GENESIS: THE SEARCH FOR AN ORGANISATION

(1925 - 1929)
Most 'Movements' have leaders, aims and ideals. They make a constitution and form an organisation consisting of members or activists, one or many communication media, with workable methods to popularise it. The Self-Respect Movement was launched on 2nd May 1925. Though it lacked one or two constituents of a Movement at the beginning of its formation, in course of time it became one of the powerful protest movements, that South India had ever seen in the course of its history. For a clear understanding of the Movement's evolution, growth, maturity and its character and structure, the decisive phases were from the 1920's to 1940's.

The period between 1925 and 1929 was a formative period in the development of an ideology for the Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu. During the period, the Kudi Arasi was started. E.V. Ramasamy, the main stalwart of the Movement for the last time in his career as a Congressite, had attended the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee meeting held at Kanchipuram on 31st November 1925. Also, in 1927 he and his lieutenant,
S. Ramanathan, had for an ideological clarification met their admirer Mahatma Gandhi twice. After these meetings, E.V.Ramaswamy] disassociated himself from the Congress and even from its ordinary membership. A series of these events revealed to the public, mostly through the columns of Kudi Arayu, the Movement's insistence on the communal representation for non-Brahmins and Brahmins, its desire to establish a caste-less society as against the society based on the principles of Varnasrama dharma, its denial to the evil effects of Brahminism against the self-respect of non-Brahmins, its opposition to Congress Party and Mahatma Gandhi on the grounds that both of them were the mouth-piece of Brahmins and Brahminism, hence reactionary and finally its refusal to compromise on the illogical and unreasonable attitudes and practices of people.

The editorial of the first issue of the Kudi Arayu expressed its aims and objectives thus:

We would certainly say to those who are interested to know about the ideals of our

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1. Kudi Arayu, 7-6-1927, 28-6-1927, 4-9-1927 and 10-10-1927, PRLRC.
magazine that our mother country should develop its society, economy, politics and morality. Through this magazine we would tirelessly work for the mental and physical growth and for the development of art and religion. It is not the intention of our magazine just to make a call for nation and nationalism leaving aside all other noble ideals...these should develop self-respect, socialism and fraternity among people. They should bound by love and affection. High and low differences add fuel to the burning caste-conflicts in the society. Equality should be maintained devoid of all these social evils. Religious feuds and the evil of bringing gods to the courts of law should be discouraged. The paper is devoted to the task of achieving these and other ideals for the benefit of the people...²

Though Kudi Aramu like other Tamil newspapers, namely, Tamilnadu and Mayasakthi, run by S.V. Ramanaswamy's colleagues in the Congress, P. Varadajulu Naidu and Thiru Vi. Kalyanasundaram, respectively, unlike the above, in several aims and objectives, the propaganda tone of the paper, from the beginning of its formation seemed to

2. Kudi Aramu. 2-5-1925, PRLRC.
have followed different means to achieve its goal. During the period, until the Kanchipuram Conference, the paper took the lead in publishing anti-Brahmin, anti-Tamil Nadu Congress*, anti-caste, anti-untouchability, but pro-Gandhi, pro-Muslim and pro-Justice Party articles. Elections to the local bodies, legislative council and legislative assembly were ridiculed for want of morality and sincerity on the part of the contestants. Prohibition was upheld and women's liberation was advocated. Inter-caste marriages were encouraged. Superstitions practices among the people in the name of God and Religion were condemned. The glory of the Tamils was rediscovered. The Hindu epics were reexamined in racial interpretations.

