

**Social reforms of E.V. Ramasamy and Self-respect movement among the
muslims of Tamilnadu**

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Abstract

In this article it is aimed to bring out social reforms of E.V. Ramasamy among the Muslims of Tamilnadu and so on. It was not just the Tanjore School of Islamic Thought spearheaded by Dawood Sha, which through print media was clamoring for reforms in the Tamil Muslim society and lashing out at the Ulemas for their indifference to the state of Islam in Tamilnadu. During this period, there began another major movement that contributed in no small measure to the need for reforms in the Tamilnadu society. This movement was known as the Self-respect movement. It was founded in 1925, by E.V.Ramasamy Naicker, a high caste non-Brahmin Hindu, hailing from a wealthy merchant family of Erode in Tamilnadu.

Keywords: Self Respect Movement, Non-Brahmin, Viduthalai, Kudiarasu, atesists, purohits, Khilafat.

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E.V. Ramasamy had actually parted company with the Indian National Congress of which he was one of the leaders in south India, primarily because he was unwilling to tolerate its Brahmin leadership. Instead, he founded the non-Brahmin Self-respect movement with the avowed objective of doing away with Brahminism, the Hindu caste system, and its Gods. He characterized the Brahmins as Aryans, and the non-Brahmins including the Tamil Muslims as Dravidians. He also held that Dravidians and Muslims were of the same mother.¹ In order to achieve his objectives; he did not just rely on propaganda through public meetings. Instead, he like Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Punjab and Dawood Sha of Tamilnadu this he carried on his propaganda war against all aspects of Hinduism throughout Tamilnadu and elsewhere. The principal press organs of his were the Kudiarasu and the Viduthalai. Tamil Muslims were allowed to express their thoughts, feelings, and views in these journals. A perusal of these journals will demonstrate indubitably the extent of importance given to the Muslims and their affairs.

E.V. Ramasamy's contemporaries such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sri Aurobindo, all of whom hailed from northern India, were more interested in fostering the aastika traditions. Though, some of them were critical of the extreme forms of the caste systems, none dared to wage a total war against it. While Vivekananda turned to the virtues of the Vedanta, Gandhi preferred to engage himself in the anti-untouchability campaign, leaving unperturbed the rest of the caste system. Tagore was known for his universal ideals and Aurobindo suddenly became a superman and formulated a religious synthesis influenced decisively by the works of the French philosopher, Paul Richard, with whom he was in close contact. Ramasamy appears to be the only Indian or rather Hindu social reformer, hailing from south India, who was pitted not only against the entire aastika traditions of Hinduism and Christianity, including the caste system, but also against the irrationalities and un-Islamic habits infecting Islam. This naturally seems to have drawn the Muslims of Tamilnadu towards him.

E.V. Ramasamy and his movement not only championed the causes and grievances of the non-Brahmin Hindus, especially through the use of the press but also that of the Muslims. He participated in various non-Brahmin and Muslim meetings, especially the Prophet's birthday meetings, where he aired his rationalistic views about religion, society, and politics. He considered the Muslims to be more progressive than the Hindus, who he said were steeped in superstitions. He and his movement extolled the lofty principles of Islam such as equality and brotherhood and asked the Muslims to admit into their fold the depressed sections of the Hindu society, in order that they might enjoy the equality and brotherhood of Islam.²

Usually E.V. Ramasamy's speeches in such meetings were systematically printed and published through his movement's publications and circulated throughout Tamilnadu. Ramasamy's sympathetic attitude towards the Muslims, in spite of being an avowed atheist, led the Muslims to consider him as a well-wisher of their community. Editors of Tamil Muslim newspapers such as Moulana Moulvi Ahmed Sayyid Sahib of Saiphul Islam, came out openly in support of the Self-respecters, especially E.V. Ramasamy, and supported his participation in Muslims meetings. Moulana Moulvi Ahmed Sayyid Sahib held that when the Hindus who worshipped thousands of gods and Christians who believed in the Trinity were allowed to speak at Muslim meetings, there was nothing wrong in allowing the atheist Self-respecters to speak at Muslim meetings as long as they did not contradict Islamic principles.³ Thus print media both Muslim and Dravidian played a crucial role in bringing the Tamil Muslims closer to E.V. Ramasamy and his movement. This would probably not have been possible if E.V. Ramasamy had relied only on public speeches to propagate his views.

