

RETTAIMALAI SRINIVASAN (1859-1945) – A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Introduction

R.Srinivasan played an important role in the socio, economic, political and educational developments of the Untouchable section of the people in Tamil Nadu and in India at large. In the prevailing pyramidal social structure, in the name of caste and Untouchability in particular, the low castes were oppressed, suppressed and Depressed to the level of sub-human beings by their co-religionists. They were denied their freedom of movement and the right to walk on the public paths or highways, to take water from the public wells and tanks and to enter into Hindu–Temples though they were Hindus. Consequently they lost their self-survival due to the hatred and animosities prevailed in the society. To get redressed these social affronts, birth of a leader among the oppressed section of the society became a need of the hour.

R.Srinivasan was born on July 7th 1859 at Kozhiyalam Village, Chengalput district (Present Kanchipuram District) to an ordinary labourer named Rettaimalai. Hence Srinivasan was known as “Rettaimalai Srinivasan”. He hailed from an untouchable family, and blessed with the life up to the age of eighty-six. He had his education at the Government Arts College in Coimbatore. Then he served as an Accountant in the English East India Company in Nilgiris. In 1887 at the age of 28, he got married to Aranganayaki and had six children. His

wife was mainly responsible for his services to his fellowmen. She was a kind and social minded woman which made R.Srinivasan to carry on his mission successfully.

He lost his wife in 1928 when she was 60 years old. It is said that R.Srinivasan's family belonged to the Sambava Community an Untouchable sect and they hailed from Thanjavur and came to Chennai to serve in the English East India Company. When he was young, caste system in the society was very rigid. He always felt inferior to reveal his caste and family. Hence he always stayed away from his classmates except in the class hours. He was greatly dejected, as he could not play with his friends who belonged to higher castes. He used to sit down in nook and corners with deep thinking of remedying this evil practice of Untouchability. He decided himself and believed that he would wipe out this social devil from the Indian Society.

Rettaimalai Srinivasan was related to Pandit C. Ayyothi Doss. He was his brother-in-law. Pandit C. Ayyothi Doss was one of the prominent leaders of the Depressed Classes of late 19th and early 20th century. Pandit C. Ayyothi Doss was associated with Olcott. He was a Journalist, Buddhist, Social worker and one of the founders of "Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha". His works are now available in book form in Tamil as "C. Ayyothi Doss Cinthanaigal." (Thoughts of C. Ayyothi Doss).

In 1890 he came to Chennai and settled down with his family. He started his Civil Rights Agitations against the social disabilities and fought for their equal rights as they were enjoyed by the caste Hindus that ought to be given to the Untouchables. He also wanted to give them a respectable position in all social and political affairs.

Then he travelled all over South India, stayed with the Untouchables in order to gain much more firsthand information about the living condition of these people. He learnt that the

people were suffering from want of clean water, proper housing facilities and were worst subject to ill treatments due to their low caste. This moved Srinivasan very much and he decided to do something concrete to remove their disabilities.

Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha

The aim and object of his life was to uplift the downtrodden Community, in order to high -light the grievances of his Community he started “Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha” in 1891 and it had branches all over Tamil Nadu. This sabha was later renamed as, ‘Adi-Dravida Mahajan Saba’. The enlightened leaders of both Untouchables and caste Hindus were invited to the sabha, and seminars, debates and deliberations were conducted for the cause of eradication of Untouchability and to find out the ways and means to bury it in the Hindu Society. Further more in 1893 he started a weekly magazine called “Paraiyan.” He started this magazine with an investment of Rs.10/- only and this money was also borrowed from a Malayalee who was his best friend. He encountered violent criticisms for this magazine; in spite of the criticisms, he carried on this work for six years. This magazine consisted of four pages and it also received wide support from the Paraiyan Community. His magazine was devoted completely for the issues of the Depressed Classes and for the inculcation of strict discipline among them. In 1895 the Depressed Classes took a big procession accompanied by a musical band to the Madras Victoria Public Hall as part of the meeting organized by them under the leadership of R. Srinivasan. His magazine encountered a threat from the Congress Party and the caste Hindus. He was put to difficulties; but he stood firm. In 1896 he was summoned to the court for publishing a false information written by a reporter. He was fined a sum of Rs.100/- and it was paid by his fellowmen who came to the court shouting the word ‘Paraiyan’ and the same written on their chests and with cash in their pockets. The Depressed

Classes, during this period expressed their views openly and progressed because of his revolutionary journal “Paraiyan”.

