

Periyar An Iconoclast and a Reformer

“Men should not touch each other, see each other; and cannot enter temples, fetch water from the village pond: in a land where such inhuman practices are ripe, it is a wonder that the earthquakes have not destroyed us, volcanoes not burnt us; it is a wonder that the earth has not split at its heart and plunge this land into an abyss, that a typhoon has not shattered us. I leave it to you to decide if you still like to trust to a divinity that has not punished us thus; if you still consider that God a just God, a Merciful Being. How long do you desire a vast section of the oppressed, the depressed classes to remain patient, peaceful and quiet? Would you consider it wrong if these oppressed were to choose death rather than lead such a life as the do now?” - Periyar

I woke up to the news that in an apparent reaction to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi's statements on Lord Rama and the Ram Sethu controversy, miscreants pelted stones and hurled petrol bombs at his daughter's house near Ragigudda in J P Nagar. The Tamil Nadu CM had of course taken some heat of Sonia Gandhi and Man Mohan Singh by boldly claiming there was no historic proof of Lord Ram's existence. There was also no proof of Lord Ram having constructed a bridge and being an expert in engineering, he told a TV channel. It is one thing for an Italian born Sonia Gandhi and a Sikh Prime Minister to make such inflammatory statements and another thing for a born son of the soil Hindu to say so, albeit a rationalist and atheist.

But the man who first said such things and more was not the current Dravidian Patriarch, Karunanidhi, but the original founder patriarch of the Dravidian movement, EVR Ramasami popularly known as Periyar. His birth anniversary was on the 17th September, just two days ago and unlike another social reformer, Vinoba Bhave, Periyar got his garlands and tributes. He remains an iconic figure in Tamil Nadu and unlike the Congress which seems to have completely abandoned its Gandhian legacy, as long people of Karunanidhi's generation are active at least the legacy of EVR is safe.

The first time that I had heard of Periyar was in the context of the “Ravana Leelas” that he and his organization, the DK used to conduct. This was as an answer to Ram Leela conducted in North. They would carry pictures of Hindu Gods garlanded with slippers and depict Hindu mythologies in obscene manner. In my childhood, I used to watch the Ram Leela but trying to imagine what the Ravana Leela might be like where the hero turned villain was exciting. Fortunately or unfortunately now the performances have now stopped having made their point about the trampling of the Dravidian identity by the Aryan one.

But Periyar's contribution was far more than the eccentric and perhaps even offensive Ravana Leelas. He was initially a Congressman inducted into the party by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, C Rajagopalachari, Gandhiji and others. He passionately espoused Gandhian ideals, such as the use of khadi. However, he soon became disenchanted with the Congress and its indecisive ways when he brings up the issue of eliminating caste discrimination. The Self-Respect Movement, founded by him in 1925, carried on a vigorous and ceaseless propaganda against ridiculous and harmful superstitions, traditions, customs and habits. He wanted to dispel the ignorance of the people and make them enlightened. He exhorted them to take steps to change the institutions and values that led to meaningless divisions and unjust discrimination. He advised them to change according to the requirements of the changing times and keep pace with the modern conditions.

Self-respecters performed marriages without Brahmin priests (purohits) and without religious rites. They insisted on equality between men and women in all walks of life. They encouraged inter-caste and widow marriages. Periyar propagated the need for birth-control even from late 1920s. He gathered support for lawful abolition of Devadasi (temple prostitute) system and the practice of child marriage.

In a sense Periyar and Gandhiji were contemporaries. Gandhiji was born in 1869 and Periyar in 1879. In many aspects they did or stood for similar things. But there were significant differences. Gandhiji's movement was deeply and irrevocably rooted in Hinduism, even if it was a kind of Hinduism that satisfied nobody. It did not satisfy the likes of Jinnah, who still thought of the Congress as a Hindu party and it of course did not satisfy the likes of Nathuram Godse and who thought that Gandhiji's Hinduism wasn't pure enough. Gandhiji did a lot to remove untouchability and was active in agitations like the temple entry movement but his stance on caste was ambivalent which made first EVR and later Dr. Ambedkar part ways with him.

Some day it would be worthwhile to study the distance that both Dr. Ambedkar and Periyar covered in their journey away from Gandhi. Both were clear that the solution to the caste problem was not to be found within the boundaries of Hinduism but whereas Dr. Ambedkar found his answers in Buddhism, Periyar felt the answer lay in humanism and going down that route, he became progressively an atheist and a rationalist. I am not an atheist and believe that religion and a longing for God is firmly and deeply embedded in the racial memory of men and women because God created them in His image.

But nevertheless, the anguish and pathos of Periyar in describing his experience as he looked at the dehumanization of life and God seemingly silent is best captured in his own words “ Men should not touch each other, see each other; and cannot enter temples, fetch water from the village pond: in a land where such inhuman practices are ripe, it is a wonder that the earthquakes have not destroyed us, volcanoes not burnt us; it is a wonder that the earth has not split at its heart and plunge this land into an abyss, that a typhoon has not shattered us. I leave it to you to decide if you still like to trust to a divinity that has not punished us thus; if you still consider that God a just God, a Merciful Being. How long do you desire a vast section of the oppressed, the depressed classes to remain patient, peaceful and quiet? Would you consider it wrong if these oppressed were to choose death rather than lead such a life as the do now?”

Interestingly, considering the comparisons I have already made with Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar, both of them were British educated barristers and Periyar’s education ended in Class IV. But for all of that his iconoclastic legacy of social reform is indelible.