

JEEVANANDAM - AS A VETERAN FREEDOM FIGHTER

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Abstract

Jeevanandam, popularly known as Jeeva was a multi-faceted personality. From the Southernmost tip of the Indian Peninsula - Kanyakumari, young Jeeva was one of them drawn towards the National Movement. By nature, Jeeva was a man of level-headedness. He stood for equality and justice. He had a liberal outlook. His compassionate heart and humanist outlook yearned to see mankind in a state of peace, happiness, and brotherhood. He had an inborn urge to serve the oppressed and the downtrodden. It was this instinct that had driven him to public life. Basically 'a man of the masses', he led a very simple life. Starting his political career as a Congress volunteer, he rose to prominence in the Congress Party. As a member of the Congress Party, he had strengthened it. He was instrumental in the victory of the Congress Party and the rout of the Justice Party in the 1937 provincial elections in the Madras Presidency. His speeches delivered deep on inequality in society, caste distinctions, and the need for eradicating untouchability. After his return from Vaikom Satyagraha, Jeeva was determined to fight against untouchability, in his native district Kanyakumari. In the district, Congress leaders like Dr.M.E.Naidu, Gandhiraman, Sivathanu Pillai, and Akkarai Neelakanda Pillai were agitating against untouchability. The Congress leaders E.V. Ramasami Naicker, and P.Varadarajulu Naidu started an agitation at Cheranmadevi against this despicable practice. Jeeva who stayed here for a short time also had joined the agitation along with the other Congressmen. Jeeva's metamorphosis from a freedom fighter to a Self-Respecter, a Congress Socialist, and finally a Communist was gradual. His other roles as a trade unionist, a legislator, an orator, a journalist, a prolific writer, and Tamil litterateur were also utilized for the same purpose. In all his roles and activities, his basic principle was humanism. Thus Jeeva proved to be a multi-faceted personality as a freedom fighter, a crusader against social evils, a Communist, a trade unionist, a man of the masses, and the champion of the working class.

Key words: Jeevanandam - Peninsula - personality - National Movement - humanist - public life - downtrodden - compassionate - oppressed - prominence - untouchability - Vaikom Satyagraha - Congress Party - Communist - working class - trade unionist.

Introduction:

Jeevanandam, popularly known as Jeeva was a multi-faceted personality. From the Southernmost tip of the Indian Peninsula - Kanyakumari, young Jeeva was one of them drawn towards the National Movement. By nature, Jeeva was a man of level-headedness. He stood for equality and justice. He had a liberal outlook. His compassionate heart and humanist outlook yearned to see mankind in a state of peace, happiness, and brotherhood. He was in public life for more than four decades. He was a force to reckon with in the political arena of the Madras Presidency. Basically 'a man of the masses', he led a very simple life. Starting his political career as a Congress volunteer, he rose to prominence in the Congress Party. A man who was constantly searching for an appropriate political ideology that would elevate the status of the oppressed and the downtrodden, found Communism as the panacea, embraced it, and became a staunch Communist thereafter.

Family Background:

Born in a very ordinary family, he had formal education up to the high school level. But his birth in an orthodox, caste-wise superior Saivite family, ironically did not deter him to become a close friend of the untouchables and champion of the downtrodden. By sheer dint of hard work, dedicated service, and selfless sacrifices, he became the leader of the masses and the working class. His innocence and friendliness without any inhibition attracted people of all hues to rally behind him, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, and political affiliation. He was respected equally, not only by his party men, close associates, and admirers but also by his political opponents. He practiced what he preached. His words and deeds were synonymous. He had an inborn urge to serve the oppressed and the downtrodden. It was this instinct that had driven him to public life.

Political Life:

As a member of the Congress Party, he had strengthened it. He was instrumental in the victory of the Congress Party and the rout of the Justice Party in the 1937 provincial elections in the Madras Presidency. The Epic struggle of India's National Movement and attainment of independence was indeed a marvelous achievement in the 20th century. It was achieved through one of the Greatest Mass Movements in World History in which millions of men and women were politically mobilized in myriad ways.' India's National Movement included men having Moderate and Extremist views and also rightist and leftist groups. In the Indian National Congress, Bala Gangadhar Tilak, an Extremist and a mass leader held sway till the rise of Mahatma Gandhi. With Gandhi's entry into Indian politics in 1920 AD, began the Gandhian era. However, both of them were leaders. in their own right. Tilak entered Indian politics at a time when the general outlook of national independence and democracy had diffused among the educated middle class. Giving a concrete form to the urge of this section of the people for independence and their democratic consciousness, Tilak evolved slogans and forms of struggle, such as "Swadeshi", "Swaraj", Boycott, resistance, use of mother tongue in the place of English, and so on. This was Tilak's contribution to Indian politics.

