
PRUDENTIAL PROGRESS OF SAGACIOUS SIVAKAMI

R.PRIYA

Abstract: Sivakami is one of the acclaimed Tamil Dalit Feminist writers who draw attention of the society to the dual oppression of Dalit women on account of gender and caste at the hands of both the upper caste and the Dalit men. She is a multi-faceted personality. She was initially an IAS officer, but gave up her service and became a prolific writer. She is well known for her integrity. Sivakami is a social activist who works for the upliftment of Dalit women in the country especially in Tamil Nadu. She considered Dalit women's oppressed state as a hurdle to the development of the Tamil society. She strongly believes that both her writings and her active role in politics will enhance her views and paves way for the development of the Dalit people. She firmly believes that only a Dalit writer can powerfully bring out all the hardship's which were faced by the Dalit people in our society. Sivakami's prudential progress continues mainly through her 'fire brand' writings which are immortal in literature. She is beyond the limits of the society. Sivakami is best suited for the empowerment a Tamil woman in the society.

Keywords: acclaimed Tamil Feminist dalit writer, upliftment of dalit women, firebrand writings, and empowerment of a Tamil woman.

Introduction:

"I don't think I'm an exception. I am who I am because of my background and environment. But people respect you for who you are".

[Sivakami in an interview with Pushpalyengar] Sivakami is one of the acclaimed Tamil Dalit Feminist writers who draw attention of the society to the dual oppression of Dalit women on account of gender and caste at the hands of both the upper caste and the Dalit men. She is a multi-faceted personality. She was initially an IAS officer, but gave up her service and became a prolific writer in 2008. She decided after 29 years in Indian Administrative Service (IAS) that it is definitely through writing, one can independently express their views. She considers politics as the powerful weapon to practice her views in this society. Sivakami is also a social activist and a strong critique of the society who works for the upliftment of Dalit women not only in Tamil Nadu but all over the country. She is serving for the downtrodden people of the Dalit society.

Sivakami is the Tamil Nadu's first woman Dalit IAS officer to be in service. She was born in 1957. Sivakami comes from a political family. Her father M. Palanimuthu was an independent MLA, who later joined in the Congress Party and became a close associate of the late Kakkan - a popular leader known for his honesty and simple lifestyle. It was her father's wish that Sivakami should join the Indian Administrative Service (IAS).

I am proud to introduce Sivakami's various facets - an IAS officer, a prolific Dalit writer, a strong critique of the society, a social activist and an

emerging politician through this paper. My focus is on the journey of Sivakami who took various efforts for the welfare and upliftment of Dalit women in the society. Her life journey is the best example for the empowerment of a Tamil woman in India.

Sivakami is Tamil Nadu's first woman Dalit IAS officer and served for our country for the past twenty nine years in the Indian Administrative Service. While in service, she was known for her integrity. When she was secretary of the Adi-Draavidar Welfare Department in 2002, she fell out with the former Chief Minister, when her demand for higher allocation for a special Dalit scheme was not met. Soon after, she was shunted out to the obscure government Data Centre, and later kept on a month's 'compulsory wait' without any posting; and for about a month-and-a-half for taking part in a Dalit rights seminar. In November 2008, Sivakami took voluntary retirement and joined in politics.

"When we talk of women's empowerment, we give priority to those who live below the poverty line - malnourished and poor women. Even in that respect, Dalit women are the worst affected".

[Interview of Sivakami in *The Hindu*].

Sivakami is a social activist who works for the upliftment of Dalit women in the country especially in Tamil Nadu. She considered Dalit women's oppressed state as a hurdle to the development of the society. She wants to rescue them from the male patriarchy and harassments in our society. Sivakami feels the most gender atrocities in our country are committed mostly against Dalit women. According to her, in our

society that it known as main stream, the problems of Dalit women are considered separatist. Sivakami is against the worst expressions of male chauvinistic society - atrocities like raping, profiling, physical assault and murder.

As an activist who works for the upliftment Dalit women folk, Sivakami is against the incidents of domestic violence and she said that the violence is highest among Dalit women in the country. She also said more men drink and assault Dalit women at home because they do not make enough money.

