

Was Periyar A Burden For Dalits?

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This has reference to “Time to dump that mind-robbert” by the “only Dalit journalist in Main Line Press in India” Shri. Chandrabhan Prasad, trying to denigrate Periyar.

All throughout I have been avoiding to write about CBP’s views, as I always thought that he has got his own compulsions, that he has to make his living by writing and that he has got to write that sells well. We should be glad that he gets patronage and wish he got more and more of it.

But no sensible Dalit could swallow his views about Periyar. One might say that the lieutenants of Periyar were not that capable to complete the revolution started by him, but no Dalit, in his senses, will show disrespect for Periyar’s work or doubt his motives. (but a ‘harijan’ may)

That Mayawati had to divert the image of Periyar to south could be because of her compulsions of coalition politics, or it might have been really meant for south as she claims; we do not know. BSP people do strange things. She did inaugurate an institution in UP, sitting in Kolhapur. Has anybody heard of such a thing? Mayawati is beyond comprehension of people like CBP. Let us forget about her for the time being and concentrate on Periyar. In any case, it does not deserve to be called a “comical exercise”, as CBP calls it.

False statistics

To show soundness of his erroneous arguments, CBP is in habit of giving doubtful statistics and drawing misleading conclusions from them. In the past also, he had quoted similar statistics, I think it was from Kerala, to prove a similar point that we Dalits must not side with OBCs, and I had that time also respectfully differed from his views.

Let us say that his statistics is right, that there are more percentage of landless Dalit labourers in South than in North.

How does that prove that poverty among Dalits in South is due to Periyar’s movement? He should give the figures in South only before and after Periyar’s movement, and then give reasons to show cause and effect relationship. He is comparing apples with oranges, as they say. Experts like Satinath Chowdhary, a mathematical wizard, may like to enlighten us.

If there was poor progress of “land reforms” in South, how is Periyar movement responsible for it? It is just like saying Phule’s and Ambedkar’s thoughts are responsible for present day condition of RPI. Also he has again to prove that Land reforms are worse in South than in North.

Atrocities against Dalits

Again about atrocities against Dalits, there is no region which can boast of more liberal or more ugly. All are more or less same, even the so called “forward” Maharashtra is no exception.

Was Periyar a conman?

CBP calls the Periyar as a “social conman” and observes:

“Periyar was a great social scamster, who plundered Dalit consciousness. He made a fix deposit of it for growth of what I call social fascism. Old Dalits bore the Periyar burden. New Dalits must dump that mind-robbert.”

This is very unfortunate, uncharitable and ungrateful charge, to be made by a Dalit. His estimate of Periyar is utterly wrong. Periyar’s work for Dalits — Adi Dravidas — as they are referred to in his writings, was not an eyewash unlike that of Gandhi. It was real work and the then Dalits responded with equal responsibility. Their sentiments were reciprocal. Neither the Dalits of old bore Periyar’s burden, nor the present day Dalits have to discard him. **He was, he is and he will remain the ideal and idol of the multitudes of Dalits, the world over.** Only the ‘harijans’ — followers of Gandhi — have discarded him, as they did Phule, Shahu and Ambedkar.

Acts of Self Respecters for Dalit upliftment

One could write a thesis on Periyar’s work about Dalits. He struggled all his life for abolition of caste, which according to him will be achieved, by “abolition of God, Religion (Hinduism), the *Shastras* and the Brahmins”. He and his Self-Respecters never got tired of repeating that untouchability and caste differentiations were root cause of

Indian slavery and always declared that it was not enough that OBCs rebelled against Brahmins but they had to abandon untouchability and treat them as equals. They always struggled for OBC - Dalit unity.

One incident is worth mentioning. At some place he was addressing OBCs and advocating unity with Dalits. One of his listeners complained that people had come there to hear about Brahmin tyranny and not to hear about love for Adi-Dravidas. Periyar's curt reply was that, to show love towards a Pariah is the real method of opposing brahmin tyranny.

They believed in proportional representation of all castes in positions of power, services, legislature and education. In a caste bound society they worked for socialism and gave in '*Samadharma*' a non-brahmin alternative on cultural basis. Periyar denounced the 'separate' facilities like wells for Dalits. They had adi-dravida concerns in mind while opposing Gandhi, or "Poona Pact" or Harijan Sewak Sangha or Christian clergy observing untouchability against Christian Dalits. They gave more importance to schooling and drinking water for Dalits than '*salt satyagraha*' of Gandhi.

Liberation of Shudras and Panchamas

Periyar's dictum was "liberation of Shudras depended on liberation of Panchamas". They fought for common eating, inter-caste marriages, temple entry to exert the right, and opposed Congressmen, who only talked and did nothing. When Dr. Subbarayan became Chief Minister, he nominated two adi-Dravidas to *Devasthanam* committee. Guruswami declared, if he becomes Viceroy he would appoint Dr. Ambedkar as Law Minister of India.

Political Power

They forced bus operators to accept Dalits in buses and resolved for unrestricted passage to Dalits to ponds, wells, schools and roads, which is a good example to show how political power CAN help solve social issues, contrary to some people's understanding. They performed many inter-caste marriages with Dalits in 'Self-Respect' method, which was given due publicity.

Political struggle of Dalits supported

There were three major incidents in political life of Dalits during those days — 'Simon Commission', 'Second Round Table Conference' and 'the Poona Pact'. In all those, the Self Respecters and Periyar stood firmly with Dr. Ambedkar and against Gandhi and his Congress. The important work done by '*Kudi Arasu*' by organizing protests, editorials and articles can not be forgotten. They even opposed 'Raja-Moonje Pact' and declared that Nationalists' fight against the British was only for maintaining brahminic hegemony and benefits.