The experience that the Indian people had gained just before and during the war and the numerous struggles that had taken place outside India in the post-war years aroused a new political awareness and enthusiasm for action among India's millions. Symptoms of a new revolutionary thrust were discernible all over India, as a continuation of the struggle for 'Swaraj' and 'Home Rule' led by Tilak and others. While emerging as the new leader of the Indian people and adopting these methods, Gandhi had no objectives other than those set out by Tilak. But he evolved his program of political work based on the life issues, the people faced and imbibing inspiration from them. It was this that enabled him to push back the radical Movement of Tilak and rise as the founder leader of a new All India Movement of mass struggle. The Congress Party's policies like eradication of untouchability among the Hindus, prohibition of liquor, wearing only Khadi, Swadeshi Movement, Tilak's slogans like 'Swaraj' and Gandhi's new technique of Satyagraha, had attracted the younger generation.

Jeeva and National Movement:

Jeeva had an insatiable appetite for reading books and a thirst for knowledge. He studied books on theology, ancient and modern Tamil literature, especially Tamil poet Bharathi's works. He was very much impressed by Bharathi's vision of 'New Age', where everyone would get their basic needs fulfilled and where there would be justice, equality and happiness all around. He spread the message of Bharathi wherever he went through his speeches in the public meetings. Jeeva was gradually drawn towards the National Movement of India spearheaded by the Indian National Congress. He found an identity of interest between himself and the Congress in matters like social justice and eradication of untouchability.

Besides, the Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy, the death of Bala Gangadhar Tilak in 1920, Mahatma Gandhi's call to the youth of India to join the Non-Cooperation Movement in large numbers had participated in the Movement. Jeeva was one among them. The Congress had already launched the 'Swadeshi' Movement as a part of the national struggle for independence. The boycott of foreign cloth was raging high in Kanyakumari District. In many places, meetings to highlight the need for a boycott of foreign cloth were held. In 1922 one such meeting held at Thittuvilai, a neighbouring village of Boothapandy, had become a turning point in the life of Jeeva.

Jeeva became a Congressman:

The Congress, the use of khadi cloth, and Gandhi attracted him very much. At the end of the meeting, foreign clothes were set on a bonfire. He too removed all the foreign cloth he was wearing except his 'Kaubinam' and threw them into it. From that day he started wearing khadi clothes, which he practiced till his last breath. In 1922, thus Jeeva became a Congressman. The erstwhile Princely State of Travancore (which comprised of Kerala and Kanyakumari district) was well known for religious orthodoxy. Here in the small town of Vaikom near Trivandrum, the abominable practice of untouchability was reigning supreme. 'Varnashrama Dharma' was strictly adhered to. Outcastes should not enter the streets of the high castes. The untouchable should not enter not only the temples but also the streets leading to them. Ezhava leader Nrayana Guru of Kerala took steps to eradicate the evil but he could not succeed. In pursuance of Mahatma Gandhi's Harijan upliftment Movement, the local Congress decided to launch a struggle against the religious orthodoxy and fanaticism of higher castes. E.V. Ramasami Naicker, the President of TNCC accepted the offer of leading the struggle. He started with a strong contingent of supporters." Discontinuing his school education once for all, Jeeva joined the Vaikom Satyagraha as a volunteer of the Congress Party. The incident had a great impact on Jeeva and his life. He realized for the first time in his life, the value and potentiality of the Gandhian technique of Satyagraha. This incident had pushed him into the mainstream of national struggle, where he was to play a very important role for not less than four decades. Later he undertook propaganda for selling khadi cloth, explaining that it was a sign of Self-Respect and raised one's self-esteem and also of the nation.