As noted earlier, Muslims were allowed to express their views in the publications of the Self-respect movement. Some local Muslim personalities identified the Tamil Muslims as Dravidians. A certain E.V.T. Sheik Abdul Khader of salem wrote in the Kudiarasu: "One who has Tamil as mother tongue from the very beginning, one who has migrated and settled in Tamilnadu, was a Tamil. Among them there may be Saivites, Vaishnavites, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, atesists and believers; they were all Tamils".

Another Muslim, B.A. Ismail of Athur clamied that racially too the Muslims were Dravidians.⁴

Even P. Dawood Sha, the most vociferous of the Muslim social reformers, seems not to have been totally impervious to this Dravidian dimension in south India. He openly claimed that Tamilians, Christians and Muslims were all Dravidians, though they had different customs and habits.⁵ One could say that Dawood Sha had more or less subscribed to E.V. Ramasamy's view as far as the latter's Dravidian theory was concerned.

Tamil Muslims did not stop with expressing their Dravidianness through the print media. Actually some of the local Muslim personalities and stalwarts such as Tiruchirappalli Haji Subagu Mohideen Sahib and Erode Abdullah gave vent to their desires for initiating radical reforms in Tamil Muslim society, through articles published in the Kudiarasu. They wanted the abolition of the purdah system and called for Women's education and their upliftment for the good of the Muslim community.

Haji Subagu Mohideen Sahib even went to the extent of writing in favour of family planning and contraception. He quoted verses from the Quran and stated that the Quran was not against them.⁶ He condemned the position taken against family planning by western-educated Muslim stalwarts of Madras such as Basheer Ahmed Sayeed and spoke of the necessity of recognizing reason in everything including religion. He wrote: "Where has rationalism gone among those who have taken B.A and M.A degrees.... When we take into

consideration the economic situation of India, family planning becomes a necessity... The Islam I know wants to resolve the problem of the poor in the most rational manner..... Quran says not to kill your children for fear of poverty (6:152 and 17:32, Quran)..... The Quran does not oppose contraception considering the economic situation.

Like Dawood Sha, he too drew attention to the pathetic and subordinated condition of the Muslim women and widows and lamented that while the Hindus were openly admitting their faults and reforming themselves, Muslims were covering up their drawbacks by asserting that all the rights were already given to women.⁷

Some Muslims, under the influence of the Self-respect movement, such as Colombu's A.L. Mohammad Tameem, even went to the extent of questioning the rationality of Islam, in publications like Viduthalai.⁸ T.M. Ibrahim, another Muslim stalwart from Colombu, wrote in the Viduthalai that Prophet Mohammed himself was a communist.⁹ He condemned the false equality prevailing among the Muslims. He held that equality where there was no economic equality was false equality and that giving two and a half percent of one's income as alms was not suited to modern times. Dindigul K. Abdul Hameed wrote that, 'If there was no equal dharma, there was no equality'.¹⁰ Such writings appeared in the Kudiarasu, when E.V. Ramasamy himself was flirting for some time with communism, after his return from a visit to Russia in 1932.¹¹

It would not be an exaggeration to say that such Muslims, apart from those of the Tanjore School of Thought were the pioneers in highlighting the need for reforms in Muslim society, the upliftment of muslim women, and the promotion of their rights. The Self-respect movement's press organs had no doubt played a crucial role in bringing the thoughts and feelings of such Muslims to the attention of the general public. We would have never known about the existence of such radical Muslim stalwarts, who desired to reform their society, had the Self-respect movement not used the print media.

