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## SOCIO-POLITICAL IDENTITY OF THE DRAVIDIAN JOURNALS IN LATE COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

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### Abstract:

*The Press and Print Media play an important role in the social transformation and political transition in every society and country. With the invention of the printing, the knowledge became spread widely. In the Tamil Society, the Depressed Classes like the Dalits and Nadars and non-Brahmin Caste –Hindus formed the Dravidian Stock. The Dravidian awakening began to crystallize in the second half of the Nineteenth century in which the role of Christian Missionaries was remarkable. Robert Caldwell contributed much in this regard. Due to this awakening, the Dalit and Nadar community intellectuals started many pioneer journal which aimed at social and political elevation of their people. The journals and print works of Periyar E.V.Ramasamy made worthy in this regard. On the whole, these journals worked to secure social and political rights which were denied for long in the name of caste and religion to the Dravidians.*

### KEYWORDS:

Nadar, Untouchability, Sabha, Parayan, Panchama, Dravidian.

### INTRODUCTION:

#### JOURNALS OF NADAR INTELLECTUALS

The leaders of the Nadar community used the Sangham as the nucleus to forge unity among them who were divided regionally. With this end in view, their society minded leaders started various newspapers. D.A. John Nadar started the newspaper Dravidabhimani in Salem and the Vijayavigatan was started by K.S. Kathirvel Nadar at Royapuram in Madras. Govidasamy Nadar started a paper Sanor Kula Viveka Bodhini at Kilairiyam in Tanjore district. S.A. Muthu Nadar another veteran Nadar leader started Nadar Kula Mitran at Tandaiyarpuram in Madras. Besides these, papers like Nadar Nanban, Pandiya Kula Deepam and Vinoda Vikatan came into being and worked to redress the grievances of the Nadars by exposing them to the public and to the Government, and thereby attempted to protect the Nadars from the exploitation of high caste people. These newspapers inspired them to fight for social rights on par with caste-Hindus.<sup>1</sup>

### PAPERS OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

Another Dravidian group, the untouchables were the bottom-line social group to get consolidation among the people of Tamil Nadu. They were economically deprived, socially submerged, culturally decadent and politically weaker section for a long time.<sup>2</sup> They were unable to ventilate their grievances and were living as silent sufferers. Under these circumstances, the problem of untouchability became a national issue. The nationalist Dravidians took up the cause of depressed, as they were the majority people. Such leaders were the products of western education.

On the inspiration given by the national reformers, the untouchables of Tamil Nadu began to organize themselves under some of their leaders. In 1891 they formed the Dravida Mahajana Sabha to represent their grievances and requirements to the Government.<sup>3</sup> In 1892 the untouchables of Madras also formed another association known as Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha. These two organizations tirelessly represented the problems of the untouchables to the government. Consequently the British government of Madras appointed S. Srinivasaraghava Iyengar to study their condition. His report depicted the pitiable condition of the untouchables and the government issued different favourable orders which provided all possible succour to the untouchables of Tamil Nadu by establishing schools and allotting lands to the landless and ex-servicemen among the untouchables. Furthermore, as a legacy of the British, many members of the depressed society were given posting in the administrative setup. They entered public services at various levels such as sirasthars, engineers, surgeons, inspectors, managers, registrars, head writers and guards.<sup>4</sup>

Thus their competent men came forward to break the shackles in all possible ways. Besides the public platform they also utilized the press for spreading their cause. They started magazines and wrote many thought-provoking headlines on various matters of political and economic importance and thereby attempted to consolidate their gains. In 1869 the untouchables published a journal *Suriyothayam* (Sun Rise). Another journal known as *Panchama* (The Outcaste) was published in 1871. In 1885 John Rathinam edited the journal *Dravida Pandian*. In the following year Pandit Muthusami of Vellore published a journal known as *Antormitran*. In 1893 R. Srinivasan, a well known untouchable leader issued the journal *Paryan*. In 1898 *Illara Vozhukkam*, a journal came into lime-light. Poonjolai Muthuveera Pavalar edited the journal *Poologa Vyasam* in 1900. In 1907 C. Iyothee Thass, edited the journal *Tamilan*. In the same year the Christian Untouchables Association of Madras introduced the journal *Dravida Kokilam*. The publishers of the journal reflected the grievances of the untouchables with valuable suggestions which condemned casteism, social evils, Hindu scriptures, Manu code, etc.,. These thought-provoking articles of the untouchable leaders inspired them to organize their people and to provide constructive support to the Dravidian Movement.<sup>5</sup>

