

E. V. RAMASWAMY PERIYAR : THE GREAT REVOLUTIONARY HUMANIST

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Abstract

E.V.Ramaswamy Naikar Periyar , a great Tamil philosopher emphasized that social equality with rational scientific knowledge is the only tool for the formation of egalitarian society. The paper aims to describe the political and social philosophies and activities of this great thinker which is still relevant today.

Key words: rationalism, self-respect, women's right, 'kudiarasu', anti-brahminism

E.V.Ramaswamy Naikar Periyar is one of the great thinker, philosopher and social theorist of our time. His ideas has influenced the politics and society of India and his social thoughts are still relevant today. He was one among the pre-colonial social theorists, challenging the non-egalitarian, unequal ideas of Hindu society by developing alternative discourse of social thinking. Periyar's political and social activities were restricted within the geographical boundary of erstwhile British Madras province and in the princely state of Travancore, Cochin, but his thinking was evolved internationally and acknowledged all over the world. Ideologically he attacked the Brahminical order of social system and criticized the Brahmin dominance over the social, political and economic life of Madras province; he was not casteist but his criticism was permeated with humanistic approach. Brahmin communities had developed strong economic and social dominance over Tamil society. Hatred towards the lower caste, practice of untouchability, restricted access of lower caste in the different aspects of public space, concept of purification, and gender-biased attitude towards women are associated with Brahminical social order. One of the great poet of 17th century, Bhemna wrote: " Brahmins are designated as the lords of the world who are purified, knowledgeable with general hatred towards common mass"(162). Excessive presence of Sanskrit words in Tamil language have further strengthened intellectual dominance of Brahmin caste over other castes, but from 1860 different non-Brahmin communities resisted this dominance. As historian Dilip M. Menon wrote: " The publication of Bishop Caldwell's study of the Dravidian language in the mid-19th century helped popularize the idea that Brahmins were not indigenous to South India. This was to have further ramification on the idea that a traditional caste-less culture had been stunted by the invasion of Brahmins from the North. Resurgent histories were the norm in South India; whereas the discovery of the glorious age of Tamil civilization; or the reconstruction of an egalitarian Buddhist past in the works of Dalit intellectual like Jyotee Thass ." (13) Publication of "Non Brahmin Manifesto" in 1916, development of non-Brahmin led parties known as South Indian People's Association or Justice Party and development of a pressure group known as Madras Presidency Association had put forward strong resistance against the Brahmin hegemony. Dalit ideologue Jyotee

Thass observed that by using different method of social apartheid Brahmin community fragmented the public space to restrict the movement of non-Brahmins and other untouchables. Some of the methods , such as, distance and purification method, separate tram and train coaches for Brahmin and British, barring entry of untouchables in the temple restricted the movement of non-Brahmiin communities . Political scietntist Debi Chatterjee pointed out that during the 18th and 19th centuries Brahmin greatly entrenched their position in the British administration and the newly created urban professions in disproportionately large numbers. Apart from this they came to dominate political and educational fields with their privileged social stature. Dilip M Menon and others pointed out that some historical incidents in the later year of 19th century, particularly the massive migration of Tamil untouchables towards Malayan and Ceylonese plantation works , accumulation of capital in the hands of different non-Brahmin communities such as Nadars and Chettiyaras had constructed counter-demand for equal right for entire non-Brahmin communities of Tamil land . As they demanded equal rights and opportunities at par with Brahmin communities the question of reservation for non-Brahmins in government jobs, emerged. In this context E.V.Ramaswamy Naikar , son of a Nadar landlord arrived in the political arena of Tamil Nadu. He gave some fresh look in the pre-colonial political thought in India .

