

CHAPTER-VII

**TEMPLE ENTRY CAMPAIGN OF
SELF-RESPECTERS**

CHAPTER-VII

TEMPLE ENTRY CAMPAIGN OF SELF-RESPECTERS

Temple entry by the depressed class people of Tamil Nadu was due to the efforts of many social reformers and social-minded leaders. Temple is considered the abode of gods. But certain sections of the Hindu society like the Nadars and other depressed class people were not permitted to enter into the significant temples located in Thanjavur, Kamudi, Kalugumalai, Srivilliputhur and Sivakasi, which were consecrated to the Brahminical deities. Though these people were treated as members of the Hindu society and allowed to follow the same Hindu tenets, and worshipped the same gods, they were not admitted into the prohibited areas near the temples. In the event of accidental pollution, the idols were required to undergo purification and various ceremonies so as to remove the touch of pollution.¹

In Tamil Nadu, the Nadars were the first people to fight for the cause of temple entry. In order to attain the temple entry right, they agitated in the temples at Thanjavur, Madurai, Erode, Arupukkottai, Kamudi, Kalugumalai, Srivilliputtur, Sivakasi, Tirunelveli and Tiruchendur.² It led to communal riots between the Nadars and caste-Hindus. The Nadars involved themselves in activities which elevated them in the society. They sanskriticized their habits and activities. They claimed **kshatriya** status. They gave Sanskrit names to their children and imitated the habits of the Brahmins and other caste-

-
1. Paramarthalingam, C., *Religion and Social Reform in Tamil Nadu*, Madurai, pp.27-28.
 2. Paramarthalingam, C., *Social Reform Movement in Tamil Nadu*, Madurai, pp.203-206. Also Pate, H.R., *op.cit.*, p.126.

Hindus. They were involved in lucrative commerce and trade and thereby enriched themselves. When they became economically strong,³ they decided to build new massive temples in the brahminical style and waited for an awakening from other sections of the depressed people and a lead from the social-minded leaders.⁴

SRM's Forum for Temple Entry

In the first half of the twentieth century, the social reformers strongly felt that temple entry movement was of primary importance in the agitation against the eradication of untouchability. Tamil speaking arena of the erstwhile Madras Presidency was the last segment to be liberated thanks to the inspiration from the neighbouring states like Kerala, Karnataka and Bombay.⁵ The demand for temple entry was first started in Kerala by the Ezhavas in 1919. But from 1920s, with the rise of E.V. Ramasami Naicker as a messiah of the non-Brahmins and depressed class people in Tamil Nadu, a demand for their entry into temples also began to gain momentum. EVR's Self-Respect Movement (SRM) believed that the depressed class people were not only entitled to enter the temples but also they could go up to the sanctum sanctorum of the temples in their capacity as Hindus as well as human beings. The Self-Respecters, induced by a Brahmanophobia attitude and with a desire to acquire equal rights for the depressed people, made some provocative attempts that earned the opposition of the orthodox and other Brahmin priests of the temples. The relationship between Adi-

3. Tamizhvel, *Samuga Urimai Porali Immanuvel Devendrar*, (Tamil), Pondicherry, 2003, pp.XVI-XVII.

4. Sobhanan, B., *Temple Entry Movement and Sivakasi Riots*, pp.27-28.

5. Nagoorkani, P., 'Temple Entry Movement in South India with Special Reference to Kerala,' *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Session of South Indian History Congress*, Rajapalayam, 1990, p.110.

Dravidas and the SRM was reciprocal and equal at all times. Adi-Dravida leaders commended the work of the SRM and urged Adi-Dravidas to support it. The Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha urged Adi-Dravidas to read the news of *Kudi Arasu*, *Dravidian*, *Tamizhan* and *Adi-Dravida Kavalan*.⁶

In 1926, just a year or so after his exit from Congress, E.V.R. organised a District level Self-Respect Conference at Tirunelveli. One of the major resolutions carried out was that all Hindus must be given the freedom of entry into the temples. A retired Tahsildar, Nellaiappa Pillai, opposed the resolution and requested an amendment that barring Adi-Dravidas, others might be given entry into the temples. It was also the opinion of Annie Besant, the leader in Brahma Gnana Sangam. E.V.R. outrightly condemned this stand of Pillai and condemned the Sangam as an off-shoot of Brahmin Association.⁷

