



A Comprehensive Analysis of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's Social Reform Ideology and its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, affectionately called "Periyar" (respected elder), was one of Southern India's leading social reformers. Throughout his life (1879-1973), he worked to dismantle entrenched inequality and advocated for universal dignity, regardless of caste or gender. He strongly opposed caste-based discrimination, gender disparities, and systemic oppression. These efforts were most visible through the Self-Respect Movement (Suyamariyadai Porchai) and his energetic promotion of rationalist philosophy.

Periyar encouraged people to move beyond uncritical religious acceptance and adopt evidence-based reasoning as the basis for personal and social transformation.

Central to Periyar's reform agenda was his consistent commitment to educational equity for women. He insisted that everyone has an inherent right to knowledge and pushed for equitable treatment across all societal groups.

His belief that justice should reach all areas of social life formed the philosophical basis for modern Tamil Nadu's progressive systems. His work in education and social justice helped shape the Dravidian political movement. This movement created the ideological base that still supports Tamil Nadu's social and political structures today. This scholarly examination critically evaluates Periyar's multifaceted social reform initiatives, analyzes the philosophical principles underpinning his activism, and assesses the enduring applicability of his vision in addressing twenty-first-century inequities.

Keywords: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Social Reform Methodology, Self-Respect Movement, Rationalist Philosophy, Egalitarianism, Caste System Dismantling, Women's Empowerment, Dravidian Political Ideology, Educational Equity

1. INTRODUCTION

The caste hierarchy has functioned as the organizing principle of Indian civilization for millennia, predetermining an individual's social position based on birth circumstances rather than merit, capability, or personal achievement. This rigid stratification systematically excluded the lower-caste communities from educational opportunities, religious participation, and fundamental human dignity. Concurrently, women

across all caste categories encountered severe discrimination regarding educational access, marital autonomy, and property inheritance rights. Within this oppressive milieu, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973) articulated a revolutionary ideological framework predicated on universal human equality.

Periyar's philosophical foundation rested upon the radical proposition that human worth derives solely from one's humanity, independent of caste designation, religious adherence, or gender classification. He systematically challenged customary practices that degraded individuals and impeded collective social advancement. His methodology emphasized rational inquiry—encouraging citizens to employ logical analysis rather than uncritically accepting traditional prescriptions. Through extensive travels across Tamil-speaking regions, organized public assemblies, interactive community dialogues, and prolific literary production, he cultivated mass awareness regarding systemic injustice.

Periyar identified education and self-confidence as the dual pathways to individual emancipation and societal transformation. His ideological contributions established the conceptual basis for numerous subsequent reform movements and significantly elevated social consciousness throughout Tamil Nadu. While he occasionally pursued legislative remedies, his primary objective involved transforming popular attitudes and belief systems—a more challenging but sustainable approach to social change.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS AND RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Despite substantial social progress since India's independence, multiple forms of inequality persist within contemporary Indian society. These persistent challenges include:

- Continued caste-based prejudices manifesting in matrimonial arrangements and professional environments
- Differential access to opportunities based on socioeconomic origins and community background
- Widespread deficiency in rational thinking capabilities and scientific literacy
- Persistent gender asymmetries limiting women's full participation in economic and political domains
- Enduring influence of unscientific belief systems on personal and collective decision-making
- Emerging social stratifications based on birth and inherited status

These observations demonstrate that Periyar's fundamental principles retain significant relevance for addressing contemporary inequities. His advocacy for equity through educational empowerment—encompassing both formal institutional learning and informal community education offers a sustainable framework for constructing harmonious and inclusive societies. The current research investigates how Periyar's ideological framework can inform present-day interventions against systemic discrimination.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholarly examination of Periyar's reform activities appears extensively within historical and sociological literature. Academic historians have increasingly recognized his contributions as foundational to modern South Indian social development. Regional histories of Tamil Nadu consistently incorporate analysis of his organizational strategies and their impact on marginalized communities.

The academic consensus positions Periyar as a central figure in South India's social revolutionary trajectory. His participation in the 1924-25 Vaikom Satyagraha in Kerala exemplifies his practical commitment to accessibility rights—specifically, his advocacy for lower-caste individuals' right to use public thoroughfares surrounding temples. This campaign attracted national attention and established his reputation as a principled

activist willing to endure imprisonment for equality.

Contemporary research documents his systematic opposition to untouchability practices and caste-based social exclusions. Feminist scholars have highlighted his progressive positions regarding women's rights, including his support for widow remarriage, married women's property rights, and female educational advancement. These positions were remarkably advanced for early twentieth-century India.

