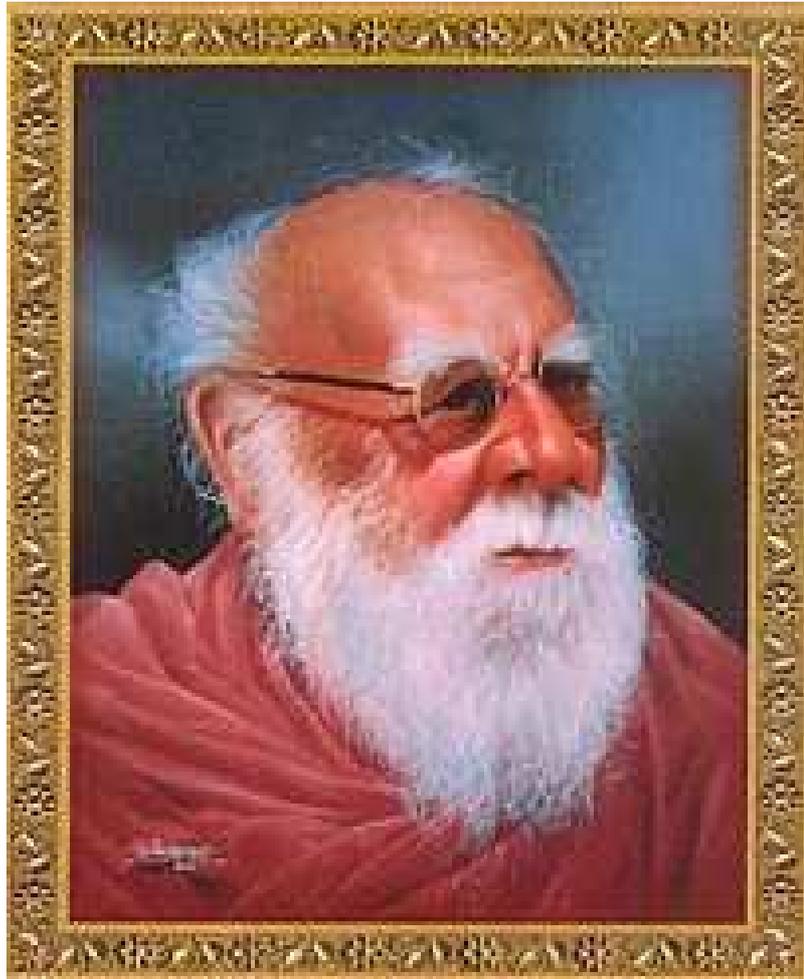


POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF PERIYAR

By: Louis Antony



E. V. Ramasamy Periyar

(1879 -1973)

INTRODUCTION

A person, who has devoted his whole life to a particular cause, should have three special qualities in order to be successful in his work. Those qualities are absolute courage, self-sacrifice and a clear plan of action. To a large extent Periyar possesses all these three qualities.

Oppression is a known phenomenon. It existed, is existing and will continue to exist. In any society, we find that some are occupying the first steps of the ladder and some are pushed to the last and the least. This is an existential situation of our country. In such a situation, there are two groups which are always prominent in the society—the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressed react to the oppression or the oppressors in different ways. Some silently accept it as their destiny. They believe that such a situation has befallen them because of their past life. Others join forces with the oppressors and co-operate with them with a hidden motive of safeguarding their lives and interests. There are others who question the situation. They think in terms of challenging the oppressors.

According to sociologists and social scientists, there are three categories of people in any society at any given time. The first category of people are known as “come and go people.” They appear and disappear. They come and go without even asking the question “why” about their existing situation. They will see to it that nothing that happens in the context disturbs, affects, touches or moves them. They like to live untouched, undisturbed and unmoved lives. The second category is better than the first. They allow the situation to affect them and they look at the situation and ask the question “why.” The third category is known as the “why not” category. In this category, the people not only ask the question “why” but also “why not.” These people are generally known as “revolutionaries.” what the revolutionaries exactly do is, they look at the situation, question it, study and analyze it like the second category but after analyzing the situation, instead of just doing something, they have a vision for a new future. E. V. Ramasami Periyar, no doubt belonged to this third category of people. He looked at the

situation, analyzed it and questioned it. He did not stop with questioning but had a vision for a new future, a new Tamil Nadu.

From my childhood, I had a special interest and respect for Periyar. This deepened when I listened to Dr. Jerry Rosario's lecture on Periyar in the year 2004. In the beginning of this year, when I was in search of a topic for my dissertation, I thought of Periyar strongly. I was deeply touched by his self-respect ideology and his philosophy. Thus, I was inspired to work on the Political Philosophy of this great leader, E. V. R. Periyar.

Power is an important factor in the world. Everyone craves for power. There is a deep wound of insecurity among the people and they want to heal this wound with the medicine called power. Everybody wants to assert his or her identity and for that, the tool is power. For the sake of power, the political parties of today forgo their ideologies and join hands with other parties, which have no ideologies of their own. These people have no vision for the country. Their political philosophy is, "Capture power by any means—it is only the tool of self-assertion." On the other hand, the political philosophy of Periyar is human respectability with an emphasis on economic and social equality, which must be primarily based on rational thinking. Periyar was never interested or cared for seats of power. However, he was in a continuous fight against certain oppressive ideas accepted in society. The re-presentation of his political philosophy is the Self-Respect Movement, which later came to be known as "Dravida Kazhagam."

All through his life, Periyar fought against Brahmin domination. There were two events, which brought him onto this path. At the age of 25, he went over to Varanasi. He always pictured Varanasi as a holy place, where anybody could go and stay. However, when he went there, he saw that only the Brahmins were taken care of while non-Brahmins were not allowed to stay in the inn. Being a non-Brahmin E. V. R Periyar was not given any food, even though at that time the temple was offering food for people coming from all over the world. Because of his hunger, he had to fill his stomach from the leftovers. This bitter experience seeded in him a great aversion towards the Hindu religion. The other event that hurt him more than the previous was that which happened in Vaikom in Kerala. At Vaikom, the low caste people were not even allowed to walk or

pass through the streets of the Brahmins. These two experiences resulted in a radical change in the thought pattern of Periyar.

In this dissertation, I make an attempt to understand Periyar, his philosophy and his values. In the introductory chapter, I deal with the early life of Periyar, the South Indian situation during his time and the socio-political role of young E. V. R. Periyar. The second chapter deals with Periyar's powerful philosophy—the Self-Respect Movement. In this chapter, I have dealt with its origin, philosophy, meaning, politics, gains, etc. An attempt is also made to show the birth and present situation of Dravida Kazhagam. In the third chapter, I have elaborated Periyar's views on women's rights. The fourth chapter portrays Periyar's views on religion. The final chapter deals with the present political situation of India, particularly in Tamil Nadu. I have also made an effort to analyze the question, whether Periyar is a failure or an ideal for the present day.

CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY LIFE OF E. V. R. PERIYAR

1.1 BIRTH OF PERIYAR

E. V. Ramasami Naicker, popularly known “Thanthai Periyar”¹ was born in an affluent family on 17 September 1879. His parents, Venkata Naicker and Chinnathayamma were deeply pious and religious. Venkata Naicker was a businessman in the town, Erode, and the family belonged to the Naicker caste.

As a schoolchild, Periyar was mischievous and showed little interest in studies, thus his schooling came to an end within a few years. He left the school at the age of twelve and entered the business of his father. To the astonishment of all, he showed keen interest in business, learnt its technique in short time and he was found to be an expert in matters connected to business entrepreneurship.

Periyar’s efficiency and skill in business won him the respect of his fellow-merchants in Erode. At the age of nineteen, he married Nagammai who was only thirteen. She proved to be an ideal wife and co-operated wholeheartedly with her husband in all his public activities and agitations. His father died in 1911 when Periyar was only thirty. Without losing heart, he threw himself into his father’s business, strengthened it and added to the wealth of the family.

1.2 THE SOUTH INDIAN SITUATION OF HIS TIME

Religiously, South Indian society is complex. The religion of the majority, Hinduism is inextricably linked up with the temple-cult. Temples and shrines are numerous and the ritual of worship in temples and at home guides the daily life of millions of Tamils. The religious year with its astrological calculations, often bound to local traditions has its timings for holidays, festivals and pilgrimages. Inauspicious and auspicious times are decisive for almost any activity in family life, in business and for social engagements. The mythological traditions, both oral and written in the *Puranas*,

¹ M. D. Gopalakrishnan, *Periyar: Father of The Tamil Race*, 2nd ed. (Madras: Emerald Publishers, 1992), p. 1.

are in the minds and hearts of the people and are often quoted and held up as ideals. To these characteristic features and trends belong also a common popular conception of power and spirits, and indigenous traditions of religious-judicial leadership exemplified by Brahmin *Purohits* (Priests) to local non-Brahmin village leaders and advisors, like elders *Mantiravatis* and inspired soothsayers. These popular leaders exercise a considerable and sometimes decisive influence based on their religious and social functions and positions. The role of the Brahmin in the temple cult, through its traditional importance, has furnished the South Indian Brahmins with great authority.²

1.3 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ROLE OF YOUNG PERIYAR

Early in life, Periyar entered a career of trade and politics. His active participation in public association started when he was in his twenties. His engagement in business and trade was soon followed by a political career at first in the municipality of Erode and later in Tamil Nadu as a whole. Periyar's first entry into public life of Tamil Nadu was made when the Madras Presidency association (MPA) was founded on 20 September 1917. His association with the MPA helped him in the development of his ideals and convictions.³ Public spirit was very dominant in young Periyar. He never believed in the theory that the character of young people was largely determined by the company they keep and the social atmosphere in which they were brought up. He lived in the midst of all kinds of people from his young days but took his own decisions about everything after deep thought and was never a victim of influence or pressure of any kind.

