

RE-READING ON DEWAN BAHADUR RETTAMALAI SRINIVASAN A LIBERATOR OF DALITS**Mr. P. Prabakaran**

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Abstract**Early Life**

In the early years of the 20th Century among social reformers in the Madras city Rettamalai Srinivasan was one of greatest Scheduled Caste leader. Srinivasan was born on 7th July 1859 at village Kozhialam in Madhauranthagam Taluka, Chengalpet district in Tamilnadu. His family was a farmer family; his father Rettamalai was a poor Adi Dravida. Srinivasan had a keen interest in painting; hence he took advanced training at Coimbatore and became well versed in arts and painting. In 1888, he married Aranganayagi who was chosen as bride by his parents. His sister was given in marriage to Pandit Iyothee thass. In 1890, Srinivasan moved to Madras. It was during this time that he became much concerned about the evils of Untouchability he faced as a student. After coming to Chennai in 1890, he did a lot of research, for almost three years, on how to uplift the depressed classes in the President. He went around all the northern districts and delta areas and found how this class of people was denied equal rights like access to common property, resources and public spaces and if demanded, they were attacked violently. He learnt that the people were suffering for want of clean water, proper housing facilities and were subjected to ill treatment at the hands of Caste Hindus. This moved Srinivasan very much and he decided to do something to remove their disabilities.¹ Rettamalai Srinivasan was one of greatest Scheduled Caste leader. He worked for their welfare. **on 18th September 1945, he passed away.**²

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Theosophical society

In the beginning he had connections with Theosophical society. This helped him very much when he started work for the betterment of his people from 1884. For three years, he vigorously explored the possibilities of uplifting the so called Paraiyars and creating a dignity for them on equal terms with other castes. During the early days of his political career in the Nilgiris, Rettamalai Srinivasan closely worked with the Theosophical Society and Henry Steele Olcott.

Undertook Extensive Tour

He undertook extensive tour of the Madras Presidency visiting Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Tiruvarur, Tanjore and Trichy the temple cities which stand as symbols of the traditional culture of the Tamils. These were not logically correct and it was the selfishness of certain upper castes people who denied the fundamental right and liberty of the Untouchables. But due to the impact of the western education Untouchables were awoken and began to demand the temple entry.

Temple Entry

The first temple entry agitation was started in Kerala which was supported by the Indian National Congress. Moreover, Gandhiji glorified the Untouchables as 'Harijans' and advocated for their right to enter into temples. One of the clauses of the Poona-Pact was the "Temple-Entry of Harijans". So, the Temple-Entry movement was started by the Government itself and the Temple-Entry Bill was introduced during the Justice Party Government in the Madras Presidency. On 1st November, 1932 P. Subbarayan, the First Minister of Madras Presidency introduced his Bill called, Temple Entry Disabilities Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to secure an amendment of the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926. The resolution read as follows: "The Council recommended to the Government that they might be pleased to recognize the strong and growing public feeling in the Hindu Community that the disabilities either to be imposed by usage on certain classes of the Community in regard to social intercourse and common worship at temples should be removed and justice rendered to them".³ Dr. P. Subbarayan, further requested the members of the Council that section 40 of the Hindu-Religious Endowment Act should be amended or repealed to facilitate the Depressed Classes to enter into temples. Otherwise they should not be included among the Hindus.

Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha and his Association

He was particular in inculcating civic behaviour and cleanliness among his people. From 1892, he associated himself with the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha.

Started a Newspaper

In 1892, he started a newspaper Paraiyan to highlight the sufferings of his Dalits. There he suggested ways and means for their amelioration and fought for his people.

First Scheduled Castes Conference 1893

In 1893, he organized a Scheduled Castes Conference at Wesley High school at Royyapettah. In the conference in his dashing speech, he declared his open war on Untouchability, caste system and religious *myths*.

Second Scheduled Castes Conference 1895

On 7th October 1895 at Victoria Hall in Madras, he had organized second conference of Dalits. Srinivasan not only focused on the problems of Dalits but also suggested the ways and means for their amelioration.

Upliftment of the depressed class through the Justice Party

In 1922 he represented the scheduled Castes in the assembly. He strove for the upliftment of the depressed classes. He also occupied an important post in the Justice Party. In 1924, on the request of his wife, he brought about a resolution in the Law Committee of the Council that the depressed classes could use the public, roads, wells, public places, resorts and buildings etc. since 1925, the resolution came into force. Thus, Srinivasan worked for more the 45 years for the upliftment of the depressed class, with great vigor and courage. He expected no profit or popularity for his untiring service he had done to the people and he was revered as a great leader.

