

More Dangerous Than Ever: Periyar's Legacy in Contemporary Politics

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the ideals and activism of Erode Venkata Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar, with particular attention to his anti-religious iconoclasm, critique of nationalism, and proto-feminist advocacy, emphasizing their relevance to current discourses on secularism, caste and gender justice. It explores the philosophical foundations of Periyar's thought, his line of activism and the enduring impact of his relentless crusade against social inequality in the colonial and postcolonial India. Highlighting Periyar's atheistic rationalism and his uncompromising commitment to egalitarianism, this paper contends that his movement represents one of the most audacious and transformative confrontations to religious, patriarchal, and nationalist ideologies in modern Indian history. In today's India, where reason is suppressed and dissent silenced, Periyar's legacy stands as a bold and enduring testament to fearless resistance against oppressive power. Shunning the path of compromising reformists, Periyar launches a fierce and uncompromising revolt against religious, caste and gender orthodoxies- offering a radically new vision for social reconstruction and equality. As religious orthodoxy and pseudoscience reshape social discourse and history is selectively erased, reclaiming Periyar's legacy affirms the enduring

power of informed resistance. This study, through a multidisciplinary lens, interrogates the legacy, contradictions, and relevance of Periyar's thought as a bold challenge to entrenched religious, social and political orthodoxies. This paper concludes that Periyar's crusade against social inequality remains a foundational chapter in India's pursuit of social equity and reform.

Keywords: Radical reform - anti-Brahminism - anti-Superstition movement - political atheism - proto-feminism – intersectionality- rationalism - Hindu orthodoxy – Self-Respect Movement - monotheism & polytheism.

On 13 April 2017 M. Farooq, a Periyarist activist associated with the Dravidar Viduthalai Kazhagam, was hacked to death by Muslim extremists for allegedly insulting Islam. The next year, on March 5, when the supporters of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party pulled down a statue of Lenin in Tripura, H Raja, one of the national secretaries of BJP from Tamil Nadu shared a controversial Facebook post stating, 'Who is Lenin and what is the relevance he has in India? The Lenin statue was removed in Tripura. Tomorrow, statues of casteist Periyar in Tamil Nadu will be removed.'(Raja). Again in 2020 at the Tamil magazine *Thuglaq*'s anniversary event, actor Rajinikanth reignited the Periyar controversy by invoking his name in a BJP-tinged jab. He claimed that Periyar's 1971 anti-superstition march, had showcased 'naked effigies of Sri Ram and Sita garlanded with slippers' (Rajendran). No historical leader still sparks more political fire than Periyar E V Ramasami, Tamil Nadu's fiercest voice for radical reform. It occurs against a broader backdrop of systemic violence targeting those outside the dominant ideology. Ironically, these political gambits often backfire, propelling rivals to prominence and reigniting passion for their legacies. In times when truth is silenced and secularism erodes, society stands in dire need of reclaiming these legacies.

Contemporary debates on social justice, secularism, and identity in India consistently turn to Periyar for critical reflection. As a reformer, rationalist, and politician, Periyar

fearlessly challenged entrenched hierarchies and reshaped the nation's socio-political discourse, provoking controversies others avoid. This article critically examines Periyar's enduring impact through his critique of Brahminism, advocacy for women's rights, and vision of a rationalist society, assessing their influence on the policies and grassroots movements of contemporary India.