Srinivasan decided to go to London to focussed the conditions of the Untouchables in India and to work out the ways and means to uplift them. While he was on voyage to London he was recalled by his father and brother but he refused to return and continued his trip to London. He determined not to return to India until he succeeded in his mission. Unfortunately instead of going to London his trip was diverted to Jhansipar, in North Africa and he stayed there for some time and there he found an employment to earn money and to proceed further to London. Again he was diverted to South Africa due to his ill health. There he found an employment as a clerk in Judicial Court for two years. In the court M.K. Gandhi was engaged as a lawyer and R. Srinivasan acted as his translator Gandhi had developed a close contact with him and taught Tamil to understand the greatness of Tirukkural.

Awards and Titles

However, in 1921 he changed his travel plan towards England and returned back to India and in 1923 he was nominated as member of the Madras Legislative council, as a representative of the Depressed classes on the basis of separate representation for the Adi-Dravidas. This became a reality an account of the Montague Chelmsford Act of 1919 which was implemented in 1921. By the provision of this Act from 1923 to 1935, he was nominated member of the above council. From the above period onwards he strove for the upliftment of the Depressed classes and also occupied an important in the Justice party. As a legislator he secured several amenities and educational facilities for the depressed classes, as a reward for these service he was rewarded with Awards and titles. He was honoured and Conferred with the following titles.

- Rao Sahib in 1926
- Rao Bahaur in 1930
- Diwam Bahadur in 1936 and
- Dravidamani in 1937

In 1924 on the request of his wife he brought about a resolution in the law Committee stating that the Depressed Classes should be allowed to use the public roads, wells, public places, resorts, buildings etc. The resolution came into force in 1925. Thus Srinivasan worked for more than 45 Years for the upliftment of the Depressed Class people with great vigour and courage. He expected no fruits of popularity for his untiring service rendered to the people; This made them to hail him as a great leader and was affectionately called by his people “Grand Father” and in Tamil “Thatha Rettainmalai Srinivasan”. It is interesting to note that Srinivasan was equally respected by the leaders and workers of other communities, for he never took any part in any communal riots. In recognition of his services Srinivasan was awarded the title “Rao Sahib” on 20th February 1926 in the presence of Commissioner R.C. Sitaramaiyar. He started the “Scheduled Castes, Educational Society” and the “Madras State Scheduled Castes Federation” in 1938. The latter organisation was popularly known as “The Scheduled caste Federation”.

The Untouchables of South India deputed him as their representative to the Round Table Conference. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was another member of Depressed Classes in the Round Table Conference. Both of them did their might to ventilate the feelings of sufferings, and hardships of the Depressed Classes, in the Round Table Conference. After a few years of his Depressed Classes, in the Round Table Conference. After a few years of his return from the Great Britain, in 1936, the Viceroy of India, by the orders of the Home Department based

on his recommendation, awarded the title “Diwan Bahadur” to him, when C. Rajagopalachari was the Chief Minister of Madras Presidency (1937-1939). The Tamil Scholar, and nationalist the ‘Tamil Thendral’ Thiru. Vi. Kalyana Sundaranar affectionately gave the title ‘Dravidamani’ to him. It was a greatest recognition due to the immeasurable values of Rettaimalai Srinivasan.

During 1930 – 1931 in the first session of the Round Table conference was held in London for discussion, the constitutional feature of India. R. Srinivasan as a representation of the Depressed classes did his might to safeguard and interest of his community. His role in the Round Table conference and Poona-Pact are the monuments in the history of the amelioration of the untouchables, and was a mark of his self-less services to the downtrodden community. During the course of the Second World War, in November 11th 1939 he declared that he was ready to sacrifice his life to save the British Government. In 1940 he attended a Depressed Class Conference in which he openly declared that only the British rule could provide anything good for his people.

