

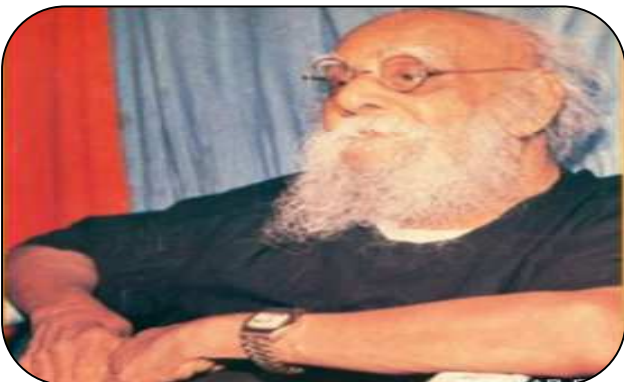
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EARLY LIFE AND POLITICAL CAREER OF PERIYAR E.V.RAMASAMI NAICKER OF TAMIL NADU

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Abstract :

This paper is an attempt to bring out the life of E.V.Ramasamy (EVR) Periyar and his major events, programmes and contributions in terms of thoughts before going to discuss the various aspects of K.Veeramani in Dravidar Kazhagam under EVR. The great leader Periyar E.V.Ramasamy was a multi-faceted personality, a social revolutionary, a rationalist, a profile writer, a forceful speaker and above all an original thinker. In fact, nineteenth century was a period of social ferment in India. This period was the beginning of Indian renaissance. In Indian sub-continent, the emergence of social awakening led to the social reform movement which paved the way for the growth of a movement for social and communal justice.



Key Words: Periyar, E.V.R., Naicker, Pandits, *Puranas*, *Sanyasi*, Kazhagam, D.K.

INTRODUCTION :

Better known as 'Periyar' meaning 'Great Man' in Tamil, E.V.Ramasamy was a crusader against caste, champion of the women rights and equality, fighter for the social and communal justice and the protector of human rights. C.N. Annadurai called him 'Voltaire and Rousseau of India'. UNESCO, in its citation likened him 'Socrates'. He is regarded as the 'Father of Tamils'. He has achieved in twenty years what revolutionists and reformers in other countries have taken centuries to achieve. Periyar questioned Manu's unequal social ideology and gave a clarion call to equality and casteless and classless society. He was instrumental in reducing to a minimum untouchability in Tamil Nadu and its neighbourhood. Periyar took the lead to demand reservation of fifty percent of the jobs for the backward classes. His policy was later implemented in Tamil Nadu by the subsequent Dravidian Political parties, whose leaders were all his followers. Hence, EVR is immortal, he will never die, his ideas and thoughts on human rights are getting popular and strong every passing day. Even after his death in 1973, his philosophy, his social vision and message and his revolutionary ideas are travelling all over the world. His influence in all spheres of life is so deep and his message is so powerful that human society can march successfully on the path of progress and modernity. Though he was born an influential and orthodox family, he never accepted the social evils, religious bigotry and superstition. By experience, he found that religion is nothing but an exploitative system. He was a great organiser from his youth days.

Recognising his organising capacity, his father assigned him many public and social works.

Relating to the general characteristics, 'Thanthai Periyar' (the great patriarch) as he was affectionately called by millions in Tamil Nadu, E.V.R. was of fair complexion and medium height. The build of his body was big, imposing and strong. His soft and sensuous lisp were roofed over by his moustache and whenever they parted for a smile they did not fail to fascinate. His dress was aggressively simple¹. E.V.R. was not miserly but frugal. He never liked wasteful expenditure on any account. He not only set an example of practising austerity in life himself but insisted on others following the same. E.V.R.'s philosophy of economy was best summed up in these lines, "He who will not economise, will one day have to face agony"². Another habit of E.V.R was that he used to shun publicity whenever he helped others.

E.V.R was a powerful speaker and he had a perfect command over the Tamil language in which he addressed his large audience. There was an unusual charm in his simple and clear speeches which kept the audience spell-bound for hours. What was striking was that he descended to the level of the audience and presented complicated ideas in such a way that he not only reached the hearts of this listeners but also carried them with him. On the platform he was hooting, hissing, hitting and exploding every thing and everyone, irrespective of rank, relation or riches. But off the platform and amidst friends E.V.R. underwent a strange metamorphosis. He became the soul of sweet conversation, the personification of drawing-room manners, the finest flower of human culture³. He himself was utterly selfless and unconcerned about what others thought of him and criticised his friends as ruthlessly as he castigated his opponents⁴.