It was at this stage that the Congress put before itself the ideals of amelioration of the condition of the masses, removal of untouchability, prohibition, etc. As these ideals were similar to his own principles on social reform, Periyar joined the Congress in 1919. He soon began to adopt Gandhiji's principles punctiliously. He cast away all expensive mill clothes and foreign garments and took to hand-spun khadi. He persuaded all the members of his family to only wear simple khadi clothes. He said, "If everyone decided to wear only khadi, there won't be starvation in this country."⁴

² Anita Diehl, *Periyar E. V. Ramasamy: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India* (New Delhi: B. I. Publications, 1978), p. 4.

³ E. Sa Vishwanathan, *The Political Career of E. V. Ramasamy Naicker* (Madras: Ravi and Vasanth Publishers, 1983), p. 71.

⁴ Gopalakrishnan, p. 7.

In the year 1920, Gandhi started the Non-Co-operation Movement. All the Congress members were asked to resign the positions given to them by the Government. In response to Gandhiji's call, Periyar closed down the wholesale business. He did this in order to devote all his time and energy to serve the people and wear the Congress banner. In the beginning of the year 1920, Periyar enrolled himself as one of the members of the Congress party in the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and was elected as a secretary for two consecutive years, 1921-22. The Tamil Nadu Congress never suspected Periyar's commitment and sincerity. In fact, they were secretly afraid of his righteousness and his fervour for eradicating casteism.⁵

Periyar was an active member in the Congress. His work in the Non Co-operation Movement in 1920-21, the Temperance Movement in 1922, the Khalar Movement in 1922-24 and the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924 had not only helped the growth of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu but also had in the process, promoted his image and status in the party as an important leader. After Periyar's significant role in the Vaikom Satyagraha, the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, which met at Kanchipuram in 1925, unanimously passed a resolution praising Periyar as "one whose contribution to the success of the Satyagraha was highly remarkable and henceforth he came to be known as 'Vaikom Veerar' (Vaikom Hero)."⁶

The attitudes, convictions and ideals of the Congress party and the Non-co-operation Movement that attracted Periyar in the beginning, gradually disillusioned him. Though he was an active member of the Congress and a responsible office bearer, he suspected that certain individuals within the party were trying to take advantage of their position to advance the interest of their communities. When he joined the Congress in 1919, he believed that all the prominent people in that organization were enlightened, and he hoped that with their co-operation, he could get rid of the evil of untouchability and that the backward and depressed classes could be enabled to have proper education and a proper share in Government appointments. With this hope, he wanted to move a resolution at the Tamil Nadu Congress Conference at Thirunelveli in 1920 urging the committee to accept the principle of communal representation in education and employment. However, S. Srinivasa Iyengar who presided over the conference

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶ K. Veeramani, *Periyar on Women's Rights* (Madras: Emerald Publishers, 1996), p. 14.

disallowed the resolution stating that it would cause communal tension. Periyar was disappointed but did not lose hope. He proposed the resolution at the Tirupur conference in 1922. There was a heated discussion. However, nothing positively emerged from it. Periyar was really irritated by the heartlessness of the upper classes, which quoted the *Sastras* and the *Puranas*. He thundered that those who were keen on doing justice to the backward and depressed classes must come forward to burn *Manu Dharmasastra* and the *Ramayana*. In 1923 at the Salem conference, Periyar proposed the same resolution. The tension between two groups of people mounted and the resolution was not put to vote.⁷

Periyar realized that some men within the party were the main obstacle for the failure of his effort in getting the resolution passed. He was then convinced that in order to get justice to the underprivileged and depressed, he must disassociate himself with Congress and work from outside. This daring step was remarkable because it gave birth to his political philosophy.

⁷ Gopalakrishnan, p. 11.

CHAPTER 2

PERIYAR AND THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

In the Annals of the presidency of Madras the period between 1927 and 1934 was important because of the series of social reform movements which emerged and affected the social and political life of the people. Of all the social reform movements in Tamil Nadu, the only movement, which was entitled non-religious and secular in its approach to social problems, was the Self-Respect Movement started by Periyar. This movement was quite strong and even militant in its efforts to achieve social equality. It was described from the beginning as “dedicated to the goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian past.”⁸ The laudable social progress that has been achieved now in Tamil Nadu can be attributed to the Self-Respect Movement and the tireless propaganda conducted by Periyar over the years. A. Ramaswamy Mudaliar, in his tribute to Periyar, said, “At the beginning of the 19th century, the French thinker Rousseau kindled the reasoning power of his country men and prepared them for the French Revolution. I should say that because Periyar has taught our people to employ their reasoning faculty and because he has kindled their sense of self-respect, he should be called the Rousseau of Tamil Nadu.”⁹

2.1 GENESIS OF THE SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT

What prompted Periyar to take up with missionary zeal a cause that was not easy to promote even among those who needed it most is generally known. But what sustained his interest is a mystery. It was the steadfast devotion to the cause. That was the greatness of E. V. Ramasami Naicker which made him a Periyar “a great man,” a *Tantai* “father” and a *Thalaivar* “leader.”¹⁰ Periyar was born and brought up in an extremely orthodox household. In his early boyhood, he was exposed to a rigid orthodox way of life strictly governed by traditional prescriptions and scrupulously attached to conventional ritual-ridden activities. Periyar, recalling his boyhood remarked that “the

⁸ E. V. Ramasamy Periyar, *The Genesis of my Self-Respect Movement*, trans. A. S. Venu (Madras: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1981), p. 11.

⁹ Gopalakrishnan, p. 86.

¹⁰ S. Saraswati, *Towards Self-Respect: Periyar E. V. R. on a New World* (Madras: Institute of South Indian Studies, 1994), p. 10.

Hindu orthodoxy practiced by his ancestors and the theological discourses perennially conducted in his house turned him to be an agnostic.”¹¹ Small incidents of caste discriminatory treatment experienced while he was yet a schoolchild seemed to have made a lasting impression so derogatory to his sense of “self-respect” as to drive him to be a determined speaker after an egalitarian society. Giving his own reason for becoming a staunch opponent to religious practices, Periyar had observed that in every circumstance and in every manner he was different from his “association and surrounding” and never became a victim to his surrounding in any field. He stated that the general belief that association and environment mould a person’s life, ideals and methods, which was also found true in experience, had been disproved in his case.¹² The environment, which provided him with enormous opportunities to learn theological lessons, did not infuse religious spirit in him, but instead helped to supply him tremendous raw material for building up a philosophy and a movement to resist and break that environment and all that it signified and patronized.

Viewed from the context in which the Self-Respect Movement originated, it seems doubtful whether Periyar deliberately shifted his attention from “reform” to “social reform” on the ground that the latter should precede the former. Periyar was actively and deeply involved in national politics in 1925, when he left the Indian National Congress to organize the Self-Respect Movement. At that time, Periyar seemed to have felt that he had not been able to reform the nation through political work and realized that the reason for this was the obstruction posed by religious beliefs and that his service was essential for removing them. Periyar felt that intense work was required first for the removal of the miseries caused in the name of religion and suffering of the people living a life without self-respect and only then the attainment of true freedom would be possible.¹³

The immediate provocation for Periyar to quit the Congress was said to be the discriminatory treatment given to students on caste basis at the Gurukulam (a resident school) conducted at Cheran Mahadevi (Tirunelveli District) with Congress funds.¹⁴ Periyar objected to the provision of separate dining and living arrangements provided for

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 11.

¹³ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴ Periyar, *The Genesis*, p. 20.

Brahmin and non-Brahmin students at the hostel. Another thing was that Periyar as an active member of the Congress and a responsible office bearer had observed and understood the subtle ways of the Brahmins to use the Congress to fortify the interest of their community. He also realized that all his efforts in the Congress were being made use of by the Brahmins in the Congress party. Therefore, he left the congress in 1925. Periyar bitterly remarked, “The Congress can not do any good to non-Brahmins. Here after, my chief duty will be to destroy the Congress.”¹⁵

However, the organization was not registered as a society for a long time although efforts were on since 1929. It was registered in 1952 under the name “The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, Tiruchirappalli.”¹⁶ The Self-Respect Movement thus got a firm foundation in Tamil Nadu. It was a political movement in origin; a social movement in its goals; and an apparently anti-religious movement in its methods. The intertwining of religion, society and state in the progress of this movement reflects the personality of its founder leader Periyar.

2.2 SUYAMARIYATHAI

The term “self-respect” corresponds to the Tamilized form of the Sanskrit word *suyamariyathai*. It is a combination of the words *suya* which means “self” and *mariyathai* which means “respect.” The motive behind the inauguration of the movement was to instill the feeling of Self-Respect among the people and to eradicate all kinds of birth-based inequalities and discriminations. The Self-Respect Movement was dedicated to the ideal of giving the Tamils “a sense of pride” based on their glorious past. Periyar declared that the objectives of the Self-Respect movement were “the establishment of a casteless and classless society with equal rights, free from superstitious beliefs and the eradication of all social evils.” Its aim was also to give complete equality, to women with men including property rights, to promote womens education and widow remarriage.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gopalakrishnan, p. 16.

¹⁶ Saraswati, p. 20.

¹⁷ “The Dravida Kazhagam: What it stands for?” (Madras: The Dravida Kazhagam Publications, 1982), p. 7.

2.3 THE PHILOSOPHY OF SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

No account of the freedom movement in Tamil Nadu can be complete without an account of the Self-Respect Movement that accompanied it and accomplished a silent revolution in the thinking of the people. The philosophy of self-respect, which underlines Periyar's image of an ideal world, was said to be an universally accepted one, a philosophy that preaches that human actions should be based on rational thinking; conclusions drawn from reason should be respected under any circumstances.

