



Research Paper

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy: Architect of Rationalism and Social Justice in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879–1973) remains one of the most influential social reformers in modern India, whose life and work were devoted to challenging caste hierarchies, promoting rationalist thought, and advocating for gender equality. Operating in a socio-political context dominated by Brahminical hegemony, Periyar emerged as a radical voice for the oppressed, particularly non-Brahmins, Dalits, and women. Through the establishment of the **Self-Respect Movement**, he institutionalized efforts to raise awareness about social inequities, caste-based discrimination, and the oppressive nature of religious orthodoxy. Periyar's philosophy combined rationalism, anti-caste activism, and women's emancipation, arguing that true liberation could only be achieved by dismantling social hierarchies and questioning superstitions. He consistently emphasized education, critical thinking, and social dignity as essential tools for empowerment. By promoting self-respect, equality, and rationalist principles, Periyar not only challenged entrenched traditions but also laid the foundation for progressive social and political movements in Tamil Nadu and beyond.

In contemporary India, where caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and social exclusion persist, Periyar's ideas remain highly relevant. His critique of religion, advocacy for women's rights, and insistence on social equality continue to inspire reform movements, political activism, and rationalist discourse. This paper examines Periyar's social and political vision, evaluates the impact of his Self-Respect Movement, and explores the continuing relevance of his ideas in shaping contemporary debates on social justice and equality. By analyzing Periyar's contributions, the paper demonstrates how rationalist thought and organized social activism can serve as powerful instruments for challenging entrenched hierarchies and promoting human dignity, providing enduring lessons for contemporary struggles against inequality in India.

Keywords: Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, Self-Respect Movement, rationalism, social justice, caste, gender equality, Dalit empowerment, non-Brahmin movement, Tamil Nadu, anti-caste activism.

I. Introduction

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), widely known as Periyar, remains one of the most influential social reformers in modern India. His life and work were dedicated to challenging caste hierarchies, promoting rationalist thought, and advocating for gender equality. In an era when Tamil society was deeply stratified by Brahminical dominance, Periyar emerged as a voice for the oppressed, campaigning tirelessly for the rights of non-Brahmins, Dalits, and women. His ideology combined social justice, anti-caste activism, and rationalism, and he established the **Self-Respect Movement** in 1925 to institutionalize his vision. Through this movement, Periyar sought to empower marginalized communities by fostering self-respect, promoting education, and encouraging critical inquiry into social norms. Periyar's critique of religion as a tool of oppression and his emphasis on reason over ritual set him apart from other social reformers of his time. He consistently argued that social hierarchies were reinforced through religious beliefs and practices, which perpetuated caste dominance and gender inequality. For Periyar, true liberation required not only social reform but also a radical questioning of deeply ingrained superstitions and rituals that justified oppression. His advocacy for rationalism extended to all aspects of life, from education and governance to family and marriage practices, making him a pioneer in promoting secular and egalitarian values in Tamil society.

Empirical evidence from his era shows the stark inequalities he sought to address. Census data and social surveys of early 20th-century Tamil Nadu reveal extreme disparities in literacy, employment, and access to public resources between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, with women in marginalized communities facing double discrimination. Periyar's campaigns for women's education, widow remarriage, and property rights

directly challenged these entrenched inequities. The relevance of Periyar's thought remains profound in contemporary India. Despite constitutional safeguards and legal protections, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and social exclusion persist in Tamil Nadu and across the country. Dalits and other marginalized communities continue to face barriers in education, employment, and political representation. Women in rural and urban areas remain vulnerable to patriarchal structures, with limited decision-making power in households and communities. In this context, Periyar's insistence on rationalism, education, and social self-respect provides a framework for understanding and addressing ongoing social injustices.

Furthermore, contemporary social and political movements in Tamil Nadu, including campaigns for caste equity, gender rights, and secular governance, draw inspiration from Periyar's philosophy. His critique of religion as a mechanism of social control resonates with current debates on the role of orthodoxy in perpetuating inequality. By combining empirical insight with philosophical critique, Periyar's life and work continue to offer a lens to examine the persistent challenges of caste, religion, and gender in modern India, emphasizing that meaningful social transformation requires both awareness and organized action.

Periyar's Social and Political Vision

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's social and political vision was both radical and multidimensional, addressing caste oppression, gender inequality, and the role of religion in perpetuating social hierarchies. At the core of his philosophy was **rationalism**, which guided his critique of religious orthodoxy and superstition. Periyar argued that religion was often a mechanism used by the dominant castes to legitimize social inequality, control marginalized communities, and perpetuate hierarchy. He rejected blind faith and ritualistic practices, emphasizing that true social liberation could only be achieved through reason, scientific temper, and critical thinking. By encouraging communities to question oppressive traditions, Periyar sought to dismantle structures that had historically restricted the freedom and dignity of non-Brahmins, Dalits, and women. A central pillar of Periyar's vision was **anti-caste activism and social justice**. He tirelessly campaigned for the rights of non-Brahmins and Dalits, advocating for the abolition of untouchability and equal access to education, employment, and public spaces. Periyar's approach was not limited to moral exhortation; he promoted tangible measures to improve social conditions, including the redistribution of resources, reservation policies, and the democratization of local governance. His insistence on challenging caste privilege extended into politics, where he encouraged non-Brahmins to assert themselves collectively, reshaping power dynamics in Tamil society.

