

CHAPTER I

EVOLUTION OF PERIYAR MOVEMENT

The Tamils of the pre-Aryan age had their own pattern of religious and social institutions, language and literature. Aryanaisation of the south was doubtless a slow process spreading over several centuries.¹ The Aryans migrated from north to south with their religion, culture and social stratification based on the four-fold caste system. The Aryan theory of mankind divided into four *varnas*, or group of caste, such as *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra* was wholly foreign to the Tamils of the *Sangam* age.² In the *Sangam* period, references are found about the existence of Aryans living in separate quarters, practicing endogamy and engaging in literary pursuits.³

The concept of caste as defined in the *Rig-Veda* with its four-fold system was unknown in Tamil society. *Purananuru*, a *Sangam* work informs that one's social status in Tamil society was not inherited but based on its merit. It points out the existence of the social hierarchy concept of high and low of the *Sangam* age.⁴ The concept of ritual purity and impurity was found in the post-*Sangam* work, *Chilappathikaram*.⁵ The grammatical treatise of the early Tamilaham, *Tolkappiyam* contains references to the four fold system. But the commentators of *Tolkappiyam* admitted this classification as *varna* or

¹ Nilakanda Sastri, K.A., *A History of South India from Pre-Historic Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*, London, 1958, p.75.

² Pillai, K.K., *Aryan Influence in Tamilaham During the Sangam Epoch*, Proceedings of the First International Conference of Tamil Studies, Vol.I, Malaysia, 1966, pp.271-279.

³ Basham, A.L., *The Wonder that was India*, New York, 1954, pp.461-462.

⁴ *Purananuru*, (ed.), Swaminatha Ayyar, U.V., Madras, 1956, p.339.

⁵ *Cilappatikaram*, (ed.), Swaminatha Ayyar, U.V., Madras, 1960, p.418.

jathi.⁶ By the time of *Manu*, the Hindu law giver, the social stratification of Indian society in general, was perfected and given a legal sanction and religious acknowledgement. The date of *Manusmirithi* is still an enigma to historians.⁷

The Dominance of Brahmins in Tamilnadu

The emergence of Brahmins and their dominance in the Tamil society was a long process. Many factors led to their domination in the Tamil society. It is necessary to trace the rise and growth of Brahmins as an important socio-political caste. The Brahmin caste is the product of the intermingling of the Aryan immigrants and the priestly class that had a native origin in the Tamil soil. The religious practices of the *Sangam* period were simple and unsophisticated. But slowly the complex Aryan rituals became popular among the kings and nobles.⁸ The Aryan Brahmins were accorded a very high ritual status, but the predominant agrarian caste Vellalas, though they were powerful, were given a lower status and were specifically referred to as *Sudras*. Vellalas were land-owning caste in the south and they were generally admitted to be highest among non-Brahmin castes in social scale.⁹ The enmity arose between Aryan Brahmins and Vellalas on performing religious rites and rituals.¹⁰ As a result of this, the Brahmins slowly began to assume ritual leadership of entire Tamil society. This gave them the role of

⁶ Subramanian, N., *Sangam Polity: The Administration and Social life of the Sangam Tamils*, New York, 1966, pp.3-12.

⁷ Ambedkar, B.R., *The Untouchables, Who Were They? and How They Became Untouchables?*, New Delhi, 1948 p.146; Buhler, G., *Laws of Manu*, Oxford, 1886, p.CXXV

⁸ Subramanian, N., *op.cit*; pp.369-370.

⁹ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India.*, Vol.VII, Madras, 1909, pp.-361-88.

¹⁰ Chidambaram Pillai, P., "Saivite Mentality and Self-Respect", - in *Revolt*, 8 May and 1 September 1929.

custodians of Sanskrit learning and *vedic* religion. Religion became the sole pre-occupation of the Brahmins. The Brahmins realised the importance of the economic factor to strengthen their position. They acquired gifts of lands and titles from kings. The lands owned by them were technically fertile and yielded more produce and such lands were called *Brahmadeya* lands and were tax free. Accumulation of wealth gave them further higher social status and greater social recognition. Their rich tradition of learning, contributed for their rise in Tamilnadu in the field of education. Institutional type of learning emerged during the period of the Imperial Cholas between ninth and twelfth centuries.¹¹

During the reigns of Rajendra I (1012-1044) and Rajadhiraja (1044-1054) *vedic* institutions similar to modern centres of higher learning existed at Ennayiram in South Arcot and Thirubhuvani near Pondicherry, in both the institutions six hundred students received education. There were fourteen teachers in these educational centres. Students were divided into junior and senior groups, and they studied *vedas* and the *upanishads* together with Sanskrit. Educational grants were made to the students, and the teachers were paid regular salaries in the form of substantial amounts of food grain. Gold coins were also given as allowances to certain categories of scholars and teachers at the Ennayiram *vedic* college. All the expenses were met by the kings. This education was meant only for Brahmins.¹²

The Siva *maths* provided educational facilities for certain occupational groups like the Vellalas and the Mudaligals. Centres of learning for Brahmins

¹¹ Nilakanta Sastri. K.A., *The Cholas*, Madras, 1955, pp.578-579.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.630-632.

continued to increase in number and size during the Vijayanagar rule and the Nayak dynasties in fourteenth to sixteenth and sixteenth to eighteenth centuries respectively.¹³ The Nayaks appointed Brahmins as their *Dalavays*, the principal officers of civil and military administration.¹⁴ Though the Brahmins were minority, they retained their identity as a social entity because of their cohesiveness and the practice of endogamy ensured their distinctiveness as a social group.

A survey of castes conducted in 1891 shows that 72.21 percent of Brahmins were educated as against 27.22 percent of Vellalas.¹⁵ The advent of British in India opened new opportunities for them in administration, law and commerce. Western education too contributed to their exclusiveness. Because of their education, Brahmins established firmness in the British administrative machinery. No wonder the Brahmins were able to enter government, public and professional services, because they possessed experience in administration and law, entrepreneurship, techniques and a good mastery over the alien language.¹⁶ They became eminent lawyers, educationalist, administrators and journalists. To strengthen their unity, they formed *Madras Mahajana Sabha* in Madras in 1884. They also dominated in the Indian National Congress, from its inception. It is interesting to note that

¹³ Sathiyanaiaier, R., *Tamilaham in the 17th Century*, Madras, 1956, p.177.

¹⁴ Sathiyanaiaier, R., *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, Madras, 1924, p.237.

¹⁵ *Census of India 1891*, Madras, Vol.XIII, Madras, 1893. p.179.

¹⁶ Visswanathan, E.Sa., *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker.- A Study in Politics of Tamilnadu*, Madras, 1983, pp.10-12.

Tamilnadu was represented by six representatives among them five were Brahmins.¹⁷

The Brahmins at this stage combined their ritual and political leadership with land ownership most effectively, to get themselves elected to local bodies through the Councils Act of India, 1892. The Indian members in the council, was dominated by the minority Brahmins. Four out of six officials and seventeen out of twenty nine non-officials, either nominated by British government or elected by local bodies, was Brahmins. The Brahmin representation further increased with introduction of the Minto-Morely Reforms of 1909.¹⁸

The representative government was introduced for the first time where non-Brahmins derived no great benefit as qualifications laid down for elections were unfavourable to them. Lack of education of non-Brahmins, though some of them had property and to understand the intricacies of representative government and consequently Brahmins continued to dominate. Between the years 1910-1919 out of nine Indian officials who served on the council, eight were Brahmins.¹⁹ This led to inadequate representation of non-Brahmin majority population both at provincial and central levels. These were the factors responsible for the emergence of Brahmins to an exalted position not only in Tamilnadu, but also in the entire India.

