CHAPTER 1

LIFE HISTORY OF E.V. RAMASAMY

Family Background

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy’s father, Venkata Naicker at his initial stage worked as an assistant to a stone mason. In due course by dint of his ability he became a fairly rich merchant. His wife Chinnathayamma contributed her share of industry for the income of the family. When her husband worked as an assistant to a stone-mason, she carried head loads of bricks from the yards to building spots. Later when Venkata Naicker started a shop, she was selling hand-pound rice at home. She stopped her rice business only when her husband became a wholesale merchant and commission agent. While E.V.R was born, his father was a reputed merchant in Erode locality.¹

Early Life

E.V. Ramasamy was the fourth son of his parents. The first

¹ Gopalakrishnan, M.D., Periyar Father of The Tamil Race, Madras, 1991, p.1.
two children of the couple died soon after their birth. After an interval of ten years on 28th September, 1877, E.V. Krishnasamy was born. Two years after him, on 17th September, 1879, E.V. Ramasamy was born. After E.V.R’s birth they got two female children, they were Kannamal and Ponnuthay.

Before the birth of these two sons, Venkata Naicker and his wife had fasted and prayed and had arranged for frequent religious discourses in their house in order to please the gods. The discourses were continued for many years in their house.\(^2\) As a result they got four children.

Vankata’s maternal aunt, who was a childless widow wished to have the pleasure of bringing up young Ramasamy. Ramasamy’s parents accepted Ramasamy lived in affluence when her poor aunt took care of him, he lived without any control. So he grew up very rough. The young E.V.R was sent to school at the age of six but he was soon withdrawn from school at the age of ten as he was mischievous.\(^3\) This mischievous behaviour was due to the lack of effective supervision and control over the young E.V.R both at home and school. This absence of control both at school and home encouraged the young E.V.R. to do things


\(^3\) Sami Chidambaranar, *ThamizharThalaivar* (Tamil), Erode, 1960, p.10.
according to his wishes. It was a cause for the development of his independent nature.⁴

In School he was freely mingling with the low caste boys. As his parents worried about the way the boy was growing up, Venkata Naicker brought him back to his home and sent him to school. The boy attended school for six years, but learnt very little. When he was twelve, his father took him to his shop. There, to the astonishment of everybody, he showed keen interest in business and learnt its techniques within a few years. Very soon, he acquired efficiency in conducting auctions and managing the whole sale trade.⁵

Venkata Naicker was now a happy man. His first son Krishnasami looked after him in religious fervour and in conducting religious discourses; the second son, Ramasamy seemed to excel him in business tactics⁶.

This second son, who appeared to be dull in studies proved to be extra cute in reasoning and in ridiculing the pundits, who gave religious discourses, by pointing out the contradictions in their statements and also their incredible exaggerations. This agnostic tendency in the young man

⁵ Gopalakrishnan, M.D., *op.cit.*, pp.1-2.
annoyed the father, though he felt secretly flattered at the sharpness of his intellect.\footnote{Veeramani, K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.3.}

E.V. Ramasamy’s family was steeped in religious orthodoxies. His parents had deep belief in the Vaishnavite-order of the Hindu religion. Vedic Pandits and Shastries paid frequent visits to his house and used to receive sumptuous gifts for the poojas and yagas.\footnote{Muthu, R.S., \textit{VeerasudandramVendinindraThamizhagaThiyagigal}, (Tamil), Chennai, p.29.}

**E.V. Ramasamy’s Married Life**

Probably Venkata Naicker thought that marriage would take the wildness of the sturdy and well-grown young man, Ramasamy and arranged for his wedding when he was nineteen, with Nagammai who was only thirteen, then. It was not altogether an arranged marriage because Ramasamy and Nagammai had known each other for some years and were actually in love with each other. Nagammai proved to be an ideal wife and cooperated, whole heartedly with her husband in all his later public activities and agitations. Two years after marriage, this couple got a girl child which lived only for five months, and thereafter they had no children.\footnote{Gopalakrishnan, M.D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.3.}

Periyar shared the profit of his business with his workers at the age of twenty one. When Periyar was twenty five years old, he left for

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7 Veeramani, K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.3.
8 Muthu, R.S., \textit{VeerasudandramVendinindraThamizhagaThiyagigal}, (Tamil), Chennai, p.29.
9 Gopalakrishnan, M.D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.3.
Benaras and Calcutta and became an ascetic. Then he returned to his home town 1904.  

