

Anti-caste Radicalism in Tamil Nadu: Remembered Moments from a Receding Past

V.Geetha

In the 1920s and 1930s, Tamil Nadu was witness to a millenarian unfolding of social energies which burst through and beyond the habitual limits set to social decorum and distance in Hindu caste society. The Self-Respect movement, founded in 1925-26 by that great Tamil iconoclast and subversive genius, E V Ramasamy Periyar, to challenge and dislodge the culture of self-loathing and negativity, endemic to caste society, was everywhere: its publicists roared against the sacred authority of Hindu scripture and the power vested in the Brahmin priest. The more socialist-minded of them took great exception to the hoarding of wealth by upper caste landlords and merchants. Feminists in the movement took issue with masculinity and its disorders. Self-consciously modern young men and women produced sophisticated critiques of the ideological influence wielded by the Brahmin caste in contemporary civil society.

Most important, almost every notable ideologue in the movement held it an axiom that the indecent hierarchies of caste and the injustice they legitimised and sanctified cannot be destroyed without the complete liberation of the *adi-dravidas*, as the untouchables referred to themselves during this period in history. For, the *adi-dravidas*, coerced to remain at the bottom of a social order, which, ultimately did not include them, suffered the most, burdened as they were by a negativity that was pressed down on them by all castes in the caste hierarchy. Periyar famously argued that the liberation of the *shudra* (lower caste non-Brahmin) would not be complete without the liberation of the *panchama* (the fifth caste, that is, the dalits): "The abolition of untouchability is one of the most important duties of non-Brahmins. Not only is the progress of non-Brahmins ultimately linked to the progress achieved by

the untouchables, but the sorrows of the latter ought to be a matter of concern and feeling to non-Brahmins ..." (*Kudi Arasu*, 15.11.1925).

The Self-Respect movement possessed an interesting and rich pre-history. In the late 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century, its millenarian themes had been anticipated by the dalit Buddhist scholar and publicist, Pandit Iyothee Thass. Iyothee Thass envisioned an alternative social universe – informed by Buddhist precepts of love, comradeship and mutuality and by a freeing of manual and intellectual activity from the hold of caste institutions. Significantly, Iyothee Thass characterised his utopian universe as being quintessentially 'Tamil' in character – since, in ancient times, the Tamils, especially those who had since been pushed into untouchable status, had known and observed the precepts of the Buddha. In fact the newspaper that he began in 1907 was called Tamizhan.

Iyothee Thass' imaginative prowess sadly did not attract a large constituency. Though eloquent, he remained a scholastic voice and besides, lived and worked at a time when popular energies had not been harnessed to social and political causes. The 1920s were different in this respect, and Periyar, who acknowledged his debt to the great Buddhist, possessed a rather Socratic public presence that proved to be extremely influential. Besides, his pronouncements, richly ironic and hugely funny, possessed a critical and irreverent edge, which endeared him to the eager young men and women who were clearly charmed by his defiant energy. His insistence on rational analysis and critique created a veritable new public culture of dissent that was vigorous and popular, without being demagogic.

What did it mean to be an anti-caste radical in the 1920s and 1930s? For one, he or she had to be convinced of the importance of self-respect and mutuality, of equality between men and women and the evil of untouchability. That is, they had to own up to a sense of community that was truly catholic. Describing this community in 1925, Periyar observed that 'non-

Brahmins' included "Christians, Mohammedans, Anglo-Indians ... all Hindus except those belonging to the Brahmin caste ... untouchables ... including those marginalized as unapproachable and unseeable ..." (Kudi Arasu, 8.11.1925). Women had to be viewed as vital adjuncts to this community. For, unlike even the *shudras* and the untouchables, their situation was founded on an existential everyday antagonism. As Periyar remarked, the relationship of husband to wife was usually of a master to a slave. Marriage, he said, was essentially a kind of servitude (Viduthalai, 11.10.1948).

Secondly, all measures aimed at the commonweal had to be examined from the point of view of untouchables. Not only matters that affected the latter's immediate interests, such as the right to temple-entry, but even general political matters had to be interrogated for the good or ill that they brought to the untouchables. It was in this spirit that the Self-Respect movement took Dr Ambedkar's part when he demanded separate electorates for the untouchables, a move, resisted stoutly by Mahatma Gandhi and the nationalist Congress. This self-same comradely spirit animated the fervour of the young self-respecter, S.Gurusamy, who exclaimed that if he were Viceroy, he would make Dr Ambedkar the Minister for Law and M.C.Raja, the Tamil adi dravida leader, the Chief Minister of Madras (Puduvai Murasu, 7.12.1931).