E.V.R. wrote several books and articles on varied subjects. The Tamil that he spoke and wrote was colloquial and commonplace. Homely proverbs rather than literary quotations were there in his speeches and writings. One writer, commenting on the writings of E.V.R. said "Periyar Ramasami had informalised Tamil prose as Richard Steele had informalised English Prose and Robert Browning's English Poetry"⁵.

E.V.R's deep sense of norms in public life and his meticulous observation of these norms were almost without a parallel in the history of Indian public life. The remarkable punctuality of E.V.R. in attending public meetings, functions (both official and non-official) and conferences (political or otherwise) and the patience with which he sat through the Trojan fervour of the energetic youth throughout the proceedings of the meetings and public functions in spite of physical strain and ailment were the inimitable qualities of his dynamic leadership. These reflected his courage of conviction and sincerity of purpose in public life.⁶

E.V.R. was opposed to any kind of 'secret moves' and he, for his part, had embarked upon all his campaigns and movements after giving full notice to the authorities and the public in advance⁷. E.V.R had tremendous strength of mind and developed strong will-power⁸. As C.N.Annadurai, one of his disciples put it, 'He is not an individual but an institution, an era, a new phenomenon, a turning point'⁹ in the political and social history of South India. On the whole, E.V.R. was an admirable combination of purity and prudence and firmness and flexibility. His enormous concern for etiquette and public decorum won the appreciation and admiration of even his worst political opponents.

Early Life of E.V.R

E.V.Ramasami Naicker was born on 17th September 1879 in a wealthy orthodox Kannada Balija Naidu family at Erode. He was born as the second son of his parents Venkatappa Naicker and Chinnathaiammal. The term 'Naicker' was only a family title. This community is also known as the Kannada Naickers or Naidus¹⁰.

From childhood he was brought up by his widowed grandmother, who adopted him, which enabled the boy to grow independently without parental supervision and care¹¹. Growing thus the young E.V.R. was sent to School at the age of six but he was soon withdrawn from school at the age of ten as he was mischievous¹². This mischievous behaviour was due to the lack of effective supervision and control over the young E.V.R both at

home and school. This absence of control both at school and home encouraged the young E.V.R. to do things according to his wishes and thus a cause for the development of his independent nature¹³. While he was at school, he was warned by his parents and teacher not to drink water from the people of low-caste and whenever he was thirsty he should drink water from his teacher's house who belonged to the upper caste¹⁴. Once the young E.V.R. went to his teacher's house to drink water. 'The high-caste teacher's daughter who offered him water, directed him to lift the tumbler up and drink without the touch of his lips on the rim and then washed it off with water before touching it. And at another time when the young E.V.R. went to a low-caste house to drink water, the woman who offered water, took away the tumbler without sprinkling water on it. To his surprise, the low-caste women asked the boy at first if his parents would not object to his drinking water from her house. He said that the parents would not but evidently he was uttering a lie as he himself narrated this incident in one of his reminiscences¹⁵. This experience led to compare the behaviour of high and the low-caste people and the young boy realised that all these were due to the prevailing social system which was caste ridden. It was his innocent experience that had in it a grain of provocation to his thinking in a rationalistic way instinctively. His discomfort in the company of high-caste people and his comfortable adjustment with low-castes gradually led him to mix more with lower-caste boys. E.V.R. therefore, violated the rules of caste purity at a very early age and in an extreme way.

His free mingling with low-caste boys worried his parents who brought the young E.V.R from his grandmother's house, thinking that the leniency and affection of the grand-mother towards their son was the reason for the boy's uncontrollable behaviour¹⁶. 'On a particular occasion the parents got his legs chained with small wooden logs for about fifteen days in order to prevent him from mixing with low-caste friends. This punishment was repulsive and it had an effect contrary to the expectation of his parents. Yet, the father used to ignore the boy's behaviour while the mother felt dis-heartened. The parents should have felt that young E.V.R would change his behaviour and conform to the prevailing social order as he grew old. Evidently, the parents underrated the boy. They were not aware of the repulsive punishment causing apparently an inner-conflict in the mind of the boy'.¹⁷

E.V.R's parents were pious and orthodox Hindus who always patronised Brahmin priests. After withdrawing his son from the school, his father Venkatappa Naicker did not set him free. He realised the intellectual ability of his son and wanted to utilize that ability in his profession. So, he inducted his son into his business when he was just twelve years old¹⁸.

