Periyar’s Singapore journey retraced

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The iconic beard is the trademark of Mr E.V. Ramasamy, known fondly as Periyar in the Tamil community. But another face of him emerged at a public lecture by Professor A.R. Venkatachalapathy last week.

Periyar sported only a bushy moustache until his first overseas trip to Malaya and Singapore in December 1929. By the time he returned to Tamil Nadu, he had grown a beard as “probably he did not get the time to shave while overseas, and did not see the need to do so after his return”, quipped Prof Venkatachalapathy, 44, the current Chair of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations at the South Asian Studies Programme in the National University of Singapore.

But the nonchalance with which Periyar treated his own appearance was a far cry from the impact he had on the Tamil community with his Self Respect movement – a movement built on the premise that caste and religion were at the core of pervasive inequality.

During the public lecture titled From Erode To Volga held at the National Library, Prof Venkatachalapathy explained how Periyar’s trips to Malaya, Singapore and Europe impacted his social movement: “Periyar incorporated economic ideals and an anti-colonial agenda to his hugely popular Self Respect movement as a result of his trips.”

Periyar, considered the iconoclastic leader of the Dravidian movement which has had a deep impact on the history of contemporary India, died in 1973 at the age of 94. In an award given out by UNESCO in 1970, he was honoured as the “Socrates of South East Asia”.

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Changing look... Prof Venkatachalapathy (above) spoke about Periyar arriving with a bushy moustache (top) and leaving with a full beard (top, in stamp format).

PHOTOS: ARUN RAMU, PROF VENKATACHALAPATY