The Self-respect movement trained its guns not only on Hindu religious beliefs and practices, but also directed its criticisms against certain customs of the Muslims, which were not in conformity with Islam. They did not even spare the religious teachers of the Muslims that is the mullahs, and wrote about the necessity for them to be reformed.¹² It condemned habits as worshipping at saints' tombs (dargahs) and extravagant participation in the Allasamy Pandigai (Mohuram).¹³ It wanted the abolition of purdah, because it prevented Muslims particularly women such as Begum Amiruddin of Madras, who was a member of the Madras Legislative Assembly, or Aruna Asaf Ali, Congress Socialist leader of the United Provinces, from participating freely in public life. Moreover, purdah was also considered to be unhygienic for muslim women, as it prevented access to sunlight and fresh air, which led to the spread of contagious diseases like tuberculosis. It also held that it was inhuman and that human values could not be sacrificed merely to satisfy some conservatives. It called upon the men to think about the gross injustice being meted out to the women of the society.¹⁴

The editorial of the Viduthalai of 29 November 1947 called upon the print media to help reform Muslim society by writing against Allasamy Pandigai, Panj dances, and the custom of fakir's blessing with peacock feathers. It also wanted the Dravidian Muslims to follow Mustapha Kemal Pasha of Turkey and Amanullah of Afghanistan who rose against purdah and other irrational customs.¹⁵ Kudiarasu even reproduced in Tamil, articles written against purdah by Muslim women like Laila Banu Begum.¹⁶

Further the Self-respect movement compared the dominance of the mullahs over the common Muslim to that of the Hindu purohits (priests) or the Brahmins. It described the mullahs as the Muslim purohits or the Muslim Brahmins. It pointed out that whereas their

dominance still continued, that of their Hindu counterparts was being destroyed. It held that the Hindu non-Brahmins had awakened, while Muslim non-Brahmins continued to live in ignorance and brought about such a state where the common Muslims were bound to the Islamic Brahmin because of a lack of education.¹⁷

E.V.Ramasamy compared the situation of Muslims in Turkey with that of India and Tamilnadu; while the latter believed in religion, and upheld the ideals of Khilafat, Turkey had put an end to religion and mythology and had adopted modernism or westernism. He exhorted Indian Muslims to follow the example of Turkey and Afghanistan and accept reforms. This, he maintained, would pave the way for Islam to become accepted as a world policy.¹⁸

Generally, during this period the Self-respect movement and its leaders and its publications such as Kudiarasu and Viduthalai took a radical position not only against Hindu Gods, the Brahmins, and the caste system, but also expressed, frequently, their views about the grandeur of Islam and the necessity for the untouchables to convert to Islam to obtain equality and liberty. The editorial of Kudiarasu of 24 February 1935 held that Islam was suitable for the Tamils.¹⁹

The Kudiarasu, in its extreme zeal to destroy the Hindu caste aberrations more than its love for Islam, encouraged the untouchable Hindus to take refuge in Islam, if they really wanted freedom and equality, which according to it was not possible either in Christianity because of its caste structure or in Hinduism where there was no freedom at all.²⁰ Viduthalai thundered that the real way to freedom and equality lay in the conversion of the untouchables to Islam so that the Muslim population would rise to 16 crores.²¹

This was happening at a time when Mahatma Gandhi was warning the Hindus that if untouchability was not abolished, Hinduism would disappear.²² The recognized untouchable leader, B.R.Ambedkar was advising the Harijans to break away from the Hindu fold.²³ Besides Abdulla Gandhi, one of the sons of Mahatma Gandhi who had converted to Islam, was touring south India, presiding over conversion of low castes to Islam. He actually declared....'I am convinced that whoever becomes a Mussalman does a distinct service to himself and to humanity.'²⁴

In a speech delivered on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday at Satyamangalam in 1929 and published in the Kudiarasu, E.V. Ramasamy declared, "My dear Hindu and Muslim brothers, Today is celebrated the birthday of a great Mahan (the Prophet). But many among us may think this Mahan belongs to Muslims alone and so they alone have got the right to celebrate his birthday. They may also think how a Hindu like me may preside over such a meeting. When I clarify this, though my Hindu brothers may suspect me for talking in favour of the Muslims and Muslim religion, yet I thank first of all heartily my Muslim brothers for giving me the opportunity to participate in this meeting and also giving me the honour of presiding over this meeting.