Along with Dr. Ambedkar in Round Table Conference 1931

In 1925 he wrote a book in *Tamil Alaya Pravesam* wherein he chalked out a programme for scheduled castes elevation. Along with Dr. Ambedkar he represented the Scheduled Castes in the Round Table Conference. Round Table Conference was a landmark event in Indian National Movement. Every important political party, organization and community was given a chance to represent at round Table Conference. Along with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mr. Srinivasan became successful in convincing the Prime Minister of England and other members of Parliament of the issue of separate electorate for Dalits. Such was the stand of Rettaimalai Srinivasan also. The Caste Hindus treated their Untouchable brothers in less than dogs and pigs still he loved his country and wanted a Poorna Swaraj. With this life mission he participated in the Round Tale Conference and succeeded in getting the separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. But it was snatched by Gandhiji by his epic fast in September, 1932.

His Role in Poona Pact in 1932

He was one of the signatories of the Poona Pact in 1932. But in India Mahatma Gandhi opposed it and undertook a fast to death, which resulted in Poona pact. R. Srinivasan was one of the signatories of Poona pact in 1932. One of the clauses of the Poona-Pact was the "Temple-Entry of Harijans". As result the Poona-Pact was signed by the Caste-Hindu leaders and the leaders of Depressed Classes including Srinivasan. After the Pact a new and vigorous trend was injected in the 'Temple Entry Movement'. On 25th September, 1932 the representatives of caste Hindus were

held a Conference at Bombay and in that Conference a resolution of significance was passed unanimously, stating that the Depressed Classes should be admitted in to temples; all the caste Hindus were using roads and other public institutions, without any discrimination, this right should be given to the Depressed Classes as their statutory right. It should also be made a law in the Swaraj Parliament.⁴

Thus, the Poona-Pact and the Bombay Conference gave impetus in the Temple-Entry Movement in the country. Public opinion was also in favour of temple entry. But Zamorin of Calicut, who was the Trustee of the Guruvayur temple, refused to open the temple to the Untouchables; Because, section 40 of the madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act, which compelled the trustees to maintain existing usages, stood in his way of the throwing open the temple to the excluded classes even though the majority of worshippers of Guruvayur temple were in favour of temple entry for Untouchables. The caste-Hindus must always be indebted to them because of their magnanimity of having signed in the Poona-Pact to save the life of the greatest man of the country. To pay back their gratitude they must recognize the right of the Depressed Classes.⁵

Convened a meeting 1939

In 1939, when the Second World War broke out, R. Srinivasan convened a meeting of the Scheduled Castes and requested them to lend their support to the British. On 11th November 1939, he declared that he was ready to sacrifice his life in the Second world War to save the British government.

Attended a Depressed Class Conference

In 1940, he attended a Depressed Class Conference in which he openly declared that only the British Rule could provide good for his people.

Scheduled Castes Federation

He also served as the President of Scheduled Castes Federation Madras.

Madras Provincial Depressed Classes Federation

He also served as the President of Madras Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation.⁶

Started Paraiya Mahajana Sabha 1891

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 “Paraiya Mahajana Sabha” in 1891 and it had branches all over Tamil Nadu.⁷

His Role in South Africa

From 1904 to 1920 Srinivasan worked as a translator in the court at South Africa. He had witnessed the racial discrimination against the blacks by white. During those days, he was acquainted with Mahatma Gandhi, who was an advocate for the Indian merchants in South Africa.⁸ Sriniasan was back in India in 1920. His exposure in South Africa and Gandhiji has given him a new outlook. With new strength and zenith again he associated himself to the cause of Dalits.

His Role Madras Legislative Council 1923

In 1923 Srinivasan was nominated to the Madras Legislative Council as a representative of the Depressed Classes. From 1920 to 1935 he was a member of the Legislature. It was a unique opportunity for him to do justice with his community. He left no stone unturned in securing amenities and educational facilities for the depressed classes.