**His Political Entry**

In 1907, Periyar was in sympathy with the political views of Indian National Congress. He started attending the Congress conferences from 1908 onwards. Little Ramasamy had a spontaneous sense of logical reasoning. He was capable of making rational enquiries about whatever he heard from others like religious preachers and learned visitors even from the early childhood. Moreover, as he was engaged in business from the very early age he had learnt the art of conversing with others (which is quite characteristic of a typical businessman). This helped him to acquire a vast fund of knowledge about the worldly affairs. These qualities, later on, moulded him into a powerful speaker and great leader. 

Between 1914 and 1918 E.V. Ramasamy held several powerful and honorary posts. During this period he convened many conferences of the Indian National Congress in Tamil Nadu. E.V.R served as the president of the Erode Registered Merchants Association. He was the member of the Administrative Council of the South Indian Merchants’ Association. The Government of India constituted the five districts Income Tax Tribunal and appointed E.V.R as one of the three commissioners 

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10 Gopalakrishnan, M.D., *op.cit.*, p.3.
thereof. E.V.R. acted as the Secretary of the Erode Town Reading Room, the Erode Alumnnae Association and the High School Board. Later on he rose to the position of President of the same High School Board. He served as the Secretary of the Coimbatore District Congress Conference. E.V.R had been functioning as Honourary Magistrate for 10 years.\textsuperscript{12}

He was the president of Erode Taluk Board and Chairman of the Erode Municipality for many years. During his tenure in Erode Municipality E.V.R worked effectively for drinking water supply and provision of Health facilities to the people. He was a member of the District Board and Secretary of the Water Works Committee and Plague Committee. He was selected as secretary of the Second Circle Temple Committee and served in the same capacity for ten years. Later on, he became the Vice President and then President of the same committee up to 1929.\textsuperscript{13}

During the First World war period E.V.R was appointed as the Honourary Recruiting Officer for military, Government also appointed him as the Administrative and Distributing Officer of the Taluk and District Rice Control Panel. E.V.R was the secretary of the Coronation Committee. During this period friendship blossomed between himself and

\textsuperscript{12} Anai Muthu, V., \textit{op.cit.}, p.8.
\textsuperscript{13} Veeramani, K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.16.
Mr. C. Rajagopalachariyar (Rajaji) a leading congressman who later became Governor - General of India.\textsuperscript{14}

**Member of Congress Party (1919 - 1925)**

In the Year 1919, Periyar resigned his Municipal Chairmanship and joined the Congress Movement. In 1920, Periyar resigned all the 29 honorary posts held by him to participate in the Non-co-operation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi. C. Rajagopalachari. And E.V. Ramaswamy were fast friends. C. Rajagopalachari was quick to realise that E.V. Ramaswamy would admirably suit the purpose of defeating the Non-Brahmin Movement. So he encouraged E.V. Ramaswamy to take a leading role in Congress activities. E.V. Ramaswamy was actually given the promise when he enrolled himself in Congress in 1919, that the Congress was in agreement with the principle of communal representation advocated by the Non Brahmin Movement. Further, he was led to believe that 50% of the Government jobs would be set apart for Non-Brahmins and that the Congress had no intention of contesting the general election.\textsuperscript{15}

E.V. Ramaswamy fully believed in these assurances and went on pressing for acceptance of his resolutions on communal representation at various committee meetings and conference of the

\textsuperscript{14} Veeramani, K., *op. cit*, pp.11-13.

\textsuperscript{15} Anaimuthu, V., *op. cit.*, p.XXII.
Congress held every year, at Tiruchirapally in 1922, Madras in 1923, Thiruvannamalai in 1924 without avail. Finally E.V. Ramaswamy attended the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee Conference at Kancheepuram in 1925, ready for a showdown with the Brahmins. At this conference he submitted two resolutions recognizing the principle of communal representation for Non-Brahmins in the public services and representative bodies. These resolutions were disallowed on the ground that they had already been rejected by the subjects committee. At this point E.V. Ramaswamy and several other Non-Brahmins in the conference walked out. E.V. Ramaswamy lingered on in the Congress- for a month or more, acting as a member of the Khadi Board. In 1925 he left the congress and found himself free to start an organisation of his own.