In modern India's reformist discourse, Periyar stands apart from prevailing paradigms through his unapologetic denial of the existence of God. He affirms, 'There is no god. There is no god. There is no god. He who invented god is a fool. He who propagates god is a scoundrel. He who worships god is a barbarian.' (Periyar qtd.in Sivaramane & Thirupathy 1). His defiant non-conformism began long before he embarked on his political journey. This rebellion unfolded through everyday acts like flouting rituals, eating meat on sacred days, crossing caste barriers and urging his wife to discard the *thali*. His slogan '*Thali Oru Veli*' - the sacred thread is a shackle – continues to echo powerfully in Tamil feminist circles today. As a radical stand against inherited hierarchy, he renounced his caste surname, setting a lasting precedent for Tamilians to shun caste in public life. The Periyar Thidal, a key hub of his literary legacy, continues to host self-respect and secular weddings, free of priests and religious rituals, while also providing refuge to inter-caste couples facing persecution. Contemporary discourses celebrate Periyar as a subaltern icon, a feminist ahead of his time, a visionary rationalist, an anti-caste crusader, and the architect of the Self-Respect Movement (SRM). Throughout his political career, Periyar remained a steadfast critique of Hindu orthodoxy and Brahminical dominance. It was a defiant, iconoclastic journey, marked by dramatic gestures like smashing idols, scorching scriptures and elevating *asuras* and *rakshasas* as symbols of subversive pride. These radical acts sparked a storm of backlash - fueling violence, assaults and courtroom clashes. Amid the controversy, Periyar's statues across Tamil Nadu were defaced, triggering legal petitions to remove the so-called

blasphemous inscriptions on them. In a rare departure from the national mood, the Tamil Nadu High Court dismissed the petition, affirming that ‘propagation of the philosophy of self-respect, social reform, ending caste system, equal rights and Thanthai Periyar’s vision to establish a society of brotherhood could be deciphered, and according to Thanthai Periyar, belief in God was the sole reason for the inequalities in society’ (Madras High Court, 2019). In stark contrast to the measured tones of religious reformers, Periyar launched a bold and unyielding assault on Hindu orthodoxy, fortified by astonishing public support, even amid fierce resistance. Remarkably, the judiciary ruled in his favour despite fierce condemnation and strong public opposition.

In early 20th century Tamil Nadu, intellectual movements rose alongside sub-continental subaltern uprisings, challenging Brahminical dominance and a nationalism deeply entwined with Hindu religious ideology. Led by fierce anti-Brahmin voices, the Justice Party, emerged as Tamil Nadu’s trailblazer in anti-caste and anti-class politics. Unlike reformist critics, Periyar broke decisively from Hindu orthodoxy and daringly challenged scriptures, rituals, and deities, redefining prevalent social discourse. His seemingly simple anti-Brahminism was in fact, a sharp critique, not only of Brahminism itself, but also of political power, nationalism, caste hierarchy, linguistic chauvinism, gender inequalities, economic disparity and racial supremacy. It galvanized a broad audience in his time and remains strikingly pertinent even today. He firmly held that an egalitarian society was unattainable without dismantling Brahminism and resolutely rejected all reforms or compromises within the caste system. Periyar, much like Ambedkar saw Brahminical political theology as fundamentally designed to entrench Brahmin privilege through a calculated fusion of secular authority and priestly power. He strongly denounces Hinduism and its hegemonic politics urging: 'Dravidian people, henceforth do not consider yourself as Hindus and do not accept that you are followers of the Hindu religion. Do not be slaves to the icons, gods, their stories,

and the rituals of that religion. We are all Dravidians; Our land is Dravida Nadu; we have nothing to do with Hinduism' (*Periyar Kalanjiyam* 28: 75).

Periyar's campaign for rationalism was his chosen weapon to challenge Hindu orthodoxy and empower the oppressed. He says, 'What I am doing is not political work- but a work for rationalism! Rationalism must spread among the people. Rationalism must be taught to those who have been brutally oppressed and they must be humanized' (*Periyar Kalanjiyam* 34: 265). He continues, 'The rationalist must have no belief in god. No belief in religion. They should have no attachment to god, religion, country or language. They should not care for ancestor worship' (*Periyar Kalanjiyam* 35: 35). Through this campaign, he sought not to end religiosity, but to sever religion from political identity. He conveys his message in simple, direct and unfiltered Tamil. His fierce attacks on Gods, patriarchy, and hierarchy may sound extreme today, but he never sought to soften it, instead he used its raw force to connect with the least literate.

