

Muthuramalinga Thevar – A Religious Reformer

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Among the eminent personalities of Tamilnadu, Muthuramalinga Thevar was one who was known for his multifaceted and multi-dimensional ideas and approaches to the problems of varied nature. Muthuramalinga Thevar quoted that “nationalist celestial bravery, wisdom, truth assurance are the qualities needed for a leader of the nation”. Muthuramalinga Thevar was born on 30th October 1908 at Kallupatti. The biography of Muthuramalinga Thevar is definitely an addition to the domain of historical knowledge pertaining to pre and post independent India. In all his activities Muthuramalinga Thevar proved himself as a realist and pragmatist. By virtue of his practical experience he was able to estimate the different situations in an apt way and was prepared to react according to the situations without any perturbation or provocation.

Religious Activities

Thevar was not against the Hindu religion. He had an idea to strengthen Hindu religion on the basis of spirituality. He believed in morality, equality justice, love and service to God and religion. But, Thevar did not accept the traditional Hinduism because that supported ‘**Varnashrama**’. He always fought against the evils of Hindu religion. He was inspired by Saint Ramalingar and Swami Vivekananda. Both the hermits accepted and wanted to strengthen the challenge from the west. But, at the same time they reinterpreted Hindu scriptures and threw new light and attempted to synthesise its different aspects.

Thevar condemned the religious superstitions and narrow mindedness openly. So, that the simple and open Hinduism might not be influenced by any other external religious movement. **Sati**, infanticide, **Purdha**, child marriage, untouchability, illiteracy and casteism were condemned by Socio- religious reformers. Their influences reformed both the religion and society which were infested with various evils. Thevar was not against the Hindu religion. He had an idea to strengthen Hindu religion on the basis of spirituality. He believed in morality, equality

justice, love and service to God and religion. But, Thevar did not accept the traditional Hinduism because that supported ‘**Varnashrama**’. He always fought against the evils of Hindu religion. Under the British rule a new system of government was introduced which separated the administration from religion. The separation of religion liberated the lower caste from the high caste and released them from the traditional economic system. Colonial rule loosened the seal in which the caste had been rooted for centuries.

The socio-economic order and **Varnashramadhharma** controlled by the Brahmins gradually lost its importance. The British court administered a uniform criminal law that replaced the law laid down by Manu which brought social changes. As a result the untouchability and inapproachability practiced by a section of people attained practical equality with the caste Hindus and considerable progress was found in their educational and economic conditions.

Temple entry meet

The temples in all countries and at all times have exercised great influence over the minds of the people. Under the roof of the temple architecture and art evolved creativity. The temples in the south India played an important role in the development of socio-economic conditions of the country which could be read from the inscriptions. The inscriptions in the temple record the endowments such as lands, lamps, educational institutions and individuals. The temples were real cultural institutions which helped in integrating the people into a wellknit society with hopes and aspirations.

Thevar synthesises the contemporary ideas and his unique ability to deal with the complex issues in clear coherent fashion and clearly marked his religious and social ideas from those of his days. He did not attempt to create a systematic theology but rather presented a fresh and beautifully articulated understanding of man that was to be perpetuated by acts of meditation,

worship and community service. One should not put oneself in the place of a **Brahmagnani** unless he has attained that state. Temples and rituals are not needed for a realised soul. Ordinary people should take care to see that they don't lapse into indolence by trying to question the need for temples and temple worship. *Kovil illaatha ooril kudi irukkavendam* said *Avvaiyar* (Live not in a place where there is no temple). *Aalayam thozhuvathu saalavum nandru* Temple worship is very good is another popular saying. Historical temples are noteworthy not only because of their historicity but also because many spiritually elevated souls have sung the praise of the deities in the temples, thereby invigorating the spiritual vibrations in them. There is a famous book called **Power in Temples – A modern perspective**, by Srikant. Thevar political orations were proverbial. Being a good exponent of religious information, equally well on the political platforms starting gradually he used to increase the tempo with suitable citation from ancient classics of Tamil and hypnotise his audience.

