

A profile on Ramaswami Naicker

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Manifest pedagogy: Rama Swami Naicker is a prominent personality in the Indian National History and the Regional History of Tamil Nadu. He is a pioneer in bringing about Radical changes in Tamil Society and Politics. As UPSC is concentrating on alternative voices of the nation like that of Ambedkar, Narayan guru in this line Periyar's voice is an important alternative voice.

In news: Recently Tamil Nadu BJP had tweeted distasteful remarks on **Periyar's 46th death anniversary** which triggered a firestorm of protests in the state.

Placing it in syllabus: Historical personalities

Dimensions:

- His Political Ideology
- Political organisations and Newspapers started by him
- His Social Reform Measures
- His opposition to Indian National Congress(INC)
- Legacy left behind by him

Content:

E.V. Ramasamy, popularly addressed as Periyar or 'The Great One', laid the ideological foundations of modern Tamil politics and social life.

His Political Ideology:

- Periyar started his **political career as a Congress worker** in his hometown Erode.

- He quarrelled with Gandhi over the **question of separate dining** for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students at Gurukkulam, a Congress-sponsored school owned by nationalist leader V V S Iyer near Tirunelveli.
- After failing to bend Congress to his views, **Periyar resigned from the party in 1925** and **associated himself with the Justice Party.**
- The Justice Party had earlier advocated reservation for non-Brahmins in the bureaucracy and after coming to power in the Madras Presidency, issued an order to implement it.
- During the 1920s and 30s, **Periyar combined social and political reform, and challenged the conservatism of the Congress** and the mainstream national movement in the Tamil region.
- He **reconstructed the Tamil identity as an egalitarian ideal** that was originally unpolluted by the caste system, and **counterposed it against the Indian identity championed by the Congress.**

Political organisations and newspapers started by him:

- Though EVR's participation in the politics of Tamil Nadu till 1920 was minimal, he **maintained political contact with important nationalist leaders from 1917** onwards.
- The **non-Brahmin members of the Tamil Nadu Branch of the Congress organisation formed the Madras Presidency Association in 1917** to represent and safeguard the non-Brahmin interests in the national organisation.
- The **immediate aim** of the Association at that time was to place before Montague, the Secretary of State for India, a **scheme of reforms that would give non-Brahmins full communal representation** in the legislature.
- He served as **one of its Vice-Presidents**, participated in all its deliberations and helped to conduct its second annual conference at Erode in October 1919.
- As an active member of the MPA, Naicker became familiar

with the programmes and **policies of the Indian National Congress.**

- It's efforts to raise the condition of the masses and do away with untouchability and prohibition impressed him.
- **As the Congress held views similar to his on social reform, he joined the Congress in 1920.**
- **In 1920 he was elected President of the Congress (Madras Provincial Congress committee MPCC).**
- He fully endorsed Gandhiji's calls for boycott of not only of legislatures but local taluk board elections as well.
- **The first Provincial Self-Respect Conference was convened at Chingleput on February 17, 1929.**
- He **toured the Soviet Union as the leader of the Rationalistic Association of South India**, a new name given to the Self-Respect Movement.
- He was inspired by the **"Phenomenal progress"** the Russians had made in agriculture and industry and attributed this to Russian systems.
- Soon after his return, he sought the assistance of **Singaravelu Chetti** who was a prominent communist in South India to start a new programme.
- The new programme envisaged the **formation of two wings within the body of Self-Respect League Samadharma (Communist) Party** of South India.
- These aims of the two wings of the movement were termed as the **Erode Programme.**
- Both aimed at **achieving political independence for the country through constitutional methods**, distribution and public transport, amelioration of the condition of the industrial and agricultural labourers.
- In the **1930s, when the Congress Ministry imposed Hindi, he drew a parallel with the Aryanisation process**, and claimed it was an attack on Tamil identity and self-respect.
- Under him, the **Dravidian Movement** became a struggle against caste and an assertion of Tamil national

identity.

- In the **1940s**, Periyar launched **Dravidar Kazhagam**, which espoused an independent **Dravida Nadu comprising Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, and Kannada speakers**.
- These ideas had a seminal influence on the **shaping of the political identity and culture of the Tamil speaking areas** of Madras Presidency and continue to resonate in present-day Tamil Nadu.

His works:

- In May, **1925**, Periyar published a Tamil Weekly under the title "**Kudi Arasu**" edited by himself to spread the principles of Self-Respect.
- Periyar published an **English magazine under the title "Revolt" in 1928**.
- In **1930** he published his **book on "Family Planning" (Birth Control)** and propagated restriction of number of children.
- In **1933** another **magazine 'Puratchi' (Revolution)** was published.
- He brought out the **Tamil weekly 'Pagutharivu' (Rationalism) in 1934**.
- Justice Party started the Tamil weekly paper "Viduthalai" in 1935 which was then entrusted to Periyar who published '**Viduthalai**' as Tamil Daily Newspaper from 1937.
- In **1950** he was sentenced to undergo imprisonment for the **publication of his book 'Ponmozhigal' (Golden sayings)**.
- The Tamil Bi-monthly, the "**Unmai**" (Truth) was first started at Tiruchirapalli by him in 1970.