E.V. Ramaswamy was quite aware of his role in the Kanchipuram Congress Conference and the eventualities it would produce, even before its commencement. So, in the Kudi Arang dated 15th November, 1925, he had invited, in large numbers, those non-Brahmins, who sincerely believed

* The Madras District Congress Committee had E.V. Ramaswamy's Pro-Justice and anti-Congress attitude, himself being a Congressite still. Kudi Arang, 1st November, 1925, PRLRC.
in the welfare of their community to attend the Conference so as to bring out a constructive programme for their overall progress and development. When the thirty-first Regional Conference of the Tamil Nadu Congress was held on 21st and 22nd November 1925, under the Presidentship of Thiru.Vi.Kalyanasundaram, to consider the question of Council entry on lines with the resolutions passed at the All India Congress Committee session held in September 1920 at Patna, E.V.Ramaswamy and one of his followers, S. Ramanathan, wanted to get the mandate for the question of communal representation. Their efforts did not succeed and Thiru.Vi.Kalyanasundaram, the President of the session, after taking into consideration the Congress Party's indecision about contesting the forthcoming elections to the council, refused to give permission to move the resolution at the session on the ground that it was not warranted. With a considerable number of non-Brahmin delegates and visitors, E.V.Ramaswamy arranged for a parallel session in which the non-Brahmins demand for communal representation, though feared that it would result in fomenting sub-national politics, was at last reluctantly felt justified. The session was presided over by T.A.Ramalinga Chettiar, one of the leading
spokesmen of the Justice Party. This incident revealed to the observers that the Justice Party was very particular about getting E.V. Ramaswamy to their fold at a time when elections to the Madras Council were to be held in 1926. To a disappointed and infuriated, E.V. Ramaswamy over the stand of the Congress, added the events that occurred at the Tamil Nadu branch of the All India Spinners Association to which he was the President and K. Santhanam was the Secretary. The Secretary, was a Brahmin by birth. He, while reorganising the Association failed to get the consent of the President, instead he sought the advice and suggestion from Mahatma Gandhi. E.V. Ramaswamy's anti-Brahmin and anti-Congress attitude became little more firm after this incident.

It was only after the Kanchipuram Conference that E.V. Ramaswamy and his followers started attending and convening Justice Party meetings and started forming Self-Respect Leagues in different parts of Tamil Nadu. E.V. Ramaswamy and his followers utilised the Justice Party platforms for this purpose. The Tamil Nadu Congress, by then was aware of the changing attitude of E.V. Ramaswamy towards Congress. By the middle of 1926,
the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee appointed a Committee to report on E.V. Ramaswamy's alleged change of attitude and also to recommend the course of action to be taken against him. The Committee found truth in the allegation and recommended his membership in the Tamil Nadu Congress working Committee be cancelled forthwith.

Accepting it, the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee severed its relationship with E.V. Ramaswamy by August 1926. This development brought E.V. Ramaswamy more close to the Justice Party. His entry into the Justice Party proved to be a positive consolation to the defeated Justicites in the 1926 elections to the Madras Council. It was due to his efforts that M.T. Subramania Mudaliar, the then President of the South Indian Liberal Federation organised a tenth non-Brahmin conference at Madurai with A.P. Patro as President on 25th and 26th December 1926. After this Conference only, the Self-Respect Movement started gaining momentum. Though the self-respect propaganda had been undertaken for the past one and half years, by the Kudi Arasu, it was from Madurai Conference...

3. The Hindu, 26-8-1926.
onwards, that the SRM began to get more popular support. On the other hand the Kudi Arasu, adopting yet another method of propagating its ideals, started publishing since 20th February 1927 large number of catchwords like, "Self-respect is the human birth-right", "Swaraj without self-respect is the right of the self-centred people", at the bottom of each page till the paper ceased its publication in 1949.

However, the pro-Gandhi and pro-khadar attitude of E.V.R. continued passively till 1927 despite his differences with the Congress. Several articles on and by Gandhi were translated from English into Tamil and published in Kudi Arasu. "Lies are the Sastras and shrutis" was one of the several sayings of Gandhi. Such opinionated versions of Gandhi were enthusiastically carried out in the columns of Kudi Arasu. A resolution to the effect that "in view of its economic viability

* Refer to Appendix I for such catchwords published in Kudi Arasu, Puratchi and Pagutharivu. These latter two replaced Kudi Arasu during the years 1934 & 1935, when the latter ceased from publication shortly for a while.

