

## Towards the complete destruction of the old order

**Periyar E.V.R**

**Abstract:** *Periyar represents a strain of progressive social reform in world, not just Indian, history which is unique in how it blended Self-Respect for the oppressed together with a scathing irreverence for religion, the oppressor's key mechanism of control. The speech published here illustrates Periyar's clarity about the modern reality of space and how the ruling classes further the oppressive systems through the segregation and management of inhabited spaces from cities to villages. At a time when the romanticising of the 'village republic' was the message of the conservative framers of the Indian future, Periyar calls for the abolition of the village as a relevant and necessary counter to the caste system and its ills. He does this in his inimitable style and reasoning which even after seven decades of its delivery has universal resonance for a world grasping with humungous inequalities.*

(This speech by Thanthai Periyar E.V. Ramasami was delivered on 31.10.1944 at the anniversary celebrations of the Village Officers Training School, at Erode. Mr. V.K. Raman Menon, M.A., Barrister-at-law, the District Educational Officer, presided over the anniversary function.)

**Mr. President and Comrades,**

Students who are undergoing training to become village officers have assembled this morning. The President of this meeting is an officer of the Education Department. The Deputy Collector seated next to him supervises the village officers. They are both invested with high responsibilities and power. So far as I am concerned, I am the arch enemy of all politicians. The so-called progressives of our society, who are hated and disliked by the public, are against me. Not only that, the so-called high caste people, who are dominating in all spheres of activity in this country are opposed to me. Moreover, I am characterized as one against the obsolete old order, the shastras (Hindu doctrines) and so on.

Though I take the privilege to call myself a social reformer, my conception of reforms and my mode of approach are entirely different. I do not attach any importance to anything that is based on religion and old traditions.



TPSPRI: [theprsri@gmail.com](mailto:theprsri@gmail.com)

Acknowledgment: With the kind permission of Dr K Veeramani, this speech has been reproduced from the book, Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R published by The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, Page 313 – 324.

Most of my remedies and methods of approach are for the complete destruction of the old order as a preliminary condition for the creation of a new order of society. My reformist ideals are mostly based on this principle. Because of this, I am also misunderstood as a dangerous and destructive man.

Under these circumstances, if I am to speak on the topic - “Village Reform and Constructive plan for Village development”, in the midst of such men who are assembled here, I do not know how far it would be proper and acceptable to this august gathering. However, even as we patiently bear the comedy in the dramas, which propagate many ideas considered to be unrealizable and unpalatable, I request you all to carefully hear, what all I say. After you reach your home, please recollect what all I said to you, think over about them independently and in an unbiased manner. One can realize the truth only by deep thinking. Good decisions are never taken in a mood of anger.

Hasty decisions are not generally wise conclusions. So, I appeal to you all, to ponder over my views deeply and then arrive at wise conclusions.

So, Comrades, let me at the outset explain what village reform is. It means that all villages should be eradicated. Not only that. Even the word “Village” has to be deleted from the dictionary. I would say that the word “Village” should not find a place in politics either.

Today, the conception of village, its connotation and its environment are distinctly different from those of the towns and cities. Whatever efforts you may take to develop and reorient the villages, you cannot reach the goal or gain complete success. Even as all social reforms to uplift the ‘Pariahs’ and ‘Chakkillis’ (the Untouchables) have ended in creating a new class of people as “Harijans” or even as the creation of the Adi-Dravidas, there will be some sort of change not worth the name by implementing the village development schemes. The villagers can never hope to enjoy the rights and liberties enjoyed by the people in towns and cities. It is because the necessity and set-up of the cities and towns are distinctly different from those of the villages.

I’d like to explain it further. Just as you find the society divided into different categories as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysias, Shudras and Panchamas based on the Varnashrama (Casteism) theory, you find the Panchamas in the lowest rung of the social ladder. Similarly, you will always find the village occupying the bottom place amongst cities and towns.

What is the Varnashrama (Casteism) theory? Some people are classified as high and superior. Some people are degraded as inferior and low. A distinct set of people called Brahmins are made to lead a happy life without straining any nerve. They need not work. Yet they are entitled to all comforts and pleasures in life, whereas another set of people of Dravidian Race have to work hard eternally. The fruits of their hard work go to others. This is the basic theory of Varnashrama Dharma (Hindu Caste Dogma). There is nothing else in it.