Thirdly, the Brahmin and his ideologies – both the sacred wisdom that he arrogated to himself, and the secular power that was vested in him, as officer in the Raj, journalist, nationalist – had to be abjured and criticised. The self-respecters held the Brahmin caste to be both changeable and elusive in its expressions and actions: "Brahminism and Hinduism are that which work, produce results. Today Brahmins do not mind losing anything, as long as they may claim the status, title and influence which accrue to only the highest caste. To possess this status, they do not mind doing anything; will behave any which way and yet consider such acts the highest forms of Brahmin dharma." (Viduthalai, 4.3.1969). Non-Brahmins, whether rich or poor, who accepted the authority of the Brahmins and the unjust logic of caste had to be

either persuaded of the error of their ways, and if that did not work, considered traitors to the cause of self-respect and condemned: "When we speak of *adi- dravidas* it is understandable Brahmins get annoyed. But it is incomprehensible to me that non-Brahmins too should be dismayed. This is foolish and dishonourable. If you feel really humiliated by the fact that you are considered '*shudras*', would you even for a moment feel uneasy when we claim that pariah-hood should be abolished?" (*Kudi Arasu*, 11.10. 1931).

Lastly, self-respecters had to imagine and build a new society – animated by rationality, mutuality and a common ethic, or *samadharm*. This meant that self-respecters practise a different politics – not of the vote and council or assembly, but of selfless labour and sacrifice. In his last years, Periyar referred to himself as a '*thuravi*', an ascetic, a '*barren tree*' – that is, he imaged the anti-caste radical as a poignant selfless and exhausted being, for, as he often remarked, "fighting caste was akin to hauling a mountain using a slender lock of hair."

The Self-Respect movement's men and women travelled, addressed innumerable meetings on the wiles of religions and the venality of priests, thundered against the Brahmin caste and its proneness to self-regard, married outside their respective castes, celebrated the virtues of marriages based on love and choice, upheld women's right to contraception and over their bodies, supported *adi-dravidas* in their various struggles, initiated several temple-entry movements that involved *adi-dravidas*, organised weddings, in which either the groom or bride was *adi-dravida*, as public events of immense importance, insisted on commensual dining in all their conferences, in fact, even appointed *adi-dravidas* as cooks to break the taboo on their sharing food they cooked with other castes, organised special *adi dravida* conferences, encouraged and pushed forward the talents of *adi dravida* intellectuals and political leaders ...

The movement was not uniform in its impulses. There existed internal contradictions. For instance, upper class non-Brahmins who were annoyed at the immense self-regard of Brahmins, and determined to oppose them, did not always wish to link up with the *adi-dravidas*. Likewise, non-Brahmin merchants and landlords did not like the movement's self-professed socialism, nor were they comfortable at all times, with Periyar's pronounced atheism. Yet, in spite of these very real contradictions, Periyar's organisational genius and his ideological conviction that *adi-dravidas* were the most important component of the anti-caste commonweal, carried the day.

In spite of the support extended it by rich and powerful non-Brahmin castes, Self-respecters worked with the barest of resources. A rickety old table, a borrowed lantern, an impromptu drum that was struck from time to time to attract public attention – thus speaking from town to town, the self-respecters managed to inspire over 110 'Self-Respect Clubs' into existence in the 1930s! Radicalism was often a homely affair, but nevertheless deeply offensive to the powerful and the orthodox and often meetings were thwarted and the speakers berated. Since the self-respecters supported women's rights to marriage and divorce, they were considered promiscuous and several lewd references to them were made in the popular press of the 1930s.

Yet the radicals persisted in their efforts, tirelessly propagandised their cause, exchanged the comforts of a sedentary domestic life for the risks that were inherent to a nomadic political existence and often sacrificed familial support to stay with the movement.

The movement acquired an additional emphasis in the 1940s, and became aligned to the cause of Tamil nationalism – the cause that, for Periyar and others, best represented the interests of the lower castes and dalits. This earned it a wider political constituency, but eventually also proved to be its

ideological undoing. This was because gradually a rhetoric of the nation came to replace the vision of the good society, and the importance of *adi-dravidas* to the cause declined over the decades. From being the ideal bearers of an anti-caste ideology, they became part of an undifferentiated 'Tamil' citizenry – their interests were merged into a generalised 'Tamil' good, which was defined in the most general of terms.