1. Early political life, Member of Indian National Congress:

E.V.Ramaswamy had a dream for egalitarian civil society. Mahatma Gandhi's constructive political programmes, such as Khadi programmes , picketing toddy shops, boycotting shops selling foreign clothes , temple entry programmes for untouchables had influenced Periyar . As a result of this he joined INC in 1919 and also took the membership of MPA. According to EVR, "movement for access to public spaces , campaign for women empowerment were all aimed at challenging Brahminical dominance" (31). He joined the temple entry movement in Vaikom in Kerela. Famously known as Vaikom Satyagraha , and supported by Gandhiji. Due to his great leadership qualities and courage he received the title of " Vaikom Veeran" and "Periyar" (which means 'great man') from his followers. "Agitative" technique of Gandhiji greatly influenced Periyar . In between 1920-24 EVR was personally involved in the non-cooperation movement and constructive development programmes. But after 1924 in the question of reservation of all non-Brahmin castes including the untouchable Adi-Dravidas and Adi-Sudra and due to the 'Gurukul' controversy there had been strong rift between the followers of Periyar and the state and central leadership of Congress. MPA and Justice Party demanded the British government for the communal representation and reservation of all the non-Brahmin castes on the basis of proportional representation of the population. Periyar supported their move and said " Proportionate distribution of all government rights in accordance with the percentage of population of the community".(79) Undemocratic political culture of Congress organization , suffocating intolerant atmosphere and dictatorial attitude of State and National leadership of Congress disheartened Periyar and he left the party in 1925. Periyar appreciated the constructive programmes of Gandhiji, but he identified that there is a symbiotic relationship between Gandhian thought and Brahminical social order : "

His(Gandhi) religious guise ,god-related discourse, constant mention of truth, non-violence Satyagraha, purifying of the heart, the power of the spirit sacrifice and penance on the one hand and the propaganda of his followers – who in the name of the politics and nation considered him to be a ‘Rishi’ , sage, Christ, the prophet, a ‘mahatma’, and an ‘avatar’ of Vishnu , on the other... have together made Gandhi a political dictator” (71)

2. Concept of rationalism evolved by Periyar:

Rationalism is one of the basic theoretical pillars of Periyar’s ideology. According to him birth and caste position did not or should not create superior position of others. Periyar explained that dignity and wisdom lies in political thinking, which criticize and question authority of religious texts and order. In a speech to the Brahmin community ,Periyar stated , “ In the name of god religion and Shashtra you have duped us. We were the ruling people, stop this life of cheating us from this year. Give room for rationalism and humanism and any opposition not based on rationalism, science or experiences will one day or another reveal the fraud, selfishness, lies and conspiracies.” (14) His rationalism is based on scientific facts and experience of personal life.

3. Concept of self-respect:

EVR’s main contribution in social theory is his concept of self-respect. This theoretical idea has an aim to establish an egalitarian society where any type of discrimination , hatred on the basis of caste, religion and gender cease to exist. As V. Geetha and SV Rajadurai pointed out that through the critique of religion, caste and gender emerged a rational atheist world view articulated overtly in some circumstances as an alternative way of imagining community and nation. Atheism acted as an important tool for criticism as it was first used by Dalit ideologue Jyoti Thass.

Self-respect movement was launched by Periyar in the Erode Conference of Justice Party in 1925. He put forward main objectives of self-respect movement:

- i) Casteless society freed from the oppression of Brahminical Hinduism
- ii) Rationalism based on the scientific knowledge and atheism
- iii) Concept of god must be abolished
- iv) Brahminism must be abolished
- v) According to Periyar Brahmins were criticized on two accounts, firstly for his privileged birth which he used both material and social advantage and secondly , he misused his intellectual ability to create an elaborate hierarchical social structure to consolidate his economic and social control over Hindu society.
- vi) Total eradication of untouchability and free access to every aspect of public space.

- vii) Right to learn should be established through mass literacy programme. As Periyar pointed out that from the ancient time Brahminical social order of Hindu society denied the right to learn of common man through the religious text.
- viii) Abolish the symbols and strategies of Hinduism by proposing the modernization of Tamil language.
- ix) Restriction on people's movement in the name of 'Varnashrama' must go
- x) People should not spend any money in the temples
- xi) Purohit system should be abolished, if needed priesthood of Hindu temple should open for all caste and gender
- xii) Give more emphasis on the development of Tamil and other Dravidian languages
- xiii) Creating employment opportunities for unemployed youth
- xiv) Common funds of the provincial government should utilize for educational and literacy programme purposes

As he wrote in his paper "Kudi Arasu" in 1933: "Our movement(self-respect) is not a reform movement but a distinct destructive movement ... I call myself a revolutionary, revolutionary means turning things upside down." (80)

4. On Women's Right- the concept of self-respect marriage:

Periyar was ahead of his time; in his concept of self-respect he advocated vigorously that women should be given their legitimate position in the society as the equals of men and they should be given good education and also right of property. He also observed that orthodox tradition of arranged marriage were nothing but to enslave women throughout their lives depriving their sexual right. Periyar was also worried about child marriage and stood against dowry culture. Debi Chatterjee observed the concept of self-respect marriage as special types of reform marriage based on the principles of contract and equality in partnership ,conducted without

In his paper "Kudi Arasu" Periyar visualized his concept of self-respect marriage through the following points.