Periyar declared that the Self-Respect Movement alone could be a genuine freedom movement and political freedom would not be fruitful without individual self-respect. To Periyar, self-respect was as valuable as life itself. To a human being it is the protection of his *Suyamariyadai* (self-respect) which is his birthright and not *swaraj* (political freedom). He described the movement as *Arivu Vidutalai Iyakkam*, that is, a movement to liberate the intellect.¹⁸ Human equality with stress on economic and social equality formed the central theme of the Self-Respect philosophy. Propagation of the philosophy of self-respect became the full time activity of Periyar since 1925. Oral and written media were used mostly in Tamil. A Tamil weekly *Kudi Arasu* started in 1925, became the principal organ of the movement.

2.4 THE AIM OF THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

The aims of the Self-Respect movement have been outlined and stated in two pamphlets *Namathu Kurikkol* and *Tiravitakkalaka Lateiyam*¹⁹

- a) This movement aims to do away with such social structure of the society where one class of people claim to be superior to others and some men claim to be of higher birth than others.
- b) It aims to work for getting equal opportunities for all people, irrespective of their communities it will strive to secure equal status for women along with men in life and according to law.

¹⁸ Saraswati, p. 2.

¹⁹ Vishwanathan, p. 73.

- c) All people should be given equal opportunities for growth and development. Friendship and fellow feeling should be natural among all the people.
- d) It aims to completely eradicate untouchability and to establish a united society based on brotherhood and sisterhood.
- e) To establish and maintain homes for orphans and widows and to run educative institutions.
- f) To discourage people from building new temples, mutts, chlorites or Vedic Schools. People should drop the caste titles in their names. Common funds should be utilized for educational purpose and for creating employment opportunities for the unemployed.

The aims and resolutions were recommended for the careful scrutiny and guidance of all the people in Tamil Nadu, after the first Self-Respect Conference which was held at Chegalpattu on 17 and 18 February 1929. More than six thousand people attended this great conference. About half of them were ordinary people who had come from distant places in the hope of getting sound advice on social equality, social evils and the ways of overcoming the forces of exploitation. The next Self-Respect Conference was held at Erode on 10 May 1930, under the chairmanship of the Guest National leader M. R. Jayakar. This conference took a bolder step than the previous one and discouraged idol worship in strong terms. At the Self-Respect Conference held at Virudhunagar in August 1931 under the presidentship of Sri Kanchi K. Shanmugam, all the progressive ideas were emphasized, in addition to these, strongly worded resolutions against untouchability and for the encouragement of inter-caste marriages were passed.²⁰

After this conference, the Self-Respect Movement gained momentum and the people in the villages realized that their children should have the benefit of education. People in general were coming to realize that caste distinctions should never be encouraged. The practice of having separate dining places for certain sections of society

²⁰ Saraswati, pp. 5-6.

was abolished. Self-respecters were the inaugurators of the temple–entry movement in Tamil Nadu.

The social service rendered by Periyar thus helped in the liberation and uplift of the neglected masses and brought them into the mainstream of National Life. Through this movement, Periyar wanted to dispel the ignorance of the people and make them enlightened. During his speech at the conference, he exhorted people to take steps to change the institutions and values that led to meaningless divisions and unjust discriminations. He advised them to change according to the requirements of the changing times and keep pace with the modern conditions.

2.5 THE POLITICS OF THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

The most outstanding personalities on the Indian political scene in the last century were Mahatma Gandhi and Loknayak Jayaprakash Narayan. They have made unique contributions to political theory and represented in their personalities an immense political force which none could ignore. However, neither could found or find a political party that could project all their philosophies and programmes. Though Periyar was not working on a national scale, yet his philosophy had, no doubt, a relevance all over India. He was working through the medium of a regional language, within a regional setting and for the regional people and this factor limited the application of his theories essentially to the local situation. However, his propaganda produced such widespread impact that the leaders and parties at the national level could not afford to ignore him or his campaigns.

In the early years of the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar seemed to have been very clear in his opinion that linking social service with political service would prove very harmful to social service. Periyar observed that politics had led to the rise of dishonest people to cheat the masses and he did not want social service to be associated with it. He feared that it would also fall into the hand of dirty politics. Therefore, he decided to keep away from politics completely.

Periyar asserted that everyone in politics was bound to turn dishonest or betray his own society or nation. He thought that for the continuance and success of the social

service movement, an assurance should be taken from the intending participants in the Self-Respect Movement regarding non-participation in active politics.²¹

His decision to not to enter into politics was taken after considerable thought, over the corrupting influence of politics. Periyar was of the opinion that even Gandhiji's movement—that was held as noble had degenerated after the decision to enter legislative politics. However, the movement that started in disgust of party politics was consciously or unconsciously dragged into a search for its identity in the political arena. At that time, the Self-Respect Movement went through a crisis over the issue whether to have political participation or not. This crisis was solved by a compromise solution adopted at a meeting. According to this, the Self-Respect Movement was to concentrate primarily on its objective of social transformation, but should permit those who wanted to enter politics to do so. The change was due to the realization that any social reform could be achieved through political power. Therefore, to accommodate the politically inclined self-respecters it was decided to organize a socialist party (Self-Respect Samadharma Party).²²

2.6 THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

The Self-Respect Movement was popular in its appeal. Though it began as a social reform movement, its effects were ultimately profoundly political. In the words of Irschick, “it was dedicated to the goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian past, which also meant a denial of the superiority of the Brahmins and of the Brahmin's implicit faith in the system.”²³

One of the important achievements of the movement is the ushering in of self-respect marriages, in which there will be no priest and the marriage alliance had to be entered into by the free will of the couple after declaring that they have agreed to be life partners by the exchange of garlands and without religious rituals in a simple function to avoid all wasteful expenses.²⁴

²¹ Ibid., p. 48.

²² Ibid., p. 57.

²³ Prakash Arumugam, “Social Reformer: E. V. R. Periyar.” Online. Internet. 28 January 2003. <http://www.uni-giessen_de/gk1415/periyar.htm>.

²⁴ “The Dravida Kazhagam,” p. 8.

After Self-Respect Movement gained momentum, all the people in the villages realized that their children should have the benefit of education. They also learned to claim that children of all communities sit together in their schools. People had been waiting for years and years for such a healthy and helpful movement. This amount of progress can be attributed only to the Self-Respect Movement and the tireless propaganda conducted by Periyar over the years.

2.7 DRAVIDA KAZHAGAM

When Periyar was young, there were two political parties other than the Congress-the Justice Party and the Swarajya Party. The Swarajya Party, like the Congress was dominated by Brahmins. The Justice Party consisted only of non-Brahmins under the leadership of Panagal Raja who was working for the uplift of the underprivileged. Although an ardent opponent of Brahmin power, Periyar seemed to have politically drawn toward the Congress rather than the Justice Party.

When Periyar left the Congress in 1925, he organized the “Self-Respect Movement” designed as a Dravidian uplift, and seeking to expose the Brahmin tyranny and deceptive methods by which they controlled all spheres of Hindu life. He publicly ridiculed the *Puranas* as fairy tales, not only imaginary and irrational but grossly immoral as well. He carried an active propaganda in a attempt to rid the people off *Puranic* Hinduism and wean them away from religious ceremonies requiring the priestly ceremonies of the Brahmins.

Periyar made a trip to the Soviet Union in 1931. When he returned he was fully convinced that materialism was the answer to Indian’s problems and openly advocated mass revolution and the overthrow of the Government. Tempered somewhat by imprisonment for sedition in 1933-34, he indicated a willingness to join one of the major parties on a conditional basis. He formulated a fourteen-point programme and presented it to both the Congress and the Justice Party for their acceptance. It was wholly unacceptable to the Congress, but the Justice Party, then rapidly going downhill gave the nod.

Under the Congress ministry of C. Rajagopalachari in 1937, Hindi was introduced to the South as a compulsory subject in schools. Taking it as an affront to Tamil culture, Periyar waved black flags of rebellion in his first anti-Hindi campaign. The agitation against the imposition of Hindi brought Periyar to the forefront of attention. The following year 1938, while in jail, Periyar was elected President of the Justice Party.²⁵

Periyar saw the imposition of Hindi as a subjugation of Tamil peoples, which could only be avoided through the creation of a Dravidian state. In 1939, he organized the “Dravida Nadu Conference” for the advocacy of a separate and independent “Dravidasthan.” In 1944, the Justice Party was recognized under the guidance of Periyar as the “Dravida Kazhagam” or “Dravidian Federation” and at its Salem conference, took on the character of a highly militant mass organization. At the 1945 conference at Tiruchirapalli, the Dravida Kazhagam adopted a constitution and took as its symbol a black flag with a red circle in the centre. Black represented the deprivations and the indignities to which the Dravidians were subjected to under the Hindu religion milieu. Red stood for the determined efforts to dispel the ignorance and blind faith among the people and to liberate them materially and mentally from all kinds of exploitation, especially of social and cultural.²⁶

The object of the Dravida Kazhagam was proclaimed to be the achievement of a Sovereign Independent Dravidian republic, which would be federal in nature with four units corresponding to the linguistic divisions each having residuary power and autonomy of integral administration. It would be a “casteless society” an egalitarian “Dravida Nadu” to which the depressed and downtrodden could get allegiance.²⁷

As in the Self-Respect Movement, one of Periyar’s basic objectives was to remove all “superstitious beliefs” based upon religion or tradition. No members were allowed to wear the sectarian marks of faith across the foreheads. Periyar vigorously campaigned for widow remarriage and intercaste marriages. The reformed marriage rite

²⁵ Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Dravidian Movement* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965), p. 27.

