeed a great social service.³⁵

"The credit for spreading Khadi in Tamil Nadu went to E.V.R."³⁶ E.V.R. used to propagate the idea of Khadi with examples, native wit and statistics impressively.³⁷ E.V.R.'s explanation of the exploitation of the British by comparing the price of raw cotton and that of the finished product and his call for the use of Khadi was so convincing.³⁸

"In Coimbatore District, both in Erode and Tiruppur, Handloom Industry was thriving and Khadi also played a prominent part and they became a center for gathering hand spun yarn and Khadi."³⁹ E.V.R.'s services were commendable for promoting the Khadi Movement

E.V.R. was elected President of the Tamil Nadu Branch of the All India Spinners Association, an organization launched to control the retail price and push up the sale of Khadi.⁴⁰ In Erode, the Tamil Nadu Congress Khadi Vastiralayam was functioning under the supervision of E.V.R.⁴¹

Gandhi's Political Programme of Non- Co-Operation movement was the first national agitation launched against the British Rule in India. The Programme mobilised the ignorant Indian Masses. As a part of the Programme during 1921 and 1922, there were hectic campaigns against the consumption of liquor in many parts of Tamil Nadu. The Campaign received a large measure of support, both from the orthodox Brahmins and from the communities such as the Nadars in Tamil Nadu.⁴² Temperance Campaign was considered a way to embarrass the British Government and a way to improve the condition of the Depressed Class people who were given to much drinking. E.V.R. was the Hero of Temperance Campaign in Tamil Nadu. E.V.R., with a batch of Congressmen delivered anti-temperance speeches on various platforms and picketed toddy and arrack shops in a peaceful manner in Erode. As a reward for his activities, E.V.R. met rigorous imprisonment and his family women were also involved in the agitation campaign. In the Khadar Campaign, an Anti - British Programme of Congress, E.V.R. was again arrested in early 1924. E.V.R. ran the main Khadar depot from his own home and he continued to be the President of the Tamil Nadu Branch of the All India Spinners Association till 1926. Thus, in the Congress Campaign of socio-economic issues, Periyar E.V.R almost spent and dedicated his life as a true follower of Congress and Gandhian Ideals.

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