- i) Self-respect marriage is a rational atheistic marriage
- ii) Personification of woman which emphasizes individual freedom
- iii) Recognize women as equal subjects
- iv) Women's empowerment in a total sense, that covers the areas of right to education, right to ownership over property and jobs and right to share the power in the family
- v) Sexual right for women

- vi) Promotion of literacy among women as women's education is regarded as human right
- vii) Emphasis on family planning
- viii) Abolition of 'Devadasi' system in the temple

Periyar interpreted the condition of Indian women as : “ It is due to the prevalence of faith in matters like god and religion, women remain subordinate to men. Valour and freedom are not the sole property of men. By birth both are equal... women are used to beget children. This has made them dependent on men; until this is abolished women cannot be really free. Women can live even without begetting children.”(38)

5. Atheistic philosophy of Periyar:

Periyar , a die-hard atheist, critics religion in five aspects.

- i) He was highly critical of role of Brahmin and Brahminism
- ii) Critic of religious texts and scriptures
- iii) Highly critical of the shallow world –view of religion
- iv) Critical about religious rituals, festivals of public space
- v) Critic of religious doctrines of other religion, particularly on the structure of Catholic priesthood

Periyar was highly critical of Hinduism as he said that due to the Aryan invasion from North India Brahmin-dominated Hindu structure was superimposed on egalitarian Tamil society and tried to destroy its indigenous cultural base. Ancient epic of *Ramayana* was the ideal example where Dravidian characters of Ravana, and Surpanakha were demonized and Lord Rama was the heroic symbol of Aryan Brahminism. Intellectually Periyar was influenced by Adi Dravida ideologue Jyoti Thass who advocated ancient Tamil atheism , based on Buddhist ideological principles. Periyar was engaged throughout his life to deconstruct the religious myth. According to him religious doctrine hindered free thinking of men, dependent on religious beliefs through astrological methods gradually distorts his mind which is then reflected on society through different religious rituals. He was the first thinker of India to de-iconize Buddha from his goodness as he said: “ We find in the teaching of the Buddha full support for all we want and for all that we want to destroy as degrading to the Hindus. Buddha's philosophy, his tenets , and his sermons stand by our self-respect and rationalist movements. The gods, creeds , Shashtras, Puranas and Itihas that enslave our people are the things that we want to discard, and Buddha's teachings and principles are of tremendous value to us for our revolutionary purposes... some of the things we propagate today was taught by the Buddha 2500 years ago” .(144)

6. The Concept of Samadharma- new interpretation of Socialism by Periyar:

Periyar was influenced by the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. In 1932 Periyar along with Communist Trade Unionist Singara Velu Chattiyer, organized a new political party namely Self-Respect Sama Dharma Party or Self-Respect Socialist party. By criticizing Brahminical hierarchy and associated social injustices Periyar and other self-respecters tried to identify economic causes behind the complex nature of caste –structure. Periyar and Singara Velu developed new concept of Sama Dharma on the basis of Marxist principle and Self-Respect concept of Periyar.

- i) Periyar was the first social scientist who analysed the social impediment of caste structure behind the economic exploitation of Capitalist system. As V Geetha and SV Rajadurai rightly pointed out “ In ‘Common Rights and Common Property’, an article written in 1944, Periyar pointed out that Caste society disallows its citizens from experiencing in common, shared and invisible rights”. (413) Periyar emphasized that the self-respecter’s urgent work is to eradicate both the social and economic differences of the society. According to Periyar Caste and class are co-existent through their economic names and social identities .
- ii) Periyar criticized the ‘Varna Jati’ economy and Brahminical dominated economic caste structure. Periyar’s economic philosophy evolved as antithesis of Gandhian philosophy. As V Geetha and Rajadurai observed “ The self-respecters return to this critic of Gandhian economy in the late 1930s when they responded to Gandhi’s Wardha plan for education which envisaged teaching the child a vocation, preferably one that was his caste occupation, while still in the school. Periyar then argued that this proposal which sought to promote which was coming to be known as handicraft sector was somewhat anachronistic. For the world was changing fast and with machines being increasingly used in manufacture in transport and construction...Periyar noted that Congress as interested in the Wardha plan because it desired to keep the entire laboring population in the bondage to its dominance.” (419)
- iii) Periyar was first Indian socialist who distinguished between caste worker and class worker. Periyar observed that Caste workers are the workers by birth and their occupation are determined by the Brahminical caste system.
- iv) Periyar did not accept the economic determinism of socialism. He pointed out that inequality in India is complex one not only determined by economic cause but also by Brahminical caste system. Socialist movement should aim to eliminate not only the economic inequality but also eradicate ‘Jati Varna’ economy of Brahminical caste system. According to him “ Would Marx have known the dominance of the Brahmins in this country, of how they conspire to keep their authority intact? Would he have known that the native inhabitants of this country are called ‘Shudras’ that is son of the slaves by birth?” (112) It is unfortunate for us that Indian communists are