As majority of them were not the elite people as like that of Brahmins there was no need for them to consider the Brahmins as enemies. But the concept of the Aryans and Dravidians separated them racially and ideologically. Therefore they were not tilted their position towards the Brahmins. Instead they turned their attention towards the backward non-Brahmin classes who were the majority people. They were also responsible for the emergence of the backward classes leaders. The backward class leaders were induced to organize their respective masses in order to strengthen the Dravidian causes. Among the Adi-Dravidas, R. Srinivasan and C. Iyothee Thass gave a good leadership. Among the Nadars, Rathinasamy Nadar pulled the Nadars into the Dravidan forum. Even though no proper leader did emerge among the Thevars in the beginning years, the British administrative measures and the social awakening among other people led the way for the increasing educated men who began to participate into Dravidian conferences.

### PARAYAN

Rettaimalai Srinivasan, (hereafter Srinivasan) born in 1859 in a village called Kozhialam near Mathurandhagam in Chingleput district, had his education in Coimbatore.<sup>6</sup> The caste system was so rigidly practised in those days that for fear of disclosing his caste, family and residence, Srinivasan always entered the class after the bell rang and once the class was over he rushed out of the college immediately so as to avoid enquiry by fellow students. During his student days he grieved over his inability to move with other students. Later on, when he served as accountant for ten years in European business houses in Nilgris, his constant thought was about the ways and means of eradicating untouchability.

In 1890, Srinivasan moved to Madras. For three years, he vigorously explored about the possibilities of uplifting the so called Paraiyars and creating a dignity for them like the people of other castes. He undertook an extensive tour of the Madras Presidency visiting Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Tiruvarur, Tanjore and Trichy the temple cities which stand as symbols of the traditional cultural of the Tamils. This tour exposed him to the degraded living conditions of the Paraiyars who were not only

subjected to the repressive practice of untouchability but were deprived of even the basic necessities of life, like food, water, dress and residence. An inquiry into the efforts of the government to uplift the pariahs revealed that they had been of little effect. Finally, arriving at the conclusion that only self-organisation and articulation of their grievances and demands could bring some relief to these oppressed people, R. Srinivasan started the journal Parayan in 1893.<sup>7</sup>

It was started fifteen years after the founding of "The Hindu." It was started as a monthly with four pages for two annas. The first issue saw the printing of 400 copies, which were sold out in just two days. The total cost including the advertisement costed Rs. 10, says Srinivasan. It was launched primarily with the aim of stimulating the Dalit people in the region to educate and organise themselves. Srinivasan made his intention of starting the magazine Parayan very clear as follows, "Like the one who constantly contemplates about himself and realise himself to become a prophet, the one who does not deny his origin but feels proud about it, speaks the truth without fear or shame and upholds his own freedom will earn proudly declare himself as such he cannot achieve his own freedom, but will be subjected to degradation him and poverty. It is therefore I published journal crowning it with the name Parayan."<sup>8</sup>

Started as a monthly the "Parayan" soon became a quarterly, devoted to propaganda in favour of the welfare of the Adi-Dravidas, to expose the acts of oppression of the caste Hindus and to influence government action. In short, it functioned as an organ of the Parayan Movement, particularly after the formation of the Paraiyan Mahajana Sabha in 1893.<sup>9</sup> For seven years from 1893 to 1900, the 'Parayan' strove to create an awakening among the Adi-Dravidas in the midst of opposition from the Brahmins and other high caste Hindus. Iyothee Thassar wrote a letter to one Seenivasa Ragava Iyengar, who was serving as the Inspector General in the Registrar office in Chennai Presidency around 1894. In that letter, he says that among the dalits in Chennai Municipal territory, there were 112 candidates qualified for the post of dubash with proficiency in many languages. This helps us to presume that it was the dalit who supported the Parayan. This clearly indicates that R. Srinivasan articulated his ideology of self-organisation through the Parayan which supported the political resurrection of dalits during his period. With the intention of going to London to work for the upliftment and emancipation of his own community, R. Srinivasan went to Bombay. When that was not possible he did not want to return but proceeded instead to South Africa where he remained for sixteen years. Returning from South Africa once again he took up the cause of uplifting the depressed classes.