His Social Reform Measures:

Periyar **consistently argued for equal rights of women in marriage, inheritance of property and civic life** in general. He vehemently argued for accessible contraceptive methods for women, as early as in the 1930s.

He redesigned marriage ceremonies, which came to be known as **'self-respect marriages'**, without any religious or community customs and without a priest. He **suggested communal representation to non-Brahmins** who were denied access to economic and political power and remained low in social hierarchy.

EVR held very strong views against four-fold division of caste hierarchy in the Indian society. He **stoutly rejected the notion of higher and low status attached to the system of Varnashrama dharma** and suggested that neither the ban on intermarriage or that on interdining was an integral part of it.

Periyar's fame spread beyond the Tamil region during the **Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924**, a mass movement to **demand that lower caste persons be given the right to use a public path in front of the famous Vaikom temple**. He would later be **referred to as Vaikom Veerar** (Hero of Vaikom).

Self – respect movement:

He gave a concrete shape to his ideas on social reform by founding the **Suyamariyathai iyakkam**, also known as the Self-Respect Movement. It was a reform movement dedicated to the **goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidianist past**.

The movement sought to turn the present social system topsy-turvy and **establish a living bond of union among all the people irrespective of caste or creed**. One of the essential points was a **denial of the mythology of Hinduism**. It covered primarily the **groups low in the social hierarchy like the Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas and the untouchables**.

Tamil language weekly

Kudi Arasu (People's Government) founded in May 1924 **became the organ of the Self-Respect Movement**. On a number of

occasions, the **manusmriti was burned.**

Certain characters in the puranas were changed. E.g. Ravana in Valmiki's Ramayana was held up as the hero and be an ideal of good Dravidian conduct. Rama was seen as a wicked and unjust Aryan.

He appealed to people to **give up the caste suffix in their names.** He **instituted inter-dining with food cooked by Dalits** in public conferences in the 1930s.

His opposition to Indian National Congress(INC):

He was a **stout follower of Gandhian methods of struggle** against the colonial power. But **on the question of communal representation and varnashrama dharma,** he differed from the Congress and Gandhi and even **left the Congress.**

Naicker expressed his confirmed belief in the Kudi Arasu that **true freedom for India would be achieved only with the destruction of Indian National Congress, Hinduism and Brahminism.** This extreme step pushed him to **support** even the **statutory Simon Commission** which was boycotted by the Congress.

In 1934, **EVR was asked to come back to the Congress fold by C. Rajagopalachari.** EVR accepted the suggestion provided a **common programme** was agreed upon as a basis for supporting the Congress. Accordingly, they jointly formulated a programme which was **sent to Gandhiji for approval.**

The most **important aspect of this programme was** that the *INCC should agree to implement the principle of communal representation in all the representative bodies, in the civil and the liberal professions.* As this was **totally unacceptable to Gandhiji,** Rajaji's efforts to bring Naicker back into the Congress fold failed.

Sometimes he **sought alliance with any one opposed to the**

Congress with the sole purpose of making that party unpopular. One example was his stand on the **Temple Entry Bill** which made it possible for Harijans in the Malabar Districts to enter and worship in the temples.

In the Legislative Council elections, the Congress won and C. Rajagopalachari became premier of the Madras Presidency. In accordance with the Congress policy, the **decision to introduce Hindi in the Madras Presidency** ignored the linguistic differences between the North and the South.

The **leaders of the Self-Respect Movement organised a march from Trichinapally to Madras** in order to strengthen public opinion in favour of the **anti-Hindi movement**. It was sent off by EVR and other leaders at Trichinapally.

EVR also participated in the **women's conference on 13th November 1938** and asked the women participants to fight against "**Hindi Imperialism**". Hindi was withdrawn from the schools only in 1940.

He **criticised the civil disobedience campaign in 1939**. But soon seeing the public reaction against himself, he changed his own opinion and accepted the Indian National Congress as the sole organisation fighting for freedom.

He **joined the Muslim League and supported its demand for partition**. Jinnah's two nation theory was conceded and upheld by EVR as the only solution for the Muslims to live harmoniously in a nation dominated by the Aryan Brahmins.

After 1949, EVR's role in the Tamil Nadu politics was less considerable. He came to support the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Kamaraj as "pure Tamilian", since he hailed from, the backward community of Nadars.

Legacy left behind by him:

EVR Naicker **represented the new emerging forces in Tamil**

Society. The Self-Respect Movement attracted the masses who were hitherto untouched and claimed to **fight against social evils** like untouchability.

Some of the **caste rigidities were removed** and **representation of non-Brahmin communities** for which EVR fought consistently in liberal services was secured. He stands for a politics that foregrounded **social equality, self-respect, and linguistic pride.**

As a **social reformer, he focused on social, cultural and gender inequalities,** and his reform agenda questioned matters of faith, gender and tradition. He asked people to be rational in their life choices. He argued that **women needed to be independent** and insisted that they be allowed an equal share in employment.

Over the years, **Periyar has transcended the political divide as well as the faultlines of religion and caste.** He is revered as **Thanthai Periyar, the father figure of modern Tamil Nadu.**

On 27th June 1970 by the **UNESCO organization honored Periyar as "The Socrates of South Asia".** It described Periyar as "The prophet of the new age".