¹⁷ Gopal Menon, C., *Early Days of the Madras Mahajana Sabha Diamond Jubilee Souvenir*, Madras Mahajana Sabha, Madras, 1946, p.58.

¹⁸ Saraswathi, S., *Minorities in Madras State: Group Interest in Modern Politics*, Delhi, 1974. p.59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.61.

Anti-Brahmin and Egalitarian Movements

Anti-Brahmin and egalitarian movements similar to the Self-Respect Movement date back at least a millennium in South India. Social mobility would have enabled the non-Brahmin castes to compete for higher ritual position in society. Non-Brahmin priests tried to displace them from their high ritual position by their scholarship. The spread of Buddhism and Jainism and later Bhakti Movement helped the non-Brahmin castes to share religious leadership with Brahmins.²⁰ *Saivasiddhantists* and *Vaishnavites* gave a fillip to this process²¹ in the medieval period. A.K. Ramanujan has made a study on the writings and ideas of the *Lingayats* of Karnataka. He has shown that the religion of the *Lingayats* was a revolt against the prevailing forms of religious observance and social stratification.

The hymns of the *Lingayats*, the *vacanas*, had contempt on all organised religion, whether *Sanskritic* or local. Basavanna, the reformer who helped to establish the *Lingayats* sect, spoke against the established orthodox ritual and the animal sacrifices of local religious cults.²² The sect did not differentiate between men and women but represented an attempt to articulate the goals of the poor, the outcastes and underprivileged against the rich.²³

In Tamil society as well there are many examples of movements similar to that of the *Lingayats*. Perhaps the most outstanding example of this kind of thinking can be found in the writings of the *siddhars*, a group of

²⁰ Subramaniam, V., "Inter-Disciplinary Isolation in Universities", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. IV 27 July 1969, Bombay, 1969, pp. 71-72.

²¹ Vaiyapuri Pillai, S., *History of Tamil Language and Literature*, Madras, 1956, p. 129.

²² Ramanujan, A.K., *Speaking of Siva*, Baltimore, 1973, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Tamil ascetics most of whom lived between the fifth and tenth centuries of the Christian era. According to Kamil Zvelebil a *siddhar* is a person who has attained siddhi or a psychic and supernatural miraculous occult power by bodily and mental discipline.²⁴ He writes that the *siddhars* are characterised by their opposition to idol worship and temples, the emphasis on knowledge, practice of *yoga*, right conduct, and the protest against caste.²⁵

The anti-caste attitude continued to have effect on the Tamil society. Tirumular who lived in the seventh century A.D., spoke of universalism and egalitarianism. He says there is but one community and one God, which has been repeated and commented on by many individuals in Tamilnadu.²⁶ Subramania Bharati, a noted Tamil poet of Ettayapuram spoke in very utopian terms and appeared to reflect the idea of Tirumular, and stated :“I am one of the *siddhars* of this land.”²⁷ Ramalingasami also strongly identified with the weary, the poor and the hungry. He said ‘I suffered whenever I saw the dried up crops, I suffered in my mind seeing the poor who were tired from the hunger that never left them.’²⁸ They begged from every house and were weary with hunger. This identification was a basic characteristic of Ramalingasami’s political and social message. In the following verse, he expresses his feeling over the weak. ‘You, my father, know in your auspicious mind that I am not strong enough to clearly express the pain, which wells up in my mind when, alas! mighty people strike the weak. You have seen how the fear which I have when I see intoxicated people is greater

²⁴ Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan*, Leiden, 1973, p.225.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²⁶ Ramanatha Pillai and Chithamparamanar,A., *Tirumular*,(T) Tirunelveli, 1962, p.223.

²⁷ Kamil Zvelebil., *op.cit.*, p.222

²⁸ Ramalingasami., *Thiruvavuralpa*,(T), V.II., p.103.

than the ocean. Who can understand the trembling which comes to me when I learn of the cruelty which evil people impose on the weak?²⁹

Ramalingasami's ability to articulate the feelings of the poor and those who had no official sponsor suggests the aspect of the transformation which was going on in Tamil society. As the basis of the society is the patron-client relationships and the responsibility of the patron for the client began to dissolve, Ramalingasami's ideas were the first stirrings of a demand that the government takes responsibility for the plight of these poor people. Through his compassion Ramalingasami was able to infuse courage to the Tamils.

C.A. Ayyamuthu, a member of the Vellala Gounder peasant caste from Coimbatore district who had started his career as a Congressman then moved over to the Periyar Movement in the late 1920s, said his egalitarian goals came from the doctrines of Ramalingasami.³⁰ S.Gurusami, a government servant of Sourh Arcot district, published Self-Respect news paper from the nearby French colony of Pondicherry and was able to silence much hostility to Self-Respect ideas in the early 1930s in a meeting at Sivaganga of Ramnad district, by quoting Ramalingasami's doctrine that all belong to one community.³¹

In then prevailing condition of the Indian Society, both *karma* and caste prevented a person from changing his status in life. Since a man's status was unalterable, equality of opportunity was impossible and therefore the root notions of democracy ran counter to all the assumptions which for

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁰ Aiyamuthu, C.A., *Enathu Ninaivukal*, (T.), Madras, 1973, p.40.

³¹ Thirumangalam Manimaran., *Oru Chilaril Oruvar*, (T), Madras, 1963. p.98.

centuries had formed the common stock of popular belief in India. Caste destroys all powers of initiative. The individual is nothing, the caste system is everything. Independence of thought, the sheet anchor of democracy, is a thing abhorrent to the Hindu. The Brahmins' social and religious position in south India, was, however less important for politics in Madras Presidency.³²

Political and social domination of the Brahmins was challenged only in 1916 by non-Brahmins of South India as evidenced by the rise of the South Indian Liberal Federation popularly known as Justice Party.³³ But the activities of the Party were confined largely to the educated and rich non-Brahmins and bulk of the non-Brahmin masses remained untouched by them. The political and social awakening was created among them by Periyar. As a consequence, though the British sought to give due representation to all caste groups in the government services, Brahmins held the largest number of the higher appointments available to Indians. Out of 390 higher appointments in the Educational Department, 310 were held by Brahmins; in the Judicial Department, 118 out of 171 and in the Revenue Department 394 out of 679.³⁴

Though Brahmins in Madras presidency numbered less than one and half a million out of a total population of forty two million, the caste, possesses seventy percent, of all graduates in arts seventy four percent, of

³² *Report of the Southborough Committee*, Enclousure,'Note by the Hon'ble Sir Alexander Cardew, Government of Madras, Madras, 1918, pp.124-127.

³³ Eugene F.Irschick., *Politics and Social Conflict in South India:The Non-Brahman and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*,California, 1969.pp.48-49.

