

L. Elayaperumal, a redeemer of Dalits' cultural capital



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The birth centenary of L. Elayaperumal, who was born at Kattumannarkovil near Chidambaram in Cuddalore begins on June 26. He was born on June 26, 1924. Imbued with values of self-respect and social justice right from his youth, he had served as a Member of Parliament three times since 1952 and as a Member of Legislative Assembly in 1980.

Fighting over social issues since 1945, Elayaperumal contested the first Parliamentary elections on behalf of the Congress in 1952. His speeches awash with courage and intellect earned him respect from Nehru and Lal Bahadur Sastry. So, in 1965 he was appointed as the chief of the committee set up to inquire into the educational and economic conditions of Dalits. He submitted his 431-page report in 1969 after studying the Scheduled Castes' issues during his countrywide travel. The SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 enacted by the union government and

Tamil Nadu's law on making people from all castes as temple archakas are the outcomes of the Elayaperumal committee recommendations.

Primary contribution

Elayaperumal's struggles to restore the Dalits' cultural capital can be termed as his primary political contribution. In the preface to the Census report, 1901, the following was written about the Paraiyar community living in the Madras Presidency: "The name 'Paraiyar' did not figure in the ancient Tamil literature dating back to over two thousand years ago. There were only details about the Einar tribe. They were referred to as being different from other people, not living in villages. They lived in the forts built by themselves. It is said that there were such forts at Ambur, Vellore, etc. The Einars were probably ancestors of the Paraiyar community. Going by the details about this community set forth in the 1891 census, it is known that it was a high-profile and self-reliant society."

How come that from such a sublime status the Paraiyar society had fallen down to abysmal depths? This question needs a deep analysis.

The Indian caste system had created not only the social hierarchy that divided the people into the high and the low on the basis of birth but also the cultural hierarchy. This discriminating system-imposed curbs on the Dalits who were not allowed to wear gold jewels and good garments and to build brick-and-mortar houses. Socially degraded occupations were thrust on them. The works included beating of 'parai', a percussion instrument, removal of carcasses, conduct of funeral rites etc. These works were clubbed together into a system that got so twisted as to be called Dalit culture. It was only after realizing this deception played on the miserable and hapless people that Dalit leaders fought against these degrading occupations in order to retrieve the Dalits' cultural capital.

Freedom from degradation

With the efforts of Elayaperumal, the degrading occupations including 'parai'-beating were completely eradicated in Chidambaram and Kattumannarkoil areas. He not only campaigned in those areas but also raised the issues in Parliament. "In South India, many workers are engaged in disposing of the dead cattle against their will. They are forced to beat the parai. Will all these works come under the ambit of the Minimum Wages Act?" he said, talking about the issue in Parliament.

When Dalits refused to beat parai, the casteists brought people from outside to beat the drum. On August 15, 1985 at Kurungudi near Kattumannarkoil, the native village of Elayaperumal, Dalits protested when people from outside were brought in to beat parai for the Mariamman temple festival. In the ensuing group clash, the police opened fire on Dalits. Pandian (23), a graduate Dalit youth, was shot dead and 12 Dalits were injured in the firing (The Hindu 20.08.1985).

Elayaperumal continued to lead the struggle against the beating of parai. The resolution against parai-beating was one of the six resolutions passed at the Vanniyar-Adi Dravidar unity meeting held at Tindivanam on 25.01.1991. The resolution was passed, signed by Elayaperumal and PMK founder Ramadoss. The resolution said that the Dalits should not be compelled to engage in despicable works including beating of parai, burial of carcasses of buffaloes, burning of the dead etc. and such chores should be done by the people of the respective communities. It is thanks to the unflagging struggles of Elayaperumal that the Dalits of the Chidambaram areas have been freed from doing the degrading works.

Need to sustain

In the late 1980s, Elyaperumal quit the Congress and started the Human Rights Party of India. In 1989, Thangarasu contested the

Assembly elections on behalf of the party and won the Kattumannarkoil constituency. The Human Rights Party of India, which contested the 1991 assembly elections in alliance with the AIADMK, won two seats.

But in 1996, Elyaperumal contested the elections from the Kattumannarkoil constituency and lost the seat, winning 37,159 votes. He had not since contested elections. On behalf of Tamil Nadu, he was awarded the Dr. Ambedkar Award in 1998 by the then Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi.

Elayaperumal passed away on 8.09.2005 following senility-related illnesses. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin has announced that a memorial will be set up at Chidambaram to commemorate his birth centenary year.

Elayaperumal's struggle to free Dalits from the degrading occupations and reclaim their cultural capital is yet to be completed. As done in Chidambaram and Kattumannarkoil areas, works like beating of parai that degrade Dalits must be completely eradicated all over Tamil Nadu. For the mission, the need for Elayaperumal will continue to exist.

Translated by V. Mariappan.