Temple Entry movement

Generally the Hindu Temples played an important role in South Indian History, culture, society and economies. Hindus are idol worshippers. So, each and every village has at least one small temple. Like this each and every caste and race has temples, There are some big temples that attracted thousands of people every day. Some were allowed to enter the temple and some were restricted from doing so. The temples acquired wealth from the kings and merchants by way of donations. Many peasants were dependant on the temple lands. The temples conduct regular **pujas**, colourful ceremonies and festivals. They maintained cattle and other animals. They patronise arts and educational institution.

The priests were affluent in the colonial society. Temples were makers and breakers of status. They even improved the economic position and social status of the priests. The discrimination of the people in the Hindu temple was condemned by Saint Ramanujar and others during the medieval period. But, the Brahmanism fostered such discriminations.

The temples play vital role in the life of Tamil people. It is generally believed by the people that they should not reside in a place, which has no temple. Due to the efforts of Pandya rulers and others many beautiful temples were constructed in Pandya country. But, it is a pity to note that a section of Hindus, who were considered as untouchables, unapproachable and useable were

denied of the privilege of entering into the temples for offering their religious prayer.

Free from Tyranny Custom:

The members of the Nadar community were also prevented from entering into the temples on the grounds that they indulge in the profession like 'toddy tapping' which was considered one of the **Panchama Pathagam**. But, the suppressed people felt that it was their duty to free themselves from the tyranny of custom masquerading in the name of religion. In 1874 Mooka Nadar tried to enter into the Meenakshi Amman Temple, in Madurai but his attempt ended in vain. The self respectors began to take up the issues and decided to put an end to these inhuman practices by securing them access to temples, public roads, tanks and wells.

Formation of Self Respect and Satyagraha

The Self respectors formed a self respect Satyagraha Committee in Thanjavur under the Secretaryship of Karaikudi R. Chinnaian to enlist activists and volunteers for launching **Satyagraha** throughout Tamil Nadu. Even though they failed in their attempts they were able to give wide publicity to these social disabilities through their newspapers **Kudiarasu** and **Justice** and they even demanded a royal proclamation to put an end to this evil. The Nadar temple entry movements held in places like Kamudhi and Ramnad were brought to the notice of the Privy Council but desired judgement was not received.

Effort of Thevar to remove discrimination in Temple:

The Hindu social Reformers became aware of the evils of the Hindu temples and tried to set rights things. But, reformers like E.V. Ramasamy Naicker went to the extent of saying that it is better to ignore Hindu temples which were the source of Hinduism. Thevar took steps to remove the discrimination shown to Harijans in the Hindu temples. Thevar clearly said that E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker's saying would lead to the damage to Hindu institutions and Hindu religion. Thevar tried to improve the Harijans' social and economic position. There was a conflict between upper caste and Harijans over the temple entry issue. Thevar tried to solve it. He rightly educated the people to believe in equality before the eyes of God and that he was always with the poor depressed, downtrodden and the backward people.

Active part of Self respecters guided by Thevar:

Meanwhile the self-respecters from different parts of Tamil Nadu took an active part in assist the low caste non-Brahmin rights to enter into the temples. In 1927 an attempt was made by some non-Brahmins to enforce the right to worship in the sanctum sanatorum of Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple, which was reserved for the Brahmins. But, they were prevented by the priests in the temple to enter into the **Arthamandapa** and the demonstrators were unable to go beyond their usual limits to which the non-Brahmins were confined. The protesters after offering prayers there itself they left the place angrily. J.N Ramanathan, an active self – respector took the lead and conducted a meeting which was attended by 2000 people, and all condemned the activities of the priests. There was great commotion in the temple. But, fortunately no breach of peace occurred. J.N. Ramanathan with a handful of self respecters continued his struggle for temple entry.

J.S Kannappar, a Justice and a self respector and an editor of **Dravidian** with his followers tried to enter into the Siva temple at Thiruvannamalai in 1927 but in vain. The priest filed a case against him and the Sub Magistrate passed the Judgment, on 30th April 1928, in his favour and fined the priest on the ground that. J. S. Kannapar and his convoy, being Hindus, had the right to enter into any Hindu temple as they did not disturb any proceedings or the purity of the temple. This victory gave encouragement to the self – respecters to put an end to hegemony of **sanatanists** in Rock Fort temple in Trichy and Ishwara temple at Erode. But, their attempts ended in complete failure and henceforth the self respecters took a decision to encounter the reactionary Brahminical forces such as boycott of temples or places of worship unitedly. They raised slogans to Cut down the expenditure that incurred in connection with religion and religious ceremonies. Thus, the negation of religion as an alternative to religious reform resorted to by the self respect movement led to the development of Rationalist movement in Tamil Nadu. Anyhow the congress continued the temple entry movement.