³⁴ John Sharock,.A., "Caste as a Factor in Indian Reform", *Asiatic Review*, July 1919, p.145.

the graduates in law ,seventy one percent ,of all the graduates in engineering and seventy four percent of the graduates in teaching.³⁵

Justice Party demanded that communal representation was the only solution by which equality between Brahmin and non-Brahmin could be achieved, and thereby promote the co-operation between castes and races and Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 sought to ensure this scheme.³⁶ The Justice Party would accept any system of reform of home rule, provided it granted communal representation for the interests of the country is preserved.³⁷

Periyar and Congress

Towards the beginning of 1919 Periyar made his final decision to join the Tamilnadu Congress, although he formally became a member in early 1920.³⁸ At this stage, the Congress set before it, grand ideals such as amelioration of the condition of the masses, removal of untouchability and prohibition. These ideals of the Congress Party attracted Periyar. By joining the Congress organization, he could realise his ideal of bringing about a new social order.³⁹ He himself stated that he joined the Congress with the belief that it would serve the cause of society and that it would plead for independence only after the abolition of untouchability and caste disparity.⁴⁰

³⁵ Report of the Southborough committee, Appendix XVI; Letter No.1146 (Reforms), Government of Madras, Madras, 31 December, 1918.

³⁶ Report on the Joint Select Committee for the year 1919, *Evidence* and Answer to Question No.3239, p.191.

³⁷ Ibid; Answer to Qs. 2818, p.176 and 2879, p.182.

³⁸ Periyar., "Enathu Kolkai Ataravu Matrathukku Karanam"(T), *Periyar's 90th Birthday Commemoration Souvenir*, Madras, 1968, p.23.

³⁹ An Admirer, *Periyar E.V. Ramasami: A Pen Portrait*, Erode, 1962, p.15.

⁴⁰ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 14 October, 1951.

In the beginning he had unquestioning faith in the Congress and its Non-Co-operation Movement and was ever ready to undergo any risk and make sacrifices for the cause. He brought his entire conservative household to take part in the national movement, his aged mother, sister, and his wife, thus broke the conventional confinement of women to household work. In response to Gandhi's call, numerous public meetings were organised in different parts of Tamilnadu. In spite of his inadequate education, he succeeded in handling the Tamil language with great facility and forthrightness, so as to rouse the political consciousness of illiterate masses.⁴¹ He fanatically supported Gandhi's agitational techniques and himself with the group led by Rajagopalachari. At the same time Periyar maintained a good relationship with the leading non-Brahmin members of the party, who have Gandhian outlook.⁴² Periyar addressed many public meetings and soon earned a name for himself as one of the four top-ranking orators in Tamil, others were Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, Satyamurthi and P.Varadarajulu Naidu, who were capable of attracting large gatherings for their meetings.⁴³ Periyar with the support of the non-Brahmin members, actively participated in the Non-Co-operation Movement and propagated the use of *khadar*. This helped Periyar to rise quickly in the Tamilnadu Congress hierarchy and in 1920 he was elected President.⁴⁴ As the President of the Tamilnadu branch of Congress, Periyar's influence among both Brahmins

⁴¹ Balasubramaniam, K.M., *Periyar E.V. Ramasami*, Erode, 1947, pp.37-39.

⁴² Rajan, T.S.S., *Ninaivu Alaikal*, (T), Madras, 1947, p.210.

⁴³ Kalyanasundaranar, T.V., *Tiru. Vi.Ka. Valkkaikurippukal*, (T), Madras, 1948, pp.430-433.

⁴⁴ An Admirer, *Periyar E.V. Ramasami: A Pen Portrait*, Erode 1962. p.19.

and non-Brahmins grew. His campaign earned special significance to put the country on the road to *swarajya*.

Periyar's determination to suffer even personal loss for the sake of principles came into force at the time of the temperance campaign. When the campaign was started in 1921, he organised picketing before arrack and toddy shops. It was widely reported in the press that in response to Gandhi's call, Periyar felled down 500 coconut trees in his farm that had been leased for toddy tapping. In August 1921, when the campaign was intensified at Erode, his wife and sister were drawn into the movement to make it a grand success. K.M.Balasubramaniam writes in his book *Periyar E.V.Ramasami*, that these two were first Indian women in the south to defy the British government prohibitory orders against picketing before liquor shops and to court arrest. Their role in the temperance campaign was commented upon by no less a person than Gandhi himself.⁴⁵ The *Hindu* reported that not even a coffee house or betel shop was opened at Erode. No cars and buses were operated. The crowd had 12000 in number. Periyar and his able volunteers worked day and night for the success of the campaign and the credit was due for them. Gandhi was apprised of this and had to take into account the vigour with which the campaign was going on in Erode while considering the recall of the boycott.⁴⁶ Periyar was imprisoned by the British government in November 1921 and imprisoned for a month under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. For the next two years till March 1924, Periyar was in the forefront of the campaign to popularise *khadar*. He thought that by

⁴⁵ Balasubramaniam, K.M., *op.cit.*, p.21.

⁴⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 25 August 1921.

urging the people to use clothes made of *khadar* or handspun and hand material, he could merely give a fillip to cottage industries in the country but could also enforce sanctions, however small they might be, against British economic interests by boycotting their textiles.⁴⁷

Periyar became very popular and he got support from among all sections of Congress members. But situation slowly changed with Periyar's participation in various programmes beginning from April 1924, especially when he questioned the orthodox, conservativeness and caste system. He began to challenge the orthodox Brahmin views on the caste system. On a number of occasions, resolutions dealing with social policy, particularly proportional representation were brought before the provincial and district Congress conferences in Tamilnadu and on each occasion the rebuff which non-Brahmins felt that they had provoked them to deeper hostility.⁴⁸ A quarrel developed at a Congress meeting in Tiruppur on 5 November, 1922, over the resolution on the entry of Nadars into the temples. At the Tamilnadu Congress Committee meeting in April 1923, it was proposed that a committee be appointed to investigate and recommend ways for the better understanding and relationship between Brahmins and non-Brahmins but owing to the controversial nature of the proposal it was thought inexpedient to pass it and hence it was duly withdrawn.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Sami Chidambaranar, *Tamilar Talaivar*, (TI) Erode, 1958.p.71.

⁴⁸ *The Hindu*, Madras, 7 November 1922.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10 April 1922.

Another quarrel between non-Brahmins and Brahmins arose when a resolution was introduced by a Brahmin member at the Tamilnadu Congress Committee meeting at Tenkasi in Tirunelveli district on 6 July 1922, recommending that the All India Congress Committee should help raise fund for a Tamil University at Kallidaikurchi. Two Vellala Congress men opposed this resolution as likely to exacerbate the ill-feeling between Brahmin and non-Brahmins in the district. At the meeting a Brahmin delegate shouted Mahatma Gandhi *ki jai*. A.Masilamanipillai, a Vellala, in retaliation shouted, *Brahmna-kurumbu* (Brahmin mischief) following which there were many angry demonstrations.⁵⁰

Periyar's radical outlook enabled him to support the progressive policies of Justice Party. Though he was a Congress leader, he welcomed the resolutions of the Justice Party on Hindu Religious Endowment Board with a view to put an end to the age-old monopoly and exploitation of the Brahmins in the managements of Hindu temples. Likewise, in 1924, he appreciated the Justice Party Government Order to implement the policy of communal representation in education and employment.