Regarding women's health statistics, nearly 1, 00,000 women die at child birth every year and a large number of them are Dalit women and Sivakami wants to create awareness among them about good health and hygiene. She feels that the concept of education for Dalid women is yet to take root in the society. By providing education Sivakami hopes that the Dalit women community can be uplifted. So she always stresses the importance and necessity of education for women especially in Dalit sect.

Being a part of her social activism, Sivakami organized various meetings for the welfare of Dalit people especially for Dalit women. She has been a part of the Land Right Movement for Dalits since 2003, has developed a network of activists, besides mobilizing women's groups. Sivakami organised a meeting on February 2014, in Trichy. In that event 2.5 lakhs of women have participated. She had succeeded in bringing all the women together for a noble cause. Regarding this Sivakami is a good organiser who can able to bring together many people and made cooperation among them. These efforts are more helpful for the development of the society.

Many IAS, IPS and Defense officers are known to join politics, usually in their post-retirement period. But Sivakami has put in her papers as an IAS officer to enter politics. She strongly believes that both her writings and her active role in politics will enhance Sivakami's views and paves way for the development of the Dalit people. She is more concerned about the Dalit women and their well being.

"For the last eight years, I met people and read to them from the writings on land rights, women's rights and other social issues. When they turned around and asked me, 'what do you expect us to do?' I realized that I need a cadre to make my message forward. The natural course was politics. I cannot make tell claims, but I want space to work independently and contribute towards fulfilling my social goals".

Sivakami in an interview with Pushpalyengar].

Many people has a question regarding Sivakami's political journey that "why would a writer want to joint politics?" But Sivakami answers to this question in a very simple way that the role of women mostly in Indian politics is because of their political lineage as wives as daughters. As a result they cannot bargain power. She feels that it is the right time to change this concept and Sivakami wants many women to enter politics. She assumes that politics will give a platform for her powerful writings. Her aim was never be a career bureaucrat. But Sivakami's postings gave her the opportunity to meet many Dalit women and talk to them profoundly.

Sivakami joined in Mayawathi's BSP (BahujanSamaj Party) which hardly has a presence in Tamil Nadu. Recently the party's head has appointed a new state unit president, K. SelvaPerunthagai. In one of her interviews to *The Outlook* Sivakami says about Mayawathi that "*she must have sacrificed a lot, considering her background, and all the fact that she worked her way to the top. I am attracted by that*". For Sivakami, Mayawathi is a role-model in her political journey.

Sivakami contested the Lok Sabha election on a BahujanSamaj Party (BSP) ticket from Kanyakumari in 2009, but lost. But she did not give up her journey in politics. She decided to travel in the path of her own. So the same year in December, she floated her own party, "SamugaSamathuvaPadai" (Forum for Social Equality). She continues her political journey by working for the welfare of Dalit people through her party till now. She says in an interview to *The Hindu* in December 2009, "*The party I launched now will take up issues mainly concerning the Dalits and women in our country*".

Sivakami is considered a strong critic of the Dravidian movement and its ideologue Periyar. When she joined the BSP she was hopeful that the party would emerge as an alternative to the Dravidian parties, the DMK and the AIADMK - which between them now ruled Tamil Nadu for over four decades. But BSP failed to upstage the regional giants. The main reason is that the party tried to replicate the UP model of Brahmin - Dalit alliance in Tamil Nadu. BSP Leaders met Tamil Nadu Brahmin Association leader, Narayanan and sought his support. The party also fielded two Brahmins in the 2009 Lok Sabha Polls. But none of the candidates won.

Sivakami also lost in that election, but that has not caused her to change her views. Sivakami analysed her stand in the current Tamil Nadu political situation. Then she decided to adapt some changes in her approaches towards the

society. She insisted that Dalits were not on the focus of Periyar's revolutionary movement. The Dravidian movement placed more emphasis on the backward classes only. She tried to overcome this idea through her own party, "SamugaSamathuvaPadai".

"Her writings (Sivakami's) are refreshing and self-critical. Hers is seen a bold voice, a modern voice that is unapologetic in acknowledging her roots, out of which she has grown and evolved successfully". [Gita Ramaswami, A publisher of Sivakami's works from Hyderabad in an interview to *The Outlook*]

Sivakami's "fire-brand" writing has its share of admirers and critics. She firmly believes that only a Dalit writer can powerfully bring out all the hardships which were faced by the Dalit people in the society. She says in an interview that Mainstream literature has boycotted her because she believes that only Dalits can write about issues and hardships concerning them and that only women can write on feminist issues. It is not just a question of experience but an aspect of perspective.