²⁶ Saraswati, p. 87.

²⁷ Hardgrave, p. 28.

of the Dravida Kazhagam gained wide acceptance among the non-Brahmins of Tamil Nadu.

The ceremonies and rites of passage at which Brahmins officiated, came to be despised by the Dravida Kazhagam, and the Hindu religion was denounced as an opiate by which the Brahmins had dulled the masses so that they might be controlled. Atheism became virtually a cult among Kazhagam members. “A Hindu in the present concept may be a Dravidian, but a Dravidian in the real sense of the term cannot and shall not be a Hindu.”²⁸ Pain was taken to destroy the images of sacred Hindu deities such as *Rama* and *Ganesh*; and the *Ramayan* and the other Sanskrit epics were destroyed.

Young people, attracted to the party by powerful speakers and forceful writers, were encouraged to contribute to the cultural growth of Tamil Nadu. The glories of the Tamil kingdom were hailed as peaks in the cultural history of India and the antiquity of Dravidian civilization was pushed further back into the past with the aid of English scholars such as Robert Caldwell. The culture of the ancient Aryans was belittled as barbarian in comparison to the splendour and richness of Dravidian tradition and Tamil culture. The past was resurrected and given a reality, which far exceeded the evidence extant.

The Dravidian movement has been instrumental in bringing the people of Tamil Nadu to an awareness of itself as a community. The Dravida Kazhagam through its organizational units in every district and *taluka* in Madras brought the message of Tamil nationality to the masses. The Dravida Kazhagam in spite of its appeals to the masses retained its quasi-military organization and its basically elitist character. The vitality of the Dravida Kazhagam had attracted many outstanding young men of whom one of the most talented was C. N. Annadurai.

Periyar’s popularity suffered a disastrous blow in 1949, when at the age of 72; he married a 28-year-old girl who had been an active member of the party. In a statement giving the reasons for his marriage, he said that as he had no confidence in his lieutenants, he was marrying a girl in whom he had full trust and who would lead the

²⁸ A. S. Venu, *Dravidasthan* (Madras: Kalai Manrams, 1954), p. 13

party after his death. On the pretext that the marriage was contrary to the avowed social objectives of the Kazhagam, which included the elimination of the practice of unequal marriages, C. N. Annadurai seceded from the party to form the “Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.”²⁹

This marked the birth of the DMK. After some years, when Karunanidhi was the leader of the party, M. G. Ramachandran seceded from the party to form “Anaithu Indiya Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam” (AIADMK). So likewise many Dravidian movements took birth. All of them appeared as manifestations of the Dravidian movement at large. Like the Dravida Kazhagam, other Dravidian parties emphasized the great role of the Tamils and their cultural heritage.

More than eight decades have passed since the Dravidian movement was born in Tamil Nadu and in this period it has passed through many changes, many slogans and deviated from many of the ideals of Periyar that it had been persuing. Today in Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian parties do not live up to the Self-Respect ideology and principles of Periyar. The heights of corruption have been reached with parties calling themselves Dravidians. They are not taking up the contemporary crucial issues for fear of losing their vote banks. Though many parts of India realize the importance of Periyar, surprisingly, back in its own state, he seems to have little or no following. As a matter of fact, we see that the main Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu have now come to a stage where they have no hesitation in joining hands with the Hindutva parties (BJP and others) to share power at the centre. Hindutva and Brahminism, which Periyar declared as the main enemy, are today the closest allies of the DMK, AIADMK, MDMK and other Dravidian parties.

²⁹ Selig Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 123.

CHAPTER 3

PERIYAR AND WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION

The oppression of women has been a chronic and deep-rooted malady all over the world. The condition of women has continued to be far from satisfactory in our country too. Early nineteenth century saw the emergence of various socio-religious reform movements in India. In the social sphere, there were movements of caste reform or caste abolition, equal rights for women, and a crusade, against social and legal inequalities. Interestingly, the enlightened individuals of the male section took the lead in initiating efforts to abolish laws and customs, which suppressed the women in society. If the girls today outshine the boys in Tamil Nadu, in academic excellence, the credit should go to E. V. R. Periyar and others. This chapter highlights the contribution of Periyar to women's emancipation.

Periyar was aware that for ages, women in India had been confined within their homes and it was taken for granted that bringing forth children and cooking for the family were their only duties. Very few families cared to educate their girl children. The orthodox people justified their attitude towards women saying that they followed *Manu dharma*. Periyar said, "Any code that advised men to treat their women folk worse than animals is a barbarous code and can be respected only by barbarians."³⁰ The uplift of women was one of the programs of Periyar from the beginning of his public services.

In the view of Periyar, women should give up all practices that deny their legitimate rights and makes them subservient to men. They should develop physical strength just like men. They must exercise and get trained in the use of weapons. They must acquire the ability to protect themselves when they are physically harassed. They should obtain the necessary training to enter the army and, when need arises, they must fight the enemy. Therefore, Periyar says, "The present system of education, which will be common to both men and women, which will be useful in practical life and which will enable them to free themselves from cowardice and superstitious belief should be

³⁰ Prakash Arumugam, "Social Reformer: E. V. R. Periyar," Online. Internet. 28 January 2003. <http://www.uni-giessen_de/gk1415/periyar.htm>.

adopted.”³¹ Periyar was thus emphatic that the common practice of giving a lower status to women in the Indian society should disappear.

3.1 SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT’S RESOLUTIONS ON WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Periyar believed, “If a man realizes that he is equal to all other men and that he has the right to equality with all other men then he becomes a self-respecting person.”³² Periyar also wanted women to develop that kind of self-respect. This was one of the reasons why he named his movement the “Self-Respect Movement.” In 1929, when the first Self-Respect Conference was held at Chengalpat in Tamil Nadu, the following resolutions were passed:

This conference resolves that women should be given equal rights with men for property and for the privilege of succession and the rights and facilities to be employed in any profession or job, and that necessary steps should be taken (by the government) to employ a greater number of women of teachers in schools including primary schools.

Another resolution stated that the age for a girl’s marriage should be about 16 years. If the husband or the wife disliked the alliance and wanted the marriage to be dissolved he or she should be given the right to cancel it. Widows should be helped to remarry and men and women should be given the right to choose their partners without attaching any importance to religion or caste.³³

3.2 PERIYAR’S VIEWS

Let us now see some of the views of Periyar on love and chastity, women’s marriage, widow-remarriage, education, birth control and property rights. These are from the vast and varied speeches and articles of Periyar.

3.2.1 On Love and Chastity

“A man or a woman can be moved to love only on a consideration of age or intellect or property or educational or musical talent, features or the status of the parents or the apparent suitability for physical satisfaction or areas of interest as a source of

³¹ Veeramani, *Periyar on Women’s Rights*, p. 41.

³² “Counter Currents,” Online. Internet. 2 August 2004. <<http://www.countercurrents.org>>.

³³ Gopalakrishnan, p. 31.

satisfaction.”³⁴ According to Periyar the Tamil word *Kadhal* which can be translated into English as “love” has no special significance other than what words like kindness, desire and friendship indicate. For Periyar, “If true love has arisen in the heart of a person towards a member of the other sex, then that love becomes a fixed and permanent feature and the person concerned cannot experience any kind of feeling like lust, temporary attachment or anything of that kind for the other person.”³⁵ Hence, Periyar opines that when a man and woman fall in love they may have the same temperament, mental or other equipments, aims and ideals.

Therefore, he believes that love is not different from desire, affections and friendships. These feelings are the same whether they are directed towards living beings or non-living things and that these feelings are all subject to change. Kindness, attachment, friendship and such feelings are there to give pleasure and mental satisfaction and not for demonstrative show. Chastity of women is highly valued in our society but today’s writers have interpreted *Karpu* as *Pathivirtham* or worship of the husband. This is because men have more property, more income and greater physical strength than women. Men have been encouraged to adopt a rough attitude towards women, to subordinate them and also to believe that *Karpu* does not concern man. The Tamil word for “chastity” only means “integrity” or “truthfulness” or being true to one’s commitments.³⁶

Periyar kindled the everybody’s thoughts by ridiculing the use of the word “chastity” only with reference to women. According to Periyar, character is essential for men and women. Therefore speaking of chastity only with reference to women, degraded not merely women, but men also. He strongly said:

Cruel religions and laws which force women to put up with the brutal behavior of the husband for the sake of chastity must die out. The wickedness of society which, in the name of chastity, force a woman to suppress her real feelings of love and live with a man who has neither love nor kindness for her, should go.³⁷

³⁴ E. V. Ramasamy Periyar, *Pen Yen Adimaiyaanaal?* Trans. A. S. Venu (Madras: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1989), p. 2.

³⁵ Veeramani, *Periyar on Women’s Rights*, p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁷ Gopalakrishnan, p. 32.

He emphatically expressed that he could not find a more hateful practice in human society than the imposition of chastity in all circumstances on women alone.

3.2.2 On Marriage

The booklet “The Benefit of a Help-Mate” by Periyar, gives his views on the situations and the rights of women. It states:

What is marriage today? We are not bound to any tradition. Marriage is an agreement. Marriage of lust is not good. Of importance is knowledge, love, suitability and experience. Marriage is for life. There is no room for old Tamil customs, or for Aryan traditions. Marriages in Russia are free, and no property is involved.³⁸

In our country and particularly in Hindu society, a marriage is a function causing a lot of difficulties and wastage. A marriage indicates that a man and a woman are going to live together as husband and wife and it need not imply anything else. But people spend a lot of money, borrow recklessly and spend lavishly to satisfy their vanity and get flattering compliments from others. For Periyar this was all a waste. He advocated civil marriages, which did not incur much expense, but were legally valid. In place of traditional marriages he advocated and even conducted self-respect marriages. These marriages enhanced the dignity of women.