Gandhi as Sanatanist

Working on ideas of Iyothee Thass, they even organized seminars on Buddhism in early thirties, and opposed Gandhian ideology. They remarked Gandhi's fast 'unto death' was because of 'over seven crores corpses had dared to seek a separate representation for themselves', and condemned Gandhi to be with those who burnt Dalits huts and butchered Dalit men and women. They declared Gandhi as '*sanatanist*' believing in *Smritis* and *Gita* and condemned his ideals of *Ramrajya*, where Gandhi wanted everybody to maintain ones own status by birth and wished Dalits to have 'peaceful co-existence' with upper castes.

Burning of Manusmriti

For Self-Respecters, temple entry was a problem of human rights — not of religion, they castigated existence of gods and temples as centers of caste oppression, proclaimed the uselessness of worship and exhorted adi-dravidas to renounce Hinduism.

Self-Respecters burned the copies of '*Manusmriti*' in public meetings, and several such instances were reported in '*Kudi Arasu*' of 4.12.1927. This means that these were earlier instances to the burning of '*Manusmriti*' by Dr. Ambedkar on 25th December 1927 at Mahad, the day the Dalits all the world over celebrate as '*Manusmriti Dahan din*'.

Nandanar Charithram

'Kudi Arasu' carried an article titled '*Nandanar Charithram*' condemning the traditional fable of adi-dravida saint Nandanar depicted as a derogatory figure by birth, living in a foul smelling '*cheri*' where bones were strewn everywhere and where men and women were always drunk, and Nandanar had to get burnt himself to meet god. The Self-Respecters considered this as a wily trick to build consent system among Dalits and make them accept slavery. So they condemned the play based on this fable, and asked for a ban on it.

Supported Ambedkar

Periyar and Self-Respecters always supported Ambedkar. Dalit Conference in 1929 in Jalgaon in Maharashtra by Dr. Ambedkar got a message of good wishes and support from Periyar, and the news appeared in '*Kudi Arasu*', describing this as a "First Self Respect Conference of Maharashtra".

Ambedkar's views on Gandhi, Poona Pact, Harijan Sewak Sangha, caste and separate electorates were always highlighted. Ambedkar's "Annihilation of Caste" was translated and serialized in 'Kudi Arasu' and later printed as a book in 1937.

Criticized non-Brahmins also

Periyar and Self-Respecters did not spare non-brahmins also. In 1930, in an attempt at 'sanskritization', an OBC caste put restrictions on adi-dravidas in dress etc. They were highly criticized, comparing their cruelty with that of notorious General Dyre. Later, in violent atrocities against Dalits, the Dalit side was upheld by Self-Respecters, various resolutions passed and various attempts made towards awakening the Shudras, stressing that brahmin non-brahmin division was fundamental.

Periyar always warned against upgrading of castes, e.g. he denounced the practice by Palas — an untouchable caste — to call themselves *Devendra kula Vellalas*, Vanniyars wishing to call themselves kshatriyas and Chettiar referring themselves as vaishyas, and declared these acts are the acts of degrading rather than upgrading.

The rich community of Nattukotti Chettis thought of spending their riches on study of Vedas for brahmin students. Periyar advised them to spend that money on education of Dalits.

On many instances, Periyar expressed disgust at non-Brahmins orthodoxy towards adi-dravidas and remarked that non-brahmins are more orthodox than the brahmins.

Liberation of Women

Periyar considered the position of women degraded by the *shastras* to a mere 'dasi', a term which to a Self-Respecter was akin to slave having no freedom in sexual matters, and resembled Tamil word 'vesi' meaning prostitute. This idea of non-brahmin woman as a sexual slave is fixed in Shudras' minds by the dharma-shastras, argued Self-Respecters.

They were also strong opponents of *Devadasi* system, where non-brahmin women were made the prostitutes in the name of god, religion and rituals. They supported the Devadasi Abolition Bill with great vehemence. Self Respecters saw the collective dishonour of non-brahmin women in *Devadasi* exploitation of low caste women.

Periyar and Self-Respecters supported 'Sarada Act', denounced the concept of chastity of women, run a sort of home for women facing atrocities, supported Miss Catherine Mayo's book 'Mother India' depicting woes of Devadasis, Hindu wives, Hindu widows and holding responsible *Shastras*, Brahmins and Brahminism for them. In degrading women, Brahminism had the motive of controlling knowledge, they averred. They considered the degradation of women and Dalits were inter-related. They advocated "self-respect marriages" without Brahmins, without sanskrit mantras and without consideration of caste.

Other points in CBP article

Dr. Ambedkar's views about Aryan invasion is a subject, which I rather not deal this time. It is a subject, many have messed about and may be some time in future, I may respond in detail. Suffice here to say that Babasaheb DID believe that Aryans came from outside.

The issue raised by CBP of personal friendship with Rajaji is just childish, to say the least, and must be ignored.

Shudras and Dalits are the natural friends and will have to accommodate each other, no matter what the people of CBP's ilk say. There is no other alternative, whether you like it or not. There are efforts by the vested interests to sabotage the Dalit OBC unity and perhaps CBP is a small cog in the big wheel of that scheme. We better be careful.

I have to request the prominent people to forward this article to the paper, where CBP's original article was published and see if they like to publish it, which I doubt.

Thanks!

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