**Early Movements Led By E.V.R**

In 1921, E.V.R led a mass movement against the Toddy Shops in Tamil Nadu. It was called the famous “Kallukadai Mariyal”, in support of prohibition. During this period E.V. Ramasamy launched Khadhar propaganda programme throughout the state.

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In the year 1922 E.V. Ramasamy engaged in Toddy Shop agitation, was imprisoned. In 1923 he was elected president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee.\textsuperscript{19}

A conflict arose over the question of untouchables using certain roads outside a temple in Vaikom in Travancore State. E.V. Ramaswamy who arrived in Vaikom on April 13 was imprisoned for a month in Travancore. After his release he began the agitation, again he was arrested and this got him a sentence of six months. Finally the prohibitory order was removed by the Travancore Durbar. E.V. Ramaswamy got a lot of acclaim and was given the title, “The Hero of Vaikom”.\textsuperscript{20}

Another incident in which E.V. Ramaswamy was involved was the agitation against the separate dining enforced for Brahmin students at the Gurukulam in Shermadevi, Thirunelveli District, established in December 1922, by V.V.S.Iyer. As a result of Non-Brahmin pressure, V.V.S. Iyer resigned the post as the Head of the Gurukulam in May 1925.\textsuperscript{21}

E.V.R founded the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 after his exit from the Congress Party. In 1926 E.V.R condemned the Hindi


\textsuperscript{20} Eugene Irschick, F., \textit{op.cit.}, p.269.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{New India}, 7 April, 1925.
imposition policy of the Government. He convened the First Non-Brahmin state conference in Madurai. Periyar opposed the introduction of compulsory Hindi in schools by C. Rajagopala Achariayar. While launching that agitation Periyar announced that C.N. Annadurai (Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu) would be the First General in leading the picketing against Hindi.22

**Self Respect Movement**

The Self-Respect Movement and Justice Party ran on parallel lines, for both worked for the upliftment of Non-Brahmins. The first Self-Respect Conference was held at Chengleput in 1929. The Justice Party leaders participated actively in it. The conference heralded the formal inauguration of the Self Respect Movement, although it originated as soon as E.V. Ramaswamy came out of the Congress in 1925. The Resolution passed guaranteed social equality and freedom from economic exploitation to all castes and creeds. From 1927 onwards, E.V. Ramaswamy interested himself in propagating the tenets of Buddhism and in expounding the teachings of Thirukkural. He was also a forerunner in the advocacy of women's education and championing the cause of women for equal rights.23

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23 *Kudiarasu*, 16 April, 1930.
E.V. Ramaswamy was attracted by the Bolshevik revolution of Russia and its beneficial effects on the Proletariat. From 1931 he frequently wrote in Kudiarasu about this social revolution. In 1931 he visited Greece, Turkey, Africa, Germany, France, Portugal, England and Ceylon. In Russia he attended the May Day Celebration of 1932 and was introduced as the leader of atheistic thought from India.\(^\text{24}\)

On his return from Russia he busied himself with meetings with workers of the Self-Respect Movement, and explained to them the novel features of the Socialist State. In this M. Singaravelu, the first communist in South India was of great help to him. E.V. Ramaswamy had also supported the Railway workers' strike in 1927 - 1928. Singaravelu helped in opening the eyes of several Self - Respect workers to a wide horizon and to a New Order in which the toiling people's- liberation would guarantee the abolishing of all social injustices and establish a society without the horrors of caste in social administration.\(^\text{25}\) Singaravelu gave the opening address in the conference of Self Respecters in Madras in December 1931. He told the Self-Respecters that only a Socialist society can be free from caste, religious distinction, and economic disparity. Further, Singaravelu wrote a series of articles in Kudiarasu on Socialism, Science and on Moral belief. These articles gave him a high standing.