Besides working to realise Adi-Dravida rights in various contexts, the SRM also mounted a systematic campaign with respect to temple entry. Apart from supporting temple entry legislation, the Self-Respecters pioneered several temple entry attempts themselves. The Suchindram Temple Entry Satyagraha which took place when E.V.R. was still in Congress is reckoned as one of the earliest of these attempts.⁸ There were many others in the years that followed.

Madurai Temple Entry, 1927

E.V.R. deduced that the root of all the social evils is Hinduism which sanctioned caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu. Therefore, his followers, the Self-Respecters, opposed the concept of pollution-purity

6. *Kudi Arasu*, 11 March 1928.

7. Singaravel, A., (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.152.

8. *Kudi Arasu*, 31 January 1926 and 14 February 1926.

practised in Hindu temples. At different parts of Tamil Nadu, they attempted to enter the temples along with some downtrodden people. They justified their action by asserting that the temple entry also was their right and those who attempted to prohibit them would be treated as the enemies of social order based on casteless and classless society. The Self-Respecters in their attempt partially succeeded in some places and received a few setbacks in some other places.⁹ In this endeavour in January, 1927, some non-Brahmins made an attempt to enter the Madurai Meenakshiamman shrine but were prevented. The bhattars of the temple closed the main doors of **arthamantapam** (inner shrine). Therefore, the infuriated Self-Respecters came back and contented themselves with breaking coconuts and lighting camphor. On 4th February, 1927, the Self-Respecters under the leadership of J.N. Ramanathan, a disciple of E.V.R., held a meeting and condemned the bhattar's obstruction to the temple entry process. On 7th February, 1927, inspired by J.N. Ramanathan, the Self-Respecters made another attempt to enter the temple. On that occasion, there erupted a considerable commotion in the temple premises. The bhattars hurt the sentiments of the non-Brahmins also by seeking the help of police who acted promptly and tactfully.¹⁰ In spite of this, J.N. Ramanathan, along with other non-Brahmins, relentlessly battled to impress upon the people the necessity of temple entry as a social right.¹¹

9. Chandrababu, B.S., 'Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Self-Respect Movement and its Rationalist Solution to Social Justice in Tamil Nadu: A Study of its Attack on Caste,' in Festschrifts for Prof. G. Thangavelu, *Social Justice in Tamil Nadu*, Madurai, 1990, p.113. Also Veeramani, K., *Koilgal Thontriathu Yean?* (Tamil), Madras, 1986, p.6.

10. F.N.R., 17 February 1927, Also Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India : The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1921*, Berkley, 1969, p.339.

11. *Ibid.*, 4 July 1927.

Attempt at Tiruvannamalai, 1927

In the same year, J.S. Kannappar, a Self-Respect leader with some other supporters, tried to enter into the Siva temple at Tiruvannamalai.¹² They were prevented from entering the temple under the pretext that they were committed to the atheist ideology.¹³ The temple authorities filed a suit in the court against J.S. Kannappar on 8th February, 1927. The Sub-Magistrate gave his verdict on April 1928 in favour of J.S. Kannappar and fined the temple authorities on the grounds that J.S. Kannappar and his followers were all Hindus and had every right to enter any Hindu temple as long as they did not disturb either the proceedings or the purity of the temples. The Self-Respecters considered the verdict as a victory which in its turn became a great blessing to the social reformers for their avowed cause.¹⁴

Mayiladuthurai Temple Entry, 1927

In the first week of May 1927, over a thousand men and women, including Adi-Dravidas, marched towards the Mayuranathaswamy temple in Mayiladuthurai in Thanjavur district. On seeing the protest marchers heading towards the temple, the temple authorities closed the main gate. The marchers, however, managed to get in through a side entrance, only to find that the sanctum sanctorum had also been hurriedly shut on them. Immediately, in the manner of the early medieval Saivite saint Thirunavukarasar, they began to chant songs. Legend has it that when the Saint sang in front of the closed doors of a temple, the doors opened of their own accord. The Self-Respecters

12. *Kudi Arasu*, 13 February 1927.