Sivakami likes more to be a writer than her other facets because her writing gives more energy and enthusiasm to act as a politician, an activist and a critique. Writing is her identity which introduced Sivakami to the society.

To be a Dalit is one thing, to be a feminist is another. In Sivakami's case, she is a Dalit-feminist and everyone wants to disown her. Something that she has faced and is aware of since the time she started writing stories in Tamil as a high school student. Sivakami's repertoire includes four novels, four short stories collection and a non-fiction. She writes columns on Land rights for Dalit women and also on political empowerment. Sivakami has also written, directed and produced a feature film.

Sivakami's novels mostly center on Dalit Feminist themes. She points out, *"In the society that is known as the mainstream, the problems of Dalit women are considered separatist. They face worst expressions of male chauvinistic society atrocities. So I took up writing about it"*. (In an interview with Kolappan, the editor of *Dalit Murasu*).

Her first book *Pazhainya Kazhidalum* published in 1989 took on patriarchy in Dalit Society and courted controversy. It was translated into English by the author herself as *The Grip of Change* (2000). *The Grip of Change* prepared the ground for a sustained critique of domestic violence and abuse of Dalit women at their home. Through this novel, Sivakami projects a gradual change and eventually

a transformation in the lives of Dalits through the formation of trade unions, in which she sees marginalized and exploited people actively fighting for their rights and justice against discrimination. The characters in this novel like Kathamuthu, Thangam and Gowri echo the ideas of the author in many aspects. Sivakami's central focus is on Gowri's character which reflects the author's ideology about Dalit women empowerment. The change in the caste status is envisioned through Gowri's progressive empowerment in education, financial independence and rebelliousness throughout her life.

In the literacy circles, Sivakami is considered a strong Dalit writer with a feminist penchant. Her second novel *Anandayee*, published in 1992 focuses on the violent exploitation of a woman's body and points out how family as an institution is embedded in patriarchal, oppressive system, that are blatantly unjust to women. Her other novel *Kurukuvettu* is under translation to many foreign languages. As a part of her long unbroken creativity, Sivakami's first collection of poems was published in October 2011 under the title "Kadhavadaippu". Not only a poet, an essayist and a prolific short story writer, she is also the founder of a Dalit literacy magazine "PudhiyaKodangi". Sivakami points out that the magazine is named after a musical instrument that is used to drive away evil spirits.

Conclusion: Sivakami wants to uplift the Dalit society especially Dalit women in the country. So she serves hard through many channels for the empowerment of Dalit women in the country. Her journey began as an IAS officer but she took many roles like activist, critique of the society, politician and a writer for the welfare of Dalit People. She wants to work for them in all possible ways. Sivakami's progress continues mainly through her writings which are immortal in literature. She is beyond the limits of the society. She has a vision regarding the Dalit women in Tamil Nadu and tries to bring her dream to life in the society. Being a Tamil Dalit Feminist who has empowered herself as a writer and an emerging politician, Sivakami wants the Tamil women to empower themselves like her. So she is best suited for the empowerment of a woman in the Tamil Society. Inspired by Sivakami and her writings, many women should empower themselves in this Tamil society and serve for our country.

Acknowledgment: I would like to thank my soul mate, Mr. P. Ananth who encourages me a lot regarding the conference presentation.

References

1. Irudayam.S.J, Aloysius, Joel Lee. "Dalit Women speak out; voice against Dalit Women in India". Overview Report. **National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights**. New Delhi. 2006.
2. Shivkumar, Vaishali. "A Dalit woman under a strong clutch of Patriarchy: A comprehensive study of *The Grip of Change*". **Language in India**. 13:4, April 2013.
3. Sivakami's Interview from "The Hindu" Newspaper - March 06, 2010, March 19, 2012 & Interview from "The Outlook" with Pushpalyengar, December 2012.
4. www.outlookindia.com/article/change - She Makes.
5. Gulf news. Com/sivakami-first dalit women writer.

Mrs. R.Priya
M.A. B.Ed. M.Phil.,
Assistant Professor of English,
V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women,
Virudunagar, Tamil Nadu.
Mail id: mayavarshitha@gmail.com