Fight against Untouchability:

It was an anathema to him to ill-treat anyone as outcaste and untouchable. He enjoyed the company of his friends irrespective of caste distinctions. He earned the wrath of orthodox elders and his parents for taking his untouchable friends into prakaras and temples of his native village, Boothapandy. Even during school days, he had exhibited his qualities of organizing meetings and delivering speeches on a variety of topics. His speeches delivered deep on inequality in society, caste distinctions, and the need for eradicating untouchability. Jeeva was not only an outstanding student in the school but also a voracious reader. After his return from Vaikom Satyagraha, Jeeva was determined to fight against untouchability, in his native district Kanyakumari. In the district, Congress leaders like Dr.M.E.Naidu, Gandhiraman, Sivathanu Pillai, and Akkarai Neelakanda Pillai were agitating against untouchability. They organized a Satyagraha opposite the famous Suchindram Temple, in which Jeeva also participated as a volunteer showing his solidarity with others. Thus gradually Jeeva's attraction towards Gandhi's Reconstructive Programmes had increased. He realized that he could not intensify Gandhi's programs in his district which was under the rule of Maharajan of Travancore. So at last he decided to leave his native district and then moved to the neighbouring Tirunelveli District. Jeeva's fight against social injustice had to continue in the Cheranmadevi Gurukulam. V.V.S.Iyer, a well-known nationalist, and a Congressman started a Gurukulam in December 1922, at Kallidaikurichi, but later he shifted it to Cheranmadevi. Both were strong-holds in Tirunelveli of Brahmin cultural tradition and learning.

The institution was established with the object of imparting religious education to youths, inculcating in them the spirit of patriotism and infusing into them a passion for social service. The Gurukulam received for its maintenance donations from all communities. Separate dining was arranged for Brahmin boys. It was objected to as social injustice done to Non-Brahmin boys. It was strongly condemned by Non-Brahmin members of the Congress Party. The Congress leaders E.V. Ramasami Naicker, and P.Varadarajulu Naidu started an agitation at Cheranmadevi against this despicable practice. Jeeva who stayed here for a short time also had joined the agitation along with the other Congressmen. The issue was referred to a Congress Sub-committee. The issue ended with the accidental death of its founder V.V.S.Iyer. Then Chettinad, known for its benevolence and munificence welcomed Jeeva. There he came into contact with Kasiviswanatha Chettiar. With his monetary support, he started an Ashram at Siravayal named after Gandhi. Its President was Kumbalingam Pillai and Jeeva was its General Secretary. Gandhi Ashram was a center for implementing Gandhi's constructive programs. Unmindful of the opposition, Jeeva carried on his crusade against untouchability there. Most of the inmates of the Ashram were from Kanyakumari District. They were attracted to him during his school days. Some of his friends, Manickam an untouchable and T.N.Gopal were teachers. His boyhood friend C.P. Elango and his younger brother P. Natarajan were also there. With this dedicated band of friends, he imparted education to the untouchables in the colonies outside the Ashram. P. Natarajan, younger brother of Jeeva and an inmate of the Ashram, says the following about the functioning of the Ashram. There were more than a hundred children including me in the Ashram. It was devoted to developing Gandhi's plans; besides faith in God. It aimed at rooting out casteism; spinning in takli was the primary duty. Here we were taught the Tamil religious literature, Thevaram', Thiruvachagam'

Nikandu, and Thirukkural and Poet Bharathi's works. Here we were taught the philosophy of humanism. During his visit, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, who operated the Swadeshi Steam Navigation and shipping corporation, ridiculed, Jeeva and his followers for spinning Khadi thread in takli.

Further, he described it as a foolish act and that would not get independence from India. Jeeva explained to Chidambaram Pillai that spinning in the 'Charka' was in no way inferior to the bravery of a soldier on the battlefield. At last, he persuaded him to accept it as an act of bravery. Pillai complimented Jeeva that India could achieve independence with the help of persons like Jeeva. Mahatma Gandhi heard about the Ashram, run by Jeeva in his name. In 1927, on his way to Srilanka, he 'paid a visit to the Ashram. Perhaps Gandhi was under the impression that Jeeva must be a rich man to run an Ashram with more than a hundred inmates. So he asked Jeeva the amount of wealth he had in his possession. Jeeva replied that whole of India was his property meaning that the nation belonged to all its people. Gandhi was very much impressed by the answer. He complimented that Jeeva was a true nationalist and India's greatest asset." After meeting Gandhi, Jeeva became more and more a Gandhian, not only in his dress but also in food habits and attitude. He started wearing 'dhoti and 'thundu' like Gandhi and had sported a tuft with a few hairs. He started practicing Ahimsa not to cause any injury to living beings. He was determined to pursue more vigorously eradication of untouchability. It was a usual practice to hold anti-untouchability meetings all over India. But a meeting held at Karaikudi on 3rd March 1933 for that purpose turned to be an unusual one for how it was treated by the police authorities. The public meeting was held under the auspices of the Karaikudi District Anti-untouchability committee. As one of the main speakers, while Jeeva was speaking, the Karaikudi Sub-Inspector of Police straightaway lathi-charged the crowd and dispersed them. Jeeva remained on the dais. Not less than ten lathi blows descended on him. He was taken to the police station along with others and charged under the Town Nuisances Act and released on bond later. Meanwhile, the citizens of Karaikudi convened a meeting the next day and passed a resolution condemning the brutal police attack at the public meeting the previous day. In 1929, the government appointed a committee for propagating prohibition. Jeeva was nominated a propagandist. He made a whirlwind tour of the Ramnad district.