Vaikkom Agitation

Periyar invariably involved himself in public agitations on many occasions. His involvement became for the first time a test of his ability to fight social inequalities without unduly affecting the sensitivity of the groups directly or indirectly. In 1924, he got an opportunity at Vaikkom, where a conflict arose over the right of untouchables to use certain roads outside a

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1922.

temple in erstwhile Travancore State. It was the first *satyagraha* for the removal of the practice of untouchability and it was organized and conducted mostly by TAMILIAN *satyagrahis*. In this campaign, Periyar's wife and sister participated. The agitation stemmed from an incident that took place between some Brahmins and Madhavan, an advocate of a lower status, of the Ezhava caste. He came to attend the court in connection with a client's case. The court was located inside the compound of the palace of Maharaja. While a religious function was in progress in honour of the Maharaja Sri Moolam Thirunal's⁵¹ birthday in the same compound. The orthodox Brahmins, afraid of pollution even from the mere approach of a non caste Hindu and forbade his entry. To protest against such inequalities in society the Congress leaders started agitation. Their decision to take out a procession of untouchables on a prohibited road was conveyed to Gandhi on 12 March, 1924.⁵²

At the outset, the Travancore police authorities made it their policy to arrest only the Congress leaders who staged *satyagraha* in protest against the rule forbidding the untouchables to use the public roads. To start in this, they arrested two Malayalis, K.P.Kesava Menon, a Nair, editor of *Mathurabhumi* and T.K.Madhavan an Ezhava, editor of the newspaper *Deshabhimani*; later, they arrested George Joseph, an Indian Christian lawyer trained in England, on a charge of stirring up trouble. The arrested leaders realised that in the absence of proper leadership, the *satyagraha* would fail, so they appealed to the Congress leaders in the neighbouring

⁵¹ Gopalakrishnan, M., (ed.), *Kanyakumari District Gazetteer*, Madras, 1995. p.93.

⁵² *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXIII, Delhi, 1967, p.272.

Presidency of Madras to render their assistance.⁵³ In the meantime George Joseph and Kesava Menon wrote personal letters to Periyar, who was then the President of the Tamilnadu Congress, requesting him to take over the leadership of the struggle.⁵⁴

Periyar accepted the request and arrived in Vaikom on 13 April 1924 and began to harangue his audience. His speeches were highly emotional and his provocative attack on orthodox religion attracted thousands of people. His ferocious speech can be seen from the following passage: They argue that pollution would be the result if the untouchables passed through the streets leading to the temple. I ask them whether the Lord of Vaikom or the presence of untouchables. If they say that the presiding deity at the Vaikom temple would be polluted, they could not be God, but a mere stone fit only to wash dirty linen with.⁵⁵ Indian *dhobis* (washermen) beat the clothes which they wash on flat stones, in order to help remove the dirt.' However within six days of his arrival at Vaikom, he was arrested and sentenced to one month imprisonment in Travancore. After his release he began the agitation and was court arrested and put in jail for six months, but he was released two months earlier on the death of the Maharaja.⁵⁶ After his release, he returned to his home town Erode, but the government of Madras arrested him for an anti-government speech he had made at the height of the *khadar* campaign. He was released within six months, and he was in Travancore when Gandhi met the Maharani, in March 1925 for talks regarding the

⁵³ Periyar E.V.Ramasami, *Tintamaiyai Olittatu Yar?: Vaikom Varalaru* (T) Erode, 1968, p.22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁵⁵ Under Secretary's Safe File No: 491, 25 June 1924.

⁵⁶ Sami Chidambaranar, *op.cit.*, pp.83-84.

Vaikom issue.⁵⁷In the meantime, the *sathyagraha* campaign received much popular support from several parts people of Travancore as well as from all over the country. On Rajagopalachari's suggestion, Gandhi went to Vaikom and met the Maharani on 12 March 1925⁵⁸in order to end the *satyagraha* peacefully. Apparently the meeting failed to resolve the issue, for the Satyagraha continued until the prohibitory order was revoked in October 1927 and the roads were thrown open by the Travancore Durbar to the untouchables.⁵⁹

Periyar utilised this opportunity to demonstrate his capacity to fight for social justice on behalf of the untouchables in Kerala. He got the most glory and he was lionised as '*Vaikom Virar*', the hero of Vaikom by the Tamil speaking population of the Madras Presidency.⁶⁰ Further the Vaikom issue indicated the orthodox Brahmins stubborn opposition to the liberalization of Hindu social customs and evils.⁶¹ It is said that Mr.Gandhi the local orthodox caste Hindu opposition leaders had a talk at the residence of *Indanthurithi* Nambuthiri. He discussed with them for over three hours and made practical proposals with a view to bringing the struggle to a speedy termination. These alternative proposals were arbitration, a referendum, an examination by select *pundits* of the Sankara Smritis. The oppositiononists did not choose to

⁵⁷ Balasubramaniam,K.M., *op.cit.*,p.30.

⁵⁸ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XXVI, *op.cit.*, 1967, p.293.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. XXXV, 1969, p.116.

⁶⁰ Under Secretary's Safe File No.688, 9 March 1924; G.O.No.513, Public Department, 1 September, 1925.

⁶¹ *The Hindu*, Madras, 11 March 1925.

accept any of these.⁶² Gandhi's talk with the orthodox leaders ended in failure.

Gurukulam Controversy

Another affair in which Periyar became involved in politics was the issue of separate dining, enforced for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students at a traditional school, *gurukulam* in the Brahmin village at Seranmadevi in Tirunelveli district. The *gurukulam*, at Seranmadevi, south of Kallidaikurchi, was established in December, 1922 by V.V.S. Ayyar, a former terrorist and editor of Tamil Newspaper *Desabhaktan* with the object of imparting religious education to youths, inculcating in them the spirit of patriotism and infusing a passion for social service,⁶³ financially supported by private individuals like Nattukottai Chettis in India and Malaya.⁶⁴ The Tamilnadu Congress agreed to donate Rs 10,000/- from the National Education Fund and offered Rs.5000/- as its initial contribution.⁶⁵ Kallidaikurchi was a centre of Brahmin culture and learning, but had a tradition of request conflicts with the non-Brahmins dating back to 1917, when the Justice Party took exception to Taluq Board funds being spent on the Sanskrit College at Kallidaikurchi. Only a few non- Brahmins were admitted in the school, and they were not allowed to study the *vedas*.⁶⁶

In January 1925, Periyar received complaints from the students of the *gurukulam*, including from the son of O.P.Ramasami Reddiar, former Chief Minister of Madras, that separate dining was enforced for Brahmin and non-

⁶² *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, op.cit., p.261.

⁶³ Yogi Sri Suddhananta Bharati, *Viravilakku Va. Ve. Su. Iyer*, (T) Tiruchinapalli, 1947, pp.104-109.

⁶⁴ Rajan, T.S.S., *Va. Ve. Su. Iyer* (T) Madras, 1946.p.52.

⁶⁵ Periyar E.V.Ramasami, *Tintamaiyai Olittatu Yar?: Vaikkom Varalaru* (T) Erode, 1968, op.cit., p.34.

⁶⁶ Varadarajulu Naidu, T., *Justice Movement*, Madras, 1932. pp.114-115.