By this heinous evil, the first three sections in the social order deliberately exploit the fourth and fifth sections of people in the society. It is believed that the fourth and fifth categories of people were created by god with the motive of affording a pleasant life for the three Castes of people above. It is further stated that the fourth and fifth Castes of people have to enter the abode of Heaven (Moksha) by serving the categories of people above and they cannot attain “Moksha” directly by any other means.

It is further ordained that if the fourth and fifth categories of people happen to have cash on hand, it could be forcibly taken away by the high caste Brahmin people. It is said that only the first Caste of people (Brahmins) are eligible to read and learn. The fourth and fifth Castes of people (Dravidians) should not read or learn. It is this basic theory underlying the Varna Dharma (Colour based Casteism Dogma) that you find in the case of cities, towns and villages. Please think over whether it is true or not.

### **What is a village?**

Now let us think about what is called a village. In a village there is no school. No hospital. No drama theatre. No park. No court, No police station. No good roads. No proper lights. No drinking water and above all no sign of civilization. The villager’s earning is merely to keep the wolf off the door. There is no scope to earn money for leading an average happy life. There is no scope to gain progress by using their right of thinking. The villagers do not have the chances of enjoying the facilities the people derive in towns and cities. What else is needed to explain the condition of our villages? But, it is said that cities and towns depend on the villages. The fruits of labour of villagers are enjoyed by the people in the cities and towns. Everything that is produced in villages is enjoyed by the people in the cities and towns. Ultimately the people in the towns and cities are the real beneficiaries, who become rich. The villages also enable the government to collect taxes. Even the gods and temples, including those who depend on temples and gods, derive the benefits because of the existence of villages.

Look at the economic status and prosperity of those who lord over fertile lands with adequate irrigational facilities. Turn to the villages in between and see what the conditions are. Look at the money lenders and Marwaris (North Indians) in the areas where fallow, *poromboke* and deserted areas exist. Look at their houses. See how the money lenders lead their lives. Compare and contrast the same with those of the villager- the real tiller of the soil. Even those who procure the products from villagers and market the same in towns and cities lead a bright life. It is only the actual tiller in the village that is in a degraded, backward condition. Why should it be so?

Because he is uneducated, he works hard and produces. After the harvest, he fills the bags and sends them to towns and cities. He takes to his huts only the hay and waste grains. He prepares gruel and feeds the children with the consolation that ‘god has given only that much. He fills the bellies of all his children with mere gruel and remains contented with that life.

If you enable the villagers to read and learn, they will realize many things and say: “We toil. We produce. We are fed with mere gruel only. Whereas those who do not work hard are able to eat everything to the full. They enjoy without working. Why should we suffer?”

When once you give education to villagers, they will realize their pitiable lot. That is the reason why the villagers are kept in the dark without education. Is this not a clear indication of the fact that villagers are treated like the ‘Panchamas’ (Untouchables) in our social order?

Under these circumstances, it is a big hoax to talk of reforming the villages with development schemes. Those who are deemed even in these days as high and superior, indulge in loud talks about village reforms. They advise the social reformers to go to villages.

With the inner motive of seeking clients and customers, lawyers and businessmen go to villages on Sunday. They hold the brooms. They sweep the surroundings. Even for this they do ‘Bhajan’ (recital of prayer songs). Filling the baskets with rubbish they carry on religious propaganda! The greatness of Rama and Hanuman (hindu gods), is dinned into the ears of the uneducated villagers. At the same time, they also decry the character of Ravana, the King of Srilanka.

O, you think a village can be developed by this sort of activity?

Please think over whether this sort of work is the right means to uplift the villagers.

### **What for the villages?**

What is the need to maintain villages? What do the people in the villages do? They look after the breeding of goats, cows, bullocks, oxen and pigs. They secure milk, curd, butter etc., to be enjoyed by the people in towns and cities.

A villager gets up at 2 A.M. in the morning. He helps to feed and quench the thirst of his pet animals. He cleans the shed by 4 A.M. He milks the cows. He takes a little of gruel without milk. By 5 A.M. he walks a long distance of 3,4,5 miles and by 6 A.M. he taps the doors of his customers in the cities and towns. He goes around with the milk, calling, “Sir, milk – Madam Milk”, almost in the dark before dawn. His children know not the value of milk or ghee. But it is true that the people in towns and cities pay money to the villagers. Even here, you will have to see what happens to the money a villager gets from the people in towns and cities. A part goes to the municipal staff. A part goes to the police. Whatever remains, it mostly goes to meet court expenses, lawyers and officials.