Periyar objects to terms like “giving of a maid” and “given in marriage”. They are Sanskrit terms, and treat women as objects. He wants them to be substituted by *Valkkai tunai*, a word for marriage taken from the Tirukkural, which means a “help-mate in life.”³⁹ Thus he advocates self-respect marriages. A self-respect wedding is based on rationalism. Self-respect marriages can be successfully undertaken in an atmosphere where the status of women is raised on par with men. Their emancipation also lies in relieving them from the age-old traditions and other irrational chains of bondage and exploitation.

³⁸ Diehl, p. 55.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

3.2.3 On Widow Re-Marriage

One of the reasons why Periyar hated Hinduism and the orthodoxy practiced in the name of Hinduism was the barbarous practice of child marriage. Many of the girl children who were married before they were ten or twelve years old became widows before they knew the meaning of the word “widow”. It is surprising that no leader other than Periyar reacted against this practice of child marriage. If the Indian society was liberal enough to permit the innocent young widows to marry again, child marriages would not appear as barbarous as it does now. But the orthodox people who conducted these child marriages considered it a sin for a widow to get married. Periyar’s sister Ponnuthai had a girl child. When this girl was nine years old; she was married to a boy aged twelve. On the thirtieth day after the marriage, the boy-bridegroom died of cholera and the innocent nine-year-old girl child became a widow. The child came to Periyar and lamented why he and others had subjected her to that miserable condition. This incident moved Periyar deeply and he decided to do something revolutionary and make life meaningful for the widows.

The 1931 census report brought to light the increase in the proportion of widows in the Madras Presidency as a result of young girls marrying bride grooms much older than themselves. The Self-Respect Movement strongly criticized marriages which involved women and aged widows. The Self-Respect Movement deplored the plight of the young widows who were denied the opportunity to re-marry and to lead a contented life like other women. It went further and appealed to all, not to resort to such inhuman behaviour but to treat the frustrated young widows with sympathy and concern.⁴⁰ The Self-Respect Movement encouraged books which highlighted the plight of the young widows with an intention to educate the ignorant and orthodox people. Therefore, the Self-Respect Movement deemed all these problems not only as social problems and mere menaces but also as complete slavery and moral degradation.

⁴⁰ Gopalakrishnan, p. 20.

3.2.4 On Birth Control

Periyar advocates birth control for women, to gain freedom. Conceiving too young and too many times is the root cause for women becoming sickly, developing premature signs of old age, and meeting with pre-mature death. Further, it is this conception that stood in the way of women proving their mettle and joining hands with men in the progress of life. That is why he advocated birth-control. It is his view that the propaganda for birth control is more important than the propaganda for prohibition and the propaganda against contagious diseases.

Birth control does not aim at preventing the birth of children altogether; it only aims at limiting the births. This policy was opposed by some priests. By way of meeting their opportunities he published a book entitled “Priests and Condemnation of Sins,” exposing the irregularities in human beings. Though the book was confiscated, the opposition of the priests ceased altogether. The continuation of his propaganda and the time spirit was strong to support it. Women began to develop the necessary courage to practice birth control.⁴¹

3.2.5 On Property Rights

Periyar says:

Despite there being a goddess of learning and a goddess of wealth in the Hindu religion, why do they not grant women their education and right to property? Among the many reasons for the subjugation of women, the most important one is that they lack the right to property.⁴²

In the sacred books of many religions we read that women are not given equal rights with men. Periyar, therefore, puts across the question to these who seek to improve the status of women. If they are real reformers, they must decide first whether they are going to be bound by the scriptures or not.

If women should gain true independence, men should give them an equal status. The view that women are weak by nature, and that they have been created to be under the protection or patronage of men should drastically change. In addition to the absence of

⁴¹ Periyar, *Pen Yen Adimaiyaanaal?* p. 73.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

property rights, women's feelings of subordination and feeling of fear, stand in the way of their enjoyment of independence.

The government is trying to root out this disease by means of legislation. According to the new legislation, women have the right to a share of the parents' property. Therefore every girl will be getting her legitimate share from her parent's wealth – if the parents are wealthy. This does not mean that the boy's family demand from the girl's parents for dowry. Periyar would have felt happy if the youth had courage, and were not be hidebound in their outlook like bullocks tied to a yolk of an oil mix. Without fear, men should come of their conventions and must treat women as their equals.

Whenever Periyar took up any problem for discussion, he explored all its possibilities most critically. On the question of uplift of women and their rights also examined he all its aspects thoroughly. His views on love and chastity, marriage, widow remarriage, birth-control and property rights, express Periyar's concern to uplift the status of women. The Self-Respect Movement, which he started, had shown a definite sense of commitment to all these sensitive issues.

CHAPTER 4

PERIYAR'S CRITICISM OF RELIGION

Our civilization does not come from the skies. It is not the result of an inspiration. It is the child of invention, of discovery, of applied knowledge, that is to say of science. In fact, religion hampers the growth of science and as well as scientific thinking at every stage. The first enemy of science is religion.

What is religion? Is religion anything but profit? If not, how do the heads of the churches, mutts, ashrams, like *Shankaracharyas* and *Sai Babas* accumulate wealth by millions? In addition, how does a temple in *Tirupati* or church in *Velankanni* collect gold, silver, currencies, etc. worth millions every month? How did they acquire their money? The answer is simple. Religion is only profit.

Religions' capital is fear. It is the dominant element, which is mightier than love. This weakness of man is exploited by the so-called "God men." They blackmail their devotees with the threats of imaginary hell and damnation.⁴³

On religion, Periyar used both lip and pen rationally and forcefully. He was convinced that people used religion only as a mask to deceive the innocent people. Periyar proclaimed himself as a vowed atheist. *Puranas*, *shastras* and *smritis* were the target of his vociferous condemnation. He firmly asserted that these were responsible in making the public feel hardy and superstitious. At one stage, he asserted that the meaningless religious treatises must be burnt. He believed that belief in God dampens the natural human qualities such as initiatives, perseverance and enthusiasm. Fear of God is the beginning of one's own foolishness. Periyar attacked mainly Hinduism and its gods, because they are the greatest enemy of human equality and liberty. He felt that if a person should live with self-respect he must do away with religion.

⁴³ K. Veeramani, *Religion and Society* (Madras: Emerald Publishers, 1994), p. i.

Religion, according to Periyar, forms the main impediment to progress towards a just and equal society and it must be eradicated and replaced by rationalism. Periyar spoke highly of man's reasoning capacity and saw a clear contrast between belief and reason. "One must respect man and his wisdom rather than talk of God and his power."⁴⁴ Rationalism thus stands for development and equality; whereas religion confirms superstitions, suppression and exploitation. For Periyar:

Rationalism and religion do not go together. Religion goes hand in hand with superstition and fear. Religion prevents progress and suppresses man. Religion exploits the suppressed classes. Religion makes man lazy as well as cowardly. Rationalism and Atheism liberate man.⁴⁵

4.1 GOD THE ARCH-ENEMY OF RATIONALITY

How and when did God come into being? Periyar answers that the notion of God arose only when man began to think. Man began to accept the natural forces as divine-beings when it was not possible to comprehend them scientifically. It had been the when something was considered to be divine would turn out to be part of science when scientifically proved. For example, when humans were unable to explain the solar and lunar eclipses, they connected a story of *Rashy* and *Khedu*, two snakes swallowing the sun and the moon respectively. It is obvious that those items that are unexplainable using cause or effect are said to be the actions of God. As one's knowledge grows, these notional items are bound to disappear.

According to Periyar no theologian could convincingly explain what is meant by God. Every theologian clings dogmatically to what he calls God, which is neither understandable to him nor explained by him in detail. Many theologians say that God administers His providential rule only through human beings. Perhaps that is the reason why, says Periyar, "that a beggar says that he got alms with the blessings of God. One who secured a job also says the same. If this is true how can we attribute responsibility to a man for all the good and bad occurrences? When God himself is omnipresent, why should a human being pray to him? Why should the human beings suffer if God is inherently benevolent? When the evil is present in the world how can we accept the

⁴⁴ Diehl, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

existence of a benevolent God?”⁴⁶ Periyar condemned those religions that divide people on the basis of caste, doctrines, etc. He was also against wasting money on religious celebrations, temple worship, etc. During his time, he said that in India more than 200 million rupees were being spent on temple worship, pilgrimage and ceremonial festivals. According to him, if the money was channelized for the development of the country, the condition of the poor and the lower castes would have improved.⁴⁷

Periyar exhorts his followers saying that God is the arch-enemy of rationalism. Belief in God has prevented us from making maximum use of our reason. The belief that everything is possible by God has resulted in the thinking that nothing is possible without Him. Man’s enthusiasm is thus mitigated. Theists would say that though we can not see God He was and is and He continues to be so. According to Periyar, it is a foolish attempt to explain what they cannot say authentically. If there is a force far beyond our knowledge why should we befool ourselves analyzing it. “God is fictitious and imaginary. It is like sapless foliage with no use whatsoever.”⁴⁸ Theists say that God is not understandable. If so, how did they understand God? If they also did not understand it, what right have they to speak about it and champion its cause? Periyar cites his rationalist motto:

There is no God, no God at all, never a God,
One who fabricates God is a fool,
One who propagated God is a dishonest fellow,
One who prays to God is a savage.⁴⁹

4.2 ANTI-RELIGION AND RATIONALISM

Periyar says, “Without destroying religion we cannot eradicate the problem of unsociability.”⁵⁰ Periyar sees religion as the main impediment to social and political progress. This explains the predominance he has given to anti-religion in the presentation of his messages. Periyar himself recorded his early experiences thus:

⁴⁶ “One Hundred Tamils of 20th Century,” Online. Internet. 2 August 2004.
<<http://www.tamilnation.org>>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ K. Veeramani, *Periyar: Is there a God?* (Madras: Emerald Publishers, 1996), p. 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁰ Diehl, p. 49.