Being a teetotaler he delivered thought-provoking speeches on prohibition and also enacted dramas with the active participation of the inmates of his gurukulam. National regeneration is a precursor to national liberation. During the Freedom Movement, India had to be domestically strengthened by removing social evils and 'superstitions. Realizing this, Jeeva evinced interest in social regeneration. He accepted the leadership of Gandhi in anti-colonial matters and E.V. Ramasami Naicker in issues on social evils. Therefore he involved himself simultaneously in the National Movement led by Gandhi and the social Movement known as Self-Respect Movement led by E.V. Ramasami Naicker. Thus Jeeva was simultaneously a Congressman and a man of the Self-Respect Movement. He rode two horses at the same time for some time. Mahatma Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement, by commencing his historic 'Dandi March' on 12th March 1930 popularly known as 'Salt Satyagraha'. In Madras Presidency, Rajaji was to lead the Satyagrahis in the Vedaranyam March'. Jeeva along with another gurukulam inmate had set but to participate in the Salt Satyagraha. Jeeva participated in the third Self-Respect Conference held

at Virudhunagar in 1931. In the Conference, Gandhi's economy was strongly condemned as a retrograde step and considered as nothing but an alternative to begging. The majority opinion was on the same line. Opposing it strongly, Jeeva argued that Khadi economy was a part of the national reconstruction program opposed to British Imperialism. So he implored the people to strengthen it and promote khadi.

Self-Respect Movement:

However, after the Erode Conference, there was a division in the Self-Respect Movement. Jeeva and Ayyamuthu, together organized a Conference at Coimbatore and named it National Self Respect Conference. Conference at Coimbatore and named it National Self Respect Conference. Here they criticized the Movement and called upon the Self-Respecters to put an end to their activities against the National Movement. On this occasion, Jeeva and Ayyamuthu severed their connections with the Self-Respect Movement and added strength to the Freedom Struggle led by the Congress. In the same year, Jeeva gained recognition in the Congress Party. In appreciation of his unflinching faith in the Congress Party and its policies and his untiring activities to the cause of Freedom Movement of India, he was elected as President of Kottaiyur Congress Committee, a rare honour in those days generally conferred on men of means and status in the society which he did not have. That was the first official entry of Jeeva in politics. On January 7th, 1932, The Government prohibited Jeeva from addressing people from public platforms. Violating this order, Jeeva and Rayachockalingam addressed a public meeting at Kottaiyur on January 8th, 1932. Both of them were arrested and sentenced to six months imprisonment. It was the first jail experience for Jeeva in the Freedom Struggle. They were lodged in the Central Jail at Trichirappalli along with Rajaji, Bengal political detainees, and friends of Bhagat Singh namely Budakeswar Dutt and Kundanlal. It was here after his association with the friends of Bhagat Singh, a change had come in Jeeva in his political perceptions and methodology of achieving independence for India. Influenced by Socialist philosophy, Jeeva established close contacts with people like Singaravelu, the first Communist from South India. He contributed articles to 'Kudiarasu', 'Pagutharivu' and 'Puratchi'. One such article had raised a controversy. His Tamil translation of Bhagat Singh's letter, 'why I became an atheist?' was published in 'Kudiarasu'. It was considered as an act of sedition, inciting people to rise against rulers. Jeeva was arrested. The Editor of the paper E.V. Ramasami Naicker was also arrested and imprisoned in 1934. He was forced to sever his connections. His old Justice Party friend AT. Panneerselvam advised him to tender an apology to the Government. E.V. Ramasami Naicker did it and got himself freed. He requested Jeeva also to do the same. But Jeeva stubbornly refused to do so. So he was arrested at Natramapalli in 1934. He was chained and dragged openly, in the streets of Coimbatore. It appeared to people like Baladandayutham, a school student of Coimbatore at that time, that a very dangerous animal was caged and dragged. This attracted young men like him directly to the National Movement.