Brothers, I consider that religious were created by the sages of the past for the good and pleasure of the people in this world and not as s Sadhana of the soul or as something endowed with divine nature or something beyond this world....I never accept that any religious policy created by a God is suitable for all times and that it cannot be altered to suit the changing times. In the same way, I consider all religious leaders as social workers... I least accept the religious leader as Gold-like or messengers of God or God's incarnation.....So the celebration of Thiru Mohammed Nabi's birthday today, as I told before, is the celebration of a great man's birthday. To say more explicitly, of all the great men that we call our religious leaders, Thiru Mohammed Nabi's religion is the latest of all

religions. Therefore I would say that it had removed all the drawbacks and faults in other religions and can be accepted by more or less all as a reformed religion. I have not read those books (sacred books of other religions). Nevertheless, whatever great things may be found in these books, it is not going to be useful to us. Will sugar be sweet, if we write 'sugar' on a paper and lick it? Muslim religion is a national religion. Besides it is an egalitarian religion i.e. in Muslim religion there is no division by birth as high and low. Setting aside the difference between rich and poor learned and illiterate, weak and strong it gives equal rights to all.... It can redeem the Chandalas. The people rejected by us as Chandalas have found refuge in the Muslim religion and are given all the rights.....

Today in our country, if six and a half crore untouchables convert to Islam, I can say forcefully that the next day itself the government needed for the good of India will come into being....Muslims cannot think in terms of getting out of India or get rid of the Hindus from India. Both have to exist in this country.....For the good of the nation the Muslims must also have to cooperate with the Hindus: I think that the several drawbacks among the Hindus will cease to exist shortly. Then, there will not be much difference between the Hindus and Muslims....²⁵

During this time at Seeliyampatti in southern Tamilnadu, the untouchables unable to tolerate high-caste Hindu oppressions, converted to Islam. E.V. Ramasamy and the Self-respect movement welcomed these conversions.²⁶ The Kudiarasu also held that E.V. Ramasamy was asking the untouchable Hindus to convert to Islam not just because they can worship Allasami (Allah) or go to heaven, but to abolish untouchability and achieve equality.²⁷ E.V. Ramasamy considered Islam as the best antidote to counter the caste feeling and even wondered if there was any better antipode than this.²⁸ In its editorial of 6 February 1938, Kudiarasu held the following: "For the past 20 years, we have been asking the Adi Dravidas (untouchables) to become Muslims. We are not interested in their (Muslims) notions of heaven or reward.....But for the Adi Dravidas to become human, to get self-respect, to be free from the oppression of the Hindus and the cowardice of the Christians, there is only one way for the Adi dravidas, i.e. to free themselves from Hinduism and Christianity and become Muslims."²⁹

On 20 June 1943, declared as the Untouchability Destruction Day in Madras, E.V. Ramasamy spoke of the necessity for the low caste and untouchable Hindus like the Tiyas, Pulayas and Nayadis to convert to Islam, he did not mean Islam's God or Prophet or Quran, but its capacity to confer dignity on the untouchables and low-caste people.³⁰

From the preceding, it becomes quite clear that E.V. Ramasamy and his movement were actually utilizing Islam as the most effective weapon in their armory to destroy or at least weaken the hereditary Hindu caste system and the hold of Brahminism to reform the Hindu society. The call for the conversions of low caste and untouchable Hindus to Islam was considered by E.V. Ramasamy and his movement as the most effective method to shake Hinduism's aastika traditions and uproot it, if possible. E.V. Ramasamy, though, had grave doubts about the possibility of reforming Hinduism at all, unlike Islam. He wanted to destroy Hinduism completely and held that it was foolish to think that it was being reformed.³¹