In our house *Sanyasis*, *Pundits*, Hermits and Priests commanded respect. Because I did not like them, I made it a point to oppose whatever they said and ridiculed them. Though I had not read the *Puranas* or other religious books the discourse with *saiva* or *vaishnava pundits* constantly in our house gave me enough information about religious matters and enabled me to question the *pundits*. In answering my questions, the religious men contradicted one another and sometimes contradicted themselves. It gave extraordinary pleasure to fling at the *pundits*, their own contradictions and thus perplex them. I believed that, it was this experience, which deprived me of faith in communities, in religion, in *Puranas* and *Sastras* and in God.⁵¹

A stand against Brahmanism is the first and seemingly the foremost conviction with Periyar. As we know, Brahmins have traditionally had a dominant role in south India such as a home-priest, temple-priest, *Purohit* and *Arcaka*. Periyar strongly and repeatedly criticized Brahmins for misusing their position and argued that traditional social structures based on religion, have been means used by them to suppress and exploit the masses. God, religions, *Sastras*, *Puranas* and *Itihasas* are the powerful weapons in the hands of the upper caste people to subjugate the sons of the soil and treat them as fourth or fifth castes under the vicious *Varnashrama Dharma* system.⁵² Brahmins are thus accused of a superior, contemptuously arrogant, attitude towards non-Brahmins and of suppressing them, religiously as well as prevailing “unjust” legal system, mainly created by Brahmins themselves. Periyar strongly said that religion was used by the Brahmins for domination and he felt that it should be replaced by rationalism, in which he puts all his trust.

So we can say that the bedrock of Periyar’s principles and the movements that he started was rationalism. He is of the opinion that the reason for the chaos and deterioration in our country is that we have been hindered from inquiry and repressed from the use of rationality. Reason is the life-blood of human beings. Among all creatures, only human beings possess reason. “Rationality is the acute capacity of thinking. Man should contemplate on anything, not following the path of belief, but that

⁵¹ Gopalakrishnan, p. 2.

⁵² Diehl, p. 28.

of reason.”⁵³ He prescribes the following as the duties of rationalists, “analyzing everything with courage and intelligence according to the need, rejecting what should be rejected, contributing what should be contributed, to reform, without fearing change.”⁵⁴

The second dominant aspect of Periyar’s struggle was to fight against casteism. He pleads for the eradication of caste system. Periyar also questions the domination of one part of the country by another. He attacks the compulsory introduction of any language in the South that will undermine Tamil. These aspects of his teachings are interwoven, and there is much that is overlapping. It is not feasible to make a clear distinction between religions and social issues in India and with Periyar and also religious, social and political ideas go together.

Religion and social issues are closely linked. Ritual impurity leading to untouchability means socio-economic degradation, for lower caste and ritual purity leads to social supremacy for the upper caste. That was why Periyar strongly and repeatedly criticized the upper castes for grave misuse of their position and the way they used religion as a means to suppress and exploit the people. One can see a clear logic behind Periyar’s extreme stand against religion and God. He was pained to see millions of depressed classes leading a subhuman life. When Periyar studied the situation, he found the cause of their ill treatment in the division of the society into several castes and he understood that it was religion, which sanctioned and provided sustenance to this unhealthy segregation. He discovered that the whole edifice of religion derived its authority from the concept of gods. In order to root out the cruelties of caste system he had to attack religion and do away with it to achieve this, he had to do away with God. Periyar’s iconoclasm is thus the result of his concern for the depressed masses and their uplift.

4.3 ANTI-HINDUISM

“If Hinduism, its arts and rituals are to be strictly implemented, you will find the Brahmins as high and superior and the Dravidians degraded to the status of *Sudras* or *Panchamas*.”⁵⁵ Periyar’s attack on the Brahmin’s function in the religio-social structure

⁵³ Gopalakrishnan, p. 60.

⁵⁴ Veeramani, *Periyar: Is There a God?* p. 113.

⁵⁵ A. S. Venu, trans. *Golden Sayings of Periyar* (Madras: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1981), p. 14.

of South India consequently leads to a criticism of Hindu religion as such. He says, “Hinduism is not a religion. It is founded by a small group for their own vested interests and built on the ignorance, illiteracy and exploitation of the people.”⁵⁶ Periyar in his pamphlet “Philosophy” argues about God, religion and man. He says, “God, religion and man are the social inventions of the upper castes, and Brahmins, with a view to securing their own superiority.”⁵⁷

The “Agamic” rules regulate the role of certain communities and authority in the temple and in home worship. Manu in his *Dharmasastra*, which was accordingly attacked by Periyar, gives a wider legislation of their superiority in the religio-social field. These have formed a part of functional Hinduism and regulate religion and form the basic structure of the social system. Periyar asks, whether we should accept or reject this religion. Can this religion be an agent of social growth? He concludes, “The oil lamps are replaced by electric bulbs, the cart-age is replaced by aviation. Similarly, gods and religions of older days should be radically amended and set right. His famous slogan is “Forget God and respect man.”⁵⁸

4.4 TEMPLE CULT

“I am prepared to demolish temples,”⁵⁹ said Periyar. For Periyar temple and cult worship are the leading features in popular Hinduism. His attack on temple cult is two fold. One is the atheistic point of view of attacking the religious functions of temples as the abodes of gods and therefore as places of worship. Secondly, temple cult also implies the application of the law of untouchability. Periyar’s criticism is about a social protest against the prohibition for non-upper caste Tamils to enter the *Garbha Griha*. A special point with Periyar is a place for abolishing any unintelligible language as the language of temple worship and cult. He insisted on the use of the vernacular.

His criticism of classical Hindu religious concepts like *Dharma*, *Moksa*, *Karma*, *Samsara* and *Maya*, which form the doctrinal structure of the Hindu faith were collected and printed in 1970 in a pamphlet called *Prakrit* or materialism. In order to break away from the Hindu religious structure and as a protest against “superstition” in accordance

⁵⁶ Diehl, p. 30.

⁵⁷ A. Sundaramurthy, trans. *Philosophy of Periyar* (Bangalore: Chintakara Chavadi, 1979), p. 3.

⁵⁸ Veeramani, *Periyar: Is There a God?* p. 72.

⁵⁹ Diehl, p. 32.

with Periyar's rationalistic way of thinking, the self-respect marriages were deliberately conducted at hours feared as inauspicious. He says, "The self-respect marriage is a revolt against accepted dogmas and tradition, against *Dharma Sastras*, against religious rites and ceremonies."⁶⁰

4.5 ICONOCLASM

Periyar's opposition to the Hindu cult and worship in and outside of temples resulted in iconoclastic actions. "He ridiculed and damaged the images of deities and heroes. He campaigned for burning pictures of them in 1956 and 1971, as his opposition to religious as well as political domination by the upper castes."⁶¹

Periyar called himself an atheist. His atheism seems to mean more a denial of the role of religion in society than a refusal of belief in God. His numerous anti-religious comments characterized religion as superstition leading to ignorance, exploitation and suppression. In his opinion, "no religion is without superstition." Superstition is belief in miracles and supernatural. Religion must be eradicated and replaced by rationalism. For this he stressed on an education that is rational and general, through which one can conquer superstition and ignorance and improve justice and morality in society.⁶²

4.6 VIEWS ON OTHER RELIGIONS

We have already said that Periyar called himself an atheist and a materialist. He always felt that it was necessary to eradicate religion as such in order to impart progress and justice in society. Periyar was also confronted by other religions than Hinduism, which even if of more recent origins and much smaller in number, have long been alive in South India. We, therefore, briefly study his views on Islam, Buddhism and Christianity.

Periyar declared, "I was prepared to die as a Muslim. I was ashamed of being a Hindu, therefore I would become a Muslim."⁶³ He recommended conversion to Islam to non-Brahmins so that they would be free from the "Hindu yoke." Since there was no

⁶⁰ Veeramani, *Periyar: Is There a God?* p. 24.

⁶¹ Diehl, p. 38.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

caste distinction in Islam, he preferred Islam. But at the same time he declares, “If you can find another way better than Islam, so much the better.”⁶⁴

Buddhism was also highly praised by Periyar. He liked to compare his own role to that of *Gautama* the *Buddha*, and at names-giving ceremonies he often named children *Gautama*. What appealed to Periyar was the fact that Buddha denied the classical Hindu concepts of Brahman (God) and Atman (Soul).

Periyar was cautious when criticizing the Christian faith. He said, “It will be difficult to abolish Islam and Christianity from society. What was said 2000 years ago could not be relevant today. Heaven in all religions is a way of collecting money. Can you accept Christ according to reason?”⁶⁵ He also wrote an article called “The Bible is a dangerous Moral Guide.”

Therefore, Periyar’s criticism of Islam, Buddhism and Christianity comes out as opportune when serving his ideological propaganda, but contains little of deeper analysis. He can speak appreciatively of them when finding in their ethic principles of equality and justice, thus advocating them if they prove to be an alternative to Brahmanic Hinduism. These religions, in spite of their comparatively long presence in India, seem to have little part in forming or breaking, the traditionally dominant Hindu Brahmin society with the result that Periyar is obviously less concerned about them.