However, E.V. Ramasami Naicker brought pressure upon Jeeva to tender an apology. With great mental agony and reluctance, he did it. The case was at last dropped. In the Madras Presidency, having failed to take Self-Respect Movement towards Communism, the leftists organized themselves as Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and started working as a wing of the Congress Party. Jeeva was the leading light of this party. In the Congress Socialist Party First Conference held at Salem in November 1936, he was elected

as General Secretary. Under his inspiring leadership, it spread far and wide in the Tamil districts. The Congress Socialist Party conferences were conducted in all the centers where the Congress Party had held its Conferences. The Congress Socialist Party also evinced keen interest in developing a mass base for itself amongst the working class. The opportunities came in the form of wage disputes. In the textile city of Coimbatore, the police unleashed repression on the textile mill workers. Jeeva took exception to this treatment of the workers and spoke ferociously against the police. After a prolonged struggle, the mill workers won their case for an increase in wages. The popularity of CSP leaders rose very high. The Government of India Act of 1935 made provision for self-rule in the provinces and dyarchy at the center. The elections to the legislatures were to be conducted. Already the Congress had decided to enter the legislatures by contesting the elections all over India. In the Madras Presidency, the working class had become aware of its rights and realized the importance of participating in the elections as a new technique to fight against the imperialist force. So it was eager to participate in the elections and its leaders like Jeeva were willing to take it in the new direction. In the meantime, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) formed a Front with the Congress Party. It was agreed that the worker's constituency should be assigned to AITUC's representatives. On that basis, the Coimbatore worker's constituency must have been given to Jeeva a candidate of AITUC. But Jeeva had agreed to give it up to a Congress candidate. The Congress Election Manifesto claimed that every vote cast for Congress was a vote against British Imperialism.

The working class also very enthusiastically welcomed the formation of a Congress ministry which as an indigenous group would serve their interest. Jeeva, who was very popular with the working class, believed that the victory of the front would have two-fold effect; it would accentuate the Freedom Struggle against British Imperialism; and it would lead to the installation of a native Congress Government at the provincial level, which would help the working class obtain better working conditions and wages. With these objectives, Jeeva undertook an election campaign in various parts of the Presidency and addressed several election meetings. It had drawn people from various sections of society. His emotional speeches in favour of the candidates of the front had made a very good appeal to the electorate particularly the working class.⁵⁶ It was evident in the overall performance of the Congress and AITUC combine. Jeeva's substitute in the Coimbatore workers' constituency, N.G. Ramasamy, a Congress candidate won the election with an impressive record. On 2nd, October 1942, for taking part in the Gandhi Jayanthi celebrations, in violation of the restrictions, Jeeva and C.P. Elango were arrested. Both of them were sent to Trivandramjail. In the same jail there were Congressmen like C. Kesavan, A.E. John Philipose, G.Ramachandran, Pattamthanupillai, and M.N. Govindan Nair. In April 1943, Jeeva and C.P.Elango were released. In 1944, C.P. Ramasamy Iyer's order confining Jeeva to Boothapondy was also canceled. So he became free to undertake his political activities in his native district. On October 3, 1945, the Madras Government had canceled the restriction imposed on Jeeva's entry into British India. As a result of the sacrifices made by innumerable people, India got Independence.

Conclusion:

Jeeva's metamorphosis from a freedom fighter to a Self-Respecter, a Congress Socialist, and finally a Communist was gradual. It was done with an altruistic intention to serve the poor. His other roles as a trade unionist, a legislator, an orator, a journalist, a prolific writer, and Tamil litterateur were also utilized for the same purpose. In all his roles and activities, his basic principle was humanism. Thus Jeeva proved to be a multi-faceted personality as a freedom fighter, a crusader against social evils, a Communist, a trade unionist, a man of the masses, and the champion of the working class. His life is an example of patriotism, selfless services, sacrifices, dedication to the cause of the downtrodden and love of his mother tongue Tamil and a message for everyone. The nation proudly recollects and recognizes their services. The Government of Tamilnadu had recognized the selfless services and sacrifices of Jeeva to the cause of the Freedom Movement of India. It had crept a life-size statue in honour of Jeeva at Nagercoil, his native district and also named a Transport Corporation, in his name as Jeeva Transport Corporation, with Headquarters at Erode in Tamilnadu.

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