Brahmin students. It was further stated that the quality of the food served to the non-Brahmin students was different.⁶⁷ Even separate water pots were kept for them.⁶⁸ A committee from the Tamilnadu Congress was thereupon appointed to look into the matter,⁶⁹ and in April 1925 Varadarajulu Naidu began a campaign against the *gurukulam* and the Brahmin domination within the Congress.⁷⁰ The non Brahmins in the Congress too opposed such an inhuman and discriminatory practice. The fact finding committee of the Congress learnt that V.V.S.Ayyar himself had given permission to two Brahmin boys to dine separately, on the insistence of their parents.⁷¹ The *gurukulam* incident merely proved the opinion existing in some quarters that non-Brahmins could not accept any social justice even at the hands of such liberal minded Brahmins as V.V.S. Ayyar.⁷² P.Varadarajulu Naidu told in a public meeting at Salem that before the Tamils sought equality or freedom from foreigners they should establish complete equality with the Brahmins in the matter of inter-dining and save the non-Brahmins from the age-old social discrimination. V.V.S. Ayyar's action of disallowing non-Brahmin boys to eat with the Brahmins was a direct challenge to the non-Brahmins and this was the time for the Tamilians to vindicate their honour.⁷³ The matter was taken up to Gandhi by the Tamilnadu Congress Committee when he was in Madras in 1925.V.V.S.Ayyar's supporters also met Gandhi and they pointed out that

⁶⁷ An Admirer, *Periyar E.V.Ramasami: A Pen Portrait*, NNPR, Madras 1918. p.178.

⁶⁸ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 30 March 1950.

⁶⁹ *The Hindu*, Madras, 22 January 1925.

⁷⁰ *Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 29 March 1925.

⁷¹ Ramanathan.S., '*Periyar Iyakkam*' (T), *Periyar's 89th Birthday Commemorations Souvenir*, Madras, 1967, p.65.

⁷² *Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 28 February 1925.

⁷³ *The Hindu*, Madras, 8 April 1925.

inter-dining was not in practice either in society or in educational institutions managed by the Government in Tamilnadu.⁷⁴

However, a compromise resolution was agreed on by which the committee recommended that all organisations partaking in the National Movement should follow a principle shunning gradations of merit based on birth.⁷⁵ Those who opposed this view contended that nearly ninety five percent of the entire contributions for the establishment and maintenance of the institution came from non-Brahmins of the distinct understanding that it would train youths on non-sectarian lines for national and social service. There was no option: either he should return all the donations received from the Congress and from non-Brahmins or he should agree to change the character of the institution forth-with. But Gandhi advised that the two Brahmin students should be allowed to dine separately, as it had been agreed to already, but in future no such restrictions should be encouraged or imposed in the *gurukulam*. Gandhi's interference in the *gurukulam* controversy also did not solve the problem.⁷⁶

With the *gurukulam* controversy, Brahmin, non-Brahmin conflicts brewing, Periyar came to the Tamilnadu Congress Conference at Kanchipuram in November 1925 ready for a showdown with the Brahmins, and against their dominance in Tamil society. P.Varatharajulu Naidu maintained that before Tamils sought freedom from the foreign yoke they must strive to attain

⁷⁴ Kalyanasundaranar, T.V., *Tiru. Vi.Ka. Valkkaikurippukkal*, p.775.

⁷⁵ *The Hindu*, Madras, 23 April 1925.

⁷⁶ *Navasakti*, Madras, 27 February and 6 March 1925, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXVI, New Delhi, 1967. p.260.

complete equality with the Brahmins in the inter-dining.⁷⁷ He condemned V.V.S.Ayyar and the incident in the *gurukulam* was not only a breach of conduct but was an attempt to bring up the non-Brahmin children in an atmosphere of inferiority.⁷⁸

Though Periyar and Varadarajulu Naidu differed in political philosophies, they held identical views on the *gurukulam* issue. Periyar's speech at Salem in April 1925 confirms this view and he said for the first time that the Brahmin question should be settled even while the British supremacy lasted in the country; otherwise they would have to suffer under the tyranny of Brahminocracy.⁷⁹ T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar who was considered by his contemporaries as a balanced person than Periyar appealed V.V.S.Ayyar to change the character of the institution.⁸⁰ But V.V.S.Ayyar was very strong in his conviction and acted on communal lines. Periyar in his capacity as the secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress refused to pay the remaining amount of Rs.5000/- to the *gurukulam*, unless the common mess as demanded by the non-Brahmin community was conceded. However, V.V.S.Ayyar got the amount as cheque without the knowledge of Periyar from the joint secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress, who happened to be a Brahmin. This was perhaps the first cheque since Periyar became the secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress to be issued without his signature.⁸¹

⁷⁷ *The Hindu*, Madras, 20 April 1925.

⁷⁸ *The Hindu*, Madras, 20 April 1925.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 14 April 1925.

⁸⁰ Meenakshisundaram, T.P., *T.V.K. The Living Tamil Culture*, Vol. VII, Madras, 1958, pp.17-18.

⁸¹ *The Hindu*, Madras, 30 April 1925.

Periyar was infuriated over this incident and said that the time had come to declare an all-out war on the *gurukulam*. Since then Periyar addressed many public meetings in various parts of Tamilnadu and he brought home to the public the caste discrimination practised by the *gurukulam* and appealed to the non-Brahmins to withhold further financial support. He was responsible for economic sanctions against the *gurukulam*. But V.V.S.Ayyar not merely turned a deaf ear but also criticised him for lending support to a malicious campaign in Tamilnadu.⁸²

Hence T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar suggested to V.V.S.Ayyar that the present location of the *gurukulam* had restrained from Seranmadevi to another centre.⁸³ As a result, V.V.S.Ayyar resigned as the head of the institution on 21 April 1925, and he criticised T.V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar for imputing unworthy motives to him.⁸⁴ Again the controversy reflected in the annual Congress meeting held in April 1925 at Tiruchinapalli. Efforts were made at the meeting to settle the issue of inter-dining. Voices were raised against this move, for they held the view that the Tamilnadu Congress had no jurisdiction over matters concerning a private institution. At the conclusion of his presidential address P.Varadarajalu Naidu, moved a resolution and expressed the regret of the Congress having paid Rs. 10,000/- to the *gurukulam*.⁸⁵ Natesan Chetti suggested an amendment in the resolution and sought to recover the ten thousand rupees. However the problem was not solved at all.

⁸² *Navasakti*, Madras, 3 April 1925.

⁸³ Kalyanasundaranar, T.V., *Tiru.Vi.Ka, Valkkaikurippukal.*, p.775.

⁸⁴ *The Hindu*, Madras, 21 April 1925.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30 April 1925.