4.7 PERIYAR AND MARX

Marx’s analysis and critique of religion is perhaps one of the most famous and most quoted by theists and atheists alike. According to Marx, religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice. Thus problems in religion are problems in society. Religion is not a disease, but merely a symptom. It is used by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience due to being poor and exploited. This is the origin of his comment that religion is the “opium of the masses.” According to Marx, human being creates religion, “because the world he inhabits is an inverted world. This perversion is described as consisting in loss of being, in suffering, lovelessness, soullessness and oppression. Religion is man’s protest by projecting a

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 41

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

world of illusion where he can lead an ideal existence.”⁶⁶ Marx has three primary reasons for disliking religion. Firstly, he regards it as fundamentally irrational; secondly, he regards it as a complete negation of all that is dignified in a human being and lastly he sees religion as fundamentally hypocritical.

We see that there are some parallels between Periyar’s criticism of religion and the Marxist views. Religion is accused of alienating human being, and wanting in social concern. There is a total repudiation of the transcendental in the acceptance of materialism. Both, Periyar and Karl Marx in criticizing religion concentrate on its structure and functions in society. One must be extremely cautious about comparing these men with each other. The decisive point here is Periyar’s own thinking, when he regards and calls himself a Marxist. Periyar certainly used Marxist terminology and could present himself as a Marxist on account of his reading and direct personal contact with the former USSR. Periyar was aware that Marxist philosophy would not be fully suitable for the South Indian situation. He believed, “Rationalistic knowledge and self-respect must come before economic equality. Economic communism does not suit our climate. The *purohit* must go before the capitalist, but communism will come.”⁶⁷

In Periyar’s concept of man his social, political, ethical and economic programme is influenced by Marxist philosophy. In short:

- a) To scrap the foolish belief that whatever sins and dishonest act a man would have committed, he can earn the indulgence of god by merely building a temple or bathing in a temple *ghat* or offering money to priests.
- b) To reveal that God has nothing to do with the expectation of couples for begetting children after the religious scriptures of the priests.
- c) To eradicate the blind belief that God is sure to offer heaven to any dishonest person when he or she pays the priest to conduct the ritual celebration in temples and that the same God is sure to condemn even an honest man who does not do so.
- d) To free the human society from the blind belief that God feels satisfied with a sinful person after accepting the latter tonsorial offer of shaven hair from his head.

⁶⁶ Sebastian Kappen, *Marxian Atheism* (Madras: Reliance Printers, 1983), p. 6.

⁶⁷ Diehl, p. 79.

- e) To stop the practice of wasteful expenditure by way of building temples and conducting religious festivals.
- f) To do away with the irrational practice that only those who are born in a particular community are entitled to officiate *Pujas* in the temple.”⁶⁸

Periyar’s criticism of religion can be summed up in his slogans such as, “Roots of evil in society are to be found in religion. Religion or superstition has prevented development in society. Religion must be abolished by rationalism. Caste system and domination by Brahmins must be destroyed.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Gopalakrishnan, pp. 27-8.

⁶⁹ Diehl, p. 49.

CHAPTER 5

RELEVANCE OF PERIYAR TODAY

We are in the 21st century. Periyar who lived for 94 years belongs to the 19th and the 20th century. Today when we look at and analyze the situation in India and especially in Tamil Nadu, we witness many changes, growth and developments in all fields. Whether the developments are towards the positive or negative side is a debatable issue. Today as I study about E. V. R. Periyar, who brought about a historic change in the outlook and behaviour of the common people through his dedicated services and through his daring, energetic but peaceful methods of struggle against stifling socio-religious and cultural practices that degraded the original people of this land, it is good to analyze whether Periyar is relevant today. Do we really see the impact of Periyar's philosophy today? Has his struggle brought any outstanding changes in the lives of the people of the 21st century? In this chapter, I would like to present the problems faced by our nation especially in the state of Tamil Nadu, the relevance of Periyar's ideals and methods to solve them and my evaluation of Periyar's life as a whole.

5.1 THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SITUATION

The contemporary Indian situation is characterized by communalism, caste, fundamentalism and corruption. In every one of the public offices Periyar held, he left a mark as a conscientious worker who would not tolerate inefficiency, insincerity or corruption of any kind. But today if one thing has spread rapidly in the Indian politics it is corruption and red-tapism. Corruption is understood to be an important criterion for politics. In all the fields of politics corruption is given a lead role. It has brought down the morality of the officials and public servants. The entire public system is harnessed to loot the public treasury. Not a single politician can be put on a pedestal as being above suspicion.

The criminalization of politics has become an avowed goal of politicians. Files disappear, investigating officials are removed through routine transfers, and inquiries eventually peter out. Corruption thrives like an organized industry, belittling public confidence and trust. Commitment and responsibility which should be the primary

qualities of politicians has no place among the politicians of today. They shrug off their prime duties and work for their own profit. Power and selfishness has become the prime motive of the politicians. Their expected service to the nation is fully concentrated towards their family, relatives, religion and their own caste groups.

Today, the militant cultural nationalism of Hindutva is raising its ugly head all over the country. The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), the *Banjrang Dal* and the *Bharatiya Janta Party* (BJP) are all hand in glove to find blow to the secular credentials of the Indian nation. They want India to be known as a nation belonging to the Hindus. They want that India to have one religion and one language.

Periyar wished India to be a nation in which no religion or caste would dominate the others. But the chief targets of the Hindu-dominated RSS are the Muslims, Christians, Dalits and Tribals. There are clear examples to show how they approach their target through violence. In December 1992, the *Kar Sevaks* demolished the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, proving that might is right. They believed that they were restoring the Hindu pride. This culminated in the Bombay riots. The simmering fire due to the humiliation forced upon the Muslim population has not yet died out. The Godhra incident and the aftermath are clear examples of the inhuman violence perpetrated by the RSS and other fundamentalists. Among the tribal people they forced upon a concept called “Ghar-Vapasi” (home coming) to include them into the category of *Sudras* so that they could also be dominated by them.

The tolerant Hindu religious philosophy has become a tortuous and intolerant institution in the hands of the pseudo-Hindu fanatics who paint a black picture of religious tolerance. All through his life, Periyar advocated the integral growth of our country. He fought for the equality of the downtrodden and the backward people. But today what we see is the socio-economic political structure of the capitalist world being exploitative, oppressive and unjust in nature; the poor have nothing to hope for. Millions do not have the bare necessities of life, while the poor flock to the cities in search of menial jobs. There is no proper demographic and population control policy. The poor continue to multiply, and so does their poverty. Social welfare programmes announced on the eve of elections are only an eyewash to elicit votes. Political process has only widened the gap between the high caste people and the low caste people and the

opportunity and growth in every area of life has remained only skin deep, even after 57 years of Indian Independence.

Periyar's philosophy is that different sections of a society should have equal rights to enjoy the fruits of the resources and the development of the country. Now what we witness everywhere is "every section of the population engaged in one battle or another. So much so, India itself has turned into a vast battle ground. Human rights are simply crushed but the upper-caste Controlled "national" media is systematically suppressing the facts and publishing rosy falsehoods."⁷⁰

5.2 THE PRESENT SITUATION OF TAMIL NADU

Periyar had a dream that through his Self-Respect Movement the Tamil people and the entire Indian society would change but in reality, it did not happen. When we take the lives of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu, we see that they are what they were before independence. The New Indian Express gave the new saying that the underprivileged status of the people has not changed greatly in the past 57 years of independence. Reservations in jobs and educational institutions have not resulted in any great improvement in their life. Illiteracy and unemployment still remain very high, higher than the national average. Worse, many gross forms of untouchability persist even in so called "progressive" Dravidian Land-Tamil Nadu. When Periyar was interviewed by Vinoba Bhave from the Tamil daily *Thina Thanthi*, he said, "I have taken up the abolition of caste system as my first priority. I believe that if the system is abolished, people would overcome ignorance and they would lead a disciplined life."⁷¹ But we read that attack on Dalits by high caste Hindus in Thirunelveli district or other places is increasing everyday and the poor Dalit people are exploited economically and even physically and not allowed to come up in the society.

It is very disheartening to see that parents withdraw their children from a school because a Dalit is the headmaster. Children are forced to forego their noon-meal at school if the cook happens to be Dalit. In the newspapers we read that in Theni and Virudhunagar districts, *Pallars*, *Paraiars* and *Chakkiliars* (*Arundathiyars*) constitute the Dalit community. There is a form of untouchability among these sub-castes as well; the

⁷⁰ "Counter Currents," Online. Internet. 2 August 2004. <<http://www.countercurrents.org>>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Pallars do not have any relationship with the *Paraiars*, and the latter keep the *Cakkiliars* at an arm's length. Double tumbler system is much in practice in many villages in certain districts. One of the Institutes for self-management in Madurai, which works for the uplift for Dalits in these districts, points out that large number of children that are dropping out of school before reaching the sixth standard were from the Dalit community. Today there are eleven core child labourers in India and most of them are obviously from the lower caste. If the government really wanted to abolish child labour, they would have taken strategic steps. But nothing seems to be happening. Leaders of the Dalit political parties have not done much for changing the situation of the scheduled castes in rural areas. Their leaders had not made even a courtesy visit either before or after the local body polls to many villages. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, many people say, is a mere paper tiger which has not helped to bring about a reduction in untouchability.

According to Aberdare Makkal Iyakkam's district secretary V. Jayaraman, most of the colonies are not provided with basic amenities and the scheduled castes are languishing without proper houses or house-sites in the district. Even now, nearly 60 percent of the Scheduled caste children are illiterates. Rajendran, a leader of the Republican Party of India in Salem District, complains that the government does not take complaints of harassment seriously and that even Panchayat functionaries felt hemmed in by the upper caste officials and politicians. In the Tamil Nadu Christian schools, colleges, hostels, hospitals are run by the forces supporting casteism. In India, two Dalits are tortured every hour, three Dalit women are raped in a day, two Dalits are killed and two Dalits' huts are fired. The Hindu newspaper reported on 28 August 2001, that a Dalit woman was paraded naked in Bellari district of Karnataka.