little aware of Periyar's work and their lack of knowledge about Indian society have hindered their expansion.

7. Modernization of Tamil Language:

Periyar claimed that all South Indian languages have same origin, i.e, old Tamil , or Adi Dravida language. Aryan invasion led by Brahmin lords tried to destroy the old grammar of Tamil language. He was initiated to reform the Tamil grammar by introducing new symbols and signs that are free from Sanskrit vocabulary with caste neutral meaning. Periyar was highly critical gendering of Tamil language . As Geetha and Rajadurai noted “ Self-repecters also wondered why the Tamil language did not possess any male equivalent for the term ‘Vidavai’(widow) and ‘Vivachari’ (female prostitute)”. (465) In this context Periyar and other Self-respecters tried to introduce and substitute new terms with gender-neutral meaning in Tamil language. According to Periyar the glory and excellence of a language and its scripta depend on how easily they can be understood or learnt. Periyar advocated that ancient Tamil epic “Thirukkural” was the alternative to the *Ramayana* and designated as valuable scripture containing many ancient scientific and philosophic truth that can be the base of alternative ideology developed by self-respecters.

8. Against Indian Imperialism: Imagined nation of ‘Dravidnadu’:

After introduction of Hindi as a compulsory language by the Rajagopalachari led Congress government in Tamil Nadu (1937), Justice Party led by Periyar started anti-Hindi agitation which ultimately culminated in the demand for separate state of ‘DravidNadu’. Dilip Menon says, that official demand for Dravid Nadu first articulated in 1944 included apart from Tamil region parts of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, and British and native Kerala as autonomous state in the independent federal political unit of Dravid Nadu . The motto was “ Divide on the basis of language and unite on the basis of race”. (40)

Periyar identified five enemies which are associated with new Indian imperialism that can block Dravidian progress:

- i) Brahmin –Bania –North Indian capitalist group with their wide network of caste class chain
- ii) Rightist consolidation over the leadership of Congress after the expulsion of Subhash Chandra Bose in 1940
- iii) Brahminical caste ideology
- iv) Brahmin community itself ,he identified particularly the Tamil Brahmin community
- v) One party dominated political system controlled by Congress

He was anxious and apprehensive about the over-centralization of power in the hand of Congress during the era of transfer of power in 1946-47. From this deeply entrenched fear he advocated independent state of Dravidnadu separated

from India . Racial and language distinctiveness are the basis for separate Dravid Nadu which will be an egalitarian federal structure where all the Dravidian languages can easily flourish in a multi-party democratic atmosphere.

9. Few Thoughts on Political Organization:

Periyar always distinguished between mass organization and political party. He believed that mass organization is an independent organization engaging to develop popular movement for common cause and cannot follow the directives from political party. Apolitical party plays separately mainly engaged with political activities which are suited for its political advancement. Throughout his life Periyar maintained this distinction . Self –Respect movement inbetween 1925-44 and Dravida Kazakam or DK from 1944 onwards were two distinct mass organizations who were engaged for Tamil cause under the superlative guidance of Periyar.

Periyar is the only social thinker who had courage to challenge the grand concept of ‘Hindu way of life’ and tried to develop an alternative hypothesis of it. At the same time Periyar was a social reformer, constructive thinker who influenced the mind of Tamils . Tamil distinctiveness with individual to communal pride were developed by Periyar’s philosophy. Tamil Nadu’s relative success in human development and general health parameter are also linked with Self-Respect movement. As Divya Gupta said , “ This success attributes partially to the language and Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu. One thing it did was help develop a strong sense of self-identity even among the common person, the common Tamilian felt he can make a difference, that he has the right to protect and his voice will be heard.” (11) This individual dignity and courage were developed by the self-respect movement which was a legacy of a Periyar, which is practicable even in the contemporary times.

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