

EMERGENCE OF NON-BRAHMIN AWAKENING: E.V.R. AND SERANMADEVI GURUKULAM CONFLICT IN TIRUNELVELI

Dr. L. RAVISANKAR, M.A., M.Phil., M.Ed.,

*Associate Professor and Head, Department of History
Thiruvalluvar College, Papanasam, Tirunelveli, India*

Introduction

E.V. Ramasami Naicker a social reformer and a mass leader felt the problem of gender discrimination in the society. He was not prepared to be cowed down or compromise. He was prophetic when he said "Gurukulam is going to be the deciding factor in the National life of the Non-Brahmins, they would no longer accept a position of inferiority in the National institutions". The letter of Gandhi to Mahadev Iyer to hand over the Gurukulam gracefully to a committee of Chief donors indicated the victory of E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu because Gandhi felt the justification in their claim. At the same time it was a defeat to E.V.R. and other socially conscious Nationalist leaders that the Gurukulam was not handed over; but rather closed. The emergence of Non-Brahmin awakening started only after this issue and E.V.R. was the pioneer in raising the issue of social justice.

E.V.R and Seranmadevi Gurukulam Conflict

E.V.R gained much experience in the Vaikom Satyagraha and he was able to understand the role of Brahmins to check his path towards social goals. He called upon the congressites to devote them for the anti-untouchability propaganda in Tamil Nadu after the end of Vaikom Satyagraha.¹ The existence of deep-rooted hatred among the Brahmins against the lower castes was revealed by an incident known as gurukulam affair. It was run by V.V.S. Iyer, a congress nationalist at Seranmadevi in Tirunelveli District.² This 'gurukulam' was run out of the public donations and congress Fund. As the Secretary of T.N.C.C, E.V.R sanctioned Rs. 10,000/- to the 'gurukulam' and a sum of Rs. 5000/- was given as advance payment. But E.V.R. doubted the administrative set-up of the institution when V.V.S. Iyer received this amount without his knowledge. With the help of other Brahmin Congress leaders like M.K. Acharyar, S.Satyamurthi and S.Srinivasalyengar the money was paid.³ Subsequently, in January 1925 the students of this gurukulam themselves sent complaints to E.V.R., about the Secretary of T.N.C.C. for his misbehaviour and mal administration. Among them, one lodged complaint was from the son of O.P. Ramaswami Reddiar who gave a clear picture to E.V.R about the gurukulam. It vividly stated about the enforcement of a separate dining, separate water pots and partial treatment to the non-Brahmin students.⁴

Therefore E.V.R. expressed his concern over this grave affairs to the congress leaders including T.V. Kalyanasundaranar, Rajaji and P. Varadarajulu Naidu, President of T.N.C.C. Inspite of these allegations, V.V.S. Iyer stoutly refused to give equal treatment to all the

inmates.⁵ E.V.R. urged the T.N.C.C. to take prompt action and to do something to set right the affair. Finally a Committee was constituted. In the political sphere, a clear cut division came into being in the congress circles, between the non-Brahmins and the Brahmin Cliques. The gurukulam conflict was a snow- balling between Brahmin and non-Brahmin leaders into a major issue, which was taken up in the TNCC meeting, held on 29 April 1925 at Tiruchirappalli.⁶ Finally the resolution was approved. Then, a censure motion was moved by Rajaji against P. Varadarajulu Naidu condemning him for endangering national unity by promoting communal ill - feeling in Tamil Society.⁷ When the motion was defeated all the Brahmin members resigned from the T.N.C.C. in en bloc. As a result of this E.V.R., S. Ramanathan and V.Thyagarajachetti of Devakottai were appointed in the committee to implement the quietness sense of resolution. Accordingly E.V.R and S. Ramanathan visited the gurukulam for a compromise and reconciliation effort. However when it failed V.V.S Iyer sent his resignation to the congress in April 1925 and in the midst of this conflict, V.V.S. Iyer passed away on 3 July 1925.⁸

Gurukulam Controversy The existence of such deep rooted hatred and discrimination happened to be revealed only by certain chance incidents in the routine business of the party. Perhaps the most glaring one in the series was what was known as "Gurukulam Affair" which exposed for the first time the ulterior motive behind any move of the moderates.⁹ So obvious was the Brahmin's hatred for the lower castes or their sense of communal discrimination that it is worthwhile to study in fair detail the so called Gurukulam affair which may be regarded as the test case for E.V.R. His opinion against orthodox Brahmins was further strengthened by this affair.¹⁰ The above incident revolved around the question of communal restriction that was imposed on the non-Brahmin students at a centre of traditional learning called the Gurukulam of Seranmadevi (Sermadevi) in Tirunelveli District. The Gurukulam fashioned on the lines of similar institutions of ancient India, was established by V.V. SubramaniaIyer (V.V.S. Iyer) in December, 1922 at Kallidaikuricci, but later shifted to Seranmadevi with the object of imparting religious and national education to youth, inculcating in them the spirit of patriotism and social service.¹¹