5. Kudi Arasu, 9-1-1927. PRLAC.
and its role in eradicating poverty to an extent, all non-Brahmins should wear khadar", was passed at the Tenth Non-Brahmin Conference held at Madurai. Another resolution aiming to promote its sale before Gandhi's visit to Tamil Nadu was passed. This was done with a deliberate intention to prove to Gandhi as to which community was rendering real service to the nation. Nonetheless, "Hail Gandhi" and "Hail khadar" slogans were published in the paper as catchwords of propaganda till 13th November 1927 and 18th December 1927 respectively. About the same period, the editor of the Kudi Arasu, E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker had shed his caste suffix "Naicker" as a protest against caste distinction in the society and the Kudi Arasu from 25-12-1927 onwards started publishing his name as E.V.Ramaswamy.

E.V.Ramaswamy and Mahatma Gandhi had ideological differences on issues like varnasrama-dharma ever since the starting of the Kudi Arasu. In an article published in the Kudi Arasu in 1925, E.V.Ramaswamy

6. Ibid., 2-1-1927, PRLRC.
7. Ibid., 2-1-1927, PRLRC.
regretted having developed an uncompromising difference of opinion with Gandhi about varnasrama dharma. He said, though Gandhi had a genuine concern about the eradication of untouchability, he had a strong faith in the high and low distinction based on birth as advocated by varnasrama dharma. E.V.Ramaswamy's already strained relationship with the Congress and Gandhi's speech upholding varnasrama dharma delivered in Mysore in 1927 forced E.V.Ramaswamy to have a dialogue and showdown with Gandhi on that issue. So, accompanied by S.Ramanathan, Co-founder of the Self-Respect Movement he met Gandhi at Bangalore in Mysore state, and another self-respect leader Va.E.Su.Shanmugam Chetty at Paganori in Tamil Nadu on 27th September 1927. On these two occasions they discussed Hindu religion, varnasrama dharma and Brahmins and Brahminism.

8. Kudi Arasu, 13-9-1925, PRLRC.


* Refer to the Appendix-II(a) 6(b) for the text of the conversation that took place between E.V.Ramaswamy and Mahatma Gandhi and between Va.E.Su.Shanmugam Chettiar and Mahatma Gandhi,
Similar discussions held later by other self-respect leaders with Gandhi during his Tamil Nadu tours, resulted in widening the ideological gap for ever between E.V. Ramaswamy and his Movement on one side and Gandhi and Congress Party on the other side.

From the moment E.V. Ramaswamy developed differences with the Congress Party, he felt alienated and freed from the party loyalty to advocate his self-respect philosophy independently and more actively. Still a member of the Congress, he conducted a condolence meeting at Erode on the death of Sir P.T. Thyagaraya Chettiar, the founder leader of the South Indian Liberation Federation (Justice Party) in 1925.11 Thereafter in collaboration with the Justice Party and under its banner, he along with his followers, toured different parts of Tamil Nadu and formed a number of Self-Respect Leagues by 1929. The self-Respect Leagues thus formed either functioned in the name of Non-Brahmin Leagues, purahit-denial Associations or other non-Brahmin Caste Associations. At various meetings, some of them

11. Kudi Aramu, 10-5-1925, ML.
organised by the Justice Party and some by E.V. Ramaswamy himself, the latter spelt out or started working towards that direction, the ideals and objects which the Self-Respect Movement upheld. In all, working along with E.V. Ramaswamy, right from the formative years of the Movement, Kaivalyam Swamiar, among others, not only gave the founder of the Movement an invaluable intellectual support by way of contributing many articles to Kudi Araiy, touching various subjects of interest and controversy, but also was to some extent instrumental in shaping the ideology of the Movement. E.V. Ramaswamy himself admitted that his ideology owes much to the learned people.12

By the time Kudi Araiy had nearly established its position as a growing popular weekly securing more than four thousand subscribers to its credit. Realising the importance of propagating the self-respect ideals to other linguistic people, more particularly to South Indians, E.V. Ramaswamy and S.Ramanathan under their

co-editorship had started publishing an English Weekly, Revolt from Erode from 7th November 1928. Besides these two communication media of the Self-Respect Movement, J.C. Kannappar's Dravidan (Tamil Daily) and Cho.Murugappan's Kumaran (Tamil Weekly) had been taking up the cause of the Movement. Contradicting and criticising these and the Movement during the period in Tamil Nadu were Swadesanitran (Tamil Weekly), 'The Hindu' (English Daily), Tamil Nadu (Tamil Weekly), Navasakthi (Tamil Weekly), 'The Mail' (English Daily) and Dasabandhu (Tamil Weekly).