In 1923, R. Srinivasan was nominated as a member of the Madras Legislative Council.<sup>10</sup> His activities in that capacity and afterwards as a representative of Indian aborigines in the first Round Table Conference (1930) signified the emergence of the dalit consciousness and dalit political voice in Tamil Nadu.<sup>11</sup> To begin with, he separated institution of untouchability from the religious issue. He was of the strong opinion that untouchability originated not from the Hindu religion but from the non-acceptance of the Dravidians of the social system of the Aryans. Distinguishing the Dravidians, the original people of India from the Aryan invaders, he excluded the former. When the caste system was introduced by the Aryan conquerors a section of the conquered refused to accept it. The people who are now variously called Paraiya, Panchama and Adi-Dravida were actually those who refused to accept the caste order and so, subject to various kinds of oppressions, created and lived in villages called the cheri establishing therein a separate society consisting of a separate temple, tanks, priests, leaders, administrators, vannar, barbers, cremation and burial grounds and practised customs of widow remarriage and divorce.<sup>12</sup> In course of time they lost their freedom as they came to be dominated by those who accepted the caste hierarchy.

### PERIYAR'S JOURNALS

Alliances of subaltern interest were produced in opposition to the Brahmin by the Self-Respect Movement. For that it took a brief detour through its propaganda methods. This is because the movement's propaganda methods were unconventional and directed at forming a subaltern non-Brahmin public. This public was qualitatively different from those produced by other critics of the Brahmin who preceded the Self-Respect Movement-such as Iyothee Thass and his neo-Buddhism, Maraimalai Adigal and his Saivism, and even the non-Brahmin subalternity of the Justice Party. This difference was the basis of new subaltern alliances against the power of the Brahmin and Brahminic Hinduism in the Tamil region. In the propaganda method, Periyar E.V.Ramasamy utilized well his journals to ventilate the grievances of the Dravidians against the domination of the Brahmins.

Surveying the political tasks ahead of him, in 1928 Ramasamy reasoned: 'Compared to the opportunities that we have to propagate [our message], the enemies of reform such as the orthodoxy, self-serving Brahmins and their hirelings have plenty of opportunities and facilities. Temples, Puranas, cartoons, festivals, religious bhajans, tradition, school education and text books impose on the people,

without any effort, ideas opposed to reform.<sup>13</sup> At one level, this comment was a recognition by the movement that the hegemonic domain of the everyday—such as temples, festivals, traditions, and modes of schooling—had perforce to be the site of its ideological intervention. In keeping with such an understanding, the movement chose to step aside from the formal domain of politics. For instance, it never participated in elections, legislatures, and ministries. In fact its emphasis on the everyday brought the movement into conflict with the Justice Party, which played its politics in the authorized colonial public sphere. Ramasamy wrote about the Justice Party thus: 'Only when a Brahmin becomes a member of the state legislature or a taluk board, would [members of the Justice Party] claim that Brahminism should be rejected; and criticise the Brahmin rule. They do not object to falling at the feet of the Brahmin in his role as [spiritual] guru, guide, to heaven, or introducer of god.'<sup>14</sup>

In forging a new public which brought together the realm of the everyday and the politics of inferiorized identities, the movement consciously employed a torrent of printed and spoken words. In 1925 Ramasamy started a journal, *Kudi Arasu* (People's Rule), which was followed in 1928 by *Revolt*. During the 1930s the colonial government, suspecting Ramasamy of propagating communism, targeted his journals. Ramasamy and his sister Kannamal were arrested on December 20, 1933 on charges of sedition for an article published in *Kudi Arasu*. Ramasamy's refusal to furnish security led to its banning. But he substituted the banned journal with *Puratchi* (Revolution). E. V. Krishnasamy, his brother, was then arrested on sedition charges on June 2, 1934 for an article published in *Puratchi*. The latter was then replaced by *Pagutharivu* (Rationalism) on August 26, 1934.<sup>15</sup> Constant and quick substitutions of each banned journal with a new ones indicates the importance attached by the movement to printed communication of its ideas to the reading public; in fact till the end of his life Ramasamy continued floating new propaganda journals. He started *Unmai* (Truth) in 1970 and *Modern Rationalist* in 1971, both when he was extremely old.