13. Eriyan, A., *Suyamariyathai Sudaroligal*, (Tamil), Madras, 1981, p.77.

14. *Dravidan*, Chennai, 1 May 1928.

were fully aware of the irony of the situation and their choral chanting proved extremely subversive.¹⁵

Tiruchy and Triplicane Temple Entry, 1928

On 25th June, 1928, a band of young Self-Respecters attempted to storm Rockfort Temple premises of Tiruchy and they were brutally attacked by men employed for this purpose by the orthodox Hindus.¹⁶ Consequently, J.S. Kannappar, J.N. Ramanathan and S. Dhandapani Pillai, along with some other Self-Respecters, attempted to enter the Rockfort Temple at Tiruchy. But their attempt ended in failure due to the closure of the door by the temple authorities.¹⁷ Reacting to the attempts of the Self-Respecters, the temple authorities filed a case and thereby the Magistrate of Tiruchy issued prohibitory order which permanently forbade J.N. Ramanathan and S. Dhandapani Pillai from entering the temple.

Undeterred by this incident, S. Dhandapani Pillai, tried to enter Sri Parthasarathi temple at Triplicane, Madras, on 6th July 1928. While marching towards the second gopuram gate of the temple, he was blocked on the way and the door was closed. But he tried another way to enter the temple. This attempt also ended in failure. He filed a suit against this action with the assistance of H. Vasudev an advocate. The plaint stated the humiliation meted out to him by the Brahmin priests and temple authorities. The High Court of Madras held the view that any person calling himself a Hindu had the right to enter the temple. Yet, the verdict did not change the attitude of the orthodox

15. Geetha, V., and Rajadurai, S.V., *Towards A Non-Brahmin Millennium from Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Calcutta, 1998, p.224.

16. Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: : The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1921*, p.339.

17. *Kudi Arasu*, 29 July 1928.

members.¹⁸ In the special session of the South Indian Reformers Conference held on 28th November, 1928, E.V.R., as the President of the Conference, gave a clarion call to the Self-Respecters to fight tirelessly for the establishment of equality in temples. He also appealed to the Justicites like P. Subbarayan, A.P. Patro, Pangal Rajah and R.K. Shanmugam Chetti to provide political forum to the Self-Respecters in order to ventilate their ideas on the temple entry issue. The session further passed a resolution to clear the barriers for those who were still prohibited to enter the temples. The other Self-Respecters asserted that temple entry agitation has so far been undertaken only by the Self-Respecters to promote the cause of the depressed class members.¹⁹

Erode Temple Entry, 1929

E.V.R., acting as the Chairman of the Dewasthanam Committee of Erode, unanimously passed a resolution in favour of temple entry by all classes in the first week of April, 1929.²⁰ It authorized all sections of the Hindus to go as far as the sanctum sanctorum and worship the deities of the temple which were under the management of the Erode Dewasthanam Committee.²¹ On 4th April, 1929, E.V.R. went to Coimbatore. For a while, he advised his follower, Kuthusi Gurusamy, not to involve himself in immediate action. But inspired by Ponnambalam, Kuthusi Gurusamy, Erode Eswaran and two depressed class members, Manjaimedu Pasupathi and Krishnampalayam Karuppan, along with ten others, forcibly entered the Fort Eswara

18. *Ibid.*, 27 and 29 July 1928.

19. *Ibid.*, 28 November, 1928.

20. *Ibid.*, 2 February 1930 and 6 December 1930.