Incorporating the aims and ideals which were already expressed and pressed in the form of resolutions at various non-Brahmin meetings, the first Provincial Self-Respect Conference at Coimbleput was convened on 17th and 18th February, 1929, more with a desire to test its strength and popularity among the educated non-Brahmins against the Congress and Brahmin criticism in Tamil Nadu. With much pomp and show and with government's support and sympathy, about four to five thousand people belonging to both sexes, of different castes, communities and professions, hailing from different
parts of South India attended it for two days as delegates, visitors, observers, reporters and as sympathisers of the Movement. The conference unfurling the Justice Party flag with head posters of Dr. T. M. Meir, Raja of Panagal and Sir. P. Thyagaraya Chetty, the founder-leaders of the non-Brahmin Movement, painted against a background of rising sun*, under the Presidency of M.P.A. Soundarapandian, Madurai District, passed resolutions expressing confidence in the British Government in India and in the leadership of S.V. Ramaswamy. The resolutions maintained to adhere to the policy of working exclusively on social and religious lines of reform. 13

A movement which had the credit of forming several taluk and district self-respect leagues and had held conferences in different parts of Tamil Nadu and also had the credit of convening the first Provincial Self-Respect Conference on a larger scale could not have

* Dravidan, 20-2-1929, PrLRC.

13. Kudi Araga, 24-2-1929, PrLRC.
Revolt, 20-2-1929, PrLRC.
For complete resolutions passed at the Chingleput Conference, see Appendix-III.
enrolled members under its banner till then. The Justice Party sympathisers who were influenced by E.V.Ramaswamy's propaganda, leadership and activities in collaboration with the Justice Party and most of the subscribers of the Kudi Aragu, spreading over Tamil districts were considered as members of the Self-Respect Movement then.\textsuperscript{14} It was at the first Self-Respect Conference, the Movement had its constitution finalised on 18th February 1929, at the concluding session of the Conference.\* And with a desire to run the movement in an organised manner, for the year 1929-1930, an executive body was formed consisting of the President, Vice-Presidents, Secretary, Treasurer and eleven other general committee members. In the early years of the Self-Respect Movement, the structure of the central organisation, seemed to have remained in the hands of those who were either English-educated elites or successful businessmen or landlords or well-to-do public servants or journalists or all of them.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Information collected from an interview arranged with H. Kaliappan, op.cit.


\textsuperscript{15} Revolt, 27-2-1929, PRLRC.
About five months after the Chingleput Conference, *Kudi Arasu* and *Revolt* the official organs of the Movement, had started publishing the proforms of the application form and that too for a shorter period, with a call to the readers to enrol themselves as members of the Self-Respect Movement at an early date. The annual subscription was said to be two annas. In the formative years of the SRM, the official organs seemed to have been run by the money of E.V. Ramaswamy himself. In course of time the money realised by the sale of the paper and contributions collected in the form of donations from activists and sympathisers were utilised for running the SRM. It was estimated that the collections for the Second Provincial Self-Respect Conference held at Brode in 1930 were rupees five thousand and thirty-five.

The emergence of the SRM owes much to the individual efforts of E.V. Ramaswamy. However, the ideological formation and its growth, programmes and work that would determine the role of the SRM in society, needed the help and co-operation of the committed followers and their propaganda.

16. *Kudi Arasu*, 16-6-1929, PRLRC.*
*Revolt*, 14-7-1929, PRLRC.*
17. *Kudi Arasu*, 16-8-1931, PRLRC.*