His service was an unselfish one, coupled with love and service for the amelioration of the Depressed Classes for more than 45 years. The Depressed Classes have by constitutional guarantees, have secured reservation for their representation and today they by didn't of constitutional safeguard able to have their representatives in Assembly, legislative council and local bodies etc. All this achievements are due to the great services rendered by their leaders, supporters, sympathesis etc. Their guidance direction and agitations helpful them the society achieve the above representation the role of R. Srinivasan under the focus of the study had made a great amount of contribution by his efforts to this cause with other leaders.

R. Srinivasan was one such leader who raised to the needs of the society with leadership qualities. He was the first western educated graduate among the Untouchable most brilliant of a tongue and a master of pen. He developed intimacy and close contact with his society through two instruments (1) 'Paraiyan' the Newspaper and (2) 'Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha' that voiced problem of the downtrodden. They gave the real picture of the Untouchables by depicting and highlighting the situation of their sufferings, both the Government and public. This line of activity began to yield to his demands. These Civil Rights achieved by Srinivasan in 1925 were further constitutionalised in favour of the Depressed Classes because of the continuous struggles of the leaders who followed his footsteps; and in course of time, the Depressed Class people achieved their goals in all walks of life. Hence, he is rightly called as the "Champion of Civil Rights" or The 'Morning star of the Depressed Classes Movement in Tamil Nadu'. His achievements are the 'Corner Stones of Liberty' and it is also, so inscribed, on the tomb of his wife Aranga Nayaki.

Rettaimalai Srinivasan a real patriot, had been breathing for the under privileged people and as a consequence breathed his last in 1945 at the age of 85, after 45 years of yeoman service to them. He was a firm believer in the principle of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes he supported Separate electorates for the Adi-Dravidas. It is not possible to state definitely whether he took part in the Non-cooperation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi. This movement was opposed by Dr. Annie Besant, the leader of Theosophical society. Through he was a strong supporter of Separate Electorate and later supported the Poona Pact which he considered detrimental to Untouchables. However they were boons for proper education and job opportunity, political representation and self respect

R.Srinivasan was a valiant champion of the cause of the Adi-Dravidas. As early as in 1891, he organized the 'Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha' for safeguarding the claims of the so

called Untouchables. The credit for starting a separate news paper for the benefits of the Depressed Classes goes to R.Srinivasan. The News Paper called the 'Paraiyan', which refers to the name assigned to the Untouchables, was started by him and through this News Paper he wanted to educate the Adi-Dravidas and to spread among them social and political consciousness. The social evil of Untouchability touched his heart; he regarded it as a social cancer, which was eating the very vitals of the Hindu-society. He described the Adi-Dravidas as a section of the Hindu minority who had been for ages exploited and kept down by the Caste Hindus without rendering proper economic, social and religious equality. He felt strongly that the Adi-Dravidas who were at the bottom of the social ladder could come up only through the good support through the medium of his newspaper, his fellow caste-men. He also pleaded with the caste Hindu leaders that it was their duty to encourage and help the unfortunate brethren to acquire and to seek Government services. Even as early as in 1895, he led the first deputation of the Adi-dravidas to wait on the Viceroy of India and apprised the Government of India of the deplorable economic and social disabilities of the Depressed Classes. After his departure to South Africa the News Paper 'Paraiyan' was stopped.

Conclusion

The life and mission of Rettaimalai Srinivasan achieved great success for his community in enabling them to enjoy Civil Rights and the basic rights of the humanity. This he was able to achieve because of his family background leadership quality, support of public opinion, and political culture etc. Undergoing a great struggle in his life he achieved this, much before the declaration of Human Rights in 1945. Later these are incorporated in the Indian Constitution. However this success faces hindrance in practice and execution. A glaring example is not permitting the elected Panchayat presidents in certain Panchayats of Tamil Nadu to carry out their duties and thereby a number of cases remain field against the

practice of Untouchability. The vision and mission of Rettaimalai Srinivasan has been to achieve success as far as in securing the equal rights through the legislative process and in incorporating it as law in the statute books.

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