Another revolutionary aspect of Periyar's vision was **women's liberation**. At a time when patriarchal norms strictly limited women's autonomy, Periyar promoted women's education, freedom to choose marriage, and equal property rights. He condemned child marriage, dowry, and other practices that subordinated women, advocating instead for gender equality as a cornerstone of a just society. For Periyar, empowering women was inseparable from the broader struggle against caste oppression, as women from marginalized communities faced intersecting forms of discrimination. To institutionalize his ideas, Periyar launched the **Self-Respect Movement**, which provided a platform for social reform and collective empowerment. The movement emphasized self-respect, dignity, and awareness among marginalized communities, encouraging them to challenge oppressive social norms and demand equality. Through this movement, Periyar created a structured mechanism for education, activism, and social mobilization, ensuring that his vision extended beyond theoretical critique into practical action. In sum, Periyar's social and political vision was holistic and transformative. By combining rationalist critique, anti-caste activism, advocacy for women's rights, and organized social mobilization through the Self-Respect Movement, he laid the foundation for a more egalitarian Tamil society and provided enduring lessons for broader struggles for social justice in India.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy: His Thoughts and Relevance Today

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar, was a pioneering social reformer whose ideas continue to resonate in contemporary India. His philosophy was grounded in **rationalism, anti-caste activism, and social justice**, addressing deeply entrenched hierarchies in Tamil society and beyond. Periyar's core belief was that social liberation could not be achieved merely through legal provisions or symbolic reforms; it required a **fundamental questioning of societal norms, religious dogmas, and caste-based privileges**. He maintained that religion and ritualistic practices often served as tools for maintaining hierarchical dominance, and therefore, rational critique and scientific temper were essential for meaningful emancipation. Periyar's advocacy for **anti-casteism and equality** was revolutionary for his time. He campaigned tirelessly against Brahminical dominance, untouchability, and systemic social exclusion of non-Brahmins and Dalits. By emphasizing education, political awareness, and collective action, he sought to empower marginalized communities to assert their rights and demand social justice. His efforts culminated in the **Self-Respect Movement**, which not only raised awareness about caste and gender inequities but also fostered a sense of dignity and identity among oppressed groups.

A significant dimension of Periyar's thought was **women's liberation**. He championed women's education, property rights, freedom of choice in marriage, and the eradication of oppressive practices such as child marriage and dowry. By linking gender equality to broader social reform, Periyar highlighted the intersectionality of oppression and advocated for a holistic approach to justice. Periyar's ideas remain highly relevant today. Despite constitutional safeguards and progressive legislation, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and social exclusion persist in India. Dalits and marginalized communities continue to face barriers in education, employment, and political representation, while women in many regions still struggle against patriarchal norms and social restrictions. Periyar's emphasis on rationalism, education, and collective social action provides both a philosophical and practical framework to address these issues.

Moreover, contemporary movements for social justice, secularism, and human rights draw inspiration from Periyar's vision. His insistence on questioning authority, challenging superstitions, and fostering self-respect among marginalized communities continues to guide activists, scholars, and policymakers. By applying Periyar's principles in the modern context, India can work toward a more inclusive, equitable, and rational society where social hierarchies and discrimination are actively challenged.

Relevance in Contemporary India

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's ideas continue to hold significant relevance in contemporary India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and religious orthodoxy remain influential in social and political life. Despite the constitutional guarantees of equality, affirmative action, and protection against discrimination, marginalized communities, including Dalits, backward castes, and women, still face systemic exclusion in education, employment, and governance. Periyar's insistence on **rationalism, critical inquiry, and questioning of oppressive traditions** provides a framework for understanding and addressing these ongoing challenges. Contemporary social movements in Tamil Nadu, such as campaigns for caste equity, women's rights, and secular governance, draw inspiration from Periyar's philosophy. His advocacy for education as a tool of empowerment is echoed in initiatives to improve literacy rates, vocational training, and political awareness among marginalized communities. Similarly, his critique of religious orthodoxy remains pertinent in debates on social reform, secularism, and the need to challenge rituals that perpetuate inequality and restrict personal freedoms.

Gender equality, another cornerstone of Periyar's vision, continues to be a pressing concern. Women from marginalized communities face intersectional challenges due to caste and patriarchal structures, limiting their access to decision-making power and economic independence. Periyar's emphasis on women's education, property rights, and freedom of choice in marriage provides both inspiration and practical guidance for contemporary advocacy and policy-making. Moreover, Periyar's Self-Respect Movement offers a model for organized social mobilization, demonstrating how collective action, awareness campaigns, and community solidarity can challenge entrenched hierarchies. By combining rationalist thought with active social engagement, Periyar's legacy provides tools for empowering marginalized groups and promoting equality. In a society still grappling with caste, gender, and religious inequalities, his vision remains a vital reference point for scholars, activists, and policymakers committed to social justice and human dignity.

II. Conclusion

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's legacy stands as a testament to the transformative power of rationalist thought and organized social activism. As a revolutionary social thinker, he challenged entrenched caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and religious orthodoxy, envisioning a society rooted in **equality, reason, and human dignity**. By advocating for the rights of non-Brahmins, Dalits, and women, he not only exposed systemic injustices but also provided practical strategies for their empowerment through education, political awareness, and social mobilization. The Self-Respect Movement, which institutionalized his ideals, created a platform for marginalized communities to assert their dignity, challenge oppressive norms, and participate meaningfully in society. Periyar's emphasis on questioning authority, promoting critical thinking, and fostering rational discourse continues to offer vital lessons for contemporary India, where caste discrimination, gender inequality, and social exclusion persist despite legal safeguards.

Moreover, his philosophy highlights the importance of collective action and organized efforts in bringing about lasting social change. By combining rational critique with activism, Periyar demonstrated that sustainable social justice requires both awareness and concerted effort. In today's India, his life and work continue to inspire scholars, activists, and policymakers committed to equality, secularism, and human rights, making Periyar an enduring figure in the ongoing pursuit of social transformation.

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