The journals were throughout accompanied by a steady flow of political pamphlets and songbooks.<sup>16</sup> These were brought out by publishing houses such as *Pakutharivu Noorpathippu Kazhagam* (Rationalist Publishing House) and *Unmai Vilakkam Press* (Press for the Exposition of Truth). The fate of several of these was similar to that of the journals: they ran into constant censorship by the state. *Bhagat Singh's Why I am an Atheist* led to the prosecution of its publisher E. V. Krishnasamy and its translator P. Jeevanandam. Publications such as *Pathirikalin Brahmachariya Lakshanam* (Truth about the Celibacy of Christian Priests), *Kudi Arasu Kalampagam* (an anti-religious compendium), and *Indhi Yethirppu Geethamum Stalin Jagadeesan Avarkalin Unnaviratha Geetham* (Anti-Hindi Songs and Song on the Fast by Stalin Jagadeesan) were proscribed at different times.<sup>17</sup> The printed word was also circulated through rather unconventional mediums by the movement. For instance, *Lourdu Samy*, an activist of the movement, printed and sold thousands of postal envelopes and postcards to the cadres during 1945-1946. These carried pictures of the leaders, and lines from poems espousing the ideology of the movement, such as: 'The old world, celebrated and revered, is breaking up because of the Erode earthquake.'<sup>18</sup>

The most important aspect of these publications was how they were directed towards subaltern sections of the Tamil public. The language in which they were written did not conform to the grammatical rules much revered by Tamil pundits. This was particularly so in the writings of Ramasamy. He openly acknowledged that *Kudi Arasu* was full of grammatical errors but declared he would not learn grammar as a solution.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Va. Ramaswamy summarized E. V. Ramasamy's politics as a fight against both *Manu Nool* (the *Manusmriti*) and *Nanool*, a Tamil grammatical text.<sup>20</sup> Given his position against elite linguistic purism, he also opposed the interpretive traditions of Tamil pundits—a tradition within which, *Thass* and *Adigal* had functioned. Ramasamy reserved some of his most scathing criticism for Tamil pundits who constructed and propagated a glorious version of the Tamil past through a reading of classical Tamil literature full of religiosity. He contemptuously characterized their skills as the mere ability to 'memorize "literature" by rote, give multiple meanings to any single word, baffle the people and gather money. . .'<sup>21</sup> Characterizing them as lacking in reasoning power and as fraudsters, he compared their exegetic exercises to stirring a pit of shit.<sup>22</sup> He dismissed such literary stalwarts as *Thiru Vi. Kalyanasundaram*, *T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar*, *Namakkal Ramalingam Pillai*, *Kathiresan Chettiyar*, and *Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai* as incapable of contributing to the betterment of Tamils.<sup>23</sup> Centrally, he attempted a form of public address free from the exclusivity of the literary elite.

The publications of the movement were priced cheap, printed on inexpensive paper, and often distributed free. In a letter written to his Saivite fellow traveller E. M. Subramania Pillai in 1947, Ramasamy said: 'My publications are priced very low. There is no orderly sale. Most of them are [distributed] free. Therefore it is difficult to work within a business framework.'<sup>24</sup> Given their anti-religious content and deliberately unrefined language, they were taboo in polite political circles. Stage artist and song-writer *Dilrupa Shanmugasundaram*, who was part of the well-known drama troupe of T. K. Shanmugam Brothers from 1941 to 1950, remembers it was forbidden to read the literature of the Self-Respect Movement in the

open. It was usually hidden behind the nationalist newspaper Dinamani and read discreetly.<sup>25</sup> It was the lowly barber shops in towns and villages that kept copies of the green-covered Kudi Arasu for cadres and sympathizers of the movement.<sup>26</sup> The Journals of Periyar alone totally attended the grievances of the Dravidians and inculcated the Dravidian consciousness among the marginalized and subaltern Tamils. When the Nadar and Dalit Journals worked for the social elevation of their community people, the Journals of Periyar provided place for the news of all the Dravidians and even representing the social and political identity of the Dravidians in the post modern period.

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