21. *Tamil Nadu*, 23 January 1930, M.N.N.R., 1930, p.159.

temple in the Erode town on 4th April, 1929, without the knowledge of E.V.R. who was away from Erode.²²

Muthusami Gurukkal, the temple priest, by closing the doors did not allow the Self-Respecters and informed the matter to Muthu Naicker, the trustee of the temple. It aggravated the situation further. Muthu Naicker, on his return from Uttukuli, complained to the police accusing that the Self-Respect leaders violently entered into the Dwarapalagar Mandapam and compelled the **bhattar** to lead them to the sanctum sanctorum for performing poojas and other related religious ceremonies. On 18th April, 1929, they were charged under section, 109, 154, 292 and 297 of Criminal Procedure Code. The three accused members were immediately arrested and were let on bail with the condition that they should appear before the Stationary Magistrate's Court for enquiry in proper time.²³ When the accused appeared before the court of enquiry, they doubted justice from the Magistrate who happened to be a Brahmin. They made an application to the Magistrate to transfer the case to another court. However, the Magistrate did not heed but ordered the accused to come back to the court on 22nd April, 1929. Meanwhile, the Self-Respecters, supporting the three accused members convened a meeting at Erode. They had two options-Whether to fill the jail by doing satyagraha or by involving in the debates to justify their stand as right.²⁴ However in the absence of E.V.R., they could not come to a decision. Because of their involvement in the social cause, the Self-Respecters at the same time supported the Justice

22. *Kudi Arasu*, 2 April 1929 and 16 February 1930. Ramasami, E.V., *op.cit.*, p.76.

23. Kuruvikarambai Velu, *Kuthusi Gurusamy*, (Tamil), Chennai, 1945, p.160. Also *Kudi Arasu*, 21 April 1929.

24. Udhasankar, I., *E.V. Ramasami, Struggle for Social Justice in Tamil Nadu, 1919-1973*, M.Phil., Dissertation, Pudukkottai, 2001, pp.75-78.

Party on the political side. They were very firm in their stand to attain temple entry right at any cost for the sake of the bottom-line people of the society.²⁵

On 22nd April, 1929, the temple entry case was taken for enquiry by the Stationary Magistrate of Erode. The accused, K.C. Subramaniam, was represented by a barrister from Nagapatnam. In the Court, Muthusamy Gurukkal deposed that the entry made by the Panchamas into the temple engendered pollution and it could be rectified only by doing the purification ceremony and usual poojas can be performed only after purification ceremony. After the enquiry, the case was adjourned to 1st May, 1929 and order was issued to reappear on the date.²⁶ After seven months, the Sub-Magistrate gave his judgement on 22nd January, 1930. The three accused were declared guilty. Every one of them was asked to pay a fine Rs. 60/-.²⁷ But on the intervention of the Deputy Collector, the fine was reduced from Rs. 60/- to Rs.30/- each.²⁸ If they failed to pay the fine, they had to undergo two months rigorous imprisonment. E.V.R. considered the incident as a violation of his word and leadership and pointed out that untoward incidents happened due to disobedience. He also wished that the accused volunteers would be punished through imprisonment and this punishment for a public cause would give him an excuse to invite mass attention for the cause of temple entry. Contrary to his strategy, the two accused came out from jail by paying the fine and he was disappointed. Immediately through Swami Sahajanadam, an Adi-Dravida leader, he also brought out Eswaran by paying the fine.

25. *Kudi Arasu*, 21 April 1929.

26. *Ibid.*, 28 April, 1929.

27. *Dravidan*, 26 January, 1930, M.N.N.R., 1930, p.158.

28. *Kudi Arasu*, 16 March 1930.

However he did not give up his fight for temple entry.²⁹ In the High Court, the case was rejected and accused were exempted from paying the fine. About the High Court's verdict, Kuthusi Gurusamy commented thus: "This verdict should be common to all temples and all the presiding deities accepted it and the depressed people hereafter should be allowed to enter temples".³⁰

View of Tamil Nadu

Following the Erode Temple Entry Agitation, the Self-Respecters made another attempt at Venkatesa Perumal Temple in Varagoor where the low caste-people were not allowed entry. They filed a case, but the court verdict also turned against the volunteers. In this regard, T. Varadarajalu Naidu condemned the verdict of Justice Wallace through his paper *Tamil Nadu* thus: "Had Justice Wallace thought over the fact that all are equal in the presence of god, it is certain that his conscience would not have permitted him to pronounce such a judgement."³¹

News in Kudi Arasu

Apart from these well-publicised and well-known campaigns with respect to temple entry, which were duly reported and celebrated in *Kudi Arasu*, the newspaper also reported numerous routine instances of Adi-Dravidas, urged by Self-Respecters at times, and at other times acting on their own, attempting to enter temples. *Kudi Arasu*, for instance, carried the story of an Adi-Dravida girl who made a bid to enter a temple while the men of her community waited outside to make sure no harm befell her.³² In another instance, Self-Respecters extended

29. *Ibid.*, 2 February, and 16 February 1930.