\(^{24}\text{Anaimuthu, V., } op.cit.\text{, p.XXXIV.}\)

among the Self - Respect workers. They were enthusiastic about changing the Self-Respect Movement from one of Social reform to a movement with political objectives as well. A new programme was drawn up and placed before the meeting of the Self Respect workers in Erode in December 1932. It suggested the foundation of a political party of Self Respectors called Sama Dharma Party (Self-Respect Socialistic Party) of South India. To intensify the propagation of Self-Respect Principles, E.V. Ramaswamy started an English weekly Revolt in 1928, Puratchi a weekly in Tamil in 1933 and Pagutharivu a weekly in Tamil in 1934, Pagutharivu daily in 1934 and Pagutharivu Tamil monthly in 1935.

E.V. Ramaswamy keenly watched the working of the Congress Ministry of 1937 and criticized that Brahmins who were just 3% of the total population had occupied six places of high position out of ten in the Ministry. He campaigned vigorously against the closing of 2000 Schools in rural areas for want of funds. He pointed out that when a Veda Padasalai had been opened at a cost of 12 lakhs of rupees, then the comparatively inexpensive schools could still be run.

The compulsory introduction of Hindi in selected schools gave rise to the Anti-Hidi Agitation. Many were imprisoned. At a meeting on the Marina beach at Madras on September 11, 1938, Ramaswamy raised

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27 Anaimuthu, V., *op.cit.*, pp.XXXVII & XXXVIII.
the call of "Tamil Nadu for Tamilians". On July 1, 1939 the first Dravida
Nadu Separation Day was celebrated. E.V. Ramaswamy was imprisoned
for 2 years. While serving the sentence, he was elected the leader of the
Justice Party. At the conference of the South Indian Liberal Federation,
held on December 29 & 30, 1938 at Thiruvarur, E.V. Ramaswamy's
Presidential address was read by A.T. Panneerselvam.28 Even here he
insisted on a homeland for Tamilians. After the Conference at Salem in
1945, the South Indian Liberal Federation was renamed Dravida
Kazhagam.

Journey to Foreign Countries

On 15th December 1929 Periyar went to Malaya (Now
Malaysia) with his wife Nagammal and some other followers. In Malaysia,
Periyar inaugurated the Tamils Conference convened by the Tamils
Reformatory Sangam. Next he went to Singapore where a warm welcome
was given to him. He addressed the conference organized by Malaya
Indian Congress. In 1930, January 16 Periyar and his group returned from
Malaya to Tamilnadu.29

In 1931, December 13 Periyar started his journey to Europe
from Chennai harbour by ship. He visited many European Countries like

28 Viswanathan, E. Sa., *op.cit.*, p.236.
29 Sami Chidambaranar, *op.cit*, pp.118-120.
Egypt, Greek, Turkey, Soviet Russia, Germany, England (Britain), Italy,
Spain, France and Portugal.

In Russia (formerly Soviet Union) his stay was extended for a lengthy period of three months because he was invited to address many workers’ meetings. Being the First Nation of Karl Marx’s communism, established by the great leader Lenin, the former Soviet Union captivated very much the heart of Periyar. In 1932, November 11 he returned to Erode after completing the European journey via Colombo, the Capital of Ceylon.  

Death of Nagammaiyar

In 1933, May 11 his beloved wife E.V.R. Nagammal passed away and the burial took place the very next day. On 12.05.1933, he immediately left for Tiruchirappalli where he conducted an Inter-religious (Christian) Self-Respect Marriage defying the section 144 promulgated in this connection and got arrested.  

Support to Justice Party

Periyar made a trip to the Soviet Union in 1931. When he returned he was fully convinced that materialism was the answer to Indian’s problems and openly advocated mass revolution and the overthrow of the Government. Tempered somewhat by imprisonment for

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sedition in 1933-34, he indicated his willingness to join one of the major parties on a conditional basis. He formulated a fourteen-point programme and presented it to both the Congress and the Justice Party for their acceptance. It was wholly unacceptable to the Congress, but the Justice Party, then rapidly going downhill gave the nod.