While E.V. Ramasamy tried to undo Hinduism, he and his movement, directly or indirectly, also lent a helping hand to the Muslim reformists, rationalists, and modernists, such as Dawood Sha, to reform Muslim society along Islamic lines. But it would be incorrect to maintain that Dawood Sha's reformist zeal was inspired by E.V. Ramasamy. His reformist tendencies appear to have started during the second decade of the twentieth century, i.e., before E.V. Ramasamy left the congress and founded the Self-respect movement in 1925.³²

It should be noted that until 1938, Dawood Sha was a staunch Congressman and leader and was even the president of the Madras District Congress Committee. He regularly spoke in meetings in favour of congress policies. He even declared that the national song Vande Mataram was not against Islam, at a time when many Muslims in the Madras Assembly and outside were opposed to it.³³ This was at a time when many Muslim papers such as Saiphul Islam, favourable to the Muslim League, wrote against reciting Vande Mataram on the grounds that it was shirk, i.e., against Islam.³⁴

Dawood Sha was such a staunch supporter of the Congress until 1938 that Muslims in some places in Tamilnadu even decided to boycott his paper, Dar-ul-Islam and support papers such as Saiphul Islam, Viduthalai and Uthaya Suriyan which were considered to be favourable to Muslims and the Muslim League.³⁵ Even an Urdu-speaking Muslim leader, Abdul Hameed Khan publicly asked Muslims to support Saiphul Islam and also Viduthalai.³⁶ The self-respecters referred to Dawood Sha as 'Ramayana Sahib', for being in the Congress and giving lectures on the Ramayana and Mahabharata like the Brahmins.³⁷

But on 1 January 1939, Dawood Sha did a volte-face. He joined the Muslim League and accused the Congress of ill-treating and cheating the Muslims. In the same year, he came out in favour of the development of Urdu or Hindustani as the language of the Muslims.³⁸ Dawood Sha was known to one and all as a Tamil scholar. He had always campaigned for the development of Tamil among the Muslims, including the moulvis of Tamilnadu. But suddenly in 1939, he switched over to the Muslim League from the Congress and even extended his support to the separatist Pakistan demand of Mohammed Ali Jinnah and the All India Muslim League. Now as a Muslim League, Dawood Sha, like P. Khalifullah of Tiruchirappalli and other prominent south Indian members of the Muslim League, did not oppose Urdu or Hindustani, though like them, he agitated against the introduction or Sanskritised Hindi into the south by joining hands with E.V. Ramasamy-for Ramasamy, though, Urdu, Hindi, or Hindustani, were of the same north Indian Aryan extraction, and were seen as the enemies of Tamil.³⁹ Naturally, people such as Dawood Sha and Khalifullah seem to have been obliged to pay at least lip service to Urdu in order to be in line with the policies of the All India Muslim League, which was dominated by Urdu-speakers, and to be in the good books of north Indian (Urdu-speaking) Muslim leaders.⁴⁰ So it would not be incorrect to conclude that the support extended by some Tamil Muslim leaders to Urdu during this period was not out of any genuine love for it.

Further, Dawood Sha held that the interests of the minorities could not be safeguarded, without supporting the Pakistan scheme.⁴¹ Following Jinnah and the All India Muslim League, he, like most of the Leaguers, distanced himself from the separate Dravidanadu or Dravidasthan demand of E.V. Ramasamy, inspite of the latter's consistent support to the creation of Pakistan and to the conversion of untouchables to Islam.⁴² This was to have serious consequences between the self-respecters and the Muslims of Tamilnadu especially after independence.

It should also be noted that though E.V. Ramasamy attacked Hinduism in the most uncompromising terms, certainly much more than any other social reformer of India hitherto, and praised Islam and even asked the untouchables to convert to Islam for their deliverance, yet he himself never became a Muslim or disowned his Hinduness completely. When he was asked why he did not join Islam, his answer was: '...I consider myself as belonging to Islam as far as its philosophy of Oneness is concerned...'⁴³ Later he said, I will destroy the Hindu religion by remaining in it. If I change my religion, I will lose the right to reform it and save the people who are caught in it...'⁴⁴