Rajagopalachari moved a resolution on 29 April 1925 at the Tiruchinapalli TNCC meeting, requesting the internal management of the *gurukulam* should be left to the people who administer it but the pupils of the institution should be brought together without discrimination.⁸⁶ S.Ramanathan's resolution recommended that the gradations of merit based on birth should not be observed in Indian social life.⁸⁷ Srinivasa Iyankar and his Brahmin friends seemed to have given their moral support to Naidu and Periyar.⁸⁸ But all the leading Brahmins, including Rajagopalachari, Rajan, K.Santhanam, Vijayaraghavachariar Dr.Swaminatha Sastri and N.S.Varadachari, opposed the resolution.⁸⁹

Periyar took a militant stand that there is no division between Brahmin and non-Brahmin and it is like binding up a wound without healing it⁹⁰ Charges and counter charges continued and finally Periyar and his colleagues appealed to All India Congress Committee to intervene in the controversy. But the A.I.C.C, refused to intervene. Periyar and Ramanathan visited the *gurukulam* and urged its authorities to dispense with communal restrictions by the direction of the Tamilnadu Congress. They failed in their mission. But before a settlement could be reached, V.V.S. Ayyar died on 3 June 1925, at the Papanasam falls in Tirunelveli district.⁹¹ T.R. Mahadeva Ayyar, who succeeded V.V.S.Ayyar, managed the *gurukulam* without changing its mess-rules. M.Baktavachalam, a Vellala non-Brahmin criticised

⁸⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 30 April 1925

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 30 April 1925.

⁸⁸ Sixtieth Birthday Celebration Committee, *Life and Sketch of Dr.P.Varadarajalu Naidu*, Madras, 1947, p.4.

⁸⁹ Ramanathan.S. *Periyar Iyakkam* (T).p.66.

⁹⁰ Sami Chitambaranar, *op.cit.*,p.94.

⁹¹ *The Hindu*, Madras, 6 June 1925.

Varadarajalu Naidu and he said, Mahatma Gandhi wanted to celebrate the year 1925 as a spinning year, but Dr. Naidu made it a non-Brahmin Year. This incident developed a deep animosity in the heart of Periyar.⁹²

Demand of Communal Representation

The communal animosity aroused over the *gurukulam* controversy, evoked keen interest in the Tamilnadu Congress in the Madras Presidency. To consider the council entry, the Tamilnadu Congress met at Kanchipuram on 21 November 1925. Periyar's main object of participating in the Kanchipuram Conference was to get a mandate from the Tamilnadu Congress on the question of communal representation. This was accepted in principle but was refused on several occasions.⁹³

Since 1920, Periyar had attempted to move this resolution in the Tamilnadu Congress Conference demanding communal representation or proportional representation for non-Brahmins in government jobs and education. In the Tirunelveli Conference in 1920, Periyar moved a resolution that a certain percentage of seats should be reserved for non-Brahmin castes in the legislative body and in the public services.⁹⁴ The resolution was adopted by the subject committee, the Chairman Srinivasa Iyenkar, who characterised the resolution as one detrimental to national unity.⁹⁵ In 1921, when Periyar moved this resolution Rajagopalachari, had given tacit approval for it but had pleaded with Periyar not to make it an issue in larger interests of national unity. In the next Conference at Tiruppur in 1922, the debates

⁹² Ibid., 19, April 1925.

⁹³ An Admirarar, *Periyar E. V. Ramasami: A Pen Portrait*, p.33.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Sami Chitambaranar, *op.cit.*, p.92.

were marred by personal attacks by extremists from both Brahmin and non-Brahmin groups. Periyar did not press this issue on the advice of P.Varadarajalu Naidu and George Joseph, in the view of the Salem Conference. In 1924, at Tiruvannamalai though he was the President of the Conference, he was not able to get a majority for his resolution, because of Srivasa Iyengar, who had undermined his efforts.⁹⁶ The Kanchipuram conference of the Tamilnadu Congress was held in 1925. Bearing the failures, Periyar decided to get his most disputed resolution passed at any cost. His endeavour proved to be his last attempt to remain in the Congress. He attacked the Brahmins in the Tamilnadu Congress Committee on the eve of the Kanchipuram conference in his newspaper *Kudi Arasu*.⁹⁷ As expected by him, the resolution came up for discussion. When the resolution of council entry was taken up for discussion, S.Ramanathan insisted that the allied question of communal representation should also be discussed. Thereupon the committee considered the resolution of Periyar on proportional representation on the basis of population strength for the non-Brahmin communities.⁹⁸ S.Ramanathan, who moved the resolution opposed Gandhi's interpretations of *varnashramadharma*, which had no relevance to the social life of Tamils. The rigidity with which the caste system controlled the social life was unacceptable to many progressive and of the changing values in society. Ramanathan himself had an experience of the iniquities of the caste system in his college days, when he had been to a picnic with his Brahmin

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁹⁷ NNPR, November 1925.p.95; *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 3 November 1925.

⁹⁸ *The Hindu*, Madras, 23 November 1925.

friends.⁹⁹ The conference resolved that as it was necessary for the advancement of the country that there should be more of mutual trust and less of bitterness between several communities. There should be representation in the Legislative Council and other bodies according to the population strength of Brahmins and non-Brahmins. But the resolution failed to get support from the members of the subject committee due to lack of consensus among the various non-Brahmin groups. R.K.Shanmugam Chettiar said, the section that demanded communal electorate is very small.¹⁰⁰ He was forced to bring up the resolution at the main session of the Conference.¹⁰¹ He felt that the communal representation was the much needed arrangement for the development of the country and for the unity and equality among the people. Srinivasa Iyankar and Rajagopalachari made the communal representation resolution technically null and void. In this political game, Periyar contended, that the non-Brahmins like Kalyanasundaram Mudaliar were used as pawns, because it was a Mudaliar who rejected his resolution on technical grounds.¹⁰²

The misunderstanding with K.Santhanam forced Periyar to break away from the Congress Party. When K.Santhanam in his capacity as TNCC secretary appointed a number of persons belonging to his own Brahmin caste to key positions in the All India Spinners' Association. Periyar viewed it, as yet another ruse of the Brahmins to promote their interests in organisations sponsored by the Indian National Congress. To stop this,

⁹⁹ Ramanathan,S., *Gandhi and the Youth*, Madras, 1947,p.9.

¹⁰⁰ *The Hindu*, Madras, 24 November 1925.

¹⁰¹ *Navasakti*, Madras, 27 November and 18 December 1925.

¹⁰² Kalyanasundaranar,T.V., *op.cit.*, pp.370-383.

Periyar introduced a series of changes, which were chiefly aimed at undoing what the secretary had done. But K.Sanathanam took the matter to Gandhi, whose interference further incensed Periyar against Brahmins. It hastened his total break with the Congress.¹⁰³ And by the end of 1925 Periyar, the most successful Tamil propagandist among the no-chargers in the Tamilnadu Congress had left to form an organisation of his own.

Periyar decided to leave the Congress, when he came to the conclusion that Gandhi too was furthering sectarian interests by propagating the cultural values of Brahmins among the masses of Tamilnadu. To Gandhi *vanasharmadharm* was a universal law and a law of spiritual economics, designed to set free man's energy for higher pursuits in life.¹⁰⁴ Gandhi spoke in a public meeting at Cuddalore on 10 September 1927, that the Brahmins as the repositories of knowledge and embodiments of sacrifice, and advised them to stick on to their traditions of austerity.¹⁰⁵ He further stressed in the same speech that non-Brahmins in their ire against the Brahmins should not wreck the system of *varnashrmadharm*, the bed-rock of Hinduism.¹⁰⁶ Over this speech a storm of discontent developed even among the nationalist non-Brahmins in Madras. C.Kandaswamy, in a letter to *Young India*, commented that Gandhi's speech exhibited his complete ignorance of the Dravidian contribution to Indian cultural traditions and of inner meaning and cause of the present non-Brahmin movement. Periyar's criticism was even more

¹⁰³ Interview with Thiru.Sankaranarayanan (D.K.President, Kanyakumari district) Nagercoil, 10 February 2005.