Philosophy of Periyar was that all women should live with dignity and have equal opportunities to develop their physical, mental and moral faculties. Discrimination against women, denying or limiting as it does their equality of rights with men is fundamental dignity. All these are clear examples for the fact that caste discrimination is still one of the major problems in India. Even after a remarkable work of great leader like Thanthai Periyar, caste discrimination, discrimination against women, etc. are still prevalent in Tamil Nadu.

5.3 THE ROLE OF PERIYARS PHILOSOPHY

“Where there is despair, Periyar instilled hope,
where there was darkness, he shed light,
where there was ignorance, he spread knowledge,
Where there was fear, he gave courage.”⁷²

This is a saying attributed to Periyar. For over fifty years Periyar worked for the education of the common people in all aspects of life through his speeches and his life. He wanted everyone to realize that he or she is as much a citizen as anybody else and that castes and creeds are man-made, intended to keep the innocent and the ignorant under fear forever. That inspiring and committed man continues to inspire the world as a remarkable person in every way.

Many believe that Periyar’s philosophy and the movement he spearheaded is still relevant today. Today the situation in Tamil Nadu is more or less the same as it was during the time of Periyar. Domination of Brahmins over non-Brahmins was the crucial problem at the time of Periyar. Today the most prominent and crucial problem and issue is discrimination against Dalits. They are deprived of their dignity and fundamental rights. They are treated cruelly. In a village near Neyveli, Dalits have to sip their tea standing, even if the chairs at the teashop are empty. It is disheartening to hear that in some parts of Tamil Nadu, even touching a Dalit is considered polluting. I would therefore feel that Periyar’s philosophy of self-respect would be of great relevance today for the empowerment of the Dalits.

Discrimination against Dalits is forced upon not only by Brahmins but also by other castes including Shudras. It is noticed, “Tamilnadu proves that the Shudras when empowered, can be more socially violent than the Brahmins.”⁷³ According to Periyar different sections of a society should have equal rights to enjoy the fruits of the resources and the development of the country; they should all be represented in proportion to their numerical strength in governance and the administration of the state. Periyar always wanted to dispel the ignorance of the non-Brahmins and make them enlightened. He exhorted them to take steps to change the institutions and values that led to meaningless

⁷² “One Hundred Tamils of 20th Century,” Online. Internet. 2 August 2004.
<<http://www.tamilnation.org>>.

⁷³ Aringnar Anna, *My Leader Periyar*. Trans. A. S. Venu (Madras: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1981), p. 5.

divisions and unjust discrimination. If he were alive today, he would give the same message to Dalits. It is true that during the life time of Periyar, he had no separate agenda for Dalits. He concentrated mostly on non-Brahmins rather than Dalits, because I think that oppressed groups like Dalits and most backward classes came on to the scene only later.

Periyar indeed, is becoming a known figure in all over India especially wherever discriminations against Dalits come to the fore. In Uttar Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj Party leader, Mayawati, realized the relevance of Periyar and used his philosophy to unite and empower the Dalits. There she celebrated the iconoclast with statues and *Periyar Melas*. But in Tamil Nadu, the relevance of his philosophy has not been really realized and the political parties which profess to follow his footsteps are only using the Dravidian tag for their political gains. Dr. Krishnasami, leader of the militant movement of the Dalit community said, “In Tamil Nadu there was a movement in the name of anti-Brahminism under the leadership of Periyar. It attracted Dalits, but after 30 years of power, the Dalits understood that they are as badly-off or worse-off as they were under the Brahmins.” He said, “Under Dravidian rule, they have been attacked and killed, their due share in government service is not given, they are not allowed to rise.”⁷⁴

The self-respect ideology and the principles of E. V. R. find no place in India today. People are carried away by the name “Dravidian.” Hero-worship and self-glorification are very common in the land where Periyar was born and fought for self-respect. If he were alive today, he may not like to identify the Tamils with the name Dravidian which is meaningless when other Dravidian groups refuse to identify with it.

There are also people who posit Periyar as a useful resource against Hindutva. But today, as his legacy and relevance are debated, E.V.R. Periyar remains a bearded, bespectacled, state-erected statue looking down helplessly at Tamils. It is true that when the elections approach, every Dravidian party features him on their posters. Speaker after speaker finds it convenient to quote his sayings. But beyond that, Periyar remains an icon more forgotten than remembered. The relevance of Periyar’s philosophy does not seem

⁷⁴ P. Krishnaswamy, “Dalits are what they were before Independence.” *The New Indian Express*. (6 February 2002), p. 1.

to be realized by the people and especially the political parties which profess to follow his footsteps.

In courage he is a lion and he has a lion's heart. He has never known what fear is. Without such courage and such fearlessness, one cannot succeed in effecting such social reforms as he has done. He has always been prepared to make any kind of sacrifice for the benefit of the society. He is not merely a fearless talker; he uses his pen fearlessly; of course, in his actions he has always been fearless.

5.4 IS PERIYAR A FAILURE?

Tamil Nadu today is steeped in superstitions and irrationalities. Every year children are buried alive for a few moments to ward off evil. Dalits are still subjected to the worst atrocities imaginable. Men and women give limbs and lives for political leaders and film stars who are venerated as gods. We also see that "Salam Kutty Sami" posing as Guru, command a better following than Dravida Kazhagam, the original Dravidian platform founded by Periyar. Against the background of this contemporary situation in Tamil Nadu, it might seem that Periyar is a failure. But Mr. Rajendran, leader of the Republican Party in the Salam District, says, "If Periyar had not struggled for the uplift of the community, we non-Brahmins would still be in bondage. Education, human rights and self-respect would have been a distant dream to us." He recalls, "There was total discrimination against non-Brahmins. They were denied education, and according to government rules, one had to know Sanskrit even apply to the Madras Medical College. And remember, at that time non-Brahmins could not easily study Sanskrit." He says:

The situation has changed today. In admissions to medical colleges in the state, students from backward colleges, most backward classes, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes get 73 percent of the seats in the open category. This situation has come about only because of Periyar.⁷⁵

But according to Thirumavalavan leader, Vidudalai Chiruthaigal:

The Periyar-led movement did open up spaces monopolized by Brahmins—temples and government jobs—to the larger intermediary castes. However,

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Periyar had no separate agenda for Dalits. The enthusiasm Periyarites have today for sanctum entry and in challenging shankaracharyas is not shown in leading Dalits into temples controlled by non-Brahmins. Periyar's only success was in displacing Brahmin hegemony. On all other fronts, the battle against superstitions, for equality, atheism, rational humanism—he has failed.⁷⁶

Periyar initiated the Dravidian Movement to restore self-respect to the Southerners and to free them from the clutches of Brahmanism. He did succeed to some extent. But it is a fact that his attempt to bring all the Dravidian sects under one banner was not a success. But the greatest success and achievement of Periyar is that he was able to bring about radical change in the attitude of the people. For example, the scheduled caste students and the girls of Tamil Nadu would not have gone to school even today, if it were not for Periyar's conscientizing.

Periyar's achievements can be summarized as follows:

- a. Periyar could create a feeling of self-respect in back ward caste Tamils.
- b. He was able to convince the people of Tamil Nadu about their political and social rights.
- c. He conducted inter-caste marriages and popularized them.
- d. Periyar could gain temple entry for all castes through his tireless propaganda.
- e. He was able to make the people aware of the ancient meaningless practices in society.

In many ways we can see that Periyar was not a complete failure. We witness a remarkable change in the thinking pattern of the people. A large number of people are aware of their fraternal, social and political responsibilities. The issues of caste discrimination, discrimination against Dalits and women, discrimination based on religion, etc are gradually taking the back seat. Periyar's principles such as self-respect, iconoclasm and rationalism are worth emulating all over the world. No wonder, he swayed the masses of Tamil land as long as he was alive. Even today, his ideals continue to inspire the multitude of this part of the country.

⁷⁶ Prakash Arumugam, "Social Reformer: E. V. R. Periyar." Online. Internet. 28 January 2003. <http://www.uni-giessen_de/gk1415/periyar.htm>.

CONCLUSION

Periyar Ramasamy stands at the head of the leaders of Tamil Nadu who have devoted themselves to all round uplift of Tamil society. He has specially won an abiding place in the hearts of the people of Tamil Nadu by devoting all his time, energy, resources for the removal of evils in our society. By his untiring efforts he aroused the self-respect of everyone in our society. Through his Self-Respect Movement he aimed at creating a society free from ignorance, superstition and empty customs. In the *Periyar Thidal*, it is rightly said, “Periyar is the prophet of the new age. The Socrates of South-East Asia, father of the social reforms movement, arch-enemy of ignorance, superstition; meaningless customs and baseless manners.”⁷⁷

Dr. Jerry Rosario once said, “Only few get opportunities to break history, but all have the capacity to bend history and Periyar is a man who has not only bent, but broken the history of Tamil Nadu.”⁷⁸ Definitely, Periyar is one of our greatest men. The passion with which he has dedicated his whole life for the enlightenment of his fellow human beings is a relentless exposure of the obscurantist superstitions in Indian society, and the tremendous awakening he has engendered in millions of hearts, despite the overt and covert opposition of the traditionally exploited groups. All this has earned Periyar an important place in the history of Tamil Nadu.

Through this study, I was deeply touched by his ideology, principles, philosophy and his total commitment to mission. This study gave me an opportunity to have a deeper knowledge about this great man, Periyar. The most admirable quality that I found in him is his fearless expression of his convictions. I feel we need more Periyars who will fight for justice wholeheartedly and selflessly and lead Tamil Nadu into a brighter tomorrow.

⁷⁷ Gopalkrishnan, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Jerry Rosario. Lecture delivered to students of Satya Nilayam, 2004.

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