

## Periyar E.V. Ramasamy

- a great Social Revolutionary

In the whole of Tamil Nadu and even far beyond, within India and without, the honorific *Periyar* indicates the name of a great Twentieth century Social Reformer Erode Venkata Naicker Ramasamy, popularly known as *Thanthai Periyar*. The Unesco awarded him a citation on 27 January 1970, calling him the Socrates of South India. The Govt of India issued a postal stamp in memory of Periyar. The Govt of Malaysia issued a stamp commemorating Periyar's 137<sup>th</sup> birth day on the 19<sup>th</sup> of Jan 2014 in Kuala Lumpur.

Even though born of a rich orthodox Vaishnava parents at Erode on the 17<sup>th</sup> Sep 1879, he proved himself to be a virtuous truant from the school and a rebel incarnate at home. Hardly a period of four or five years, he was at the school and then left it for ever. But so worldly wise and of commonsense he was, even though heretical and non - conformist. Hence his father got himself relieved from the wholesale trade of grocery and saddled young Ramasamy with the business. An opportunity for young Ramasamy to show his talent and shrewdness. But drifting to business did not stop him from his unorthodox and rebellious behavior. His father was unhappy with his son. At one stage, unable to bear the parental punishment for his atheistic fervor, Ramasamy ran out of Erode to the north of India in search of an independent career. He went up to Benares incognito and somehow returned to Erode after a gap of a few months.

It was Mr. C.Rajagopalachary who induced him to join in Indian National Congress party where Periyar found it difficult to withstand for more than five years. Dominance of higher caste in Congress was unbearable for him. But still, he was President of Tamil Nadu Branch of the Congress. He served as Municipal Chairman of Erode and proved his mettle as a person of outright honesty and an excellent public service. Headed various public organizations such as schools, banks and chambers of commerce in Erode. Proved himself a man of integrity,

impartiality and uprightness to the core. Surprisingly, he was also trustee of a few temples and administered them well.

On the request of the local leaders such as George Joseph, and T.K. Madhavan who were involved in the agitation, he went to Vaikom in Kerala in April 1924 for an agitation to get civil rights for Harijans to walk on the streets around a local temple. Presently a statue of Periyar in Vaikom commemorates his outstanding work there. He worked for the abolition of sale of toddy and got imprisoned at Erode. This was very much to the appreciation of Gandhiji whom he met in Bangalore in 1927. Periyar championed the cause of Prohibition so devotedly that at one stage his sister and wife too jumped into the fray and went to jail. When the hegemony of the upper class was dominant in the Congress, Periyar as a champion of Backward and Scheduled castes came out of it and started a Self Respect Campaign on the plank of rationalism in the late twenties of the last century.

A socio – political outfit, Justice party that stood for the welfare of non – Brahmins and their proportional rights in those days sought the support of Periyar. When he was in jail, he was elected as its President. After his release, he combined the Justice Party with Self - Respect Movement and started *Dravidar Kazhagam* in 1944 mainly for the eradication of casteism, superstition, rituals and for upholding equality, remarriage of widows, women's education and communal representation in job opportunities.

Vested interests, orthodoxy and higher castes opposed him tooth and nail. But Periyar swam against these cross currents and sternly upheld his views. He toured European countries and visited Russia in 1932. He appreciated the communist rule and wrote very highly of it in *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai*, the journals that he edited and published. Earlier in 1930, Periyar translated Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* in the pages of *Kudi Arasu*. Also published an outright condemnation of British rule for having executed Bhagat Singh, the hero of Punjab.

Periyar severely criticized the puranas, scriptures and mythologies and wanted scientific temper to be inculcated among the masses. As regards language and medium of instruction, he feared the domination of Hindi and opposed its imposition. The rank and file of his party stood by him in all the ups and downs of his life. In disseminating his innovative thoughts and opinions, Periyar visited every nook and corner of Tamil Nadu and addressed the rural gatherings in hundred thousand meetings. His informal and colloquial style of Tamil lectures inspired the rural masses. People thronged in thousands to listen to him with eagerness and discipline. Never did he seek the help of rich men and aristocrats. Known for his frugality, he led a simple life and wanted his followers to do the same. Neither a theist nor an agnostic but an outright atheist he was.

Periyar shunned politics and at one time when he was offered in 1940 a chance to form the State Ministry of Tamil Nadu twice by the British Govt he politely declined it on both the occasions. He felt that socio - economic freedom is more important for the country than political freedom. This opinion of Periyar along with his arrangement of platonic marriage made his young stalwarts of the outfit go away from him to organise a new political party DMK in 1948. Periyar did not bother about the dissent of his lieutenants but ploughed his lonely furrow until the last breath of his life in 24<sup>th</sup> Dec 1973. He died a nonagenarian. *The Dravidar Kazhagam* founded by him still continues to be in the forefront of social reform and never gets into electoral politics. What Periyar earned in all his life has been made a public charity which is presently running about 40 institutions including a Deemed University at Thanjavur named after him. His outstanding and versatile disciple Dr. K. Veeramani has been disseminating Periyarism in USA, Europe and in South Asian countries. A publication unit founded by Periyar has so far brought out more than hundred titles in Tamil and English and a few titles in French, Hindi, Telugu and Malayalam also.