

## Notes

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**Module name: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy: Profile and Social Activism**

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A rationalist Dravidian social reformer of the twentieth century, E.V. Ramasamy, popularly addressed as 'Periyar' or 'the Great One' or 'Respected one' in Tamil. He argued in favour of equal rights for lower-caste communities and women, issues of 'caste identities'. (NG 2019).....

### **Early life**

**Erode Venkata Ramasamy** was born on 17 September 1879 in Erode, then a part of the Coimbatore district of the Madras Presidency. E.V. Ramasamy's father was **Venkatappa Nayakar** (or Venkata), and his mother was **Chinnathyee Muthammal**. He had one elder brother named **Krishnaswamy** and two sisters named **Kannamma and Ponnuthoy**. He could speak three Dravidian languages: Kannada, Telugu and Tamil. EVR attended school for five years after which he joined his father's trade at the age of 12....

Ramasamy's father arranged for his wedding when he was nineteen. The bride, Nagammai, was thirteen. She supported her husband in his later public activities and agitations. Two years after their marriage, a daughter was born to them. However, their daughter died when she was five months old. The couple had no more children. After the death of Nagammai, Ramasamy married for a second time in July 1948. His second wife, **Maniammai**, continued Ramasamy's social work after his death in 1973. ...

A regular occurrence in his home through his childhood, was the discourses given by Tamil Vaishnavite gurus. He used to listen to the gurus. At a young age, he began questioning what he

recognized as apparent contradictions in the Hindu mythological stories. As Ramasamy grew, he felt that people used religion as a mask to deceive innocent people and therefore took it as one of his duties in life to warn people against superstitions and priests...

### **Let us look at his early years in Politics**

Ramasamy was initially a follower of M.K.Gandhi. During the time when Gandhi announced the non-cooperation movement in 1920, Ramasamy was then one of the star speakers of the Congress. His practical ways of approaching problems and his simple and direct Tamil attracted people all over the Tamil country. Ramasamy initially was attracted to the Gandhian ideals of noncooperation and constructive work, though later he differed deeply with Gandhi on both political and intellectual levels. His differences with Gandhi and mainstream nationalist movement represented by Indian National Congress grew sharper along the lines of the method to be adopted the freedom struggle and conceptualisation of freedom itself. Another reason for the rift with Gandhi they differed in their views on the caste system....

**Self respect movement:** Ramasamy founded the Self-Respect Movement in 1925, (after a brief stint with the Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi). This movement went on to become the cornerstone of the anti-caste, non-Brahmin social movement in the region. He is known the most for his Self-respect Movement that aimed at generating pride in lower castes. In 1929, E.V. Ramasamy announced the deletion of his caste title **Naicker** from his name at the First Provincial Self-Respect Conference of **Chengalpattu**.

Ramasamy consistently argued for equal rights of women in marriage, inheritance of property and civic life in general. He vehemently argued for accessible contraceptive methods for women, as early as in the 1930s. He redesigned marriage ceremonies, which came to be known as 'self-respect marriages', without any religious or community customs and without a priest. Feminist scholars have described how this reconfiguration of the marriage ceremony led to the 'desacralisation of marriages' making them into modern contracts that individuals enter into with knowledge and consent. (NG 2019)....

In 1921, E.V.R led a mass movement against the Toddy Shops in Tamil Nadu, and supported prohibition.

He was involved was the agitation against the separate dining enforced for Brahmin students at the Gurukulam in Thirunelveli District, established in December 1922.

In 1924, he supported the agitation of untouchables using certain roads outside a temple in Vaikom in Travancore State. He was arrested twice on account of this. Finally the prohibitory order was lifted....

### **Later Political Life**

**Anti Hindi Protest:** Ramasamy founded the Self-Respect Movement in 1925. In 1926 Ramasamy condemned the imposition of Hindi over South India. 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, Ramasamy waved black flags of rebellion in his first anti-Hindi campaign.

The agitation against the imposition of Hindi brought Ramasamy to the forefront of attention. The following year 1938, while in jail, Ramasamy was elected President of the Justice Party (later called Dravidar Kazhagam). Ramasamy saw the imposition of Hindi as a subjugation of Tamil people. His campaign against imposition of Hindi in Tamil Nadu is the origin of all anti-Hindi movements later in south India....

**The Formation of Dravidar Kazhagam:** Dravidar Kazhagam (DK)—the political outfit he founded in 1944 (it was known as the Justice Party until then)—worked for the ‘Adi-Dravida people’, who he recognized were oppressed by the pro-Hindi nationalists, politically, and by the Brahmins, socioculturally.

It was named ‘Dravidar Kazhagam’ to signify as a social revolutionary movement for the emancipation of Dravidian race oppressed by Brahmins. The objective of the Dravidar 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.....

He established the “Black-shirt Volunteers cadre”, 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 religious 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 social and cultural.

Dravidar Kazhagam underwent several splits in the later years and major political parties, including the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIDMK), claim legacy of the movement. (Shodhganga 2007)

## REFERENCES

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