



JEEVANANDAM AND SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

P.Jeevanandam played a significant role in the politics of South India between 1930 and 1963. He was one of the important leaders of Tamil Nadu. His involvement in politics beginning with the Self Respect Movement contributed to the growth of Communist Party later on. Influenced by the Communist detenus in jail, he took interest in socialism and communism. Though a prominent leader of the Self Respect League, difference of opinion on party principles with E.V.Ramasamy made him to join the Congress Socialist Party in 1936. Influenced by rationalism and nationalism, Jeevanandam wished to accomplish social reforms for attaining social equality. The Self-Respect League promoted the principles of temple entry and anti-untouchability. His alliance with E.V.Ramasamy paved the way for his entry in politics. His interest in nationalism made him to join the congress party participating in Civil Disobedience Movement. His interest in rationalism made him to be a member of the Self-Respect League participating in anti-caste conferences.

Key words: Socialism, Communism, Self Respect League, Rationalism.

INTRODUCTION

P.Jeevanandam, a well-known writer and Communist leader, was born on 1st August, 1907 at Bhoothapandi,

Kanyakumari District, to Pattan Pillai and Umayammal. Jeevanandam was the fourth among the nine children of his parents. He

was named as Mukandi and also as Sorimuthu, after his family deity, Sorimuthaiyan. In 1927 he called himself as Jeevanandam.^[1] His interest in nationalism inspired him to compose songs on nationalism even at the age of seventeen.^[2] He started a Gandhi library at Bhoothapandi and liked to write the word, 'Vandematharam' on street walls. Interested in political activities Jeevanandam discontinued his studies and left his house. There upon he directed his full attention in political and social activities.^[3]

EARLY SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

As a social worker Jeevanandam earned distinction during the anti-Brahmin movement in the South.^[4] The caste system in the Hindu social set up had split up the Hindu society in several watertight compartments. Generally the Hindus were divided into high castes and low castes. The low castes were subjected to several difficulties.^[5] As a champion of the removal of untouchability, Jeevanandam inaugurated his social activities with his participation in the famous Vaikam satyagraha in 1924.^[6]

UNMAI VILAKKA NILAYAM

At Nachiarapuram, Jeevanandam with his associate, Subbaiah started an organization called Unamai Vilakka Nilayam.^[7] In a notice circulated, they explained its principles.

1. removal of poverty, ignorance and slavery,
2. equality – irrespective of caste, religion, nationality and language,
3. abolition of untouchability,
4. eradication of superstitions,
5. prohibition,
6. upliftment of Adi-Dravidas and
7. Emancipation of women.

For obtaining these goals, the means as stated by them were: propaganda, establishing schools, gurukulams, labour unions, hospitals and yoga schools and distributing notices and publishing books and journals.

INITIAL ROLE IN SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

In 1925 E.V.Ramasamy Naicker is popularly known as E.V.R. started the Self-Respect Movement as a counter organization to the Congress Party. It was the outcome of a variety of factors within the Congress organizational set up. Monopolised by the Brahmins the Congress Party was generally considered as a Brahmin organisation.^[8] He proved himself as a devoted servant of the down-trodden communities. He took efforts to uplift the socially depressed classes. In consequence of his desire to continue his service to the society, obviously his next step was towards politics. To improve the condition of Adi- Dravidas, efforts were

taken to establish a United Labour Union. The notice was signed by Jeevanandam and Subbaiah as Secretaries of the Association.

Further they gave importance to mother tongue, self respect, national awakening and a sense of rights. In 1931, Jeevanandam was elected as the President of the Congress committee, at Kottaiyur and thus he started his entry in politics.^[9] With this ended, the first phase of his career after which he engaged in politics as full time worker.

In 1916 V.O.Chidambaram pillai took efforts for giving equal representation to all communities. However, it ended in failure. E.V.R renewed his efforts thereafter. As the secretary of the Provincial Congress Committee at its Tirunelveli session in 1920, E.V.R. moved a resolution favouring communal representation in the legislature and government services as a first step towards ensuring social justice. Supported by a strong Brahmin wing S.Srinivasa Iyengar, the session President ruled out the resolution. For four years in succession, E.V.R. persistently attempted in vain to get the resolution passed. Finally at the Kancheepuram session of the Provisional Congress in 1925, as he rose to move it, he was opposed. Greatly dejected, E.V.R. vowed that the Brahmin domination in

the Congress should be crushed. With this motive, he left the Congress and started the Self-Respect Movement.[10]