It is interesting to note at this juncture, that when a few Muslim youth, who were highly influenced by the Self-respect movement, apprised E.V. Ramasamy of their intention to leave Islam, the latter had advised them against it. Instead, he had asked them to indulge in social reform activities like Mustapha Kemal Pasha and get rid of all superstitions in Islam. He even suggested that they work for the removal of the Muslim priestly class by establishing an anti-purohit sangam. It was his opinion that Mustapha Kemal Pasha would never have been able to reform Turkish Muslims if he had chosen to abandon Islam.⁴⁵ It would then seem that E.V. Ramasamy was simply following the line of Mustapha Kemal Pasha by choosing to remain in Hinduism in order to reform it and asking the Muslims also to do the same. But, many Muslims appear to have been expecting E.V. Ramasamy to convert to Islam during this period. Sultan Bagdhadi Sahib, a local Muslim leader from Ramnad, where conversions to Islam were taking place, refuted the allegation that E.V. Ramasamy was an atheist or was insincere when he advised the untouchables to convert to Islam. He said that E.V. Ramasamy was at heart a Muslim and he had not adopted the Muslim faith because he wished to inspire conviction among the untouchables by remaining within the Hindu fold.⁴⁶ Such a posture seems to have been adopted by certain Muslim leaders, who were sympathetic to the self-respect movement, in order to ward off the criticisms of certain Congress Muslim leaders, such as the staunch nationalist Haji Mohammed Moulana Sahib of Madura and K.M. Sheriff, Tamil Muslim member of the All India Congress Committee.⁴⁷

It is highly improbable that the propaganda of E.V. Ramasamy and his movement, in favour of reforming Hindu and Muslim societies, would have achieved the popularity and the success that it really achieved in south India without the print media. It would not be an exaggeration to say that print technology and culture had directly contributed not only to the acceleration of the pace of reforms in Hindu and Muslim societies, but also to the coming together of the Self-respecters (who never disowned their Hinduness) and a sizeable section of the Tamil Muslims.

END NOTES:-

1. Kudiarasu, 15 July 1947.
2. Ibid., 24 August 1930.
3. Ibid., 6 February 1938.
4. Ibid., 30 April 1939; 21 June 1947.
5. Mail, 18 April 1940.
6. Kudiarasu, 26 November 1933; 25 March 1934.
7. Ibid., 28 January 1934; 26 November 1933.
8. Ibid., 29 April 1934.
9. Ibid., 17 September 1933.
10. Ibid., 31 December 1933.
11. Under Secretary Safe File No. 896, Government of Madras, Madras, 22 June 1943.
12. Kudiarasu, 27 October 1929.
13. Ibid., 3 March 1929.
14. Ibid., 14 October 1928
15. Viduthalai, 29 November 1947.
16. Kudiarasu, 14 October 1928.
17. Ibid., 3 March 1929.
18. Dravidan, 5 August 1929.
19. Kudiarasu, 24 February 1935.
20. Ibid., 19 April 1931.



21. Ibid., 12 January 1936.
22. Swadesamitran, 11 June 1936.
23. Madras Mail., 25 October 1935.
24. Ibid., 2 September 1936.
25. Kudiarasu, 25 August 1939.
26. Ibid., 20 October 1929.
27. Ibid., 2 February 1936.
28. Ibid., 12 March 1947.
29. Ibid., 6 February 1938.
30. Viduthalai, 26 June 1943.
31. Kudiarasu, 12 March 1947.
32. Viduthalai, 26 September 1943.
33. Ibid., 24 November 1937.
34. Saiphul Islam, 4 August 1937.
35. Ibid., 15 November 1937.
36. Kudiarasu, 26 June 1938.
37. Viduthalai, 4 April 1947.
38. Madras Mail, 24 January 1939.
39. Swadesamitran, 17 April 1937.
40. Kudiarasu, 16 June 1940.
41. Mail, 16 April 1941.
42. Ibid.
43. Kudiarasu, 10 July 1947.
44. Ibid.
45. Kudiarasu, 15 February 1931.
46. Madras Mail, 10 January 1939.
47. Ibid., 14 April 1938.