30. *Puduvai*, 17 November 1930.

31. *Tamil Nadu*, 4 April 1932.

32. *Kudi Arasu*, 18 March 1928.

their support to the temple-entry movement launched by the Pune depressed class leaders, Shivram Kamble and Rajbhoj.³³ For Self-Respecters, temple entry was in the realm of civil rights. But even as they urged it as a right to be claimed and won, they also castigated the existence of temples, gods and proclaimed the uselessness of worship and exhorted the Adi-Dravidas to renounce Hinduism.³⁴ Kuthusi Gurusamy, even as he urged Adi-Dravidas to exercise their right to temple entry, wrote with disarming candour of the sites of oppression and the caste order that temples essentially represented.

Boycott of Temples

After these futile attempts to secure rights for temple entry, the Self-Respecters decided to boycott the temples or places of worship in a united stand for bringing about change in the hearts of the Brahmins on the one side and if it was not possible, to persuade the people to reject temples.³⁵ The Self-Respecters considered that religious institutions, and many Hindu religious rites conducted by Brahmins were permanent sources of easy income for them.³⁶ To prevent the non-Brahmins from spending their money in temple worship and to the priestly class of Brahmins, the Self-Respecters called the non-Brahmins to refrain from spending any money on worship in temples and to reject the services of priests and to cease building new temples. They also advocated that the income of the existing temples and pious endowments should be utilized for promoting technological studies,

33. *Ibid.*, 27 October 1929.

34. *Ibid.*, 2 January 1932, 22 January, 1932, 30 October 1932, 20 November 1932.

35. Washbrook, D.A., 'Caste Class, and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu,' in Francine, R. Frankel and Rao, M.S.A. (ed.), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1990, p.214.

36. Veeramani, K., *Koilgal Thontriathu Yean?* p.16.

industrial research and education in public health and general hygiene.³⁷ Even after its ideological shifts to rationalism and atheism, the Self-Respecters asserted that the free entry into temple was a social right and if that right was secured, it would be equal to removing one of the roots of the caste system.³⁸

Thus, the 'Self-Respecters' from the beginning, advocated the entry of depressed class people into temples, was based upon the ideology of E.V.R. The Self-Respecters from different parts of Tamil Nadu took an active part in asserting their rights to enter into the temples where the low caste non-Brahmins were prohibited. In this regard, E.V.R.'s ideology was well backed by J.N. Ramanathan and J.S. Kannappar. In their attempt to enter the temples at different places, the Self-Respecters had to face severe opposition from the orthodox reaction, and also met many difficulties like court cases. Even though their attempts were futile, due to the lack of legislative measures, E.V.R. and his followers were the pioneers in the modern era in advocating temple entry to the depressed class people. But due to the reactionary forces of the Brahmins, the Self-Respecters took an ideological shift to atheism but advocated temple entry as the community's birth right and wanted a change of heart from the Brahmins' side to open the temple to all irrespective of any caste. The Self-Respecters commended the move of the temple entry bill of Subbarayan as a wise move and acclaimed it.³⁹ Following the initiatives of E.V.R., the struggle for temple entry was continued by Ambedkar at Nasik in 1930, at Guruvayur by Kelappan in 1931 and at Madurai by A. Vaidhyanatha Ayyar in 1939.

37. *Dalit Voice*, 16 October 1989, p.6.

38. *Kudi Arasu*, 23 October 1932.

39. Geetha, V., and Rajadurai, S.V., *op.cit.*, pp.248-249.

E.V.R. welcomed Rajaji's Temple Entry indemnity Act of 1939 as a right move at the right time.