Honour of Dewan Bahadur

In 1935, when Srinivasan drifted away from Dr. Ambedkar on the issue of conversion and remained aloof from Dalit movement till his death in September 1945.⁹

His Role in the Temple Entry Movement

The Bhakti Movement in Tamilnadu had brought Bhakti and Wisdom but failed to bring a total Communal harmony. SriRamanuja renamed the Untouchables as “Thirukulathar” and took them into temples. But he did not advocate the abolition of caste system and Untouchability, but only spoke equality of opportunity in the presence of the divine.¹⁰ The Total effect of the ‘Religious Movement’ was the increased number of temples and methods of worships. The growth of numerous temples and *maths* socially strengthened the caste divisions and Untouchability in Tamil Nadu. Whenever the social reformers wanted common worship in the temples, the trustees, priests and heads of *Maths* used to quote the rites of ‘Agamas’ and denied the entry of certain castes of people into the temples. Some of the Vedic Brahmanas used to quote some Sashtras, Puranas and such scriptures to deny the entry of all castes into temples. It was also believed that Untouchables were not clean and ate cow’s flesh which was the cause for their non-admittance into the temples. These were not logically correct and it was the selfishness of certain upper castes people who denied the fundamental right and liberty of the Untouchables. But due to the impact of the western education Untouchables were awoken and began to demand the temple entry. The first temple entry agitation was started in Kerala which was supported by the Indian National Congress. Moreover, Gandhiji glorified the Untouchables as ‘Harijans’ and advocated for their right to enter into temples. So, the Temples-Entry movement was started by the Government itself and the Temple-Entry Bill was introduced during the Justice Party Government in the Madras Presidency. During 1935-39 there were 11,625 major temples and 11,569 minor temples under the jurisdiction of the Hindu Religious Endowments Board.¹¹

The Depressed Classes were not allowed to enter the temples and *maths*. The *Shanars* or *Nadars* who were also Untouchables were not allowed to enter and worship in the Hindu-Temples. Their main profession was toddy-trapping which was considered as one of the *Panchama Pathagas* (five sins). The *Nadars* of Kamudhi in Ramnad District were not permitted to enter into the local temple, they moved up to the Apex court (Privy Council) in London. The Privy Council gave its final judgement as follow:-

- (i) Custom observed in the temple shall be the only test;
- (ii) The Trustee has no power to alter such custom;
- (iii) If the Trustee alters or departs from such custom he will be removed from office;

Indian Penal Code

Further, section 295 of Indian Penal Code considered that the entry of an Untouchable in to temple was defilement. This section also enforced to those Untouchables who enter into temples should be punished for two years imprisonment or with fine or with both. However, the Congress was very keen in removing the disabilities of the Untouchables. M.R. Jayakar, a member of the Central Legislative Assembly wanted to introduce a Bill to remove these obstacles, particularly the obstacle created by the Indian Penal Code. He said, that the Depressed Classes were the Hindus and they have got every right to enter into Hindu temples. Though Lord Irwin in 1929 and Lord Willington in 1931 gave previous sanction, the Bill was allowed.

Salt-Satyagraha “Dandi March” of Gandhiji

Ten days before the salt-satyagraha “Dandi March” of Gandhiji, Dr. Ambedkar launched his “Temple Entry Agitation at Nasik on Sunday March 31, 1930. Ambedkar said, that Depressed Class people are Hindus and the temple at Nasik (Kala Raman temple) is a Hindu temple. The Depressed Class people are having every right to enter into the temple. It is the Civil Rights of the Depressed Classes. They started agitation of temple entry not to seek justice from the God in the temple. They are all the sons of the soil and to move to anywhere is their birth right. Hence, they started to regain their right. There were 1,500 volunteers in the agitation and they were divided into ten groups at the rate of 150 volunteers in a group. And each group waited at the doors of the temple which were already closed by the temple trustees. They were waiting at the doors and singing the holy songs of Sri Rama! But unfortunately, the Hindu social-leaders never yielded to his plea. Instead they indicated the people against the Depressed Class Satyagrahis. Hence, they attacked them brutally. Ambedkar was also wounded by stone throwing. One of the volunteers was dead. Despite, this temple entry agitation had been continued for five years. Even then, Ambedkar said, “It is only in Swaraj Constitution, that you stand any chance of getting political power in your own hands without which you cannot bring salvation to our people. I am sure you will accept Swaraj as our goal”.¹² Such is the patriotism of Dr. Ambedkar!