This merging of interests was however gradual and to be fair to the energy of the early nationalists neither programmatic nor manipulative. In fact, in the late 1930s – during 1937-39 – when the Self-respect movement waged a campaign against the imposition of Hindi on Tamil school students by the Congress government, elected to a limited office under the colonial regime, *adi-dravidas* were in the forefront of that struggle. After all *adi-dravidas* possessed a stake in the Tamil nation – had not Iyothee Thass imagined a 'Dravidian fraternity' in which *adi-dravidas* as the original inhabitants of the land, occupied a honoured place? Besides, Tamil, as the language of everyday life and a counter to Sanskrit, possessed for them, as it did for countless others, a charismatic power that had to be upheld and defended. But once the heady days of struggle were over and Tamil nationalism marched forward in historical time to claim a political identity for itself that identity came to rest more or less on rhetorical notions of brotherhood and cultural passion. Politically, it sought to realise itself through the vote – and this meant that it heeded caste demography, so crucial to electoral politics.

There is no doubt that nationalist emotions were deeply felt – and *adi-dravidas* felt as much as their caste Hindu Tamil peers in this respect – but the manner in which political life came to be conducted in Tamil Nadu changed on this account. Sentimental claims on an ancient identity came to replace rational claims on equality and self-respect, social justice came to be increasingly interpreted in terms of 'ethnic' or 'cultural' pride (and entitlement), and mutuality gave in to the claims of national feeling. The anti-caste agenda of the Self-respect movement came to be re-defined in other

ways as well – the politics of the vote demanded an accommodation with dominant caste interests, and this meant that over a period of time, anti-caste radicalism simply could not survive except as a hoary founding principle which existed only to be invoked and immediately forgotten. *Adi-dravidas* were not passive victims of this nationalist re-arrangement of politics, but the particular nature of their oppression came to be gradually suppressed in public memory. And while many continued to swear fealty to the parties of Tamil nationalism – and quite a few do, to this day – several others were left disillusioned.

It is this politics of nationalism that survived the heady pre-history of the Self-Respect movement into our own times. Today, very few remember the centrality of anti-caste radicalism to the cause of self-respect and even fewer know, or wish to admit, that the importance of fighting untouchability lay at the core of this bold cause. Besides, in a concrete, everyday sense, the subordination of social concerns to the assumption and consolidation of political power, and economic changes, which have catapulted particular non-Brahmin castes into positions of influence, have more or less completely compromised the founding ideals of anti-caste radicalism. And it is not surprising that several embittered dalits today wonder loudly – and wrongly – if Periyar ever supported them; or if he considered them merely useful democratic adjuncts to a struggle that was committed to the so-called middle castes assuming social and political power. But, however erroneous their historical judgement, the bitterness and anger expressed by a few contemporary dalit ideologues is well-founded, given the fact that dominant non-Brahmin castes are the chief oppressors of dalits today and determined supporters of the caste order.

But beneath dalit anger, the sense of betrayal and grief over continuing violence against dalits, hidden in the recesses of a common historical memory, is present a sense of the past. This is what makes popular dalit leaders in Tamil Nadu, invoke a common and comradely Tamil community,

and appeal to a long-forgotten memory of anti-Brahmin and anti-caste struggle, as they struggle to acquire the ear of the more sensitive amongst the dominant castes.

It seems to us that more than any other time in the immediate past, we need memories of solidarity and comradeship, of struggling together. For the common and popular culture of dissent that the Self-Respect movement created is vitally important at a time when the caprices of global capital and the increasing non-accountability of the Indian state are ushering in a new era of alienation, helplessness and despair. To struggle with our differences, to fight contradictions that are antagonistic and violent, to work through antagonisms that are unfounded – the anti-caste radicalism of the 1920s and 1930s holds lessons from which we may still learn.

Note: *Kudi Arasu* (Republic), *Viduthalai* (Liberty), *Puduvai Murasu* (The Pondicheri Drum) were all newspapers published by self-respecters. *Tamizhan* (Tamilian) was founded by Iyothee Thass.

(V.Geetha, along with S.V.Rajadurai wrote Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: from Iyothee Thass to Periyar, Samya/Stree, Calcutta, 1998. She is a writer and translator and is currently an editorial director with Tara Publishing, Chennai.)