Under the Congress ministry of C. Rajagopalachari in 1937, Hindi was introduced to the South as a compulsory subject in schools. Taking it as an affront to Tamil culture, Periyar waved black flags of rebellion in his first anti-Hindi campaign. The agitation against the imposition of Hindi brought Periyar to the forefront of attention. The following year 1938, while in jail, Periyar was elected President of the Justice Party. \(^{32}\)

**Dravidar Kazhagam**

Periyar saw the imposition of Hindi as a subjugation of Tamil peoples, which could only be avoided through the creation of a Dravidian state. In 1939, he organized the “Dravida Nadu Conference” for the advocacy of a separate and independent “Dravidasthan.” In 1944, the Justice Party was recognized under the guidance of Periyar as the “Dravida Kazhagam” or “Dravidian Federation” and at its Salem conference, took on the character of a highly militant mass organization. On 27\(^{th}\) August 1944

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the name of the Justice Party was changed as ‘Dravidar Kazhagam’ to signify purely as a social revolutionary movement for the emancipation of Dravidian race oppressed by Brahmins at the Provincial Justice Party conference held at Salem and also not to contest elections and accept the titles given by British Government. He conducted Dravidar Kazhagam state conference at Trichy on 29th and 30th September of 1945. He established the “Black-shirt Volunteers cadre” in the conference and adopted a constitution and took as its symbol a black flag with a red circle in the centre. Black represented the deprivations and the indignities to which the Dravidians were subjected to under the Hindu religion milieu. Red stood for the determined efforts to dispel the ignorance and blind faith among the people and to liberate them materially and mentally from all kinds of exploitation, especially of social and cultural.

The object of the Dravida Kazhagam was proclaimed to be the achievement of a Sovereign Independent Dravidian republic, which would be federal in nature with four units corresponding to the linguistic divisions each having residuary power and autonomy of integral administration. It would be a “casteless society” an egalitarian “Dravida Nadu” to which the depressed and downtrodden could get allegiance.

34 Saraswati, *op.cit.*, p.87.
E.V.R’s Marriage with Maniammai

E.V.R married Maniammai on 09.07.1949 in order to protect and preserve the interest of the party. It led to the clash between Anna and E.V.R. So Annathurai and his followers started Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.  

Support to DMK Party

In 1967 C.N. Annadurai became the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, his party (DMK) having secured the majority of seats in the Tamilnadu Assembly. He went to Tiruchirappalli and sought Periya’s greetings, goodwill and advice. Periyar decided to extend his support to the D.M.K. Ministry. C.N. Annadurai declared in the State Assembly that he dedicated his Ministry to Periyar.

Complete Freedom for Tamilnadu

Periyar demanded complete freedom for Tamil Nadu and asked the people to observe ‘Delhi - Condemnation Day’ throughout the state on 14.04.1968.

Magazines Started By E.V. Ramasamy

In 1925, the famous Tamil weekly magazine KUDIARASU was started by E.V.R. Periyar published an English magazine under the

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title “Revolt” on 07.11. 1928. In the year 1933 Periyar started Puratchi a Tamil weekly magazine to propagate socialism. He was convicted and imprisoned for the same. Periyar started “Pagutharivu” a weekly magazine in Tamil. He introduced new reforms to the Tamil alphabets. On 22.01.1950 Periyar published a book “Ponmozhigal’ and was to undergo imprisonment for the publication of this book.39

**Honorary Titles of Periyar**

The title “Periyar” was conferred on him by Tamil Nadu Women Conference held in Madras on 13.11.1938 under the presidency of Neelambigai Ammaiyaar daughter of Mariamalai Adigal a veteran pure Tamil Scholar.

The UNESCO, an international branch organization of the United Nations, conferred on Periyar a glorious title, the citation of which read as “Periyar the Prophet of New Age, Socrates of South East Asia, Father of the Social Reform Movement, and Arch enemy of ignorance, superstitions, meaningless customs, and baseless manners” - UNESCO, 27.06.1970. The award was presented by the Union Education Minister Trigunasen under the presidency of Chief Minister Kalaingar M. Karunanidi.40

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In his last meeting at Thiagaraya Nagar, Chennai on 19th December 1973, Periyar gave an inspiring clarion call for action to gain social equality and dignified way of life. He fell ill on the next day and breathed his last on 24th December 1973.\(^{41}\)

In the following chapter an attempt has been made to bring to light the causes for the emergence of E.V.R as a social reformer before the study of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy’s various struggle against caste system.

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