His withdrawal from school, benefited young E.V.R in two ways. E.V.R. abundantly availed of the opportunities to hear the Pandits, Sanyasis (Sadhus) and people connected with Hindu religion, who were flooding his house frequently to deliver religious discourses. With his instinctive rationalism already activated, with his environment having been more liberal allowing his biological urge to come to surface and with his liberation from the ties of school, E.V.R. learnt in a free atmosphere by hearing the Pandits and questioning them, clarifying doubts with them and raising new doubts for them.

Secondly, his contacts with Brahmin priests and religious preachers who came to his house led him to have a close life with them. Through this contact he gained full knowledge about Hindu Religion and Hindu mythology. His debates with them sharpened his intellect on the subjects like Religion, God, Puranas, Ithikasas, etc. and made him to have a radical original thinking. 'He would first attempt to contradict the view point of the pandits by finding loopholes in the opponents' arguments. He would corner them in their own statements. He would pick up the self-contradictory trends in their analysis. He would relate their statements of conviction with their personal life showing again the conflict, somewhat less sympathetically, between their principles and practices. And such contradictions he would spell out from the very scriptures which the priests had kept as an authority with them'.¹⁹ Contradiction was a powerful tool of analysis which E.V.R. used with dexterity in the

early years of his life. Thus, being in the midst of Brahmin religious priests, E.V.R. became a master of the Puranas and the Vedic literature of the priestly class and this helped him to criticise God and religion even in his teens. His family surroundings made him a free thinker and a bold rationalist and he got the urge to reform the Hindu Society.

‘Much against the wishes of his affluent parents, E.V.R. loved and married Nagammal who hailed from a poor family at the age of nineteen. After six years of married life and at the age of Twenty five, E.V.R. was struck with the futility of this mundane world and changed clothes as a ‘Sanyasi’ (Sadhu) and started out from home, he knew not whither²⁰. His renunciation of the world was only a momentary decision and a short lived one but the experience he gained during this period was a worthy lesson to him to know more about the Brahmins and religion. In 1904, he undertook a northward pilgrimage to various holy centres of India and finally came to ‘Benares where he was disgusted with the Brahmins who ate meat and drank liquor’²¹. He got annoyed with the empty-mindedness of the Sanyasies and corruption to the core of the Brahmin priests and got disgusted at the cheap prostitution of the pilgrims. His critical views about God, religion, rites and rituals and scriptures were confirmed by his own personal involvement objectively in the environment of a pre-eminent city of Hindu holiness and pilgrimage²². E.V.R. returned to Erode, disillusioned with both Brahminical society and the ascetic mode of life. Those who practised the priesthood, they failed to live upto his ideals²³. After his trip to holy places, he gradually abandoned all faith in religion.

When he rejoined his father’s business at Erode, he actively engaged himself in the public life of that town. At Erode, whatever good or bad happened in any house E.V.R. invariably participated in all ceremonies, be it a marriage or death, without any distinction of caste prejudices. He himself would voluntarily conduct such things with all responsibility as if they were his own²⁴. Due to this natural character, he became very popular at Erode. He had an abiding interest in public welfare. For instance, ‘when the disease of plague struck Erode, he did yeoman service to the public. While the well-to-do deserted Erode for fear of the scourge of plague, he undertook courageously along with his band of friends and followers, the selfless humanist service of treating the plague-afflicted poor population with tender care and even of lending his shoulders in removing the dead bodies to the cremation ground. He was a source of succour and strength to the poor families at Erode in whose life his willing, voluntary interference would bring refreshing solution and compromise’²⁵.

With the experience and the sense of responsibility dawned on him, he was found equal to any task. By his natural gift of reason he gained a powerful position in Erode public life and soon he was connected with twenty nine public institutions such as the District Board, Taluk Board, Devasthanams, War Fund, Urban Bank, Magistracy, Merchant Association, Music Academy, Agriculturalist Association, Naidu Sangam, Reading room, Mahajana High School, Peace Committee, Committee for Recruiting Jawans for War etc., in varied capacities. He was Honorary Magistrate for 12 years, President of the Erode Taluk Devasthanam Committee for a number of years, Vice-President of the Taluk Board and Chairman of the Erode Municipality²⁶. ‘Though he administered temples in his capacity as President of the Temple Committee, he never regained faith in religion. Often his critics pointed out that his trusteeship was inconsistent with his views on religion and God. But, E.V.R. answered that he held such position only for proper administration of temple and temple funds²⁷. His opposition to religious worship and caste regulation brought condemnation from all high-castes. He was an outcaste to his own relatives because he defied his orthodox kinsmen by encouraging his young niece to remarry after she had lost her husband. Yet, he gained importance and influence.