The Indian National Congress on the other hand treated the untouchables as a religious caste – group, whose interests had only a political bearing and hence not fundamental to national politics. In a memorandum submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission on 29th may 1928, Ambedkar said “many people in the world have fallen low by force of circumstances. But, having fallen they are free to rise. The depressed classes on the other hand formed a solitary case of people. They have

remained fallen because they were opposed to the religious notions of the majority of their countrymen”. He said that Hinduism gave no support to social unity as for as depressed classes are concerned. Hinduism and its traditional social structure is the greatest obstacle to Hindu unity. According to Ambedkar, caste was compatible with conversion. He also viewed that Hinduism is a religion of inequality, inequalities, communalism and religious intolerance. Nationalism is a two pronged strategy for India. It defies imperialism at the global level and fosters a spirit of achievement on the Indian context It should be noted here that in the early 1930’s the leadership of the temple entry movement was close to the untouchables and the participants in the controversy were mostly caste Hindus and not the depressed classes. The Congress selected men like T.S.S Rajan, M. Bhaktavatsalam, A. Vaidyanatha Iyer and others of upper class status to lead the movement. From 1924-1931 the Congress several times resolved that the removal of untouchability as an integral part of its programme.

Varnashrama Swarajya Sangam

Gandhiji appealed to the people to give up this practice and leaders like Periyar E.V.Ramasamy and. P.Subburayan, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu gave a clarion call to remove all these evils for the betterment of India. Dr. P. Subbarayan introduced a Bill in the Legislative Council of Madras in November 1932, and T.A. Ramalingum Chettiar seconded it. Majority of the members also favoured the Bill. But, orthodox Hindus condemned the activities of the Government and the members of the **Varnashrama Swarajya Sangam** appealed to the Governor and argued that the legislative council had no mandate to enact laws on this subject as it affects the basic principles of Hindus customs and traditions.

Campaign for Depressed Classes:

The Government of India concluded that the orthodox opinion was strong and moreover it did not like to intervene in the socio-religious customs of the people. Hence, sanction was refused on the ground that its implications were far reaching and hence not feasible for enactment by a provincial Legislature. Another Bill introduced by Ranga Iyer also proved to be a failure. **Tamil Nadu Servants of Untouchable’s Society** took referendum in places like Madurai, Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam, and Srirangam and the people of all these places voted in favour of temple entry. In the first election to the Madurai Meenakshi Amman

Temple Devasthanam Committee held in the year 1932, candidates belonging to the **Servants of Untouchable Society** won all the six seats. The group led by Vaidhyanatha Iyer faced serious opposition from another faction led by N. Natesa Iyer, who vehemently opposed the temple entry movement. The campaign for depressed classes appeared to be making some rapid progress. Many cases were filed against Vaidhyanatha Iyer by his opponent but ultimately Vaidhyanatha Iyer won the cases with the help of Thevar.

Harijan Seva Sangam:

In 1937 C. Rajagopalachari became the Premier of Madras and the Congress party during his Premiership passed the 'Malabar Temple entry Act' by which in 1938 the temples in Malabar were thrown open to the depressed classes. Under the inspiring leadership of Rajaji the premier of Madras, the **Harijan Seva Sangh** once again began to start Temple entry campaign under the leadership of V. Vaidyanatha Iyer in Tamil Nadu. Vaidyanatha Iyer felt that the entry of untouchables into the temple would go a long way in helping them to join the social main stream. He launched intensive propaganda campaign in many places in Tamil Nadu and advocated the programme of temple entry.

Temple Entry Conference was also held in Madurai on 13th June 1939 at Victoria Edward Hall, Madurai and it was presided over by Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru, Vice-President of all India **Harijan Seva Sangh**. The presidential address of Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru, the opening speeches of V.I. Munisamy Pillai, T.S.S. Rajan, A.Vaidhyanatha Iyer, N.M.R. Subburaman and L.N. Gopalasamy favoured temple entry movement. This conference gave fillip to the enactment of Temple Entry Legislations in Tamil Nadu.