The Gurukulam received for its upkeep donations from private individuals belonging to all communities and also private institutions. The Tamilnad Congress also had sanctioned a sum of Rs.10,000 from its own funds and had paid five thousand rupees as its initial contribution. While the main objects were universally accepted, all was not well with the actual working of the institution and its management in general. There were frequent complaints of gross partiality. The Brahmin wards, it was stated, were given richer food and better comforts than those of the non-Brahmin community. On January 1925, E.V.R. received certain complaints from the students of Gurukulam including one from the son of O.P. Ramasami Reddiar (a later Chief Minister of Madras) about the enforcement of separate dining among Brahmin and non-Brahmin boys.¹² There was a storm of protest against such discriminatory practice from the non-Brahmin members of the Congress as well as from those who had donated liberally for the establishment of the institution. E.V.R could no

longer remain an idle spectator of the scene. Being answerable to the various interest which had helped the establishment and running of the Gurukulam, it was time for him to intervene and to do something to set things right. A committee constituted to investigate the allegations also learnt that V.V.S. Iyer himself had given permission to two Brahmin boys to dine separately on the insistence of their parents.¹³

But V.V.S. Iyer was rigid. Abetted by his friends Dr. T.S.S. Rajan, K. Santhanam and others he maintained that any unrestricted promiscuity as clamoured for, "would prove highly sacrilegious and would particularly hurt the feelings of the highly religious Brahmin members. The Gurukulam affair became the burning question of the day. Popular resentment arose and since V.V.S. Iyer was running institution on communal lines, it was demanded that either he should return all the donations received from the Tamilnad Congress and non-Brahmin members or he should agree to change the character of the institution. Iyer's supporters pointed out that interdining was not in practice either in society or in educational institutions run by the government. So they maintained that in the absence of such a custom in society it would be senseless to importune that the Gurukulam alone should implement inter dining among its students. Although E.V.R and Varadarajulu Naidu had differences of opinion on various political questions, they held identical views on the Gurukulam issue. E.V.R made a speech at Salem in April 1925 about this affair. Gandhiji's interference in the Gurukulam issue also did not solve the problem. Gandhiji advised that the two Brahmin students should be allowed to dine separately, as it had been agreed to already but in future no such restrictions should be encouraged or imposed in the Gurukulam.¹⁴

Apparently the meeting with Gandhiji failed to satisfy the parties concerned. E.V.R. and Varadarajulu Naidu gave vent to their feelings against the Gurukulam and what they considered to be Brahmin dominance in Tamil society, through the columns of their Tamil Papers "KudiArasu" and "Tamil Nadu" respectively. T.V. KalyanasundaramMudaliar who was considered by his contemporaries to be a more balanced person than either Naidu or E.V.R. appealed to Iyer to change the character of the institution from Seranmadevi to another centre.¹⁵ But Iyer not merely turned a deaf ear to this but also criticized him for lending support to malicious campaign in Tamil Nadu.¹⁶ The situation grew increasingly tense and called for some more drastic action. Some efforts were made at the Tamil Nadu Congress annual meeting to settle the issue of jurisdiction over matters concerning a private institution. Nonetheless Varadarajulu Naidu who did not fully succeed in raising the Gurukulam issue at the Congress meeting held on 29 April 1925 succeeded in limiting the agenda specifically to the question of inter dining. At the conclusion of his presidential address he moved a resolution which expressed the regret of the Tamil Nadu Congress at having paid five thousand rupees to the Gurukulam.¹⁷ But his resolution failed to get the approval of the Committee. Rajaji moved a resolution which said that the internal management of the Gurukulam should be left to the people who run it but that the pupils of the institution should dine together without discrimination.¹⁸ This resolution of Rajaji was also not approved by the committee. Finally S. Ramanathan's resolution which

recommended that the gradations of merit based on birth should not be observed by any organization participating in the national movement was approved and V. Thiagaraja Chettiar of Devakottai, Ramanathan and E.V. Ramasami were appointed to help the Gurukulam to implement this principle.¹⁹ Out of twenty six members nineteen voted for it and seven against it. Rajaji, Rajan, Vijayaraghavachariar, K. Santhanam, Dr. Swaminatha Sastri and N.S. Varadachari (all Brahmins only) opposed the resolution.²⁰ This confirmed the belief of E.V.R that the Brahmins whether traditionalists or progressives, were essentially communal in outlook. At this time a censure motion which was moved against Varadarajulu Naidu condemning him for endangering national unity by promoting communal ill-feeling in Tamil Society was rejected but it helped to widen the split with the Tamilnad Congress.²¹ In his capacity as the Secretary of the Tamil Nadu Congress E.V.R refused to pay the balance amount of Rupees Five Thousand due to Gurukulam until and unless the common mess system advocated by Gandhiji was practised V.V.S. Iyer and his band of associates, therefore decided to get the money without E.V.R's knowledge; and they succeeded in doing so. They got the cheque from the joint secretary K. Santhanam, a Brahmin. This also made E.V.R to declare an "all-out war" on the Gurukulam. M. Baktavatsalam criticized Varadarajulu Naidu only.²² But this incident developed a deep animosity in the heart of E.V.R and hastened his decision to quit the Congress.

Conclusion

Before the communal animosity, aroused over the Gurukulam controversy could wane out, the Tamil Nadu Congress met at Conjeevaram to discuss about council entry. It was a question hotly discussed by all political parties of the day. E.V.R's main object in participating in this conference was to get a mandate from the Tamil Nadu Congress on the question of communal representation. The failure of his hopes in the Congress made him to draw a new line of approach. Consequently, he decided to quit from the Congress and wanted to start a new movement for the cause of non Brahmin against Brahminism. This led to the birth of the Self - Respect Movement.

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