Periyar frames political atheism as a radical challenge to the growing entanglement of religion, state power and political theology. It views the unholy nexus of religion and politics as a persistent force of oppression against the marginalized. A parallel can be drawn between Periyar's critique of political theology and the revolutionary ideals of Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist thinker. In *God and the State*, Bakunin hails reason and rebellion as primal human forces against both divine and secular tyranny. He fiercely rejects the legitimacy of Christianity and modern nation states, accusing them of stifling individuals' revolutionary and rational potential. He insists that only a comprehensive scientific education can liberate humanity from these oppressive forms of irrationality. Periyar's ideals of political atheism and anti-Hinduism closely align with Bakunin's anti-state and anti-Christian ideology. In the article 'Why Should Religion be Destroyed?' Periyar argues that religion not only harms human life but also legitimizes crime, violence and communal riots. At times, he expressed

affinity for the monotheistic ideals of Islam as a means to reject the polytheism inherent in Hinduism. In his article, 'Islam is Suitable for Tamils, Periyar highlights the shared egalitarian ethos between ancient Dravidian religion and Islam. Later, he concluded that monotheism offered no advantage over polytheism and asserted that no religion serves the needs of human life. He notes that, whether in Hinduism or Islam, prolonged submission to priestly authority leads to the erosion of individual's critical thinking.

Rationalism and atheism formed the core principles underlying all of Periyar's political and reformist campaigns. He was at the forefront of Gandhi's khadi movement, the boycott of foreign goods, and the agitation for the prohibition of liquors. Alongside Gandhi he picketed liquor shops and cut down over five hundred of his own coconut trees to prevent toddy tapping. He played a leading role in the Gandhian struggle for temple entry and led a protest march in Vaikom, Kerala to challenge caste-based exclusion. Despite all their collaborative engagements, Periyar remained fundamentally at odds with Gandhian line of activism. He strongly urged Gandhi to launch the freedom struggle only after addressing three major issues: the Brahmin-dominated congress party, the caste-based structure of Hinduism, and the social dominance of Brahmins. He added that as long as the oppression of untouchables and women persists, all our cries for freedom ring hollow, tainted by selfish deceit. He went so far as to say that British rule is preferable to self-rule, at least until a radical change is brought about in the nation's social structure. Seeing Gandhi and Congress as symbols of elitism and Brahminism, he redirected his movement with a bold new agenda: 'No God, no religion; no Gandhi, no Congress; and no Brahmins' (*Periyar Kalanjiyam* 6 : 112). He dismisses both Gandhian and Nehruvian hopes that freedom would naturally follow the British departure. He viewed the dream of a unified, independent India with deep skepticism. In the place of a unified India, he envisioned Dravida Nadu- a homeland uniting Tamils from South India and Ceylon alike. As a radical stand against India's centralism, he

threatened to burn the nation's map and urged thousands of Tamils to burn the Indian Constitution – a seditious act that cost him six months behind bars.

Religion was another sharp fault line in the rift between Gandhi and Periyar. While Gandhi aimed to revive Hinduism as a foundation for nation-building, Periyar fiercely sought to dismantle it. As a symbolic protest against the onslaught of the Indo-Aryan dominance in the Ramayana, he publicly burned images of Rama and willingly courted arrest. He defiled images of Krishna and Rama, the Aryan deities who vilified Dravidian Shudras as the offspring of prostitutes. To show the masses that the idols of Gods were mere stone and metal, he smashed Ganesha idols, burned Rama's images and defiled sacred symbols without hesitation. At the Salem Conference of 1944, he condemned government patronage of religion, called for the repeal of punitive laws against religious dissent, and urged people to declare themselves as non-Hindu in the census.