Temple Entry Disabilities Bill

All the members supported the Bill but outside the Council there was wide spread opposition from the orthodox Hindu sections of the Community.¹³ Meetings of Protest by the Caste-Hindus were held all over the Madras Presidency and they agitated for the Government interference in the religious matters. The Madras Advocate’s Association and, Puri Sankarachariya objected the Act of the legislature and said, that the majority had no right to coerce the minority.¹⁴ Varnashrama Suvarajya Sangam in its memorandum stated that the Legislative council had no mandate from the electorate to pass a law of encroaching the religious freedom and there was no connection between temple entry and the upliftment of the Subaltern People.¹⁵ Kammalas and Kaikkolas who wanted their castes should be included in the list of Depressed Classes for concessions, now protested against this legislation.¹⁶ When the Bill was introduced the members of the Depressed Classes participated in the debates but in their heart of hearts they were not much interested in the subject. N. Sivaraj had proclaimed. “I do not think that the question of temple entry will be finally

solved Depressed Classes problems even as regards the Non-Brahmins are concerned.¹⁷ R. Srinivasan described the Bill that it was a very modest one because, the Depressed Classes were the original owners of the ancient temples and they did not want restoration of temples but only the right to enter in to the those temples. He cited some examples such as the Jambukesawara temple is the holy site where the Sambuva Samban was cremated. Where the Thangam of Thyaga Samban was cremated and whose (Thyagan) daughter, the Cholaraja married and the temple is now called as Thyagaraja Perumal temple.

When the Marathas, and Telugu invaders came to south, they destroyed the forts of Samban and took possession of these temples and drove the Sambans out of them.¹⁸ Again, in Tanjore of Mariamman Temple was built by the very Chola Raja, Mariamman was the sister of Thiruvalluvar and it was built in honour of her virtue. Thus, hundreds of such temples owned by the Depressed Class people and when they occupied by the caste Hindus, the Depressed Classes were driven out of them.¹⁹ Some of the members referred that the Depressed Classes were unclean. If they were wretched and unclean how were able to produce so many poets, saints and sages in the past? Poverty many derive them to be unclean.

But when a Depressed Class woman wants to go and worship in a temple situated within her own locality or Cheri, even though she has got one saree, she takes particular care to wash and wear it before she goes in to the temple. When such is the case to charge them that they are in an unclean state, that is merely to deny them the opportunities, and privileges due to them, telling the fact only the caste people are dirty or unclean deplored Srinivasan. Some members said, that temple entry is not an important thing in elevating the Depressed Classes. According to the Poona-Pact, "Temple-Entry" is one of the terms it ought to be fulfilled by the caste-Hindus. Hence, Srinivasan hoped that the Temple-Entry-Resolution would be passed unanimously by the House.²⁰

Rettaimalai Srinivasan said, "Weather the God is inside the temple or not, but I am the original inhabitant of this soil and I must have the birth right or civil right to move an where and every where in my land weather it is a land or sea, road or temple".¹ P. Subbarayan is Bill of 1932 to remove the disabilities of the so called Depressed Classes in regarding the entry into Hindu Temples was not interested by some Depressed Classes. Their leader B.R. Ambedkar was not particular about the right to enter into temples but instead, he later advocated mass conversion of untouchables to Buddhism.²² While the temple entry question was discussed in the legislature, the 'Self-respect movement' in Madras was propagating the total destruction of Hindu Religion and its practices, as the only way of ending many social evils.

On 6th may 1939, "Temple Defence Day" was observed in the Parthasarathy Temple, Triplicane, Madras.²³ The Devotees digged a fire pit in front of the Temple and put fire wood, fibers and Kusa grass etc., and poured oil in the fire pit; chanting Mantras and abusing Untouchables as criminals and crying 'Save the Temple against the Untouchability' was considered as Temple Defense performance. Thus, the attempt made by P. Subbarayan, was opposed by all and it awakened the Subaltern People for Social Equality.

The foregoing paper reveals that in recognition of his services, R. Srinivasan, was awarded the

title Rao Sahib on 20th February, 1920, in the presence of Commissioner R.C. Sitaramaiyar. No wonder his people called him “Grand Father”, “*Thatha Rettaimalai Srinivasan*”. In Jan. 1936, he was awarded the title of Diwan Bahadur by the Viceroy. When Rajaji was the Chief Minister of Madras State, Thiru V. Kalyanasundaram awarded him the title of Dravida Mani. Rettaimalai Srinivasan played a major role in liberation Dalits in Tamil Nadu. British Government for his selfless services bestows the honour of Dewan Bahadur on him.

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