¹⁰⁴ *Young India*, Madras, 22 September 1927; quoted in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.XXXIV, New Delhi, 1967, pp.510-511.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*,p.546.

¹⁰⁶ *Young India*, Madras, 22 September 1927.

pungent and devastating, for he felt that in the Tamil country it relegated all the caste Hindus to the position of *Sudras*, which meant in the *Manusmriti*, the sons of prostitutes.¹⁰⁷

Periyar and S.Ramanathan met Gandhi in September 1927 with a view to modify his stand on *varnashramadharma*. They expressed their deep concern over Gandhi's statements on the Tamil country and pointed out that this would only strengthen the orthodox Hindu position on the question of untouchability and child marriage, the two evils against which Gandhi himself was contending. When their views were diametrically opposed, Periyar expressed to Gandhi that his confirmed belief, the true freedom for India would be achieved only with the destruction of Indian National Congress, Hinduism or Brahminism.¹⁰⁸ And therefore Periyar began to concentrate on strengthening his newly organised Self-Respect Movement.

Emergence of the Self-Respect Movement

The exact date of the emergence of the movement is not known. But in Periyar's Speeches and writing, the editor in his preface remarks that the release of Periyar's newspaper *Kudi Arasu* on 2 May 1925 should be taken as the date of the birth of the Movement.¹⁰⁹ In the beginning the movement was called in different terms like *Parpanarallathar Suyamariathai Sangam* (Non-Brahmin Self-Respect League), *Parppanarallathar Valibar Suyamariyathai Sangam* (Non Brahmin Youth Self-Respect League). Later it was called in short form as *Suyamariyathai Iyakkam*, Self-Respect Movement

¹⁰⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 7 August 1927.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 August 1927.

¹⁰⁹ Anaimuthu, V., *Periyar E.V.R. Chinthanaigal*(T), Vol.I.Tiruchinappalli, 1974, p.3.

The motive behind the establishment of the Self-Respect Movement was nothing but Periyar's contempt for caste system and its evils. His bitter experiences in the Tamilnadu Congress, had given benefits to the Brahmins and discredit to the non-Brahmins.¹¹⁰ The movement was dedicated to attain the goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian concept, which also meant denial of the superiority of the Brahmins whom he described as representatives of the Aryans. Unlike the Justice Party, the Self-Respect Movement was popular in its appeal. Though it began as a social reform movement, its effects were felt in the political field also.¹¹¹

As the founder of the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar claimed to promote rational thinking, self-respect and self-confidence. In many ways the Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s was simply a popular articulation of views of Bharati and Ramalingasami. Aside from the centrality of the need to restore the pristine role of the Tamil language and Tamil literature, the Self-Respect Movement urged the necessity to eliminate superstition and differentiations based on birth.¹¹² These goals were to be accomplished by eliminating Brahmin priests, encouraging marriages without the Brahmin priests, between persons of different Tamil castes, destroying untouchability, and raising the degraded position of women. All these should be done before getting the freedom from the British. Marriages in particular should be looked as a contract, which could be broken by mutual consent. Religion and a belief in God should be destroyed, because they are against human

¹¹⁰ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 7 November 1926.

¹¹¹ Eugene, F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India.-The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929*. California, p.330.

¹¹² Under Secretary's Safe File No.896, 22 June 1934.

equality. Perhaps the most enduring and dramatic of these actions were those seeking what came to be called Self-Respect Marriages performed without the Brahmin priests.¹¹³

When the Self-Respect Movement developed, it reflected in many Christian missionary perspectives. One goal of the Self-Respect Movement was nativist -to get rid of foreign Brahmins. The other goal was revivalist-to restore Tamil society to a presumed pristine state of true equality. Originally these ideas were stated by the followers of the Self-Respect Movement both in English and Tamil periodicals. The manner, in which they were expressed, however, was partly western and partly Indian. S. Ramanathan, the editor of *Revolt*, wrote; A new understanding of the values of life, a genuine feeling of resentment against those who would have the accident of birth accepted as the one and only criterion of personal worth, a sincere recognition of the fact that much of what passes for religion and deity is nothing short of gross and grotesque superstition foisted and feeding upon the ignorance and credulity of the unsophisticated and these are the outstanding features of the awakened popular mind of the present day.¹¹⁴ Periyar used his Tamil weekly *Kudi Arasu* to arouse popular support for the movement. He questioned that whether these Brahmins have any morality in taking collections of money from us in the name of this religion; is there any system? Is there any account given of the income and the expenses? Not at all.¹¹⁵In the beginning the Self-Respect Movement was largely the work of a single person, Periyar.

¹¹³ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 2 June 1929.

¹¹⁴ *Revolt*, Madras, 7 November 1928.

¹¹⁵ *Revolt*, Madras, 3 April 1927.

A vigorous propaganda to spread the Self-Respect ideals throughout Tamilnadu was carried on by him between 1925 and 1929. Great personalities from different castes actively involved in spreading the ideas of the Periyar Movement. Kumararaja Muthiah Chettiar, M.K.Reddi A.T.Pannerselvam, Vallattarasu, W.P.A.Soundrapandian, and S.Ramanathan organised campaign against *varnasharmadharma*. Periyar founded Self-Respect Youth Association in 1929 in Madras. C.N.Annadurai, who was then a student in Pachayappa's College at Madras, was said to be a regular participant in the deliberations.¹¹⁶

The *Kudi Arasu* of 18 December 1927 has a picture of Mother India standing beside a map of India on one side and a person weaving cloth by hand on the other side was published. It also contained the motto, long live khadar (homespun). The next issue dropped these altogether and Periyar's name was printed without the Naicker caste identification.¹¹⁷ In 1929 despite his protests against temples and Brahmins, Periyar was made first a member and then vice-chairman of the Erode Temple Committee by P. Subbarayan, Chief Minister of Madras.¹¹⁸ But Periyar resigned these positions shortly.¹¹⁹

As a result of many local meetings and gatherings the availability of money, journalistic propaganda, and the recruitment of several young leaders in Self-Respect Movement it became a formidable movement in Tamilnadu. A Young Self-Respect leader S. Guruswami who was a member of the Tondaimandala Vellala peasant caste of twenty three years old,

¹¹⁶ Parathasarathy, T.M., *D.M.K. Varalaru*, (T), Madras, 1963, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁷ Anaimuthu, V., *op.cit.*, pp.473-74.

¹¹⁸ Baker, C.J., *The Politics of South India, 1920-1937*, New Delhi, 1976, p.517.

¹¹⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 14 July 1929.

presided over a Self Respect Conference in Pattukottai in 1929.¹²⁰ At the conference S.Gurusami expressed that it was necessary to get social rights by force if necessary. He referred to other reform movements elsewhere and argued that Self Respect was simply a continuation of the work of the British who, according to him, had tried to get rid of caste boundaries. Though S.Gurusami's style and age were unusual, his connection with local land holders was an essential ingredient to his success.