The anti-superstition rally of 1971, aimed at exposing the obscenity of deified figures and fiercely condemning blind faith, was a defining flashpoint in Periyar's reformist crusade. The public support for the rally was massive, with lakhs joining in, chanting slogans like, 'Rama down, down'. When a slipper was hurled at Periyar from temple protection protesters, his supporters seized it and defiantly slapped it against the image of lord Sri Ram! Interestingly, this unimaginable act went unreported for days, until papers like *The Hindu* and *Dinamani* finally covered it – only to dismiss it with contempt in their editorials. More strikingly, the Madras Magistrate Court filed defamation charges against the editors and publishers of these dailies and their appeal was swiftly dismissed by the Madras High Court. The aggrieved parties had to fight a year-long legal battle in the Supreme Court to overturn the Madras Magistrate court's criminal proceedings against them. Even Rajinikanth's dig at Periyar's 1971 rally was widely interpreted as a BJP-aligned swipe at DMK, Periyar's ideological heir, prompting unusual show of Dravidian unity in demanding his apology. In

hindsight, amid years of religious hooliganism triggered by the slightest provocation and courts often tilting toward the ruling majority, these events and the legal stand taken, seem both astonishing and rare. They stand etched in time as a luminous chapter in the secular legacy of the nation.

Of all Periyar's reformist campaigns, the Self-Respect Movement, rooted in the philosophy of the Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar, stands out for its profound and far-reaching impact, resonating well beyond India. At its core, it is a defiant stand to restore Tamil pride against cultural, linguistic, and patriarchal impositions. Recognizing women as the primary victims of entrenched norms, it prioritizes their emancipation and empowerment through education and equitable representation. Long before intersectionality reshaped feminist discourse, Periyar anticipated its core ideas by envisioning womanhood as a radically inclusive spectrum embracing sex workers, devadasis, labourers and professionals. His relentless struggle secured women the right to education and 50% reservation across all sectors. He firmly believed that women must lead their own liberation and urged them to challenge every oppressive norm cloaked either in faith or custom. The 1921 anti-toddy crusade and the 1937 anti-Hindi agitation saw women join Periyar at the frontlines in significant numbers. His advocacy for reforms in marriage laws and women's bodily autonomy foreshadowed the radical spirit and ideology of 1950s Western feminism. He saw marriage reform as vital to women's liberation, and his persistent efforts turned many once-sacrosanct marital customs into optional ones. Consequently, Hindu Marriage Act was amended with section 7A, officially validating self-respect and reformist marriages – eschewing *mangalsutra*, priestly officiation and caste or religious constraints. Beyond that, women are empowered to choose their own paths, divorce, and remarry on their own terms. They were given freedom to choose their attire, hairstyle and career path. Periyar's Salem Conference revolutionized the terms of marital legitimacy through a series of landmark

resolutions. Viewing marriage not as a constraint on women's freedom to love, the conference sought legal reforms to redefine conjugal laws and decriminalize adultery. It took years for this historic resolution to be realized, and on 27 September 2018, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court unanimously struck down section 497, decriminalizing adultery. In true Periyar spirit, Chief Justice Dipak Misra scrapped the 1860 colonial statute, declaring that, 'adultery cannot be and should not be a crime. It can be a ground for a civil offense, a ground for divorce.' He further asserted that 'a husband cannot be his wife's monarch. While adultery could be a civil wrong, it cannot be a criminal offense.' (Misra qtd.in *Economic Times*) A luminous turn in penal history, it reaffirms the timeless voice of Periyar.

History rarely honours the voices that thunder too far ahead of their time. Periyar's was one such voice -unyielding for equity, fearless against dogma, and revolutionary in its vision for women's liberation. Yet, his legacy was eclipsed, perhaps it is too radical in its anti-religious fervour and too unsettling for both political and academic comfort. In the sweeping saga of nationalist movements, he stands alone- championing not just political independence, but profound social emancipation. As others rallied for the nation, he stood for the individual- the women, the oppressed and the rational mind. His feminist vision, far ahead of global peers, was buried beneath Western narratives that monopolized the discourse on emancipation. Today, reclaiming Periyar means more than giving due credit, it is about facing the forces that silence voices, from the South that champion women and challenge God.

Declaration of Originality

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