### **Food Grains**

Even the agriculturists in the villages sail in the same boat. Their position is also not worthy of praise. A villager who worked hard in the fields takes his produce to the dealers in the cities and they are swindled in the bargain. Even in measuring the stocks he is duped. Many deductions are

made under the heads 'for brokerage', 'for god', 'for account' 'for lot cooly', 'for watchman' and so on. After all these, the dealer gives some meagre amount only. The agriculturist from the village on seeing a few notes and coins feels that god has given him that much for his hard work. He drinks coffee, attends a cinema show, and goes back to his village. The merchants hoard these grains and wait for the prices to go up. They mint money by hoarding and black marketing. They become rich and live in bungalows. Whereas villagers are made to drive carts, take the cattle to graze and do household jobs.

In the eyes of the governments the villagers are more or less like the goats taken to the butcher.

So, I do not think that I am wrong in saying the villages are like the Untouchables in the society. Villagers live only to make all others live happily. When the state of affairs is so deplorable what are you going to gain? Villagers will ever be in the same conditions as the Shudras (Backward Dravidians) and the Untouchables in the society.

So, what is the solution? Even as we crave for a society where there will be no Brahmin or Pariah, similarly there should be no room for different classifications as Town, City, Village and Hamlet. Just as society must be composed of only human beings there should be only cities. To further understand clearly that villages are treated like the lower castes under the Varnashrama (Casteism) system, I'd like to say more.

In this society, 90 percent of the people belong to the fourth and fifth categories of the caste system. Only 10 percent of the people belong to the higher three categories. Similarly, out of each 100 places about 90 are villages. The President of this function stated that there are seven lakhs villages in India. But towns and cities, not even seventy-five thousand.

Moreover, among those living in towns and villages, an ordinary cartman or a peon or a begging Brahmin priest is able to educate his children. Some are able to pass S.S.L.C., and B.A., (Bachelor of Arts Degree). Some are able to become an engineer or a doctor or an I.C.S., (Indian Civil Service Officer). It is not so in the case of a Dravidian villager. Even landholders who own 100 to 200 acres of land in villages have to spend a portion of their income to provide education to their children. The poor cultivator's son goes only to look after cattle, the moment he is able to walk. In the towns, the government compels all including scavenger's children to study. Free schools are started. But in the case of a villager he has got to send his children to towns for providing education. There, due to lack of proper supervision they get spoilt. Some become addicted to the bad habit of smoking and drinking.

Why go so far? Take the case of rationing of food grains. Even as the Nattukottai Commercial people allot regular and fixed quantity of food grains needed for the temples and gods, the government ensures regular supply of essential food articles to the people residing in towns and cities.

There is no such rationing to the people in villages. God alone should look after them! The villagers go to towns and purchase a measure of rice for a rupee stealthily. The villager is the producer of grains. He is deprived of his produce. He is made to commit a crime, as we leave him in the lurch. He has no other option but to go out of the way and secure his needs in towns and cities. Coming to the mode of living, 90 out of 100 people in towns and cities do not do hard physical work. They live happily. But it is not the case with the people who live in villages.

If there is any outbreak of row and rupture, the villagers have to go the towns or cities any number of times to get justice. On account of his serious drawback a villager is bound to submit silently to the dictates of the rowdy elements in the village and also the rich people in the village.

Diverting to other aspects I wish to say a few words about the village officers. They are paid only Rs. 15 a month as salary. But they need at least one hundred rupees a month to maintain their status and to fulfil their needs and for the maintenance of their family. How could you expect justice from these village officers, who are paid a meagre salary? How could you expect them to discharge duties, if you keep them in want? He is an officer in the village, but he is a servant to the town.

### **Agriculture**

Our agriculture continues to be the same as it was 200 years ago. To some extent irrigation facilities and over-head tanks were introduced to provide water for cultivating new lands. There is no other substantial improvement. The agricultural department has merely recruited a few new hands. Even that was helpful only to the Brahmins, who know not the ABCD of agriculture.

There was no improvement in the production of food grains. There was no improvement in the mode of cultivation. The tillers are not able to get substantial gains from their work. Agriculturists have not been enlightened about their profession. What has the government done to them? Under the misconception that the agriculturists in the villages are educated, they have been distributed printed leaflets! It is wrong to presume that our agriculturists are also educated like those in the foreign countries. The government failed to realize the fact that most of our agriculturists are uneducated and uncivilized. They live far away from the towns and cities. They are not aware of any modern developments. They are kept as mere irrational human beings.