AIMS OF SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT

The term 'Self-Respect' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Suyamariathai'. It is a combination of two words 'Suya' which means 'Self' and 'Mariyathai' which means 'Respect'.^[10] Its main object in the early years was to secure communal representation in all spheres of public life. But subsequently the Self-Respect Movement confined its activities to social reform in which it aimed to give Non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on the Dravidian past. In condemning the caste system the Self-Respect Movement may be said to have gained an anti-Brahmin character from the beginning and subsequently anti-Brahminism became the distinctive feature of the movements. The Self Respect League and the communist parties opposed the congress and demanded economic, social and political reforms.^[11]

E.V.R, felt that the acceptance of this superior and inferior status due to caste was inconsistent with the self-respect of an individual. His argument and his line of logical thinking led to the

conclusion that if one was to maintain one's own self respect, caste system should be abolished.^[12] When his attempts met with failure, he started the Self Respected Movement with the following aims:

1. To crush the Brahmin dominated congress – co-operating with the British for that,
2. To work towards the removal of caste, untouchability and superstitions, and
3. To work for attaining socialism.^[13]

Jeevanandam's relations with E.V.R. started during the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1925. In 1926 he participated in the anti-caste conference at Nellikuppam. When he was the headmaster in the Gandhi Ashram, he attended most of the meetings organised by the Self-Respect League. The principles of Gandhi Ashram and Nachiarapuram Ashram were mainly derived from the principles of the Self-Respect Movement. He wrote many articles in *Kudiarasu*, *Puratchi* and *Pagutharivu* the political organs of the Self-Respect Movement.

He participated in the first Self-Respect Conference held at Chingleput in 1929 and the second conference at Erode in 1930. At the third conference held at Virudhunagar in 1931, he supported the propagation of khaddar and charka, despite

heavy opposition. At Karaikudi, he took a leading part in promoting the sale of khaddar. It was recorded that Karaikudi stood first in the largest sale of khaddar in the whole of Madras Presidency. Then Jeevanandam became a recognized leader of the Self-Respect Movement.^[14] In this conference he moved a resolution that the movement should spread throughout India and for that an English weekly should be started. This resolution received support and as a result the English weekly, *Revolt* was started.^[15]

LATER ROLE IN SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

Jeevanandam's role in the Self-Respect League after 1932 was based on the effect of his prison life. He devoted most of his time for the propagation of socialistic ideas. It so happened that when he came out of jail, E.V.R. had just finished his European tour and returned to Erode as a Communist.^[16] On 28 and 29 December, 1932, the Self-Respect Planning committee held a special meeting at Erode under the Presidentship of Singaravelu.^[17] E.V.R. and Jeevanandam exchanged ideas at this meeting and decided to preach communism everywhere thereafter. However, E.V.R.'s shift towards communism alienated some of the rich Self-Respect members like R.K.Shanmugam chetti and W.P.A.Soundara pandia Nadar.^[18] Considering the futility of

the moderate means of the Congress, Jeevanandam left it and identified himself with the Self-Respect League. He accompanied E.V.R. in most of the meetings and inspired the mass through inflammatory speeches.^[19]

The ideological change from Gandhism to Marxism formed another important effect of his life in prison. From the position of a staunch supporter of Gandhism and Khadar till 1932, Jeevanandam became a strong opponent of the same later on. In *Puratchi*, he wrote articles citing reasons for the boycott of Gandhi.^[20]

1. Gandhi's belief in 'inner voice' was not rational,
2. Gandhi accepted Varna system,
3. Gandhi preached about 'Ramarajya' which was not a socialistic society,
4. Gandhi was spiritualistic and conservative,
5. Gandhi wanted an agreement between the labourers and capitalists but not the abolition of capitalism,
6. Gandhi gave priority to cottage industries in an age of industrialization and
7. Gandhi's proposals for the removal of untouchability and self sufficiency.^[21]

Similarly writings against capitalists and participation in non-jamindar conferences were due to his changed principles after prison life. In August 1933 Jeevanandam participated in the Non-jamindar Conference and moved the following resolution,

“The National Struggle with the aim of establishing democratic government paved the way for the zamindars to come to the front and now it is the duty of the Self-Respect League to work out plans to push back the zamindars and bringforth the poor and the labour class to the front”.^[22]

In April 1934, Jeevanandam wrote an article in *Puratchi* under the caption, 'Blind capitalists and Deaf government'.^[23] Considering it as a seditious literature the Government required a deposit of Rs. 2000 and to sign an agreement.^[24] In consequence *Puratchi* stopped publication but another weekly, *Pagutharivu* emerged in its place. Later, when the ideological difference between Jeevanandam and E.V.R. took a serious turn, E.V.R. quoted this incident and declared that he met heavy loss on account of Jeevanandam's writings.^[25]

IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT WITH E.V.R.