E.V.R’S Later Political Life

With the view of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”, E.V.R. allied himself with the Justice Party. The mutual co-operation and goodwill between the two movements which aimed at improving the non-Brahmins

condition in social and political fields between the years 1926 and 1938 culminated in the election of E.V.R. as the leader of the Justice Party. What was left of the Justice Party after the 1937 elections, E.V.R. took over to the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944²⁸. The Kazhagam proved to be a strong force capable of effecting changes in the social system of South Indian life and tried to oust Brahmins from the social domination of society in later years.

'After the split and formation of the D.M.K. in 1949, E.V.R. and the D.K. moved off the main political stage and concentrated on a broader ideological propaganda, linked up with the Dravidian Movement. E.V.R. involved himself in numerous Self-respect campaigns and meetings, formed Rationalist's Societies, demanding the removal of Brahmin names and titles and the cessation of religious ceremonies and removal of God's pictures from public offices. He pleaded for Tamil to be used as the Temple Language, for the right of Harijans to enter the priesthood and for women's rights and social equality based on full rights for all castes²⁹.

From 1950 to 1973, E.V.R. involved the D.K. in numerous campaigns of which the agitation for retention of the Communal Government Order in 1950, the iconoclastic campaign of breaking the image of Vinayaka in 1953, the campaign of burning the national flag in opposition to Hindi in 1955, the campaign of burning the pictures of Rama in 1956, the campaign of burning the Constitution of India in 1957, the campaign of erasing the word 'Brahmin' from Hotel Boards in 1957 and later in 1970, the campaign of burning the maps of India in 1960, the campaign of the burning of 'Ramayana' in 1965-1966, the *garbagraha* (sunctum sanctorum) entry agitation in 1969 and the superstition eradication conference in January 1971 at Salem where Rama's picture was beaten with slippers, were important and historical campaigns. Also, his anti-Hindi campaign and propaganda for separate Dravidistan continued.

E.V.R. died at the age of ninety five on 24th December 1973³¹ at Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore in Tamil Nadu. 'His body was brought to Madras and was laid at Rajaji Hall for the public to pay their last respects to him. The body was draped in the red and black D.K. flag. It was a poignant scene as sobbing men and women filed past the body. The National Flag flew at half-mast. In a communication announcing the death of E.V.R., the State Government described him as 'India's foremost social reformer' and placed on record his services for eradicating social disabilities and caste distinctions³⁰. The body was buried, not cremated, with a simple un-Hindu funeral ceremony with full police honours on 25th December 1973 at Periyar Thidal at Madras.

E.V. Ramaswami's virtue was his frugality and simplicity. His ambitions were high; but his wants were modest; he kept them to the barest minimum. He was free from addiction of any kind. He dressed in the simplest piece of cotton material, ate whatever was served, slept anywhere when he needed rest. He left behind him a society, vastly different from the one he inherited, more alert, more questioning, less gullible, better educated, more modern and in general closer to take off point for a state of living that would be richer in all respects. Till his demise in 1973 at the age of ninety-five, it was more than a half a century of total dedication to the service of the of the people with few parallels in the political history of India E. V. R. served the human society.

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6. E.V.R. along with his friends S.Ramanathan, Sami Chidambaranar, A.Ponnambalanar, Mayuram Natarajan and others visited several South East Asian countries between 15.12.1929 and 11.1.1930. His self-respect propagandistic speeches in several cities and towns of Malaya and Signapore did not allow him sufficient

time even to have a shave. E.V.R. was scrupulous to the point of not wasting his time for trivial personal routines like shaving, bathing and brushing the teeth. In fact, E.V.R. expected that all public men should not waste their time in such routines. (Karunanandam, S., **Thanthai Periyar** (Father Periyar) Madras, 1979, pp.81-83;Subramaniam,M.K.,**Periyar's Self-Respect Philosophy**; Erode, Self-Respecters Academy Publication, 1980. p.22.).

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