Periyar often sought to combine elements of social revitalisation with traditional political control and patronage. He developed connections with C. Jayaram Naidu, vice-president of the Chingleput District Board from whom he received Rs. 30,000/- as donation for his movement. He was also supported by M.K.Reddi, a member of the Chingleput District Board who became its chairperson in 1932.¹²¹ His connection with Reddi and Jayaram Naidu helped him to mount a substantial Self-Respect Conference at Chingleput in 1929. P.Subbrayan the Justice Party leader, participated, with great fervor, in the Conference.¹²²

Periyar encouraged the newspapers supporting the Self-Respect Movement as a way to widen his influence. In addition to the *Kudi Arasu*, which was a weekly journal published from Erode, the English weekly *Revolt* was published from Erode. The *Puduvai Murasu* (Pondicherry War Drum) was edited by S. Guruswami and carried the messages of Periyar. Karaikudi became the centre of three reformist weeklies *Sandamarudam*, the *Kumaran*

¹²⁰ *The Hindu*, Madras, 25 July 1929.

¹²¹ Baker, C.J., *Politics of South India, 1920-1937*, p.520.

¹²² Eugene, F.Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930's*, Madras, 1986 p.64.

and the *Nadarkulamithran*. *Paguttarivu* a Tamil monthly from Madras, and *Nagaratootan*, a Tamil weekly were published from Tiruchinapalli. The *Pagutharivu Nurppathippu Kazagam*, was registered in 1932. To perpetuate the philosophy of Self-Respect, an organisation called the Thinker's Forum was established in Tiruchinappalli. The *Kumaran*, though a caste journal of the Nattukottai Chettis, ridiculed traditional religious practices of the caste, especially those related to marriage.

Social Mobility of the Movement

The Self-Respect Movement made its appeal primarily to the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin castes. But very soon it became a mass movement. Its leaders and propagandists came largely from the Vellala and the Baliya Naidu castes. On the other hand the non-Brahmin educated leaders formed associations which acted as instruments for social and political mobilisation. *Adi Dravida Mahajana Shabha* (1892), *Senguntha Mahajana Sangam* (1908) *Viswakarma Mahajana Sangam* (1912), and the *Nadar Mahajana Sangam* (1919) were the prominent caste associations, which spearheaded to acquire a new social status for the castes they represented.

Periyar sought assistance from the rich to attain his goals. He continued his search for individuals who would articulate the ideals of Self-Respect. In 1930 and 1931 he was partly successful in Ramnad district. W.P.A. Soundarapandian accepted the offer and extended his whole hearted support to the movement. Seeking to draw the mass support of Nadars of Tamilnadu and Kerala, a Self-Respect Conference was held at Chengalput in

February, 1929. W.P.A.Soundarapandian in his presidential address, affirmed the philosophy of Self-Respect in rejecting the whole system of caste, as alien to Tamil society.¹²³ As a result of W.P.A.Soundrapandian's effort, large section of Nadars de-Sanskritised their life style and dispensed with some of the Hindu rituals and performed their religious functions like marriage, without the Brahmin priests.¹²⁴

Periyar conducted Self-Respect marriages in W.P.A.Soundarapandian's village, Pattiviranpatti¹²⁵ and decided to have the third Self Respect Conference at Viruthunagar, a town of commercial importance. W.P.A.Soundarapandian supported Periyar Movement and rendered financial assistance for the Conference at Viruthunagar in August 1931.¹²⁶ Periyar's increasingly strident anti-religious style provoked R.K. Shanmugam Chettiar who in protest, staged a walk out from the Conference.¹²⁷ Though the atheistic pronouncements of the Self Respect Conferences and literature lost support in justice leadership ranks, Periyar retained much sympathy among the Nadars of Ramnad. The Nadars of Ramnad and Madurai loyal to the British rule and supporters of the Justice Party extended their overwhelming support to Self-Respect Movement.¹²⁸ Even Periyar attended Nadar caste Conferences. The third Self-Respect Conference was held in Viruthunagar on August 1931. The Self-Respect Movement advocated inter-dining. To implement it in practice, he selected Nadar cooks to prepare food for each of

¹²³ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 28 December 1930.

¹²⁴ Robert.L., Hardgrave., *The Nadars of Tamilnad-The Political Culture of a Community in Change*, California, 1969 pp.177-78.

¹²⁵ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 28 December 1930.

¹²⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 10 August 1931.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10 April 1931.

¹²⁸ Robert.L.Hardgrave, op.cit., pp.179-180.

the Self-Respect Conferences.¹²⁹ Periyar Movement also offered Nadars not only a chance for recognition and assistance from the ministerial machine but also an institutional way by which to continue the reform.¹³⁰ With rise of Periyar Movement many Nadars advocated a boycott of Brahminical temples. Self-Respect ideas and Gandhism, were a combination of western and indigenous idealism, both of which grant high status and on appearance to the Nadar caste¹³¹.

In the early 1930s the Self Respect Movement found the entry of Agamudaiyars of Ramnad district in large number. For instance S. Ramachandran, an Agamudaiyar lawyer from Sivaganga, formerly chairman of the Sivagangai Taluk Board participated in both Self Respect and Agamudaiyar caste activities.¹³² He was also chairperson of the Ramnad Devasthanam Committee which passed resolutions supporting measures proposed by Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddi to prevent the temple dedication of *devadasis*.¹³³ S.Ramachandran's wife R. Krishnammal, a staunch follower of Self-Respect movement became a member of the Sivagangai Taluk Board in 1932.¹³⁴ Likewise, Nattukottai Chetti a merchant caste from Ramnad district with a long history of social reform activity behind them¹³⁵ participated in the Self-Respect Movement. The most important among them was S. Murugappah Chetti, from Devakottai, of Ramnad district. He edited three weeklies *Kumaran*, the *Ooliyan*, and later the *Sandamarudam*. He joined the

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, P.180.

¹³⁰ Bakar. C.J.op.cit., p.519.

¹³¹ Robert.L.Hardgrave, op.cit., p.181.

¹³² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 28 September 1930.

¹³³ *Natarkulamitran*, Aruppukottai, 1 September 1930.

¹³⁴ *The Hindu*, Madras, 10 September 1932.

¹³⁵ Murukappa Chetti, Sa., *Namatu Palacarakkukatai*, (T), Karaikudi, 1922, p.80.

Self-Respect activities along with two other Nattukottai Chettis, Ramasubramaniam and Lilavati, who were married in Karaikudi without any Brahmin priests.¹³⁶ They were very active in the movement and Lilavati was particularly remembered for her thought provoking articles in *Kudiarasu*.¹³⁷ Following the Self-Respect Marriage of Ramasubramanian, several Nattukottai families performed self-respect marriages.¹³⁸ They saw the Periyar Movement as a way to change the habits of their caste members and social practice in general. To enhance social reform tendencies within their own ranks the Sengunther weavers community of Tamilnadu preferred to join the movement.

The Self-Respect Movement, however, directed its appeal primarily to the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin castes which were low in the Tamil ritual status including Pallars, Parayars, Vannias, the Nadars, the Agamudaiyars and the Isai Vellalars. The movement propagated the social and economic discontent among the backward castes and at the same time it enlisted their massive support.

¹³⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 16 November 1930.

¹³⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 4 January 1931.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12 October 1930.