

## Tripuraneni - the Dravidian Icon in Andhra

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The 125th birthday celebrations of Tripuraneni Ramswamy (1887-1943) were held in different parts of the State and also in the United States on 15th January. We had the benefit of the scholarship of two T Venkateswara Raos when the centenary seminar was organized in 1987 at Andhra University.

Now very few can speak authoritatively on Tripuraneni. Except a few necrological observations on the eve of his 125th birthday in some regional papers, there seem to be not an elaborate discussion on the contributions of Tripuraneni to Telugu literature and the renaissance movement that he championed.



Tripuraneni Ramswamy

The proceedings of the Ongole seminar are not yet published. It is necessary that the younger generation should know about our leaders who were iconic in their contribution in transforming the Telugu society into an independent entity.

It is in this context that he is considered here as a Dravidian icon as his statue was unveiled in Tenali by the Secretary of Dravida Kazhagam Arivukkarasu on April 11, 2011. It is not only a symbolic gesture but a significant recognition that Tripuraneni had close interactions with the movement.

The first quarter of the 20th century had discerned remarkable developments in our social and cultural life.

Though the emergence of modern society appeared to be a universal phenomenon as a natural trail of reformation movement in Europe, it had its spillover effect on other societies. Orthodoxy in religion had dwindled, utilitarian and pragmatist ideas were freely exchanged in Europe. It had its impact on British India.

Indians have started going abroad, defying the religious ban on crossing the seas. Interestingly, children of orthodox families were among the few (like the present Swadeshis going westward) who got educated in London, Dublin, Cambridge and other liberal universities in Britain.

Some of them went to England to appear for ICS and to get license to practice at Bar. But, majority of them have become freedom fighters and freethinkers because of the prevailing intellectual climate in England.

Already, a reasonable ambiance was created in India after the introduction of reforms in education with Woods dispatch. Interestingly, the situation in the Deccan (South, including Bombay) and in the East India was qualitatively different from that in the rest of the country where the feudal princely States had

control over social life with exceptions like Baroda and a few others. Tripuraneni Ramaswamy left for Dublin under the refined circumstances.

Tripuraneni cannot be evaluated in isolation of the legacy that he endured from a region that was known for one of the earliest social revolts in India. He parodied the Gita to replicate the story of Palanati Brahma Naidu, and followed the traditional language in all his works, including Sambhuka Vadha, Khooni, Kurukshetram and others. Even his first edition of Vivaha Vidhi was in that language. There is a story in circulation like that of Periyar EVR.

He would not be taught Sanskrit by a Brahmin as he was a Shudra. He learnt the language through other means. It was quoted as one of the reasons for his vehement opposition to Brahminical scriptures.

Tripuraneni had very good contact with the Dravidian movement led by Periyar and participated in their meetings at several places.

The binary Aryan and Dravidian are explained as a phase of cultural divide, one representing an alien and the other homegrown. Tripuraneni appears to have championed the native and local variety.

Tripuraneni Ramaswamy Choudary was considered by some as the leader of a particular community like that of Veeresalingam Pantulu.

In a society of graded inequalities based on birth and charged with primordial emotions, one cannot denounce such accusations. But the impact of the movement and the cultural ethos that it generated has long lasting influence on the future course of society.

It is exactly here that some of our scholars have failed to place him in the correct historical perspective. The agrarian conditions of the region and the influence of the just started irrigation works and the surplus created have a different bearing compared to regions that were purely under the tutelage of feudal landlords. He hailed from a farmer's family and was not attached to any farm. He was a free citizen.

Therefore, he started his public career as an independent freethinker and joined the contemporary Social Justice movement started by non-Brahmin landholders in Madras Presidency. This matched his ideological position that he might have developed with his exposure to the rationalist literature, maybe Buddhist epistemology that was prevalent in the region.

Unlike other members of the Justice Party in the Andhra region, Tripuraneni was not a landlord or a zamindar. This makes all the difference. One can see how leaders of the Justice party have slowly disappeared after 1935 and how the seeds of dissent grown in the region gave birth to a Dravidian party to emerge later. But Tripuraneni did not live to see the fruits of Independence nor a social awakening that resulted in identity politics in the region a few decades later.

Unlike other non-Brahmin leaders, Tripuraneni and Periyar belonged to a different category of social activists. In fact, the first half of the 19th century had produced two interesting ideologues in the South (Deccan) unlike that of Bengal.

They were Mahatma Phule in Bombay presidency and Pandithamani Ayothidasar in Madras presidency. It was Ayothidas who popularized the concepts of Dravida, Sakya Buddhist society that helped to lay the foundation for a self-respect movement to be led by Periyar and even inspired Ambedkar.

In fact, Periyar Ramasamy was influenced by Ayothidas and worked with him when he was young. Similarly, Phule had laid the philosophical foundation for B.R. Ambedkar (he acknowledged it) to work in Maharashtra. But there was no such precursor for Tripuraneni.

This is an unexplored area for scholars to bring out the philosophical or ideological clout that he enjoyed. It seems he had very good connections with his contemporary freethinkers.

M N Roy and Tripuraneni were born in the same year. A meeting was arranged by Avula Gopala Krishnamurthy, the leader of the Rationalist movement, between M N Roy and Tripuraneni in Tenali. Had Tripuraneni lived longer, he would have been brought under Radical Humanism or Communism. One of his ardent followers (a personal friend of mine) Ravipudi Venkatadri worked in the movements initiated by Tripuraneni; Ravela Somayya ended up with Lohia socialism, etc.

We just do not have sufficient tools to appraise personalities like Tripuraneni; otherwise, it is easy to refer to the emergence of some communists, a regional party, cultural renaissance, including films, etc, as probable outcomes of his labour. Or we can at least conclude that Tripuraneni halted the decadence and religious bigotry in which the community was steeped in once economic power entered the cerebral.

The tragedy is that those who eulogized him once as the greatest reformer do avoid uttering his name now, lest the Dravidian ethos elude them forever.

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