SRM and Anti-Untouchability Activities

E.V.R. considered the temple entry right to be totally associated with the eradication of untouchability and caste evils. E.V.R.'s robust and indignant rejection of untouchability was a noteworthy feature of his speeches and activities. Self-Respect propaganda meetings were held regularly in several parts of the Tamil Country from 1926 onwards. Such meetings at Lalgudi, Poovalur and Komangudi drew a large number of Adi-Dravidas including women, and caused palpable tension. At Poovalur, rumours were circulated that 'Ramasamy Naicker proposed to enter the local temple with Adi-Dravidas. This caused panic among the orthodox residents who gathered together to demonstrate against E.V.R. and the SRM.⁴⁰ Thus SRM was eagerly sought after by various subaltern caste groups, of whom the Adi-Dravida caste was of course the most conspicuous in terms of sheer numbers. In this regard, Singaravel noted that the SRM had become a veritable protective umbrella under whose generous shade thousands of members of the depressed classes had taken refuge.'⁴¹

From 1926, the SRM never lost sight of its untouchability abolition campaign and sought to refine and redefine it to suit the exigencies of the moment. When the First-Self-Respect Provincial Conference was held at Chengleput in 1929, untouchability abolition figured as an urgent agenda in the debates and discussions. Likewise, at the Second and Third Provincial Self-Respect Conferences at Erode in 1930 and Virudhunagar in 1931 respectively, this concern was

40. *Kudi Arasu*, 18 December 1927.

41. *Ibid.*, 1 May 1932.

manifested in the debates as well as resolutions which were passed. In the early and mid-thirties, the SRM's campaigns were guided chiefly by Adi-Dravida concerns: whether it was Congress or Gandhi, or the Poona Pact or reviewing temple-entry bill, or evaluating critically the activities of H.S.S., or advancing the right to equal dignity of Adi-Dravida Christians, SRM was asserting these rights in the face of obdurate opposition. In all these instances, the question of Adi-Dravida rights and progress constituted the modality through which the concerns of the SRM as a whole were mediated, expressed and addressed.⁴²

Kudi Arasu carried lengthy reports of Adi-Dravida Conferences, whether these were organised by the movement or one or the other of the Adi-Dravida organisations.⁴³ Whenever any press sought to misreport the events that unfolded at these conferences, *Kudi Arasu* immediately refuted such distortions. The Self-Respecters applauded those who undertook measures that would benefit the Adi-Dravidas, such as when the Pachaiappa's Trust in Madras decided to admit Adi-Dravidas into the Pachaiyappa's College in Madras city. Conversely they criticised those who were indifferent to Adi-Dravida rights or down right hostile to them. The victory of an Adi-Dravida at a local election or his or her nomination to a post in the executive proved to be an occasion for Self-Respecters to celebrate. The Self-Respecters also registered their views at Congress meetings where untouchability was discussed and insisted that untouchability abolition and granting access to public places to Adi-Dravidas be immediately achieved. At a Congress meeting chaired by T.S.S. Rajan at Coimbatore, Ayyamuthu, a Self-Respecter opposed the Congress' habitual resolution on

42. Geetha, V., and Rajadurai, S.V. *op.cit.*, pp.354-355.

43. *Kudi Arasu*, 15, 22 January 1928, 11 March 1928, 20 June 1928, 25 May 1929, 25 August 1929 and 19 April 1931.

untouchability.⁴⁴ Besides E.V.R., several other Self-Respect publicists and speakers wrote and spoke their way into the hearts of the Adi-Dravidas. J.S. Kannappar, Kuthusi Gurusamy, Kunjitham, Sattai A. Raghavan, Jeevanandham, Neelavathi and many others addressed or presided over Adi-Dravida conferences, proposed resolutions on the abolition of untouchability, fought for temple entry for Adi-Dravidas, took on Congressmen and others who were wont to sentimentalize the Adi-Dravida cause. The Self-Respecters took very seriously the dictum of E.V.R. that the liberation of the Adi-Dravidas was contingent on and would be complete only with their realisation of temple entry right.

44. Geetha, V., and Rajadurai, S.V., *op.cit.*, pp.352-358.