Thevar's entry in to Meenakshi Amman Temple:

On 8th July 1939 a group of people numbering six belonging to depressed class community inclusive of one Nadar, under the President ship of Vaidyanatha Iyer and the support of Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar entered the Meenakshi Amman temple at Madurai on July 8th 1939. In the company of L.N. Gopalasamy and six of his Dalit friends P. Kakkam, Muruganandam, Chinniah, Purnalingam and Muthu. This was stringently opposed by upper – caste Hindu leaders and those seeking to presecure varnashrama Dharma.

A. Vaidhyanatha Iyer, President of the **Harijan Seva Sang** and L.N. Gopalasamy, the Sangh's secretary, made their entry into the Sri Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai. Nobody opposed the temple entry and it was really a historic occasion to see change in their attitude that occurred among the orthodox section. R.S. Naidu the Executive Officer and A. Chidambaram Mudaliar of the Meenakshi Amman Temple Devasthanam Committee also extended their support to the reform. But, the movement was not without opposition.

N. Natesa Iyer the President of the **Varanashrama Swarajya Sangh** Madurai sent a telegram addressed to the Private Secretary to his Excellency the Governor of Madras and requested him to intervene in this matter and prevent the depressed classes from entering into the temples. He also sent a telegram to Gandhiji in this regard. N. Natesa Iyer and K.R. Venkatrama Iyer were not willing to accept the reforms within the Hindu Society and they said that the Meenakshi Amman Temple was defiled, desecrated and polluted and demanded that **Samprokshanam** (Purification ceremony) be performed in the temples opened to the depressed classes. At this juncture the Government of Madras under the Premier of Rajaji came to the rescue of the Executive Officer and other persons, who welcomed the temple entry gatherings in Madurai.

Reply from the action of the reformers:

On 11th July 1939, the Madras Temple entry Authorisation and Indemnity Bill was published legitimising and indemnifying the action of the reformers. Since, the Legislature was not in session. Erskine, the Governor of Madras on the advice of Premier promulgated an ordinance on July 17,1939 validating temple entry and indemnifying all actions taken in this regard. In the first week of August the Bill was discussed in the Assembly and after much discussion the Bill was passed in the Assembly in 4th August. Then the Bill was introduced in the Legislative Council and it was passed there on 8th August and the Governor gave his assent on the 12th August and reserved it for the consideration of the Viceroy.

The Viceroy, **Lord linlithgow**, gave his assent on 4th September 1939 and it was published for general informations Act No. XXII of 1939. Accordingly, this act popularly known as the Temple entry Act, granted the civil rights of opening temple to all the sections of the people and it also stated that no person should suffer any civil or criminal penalty or disadvantage by reason of

anything done in connection with such entry and worship. As a result of this Act many temples like Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai, Kudal Alagar temple, Sri Sundaraja Perumal temple Valayampatti, Sri Brahadiswara temple, Tanjore, Sri Tirukuttalanatha Swami Temple, Courtallam, Tirunelveli District were opened. Kasi Viswanatha Swami Temple, Tenkasi was opened to the Depressed classes and it created a mile stone in the history of Tamil Nadu. The Madras Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Act 1939 was replaced by the Act of 1947 conferred the right on the excluded classes to enter the Hindu temples and offer worship on equal footing.

CONCLUSION

Muthuramalinga Thevar was a great social reformer and universalist, who always wished to uplift the weaker sections. Thevar's struggle for their cause instilled in them confidence and courage and they moved forward steadily. His contribution to the efforts of Harijan temple entry exposed his faith over equality. The avoidance of self discipline and deviating from the realities of life in the name of civilisation were treated by him as the causes for the deterioration of mankind. Only the joint efforts of culture and civilization would place the society in the path of progress. Being a self disciplined man he was able to absorb and adjudge the trends of the society of his period. He placed very important role for the upliftment of lower class people. Through his effort the people who considered as untouchables and lower class got freedom to enter into the temple. Thus Thevar was a great religious reformer and Universalist.

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