### **Way out**

If we are really sincere in improving the conditions of the villagers and to reorient the villages, we have to carry out many schemes. There are very important plans to reform the villages. Today agriculture is carried on by physical labour. It must be changed. Agriculture must be made an industry, by the introduction of machines.

Ploughing, sowing seeds and harvesting must be done with the aid of machines.

Boring wells, bailing out water and irrigating fields must be done, with the aid of machines.

For implementing this sort of change, it is necessary that the fields should be reorganized to enable the use of machines. Fields which could not be used for mechanized contrivances should be utilized for cultivating crops, which do not require frequent attention and much labour by the tillers.

The farmers should be brought under Cooperative bodies and the harvested crops should be under the control of the farmers' cooperatives. The entire benefits of the produce should be equally shared by the farmers themselves. Villages should be linked together and made as towns, with schools, hospitals, parks, cinema theatre, drama halls, recreation centers, library, reading room, radio center, good roads, bus stands, police station etc. There should be a magistrate and a market for securing all commodities. There should be a mobile exhibition to go around all the villages.

There should be an appeal court here and there. When there are signs of any feuds or enmity, it should be immediately tackled by suitable persons, whose duty is to go on camping at all crucial places in the villages.

Today (in 1944) the population of Madras city is ten lakhs. The population of Coimbatore town is one lakh. The population of Erode town is 50,000. The villages around Erode such as Kollam Palayam, Moolapalayam, Surampatti, Mettuvalasu and so on must be linked together into a circle with some name or other and it should be raised to the status of a town with 3000 or 5000 population. It should be carefully protected from the exploitation of the brokers in towns.

The feeling that the villages exist only for the sake of the people in towns should be completely eschewed.

Apart from this, small scale industries should be started in and around the villages. This will put an end to villagers going out in search of jobs. There are many cottage industries carried on with small machines. We should provide jobs to the villagers in their own villages. We must avoid the usage of words as '*Kuppaikattan*,' '*Pattikattan*' and '*Gramathan*'. They are no more needed. I do not understand why the hard-working people should be called by these degrading words. Moreover, it is unfair and unjust to do so anymore. So, I want these names to go.

I have travelled abroad and visited many villages in the Western countries. There I found the villages as I wished.

That is to say, you cannot easily find a village, where there is no road, taps, water facility, electric power, school, playground, factory and above all perfect equality amongst all the villagers. It is only in Russia that I was able to see a few villages. By this time all those villages might have been improved as towns. I would confidently say that there will be no village as you see here in any of the European countries.

You say here that Villages exist to serve towns and cities as the Shudras (Backward Dravidians) and Panchamas (Untouchables) are created to serve the high caste Brahmins. But you cannot find

even a single village there that could be deemed to exist for the sake of the towns, in any Western country.

You may ask as to who is to look after cultivation. This query is something like asking as to who would do the scavenging work if all scavengers are given education and work. To that, my reply is that all communities should come forward to do the work in proportion to their number in the total population. This principle should operate at all places. That is my view.

Steps must be taken to eradicate what is called “low” and “mean” in work. Professions which requires hard labour must be made easy and light. We should see that such professions are gradually eradicated. Then only we can improve and make the country progressive.

If an individual builds a ship and becomes a millionaire, it cannot be strictly called as a progress of the entire country. If one becomes a millionaire with the iron industry, it will not mean prosperity to the entire nation.

If it is not possible to eradicate the professions considered as low and mean, if it is not possible to lessen the burden and hard physical labour involved in these professions, if it is not possible to ensure more gains and profit to the villagers, if it is not possible to evaluate the status of the villagers, there is no use talking of Village Reforms. I am confident that it is quite possible to achieve success, if we start to introduce the machines and chemicals at the village level.

A stage would come when there would be no such place known as village.

It is quite absurd and foolish to say that this is Socialism or Communism. If one is able to bestow thoughts with a progressive outlook, he would realize the truth and justice underlying my views.

It is not as if a worker or a villager gets a few more coins as his income. One should not feel contented with that.

The differences between the labourer and the capitalist, has increased on account of inflation in the country.

Similarly, the gap between the villager and the town man gets widened by this inadequate rise in wages. We must find ways to narrow the gap.

The differences have worsened the condition much more. The prevailing low status and the agony so long sustained will only render a vast section of the people as low, degraded and downtrodden.

The society must be rid of the evils of degradation, humiliation and inequality. Then only, the people could lead a happy and contented life.