There arose differences between Jeevanandam and E.V.R on the question of

communist propaganda. After his return from Russia in 1933, the C.I.D. noted E.V.R. as a Russian spy.^[26] The Government kept a heap of records of the “objectionable speeches and writings of E.V.R.”^[27] Advised by Panneerselvam, the Home Minister of Madras and a well-wisher of E.V.R., he decided to abandon the communist propaganda in order to remove the suspicion of the Government on him and the Self-Respect League.^[28] However, their strained relationship passed through certain phases in politics.

Jeevanandam started a new weekly, *Samatharmam* on 1st August, 1934 at Jolarpettai with V.Parthasarathi as its editor. The covering page contained his songs on socialism. He wrote several articles in it under the names Samatharmi and Comrade. Jeevanandam’s tour programmes in the presidency appeared in every issue. In fact it moved socialistic in nature. But soon trouble started. For an article published in its issue dated 21 November, 1934, a jamin of Rs. 3,000/- was levied under Sub-Section of (3) section (7) of Indian Press (Emergency) Act 1931.^[29] Failing to pay the said amount, the weekly stopped publication on 26 December, 1934.^[30]

By the end of 1934 – Jeevanandam was critical in his dealings with the Self-Respect Movement. He openly criticized the ‘Hero-worship’ prevailing in the Movement

on E.V.R and the lack of organization in the League. He suggested for reorganizing the whole League and requested E.V.R to convene a Self –Respect Conference for self criticism in order to strengthen the movement.^[31] However, E.V.R. did not listen to his advice.

The next phase of the conflict between E.V.R. and Jeevanandam was over a case filed against the latter and E.V.Krishnasamy, the brother of E.V.R. and the editor of Kudiarasu. In 1934 Jeevanandam translated into Tamil a letter written by Bhagat Singh, “Why I become an atheist?” (Nan Nasthigan En?)^[32] It was published in the form of a booklet on 2 April, 1934. Since it contained materials suggesting violence against the Government, E.V.R. and Jeevanandam were held responsible to it and were arrested. The Government also forfeited about 526 books out of the 2000 books printed.^[33]

In this case E.V.R. compelled Jeevanandam to give a petition of apology on the promise that E.V.R. would acknowledge his responsibility for the apology letter, Jeevanandam and E.V.K apologized for the writings and got released. As promised E.V.R acknowledged his responsibility for the apology letter for he considered that it was the only way to safeguard the Self-Respect Movement.^[34] E.V.R. feared that alienation with the Government due to

excessive communist propaganda might result in the ban on Self-Respect League just like the fate of the Communist party of India.

E.V.R.'s open support to the Justice Party in the election of 1934 was not liked by Jeevanandam. He considered the Justice Party as a band of capitalists from economic point of view, whereas E.V.R. considered it as a non-Brahmin organization from the social point of view.^[35]

In the meantime, at the Trichi Conference on 19 October, 1935, a covert conflict started between them when Jeevanandam stated that the Self-Respect League had come down from the Himalayas to the ground since it had joined the Justice Party in the election of 1934.^[36] Subsequently, E.V.R. answered that the attainment of communal rights formed his main objective for which Justice Party was also striving hard. To him social equality should be aimed at first and economic equality would follow it.^[37] Yet the open conflict between the two did not occur very soon. It was at this moment, to realize his socialistic ideas, Jeevanandam decided to start a leftist wing in the Self-Respect League.^[38]

Jeevanandam played the role of a socialist in Self Respect League. He was not prepared to sacrifice socialism for Self-Respect League and E.V.R was not ready to sacrifice Self-Respect League for socialism.

Then Jeevanandam turned to the Socialist Party of the Congress or he "began a return journey to the Congress".^[39]

CONCLUSION

Jeevanandam was a freedom fighter, social reformer, political leader and one of the pioneers of the Communist and Socialist in the state of TamilNadu. He became a recognized leader of the Self Respect Movement. The aim of the Self-Respect Movement has been defined as universal, social, economic and political equality to be achieved by the complete destruction of capitalism and imperialism, the abolition of religion, capital and labour, and such class distinctions as rich and poor, high and low class. He participated in different progressive movements ranging from anti-colonial nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi, social reform movement with E.V.R and the Communist movement. Jeevanandam's life reminds us of simplicity, honesty and commitment for social change.

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