Philosophical analyses of Periyar's extensive speeches and published works reveal consistent emphasis on individual dignity and autonomous self-determination. His rationalist critiques of religious orthodoxy have generated substantial academic commentary regarding the relationship between secularism and social reform in colonial and post-colonial India.

The collective scholarly assessment confirms that Periyar's ideological contributions significantly influenced subsequent political mobilization and policy formation in Tamil Nadu, particularly regarding affirmative action (reservation) policies and comprehensive social welfare programs. This literature establishes the theoretical foundation for examining Periyar's continued relevance.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This investigation employs descriptive-analytical research methodology, utilizing a comprehensive secondary source analysis. Data sources include:

Primary Sources: • Periyar's collected speeches and editorial writings • Contemporary newspaper accounts of his activities • Government records regarding social reform legislation

Secondary Sources: • Peer-reviewed historical and sociological scholarship • Biographical studies and autobiographical materials • Educational policy documents and governmental publications • Comparative analyses of social conditions across temporal periods

The analytical framework examines Periyar's ideological development, organizational methods, and measurable social impact. Comparative analysis juxtaposes historical social conditions with contemporary circumstances to evaluate the ongoing applicability of his reform strategies.

5. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

This research pursues five interconnected objectives:

First, to comprehensively examine Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's biographical trajectory and reform initiatives, identifying key developmental phases in his ideological evolution.

Second, to systematically analyze the philosophical tenets and organizational structure of the Self-Respect Movement, evaluating its distinctive contributions to Indian social reform history.

Third, to critically investigate Periyar's conceptualizations of rationalism and equality, examining how these principles interconnect within his broader ideological system.

Fourth, to assess his specific contributions to gender equity advancement, including women's educational

access, economic empowerment, and legal rights.

Fifth, to evaluate the contemporary relevance of Periyar's anti-caste and anti-discrimination frameworks for addressing persistent social inequalities in modern Indian society.

6. KEY REFORM INITIATIVES AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

6.1 The Self-Respect Movement (Suyamariyadai Porchai)

Established in 1925, the Self-Respect Movement represented Periyar's primary organizational vehicle for social transformation. Unlike earlier reform movements that sought accommodation within existing hierarchical structures, Periyar's approach demanded fundamental restructuring of social relationships based on equal dignity. The movement emphasized:

- Rejection of birth-based status determination
- Inter-caste marriage promotion as a social integration strategy
- Elimination of ritual hierarchies in religious practice
- Economic co-operation transcending caste boundaries

The movement's distinctive characteristics included its mass mobilization strategies, use of Tamil language in public discourse (rather than Sanskrit), and a direct challenge to Brahminical religious authority. Periyar organized thousands of self-respect conferences throughout Tamil Nadu, creating alternative spaces for lower-caste communities to develop political consciousness and collective identity.

6.2 Rationalist Philosophy and Critique of Orthodoxy

Periyar's rationalism extended beyond mere atheism to encompass methodological skepticism toward all unexamined traditions. He argued that religious orthodoxy functioned as an ideological mechanism for maintaining dominant group privilege. His critique targeted:

- Scriptural interpretations justifying caste hierarchy
- Superstitious practices exploiting economically vulnerable populations
- Gender discriminatory religious customs
- Divisive communal politics based on religious identity

His rationalist approach emphasized empirical verification, logical consistency, and human welfare as criteria for evaluating social practices. Periyar established rationalist associations and publications to disseminate scientific thinking among the general population. He famously declared, "There is no God, there is no God, there is no God at all. He who invented God is a fool. He who propagates God is a scoundrel. He who worships God is a barbarian."

While this militant atheism generated controversy, Periyar maintained that religious belief perpetuated social inequality by discouraging critical examination of traditional hierarchies. His rationalism sought to liberate individuals from mental subjugation, arguing that social oppression required ideological justification that critical thinking could dismantle.

6.3 Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice

Periyar recognized gender inequality as interconnected with caste oppression, advocating comprehensive

reform, including:

- Compulsory primary education for girls
- Property inheritance rights for married and un-married women
- Abolition of dowry systems and marriage-related financial exploitation
- Women's independent economic participation and professional employment
- Legal recognition of self-respect marriages (civil ceremonies without religious officiation)

He particularly emphasized that women's education represented the foundation for all other reforms, arguing that ignorance perpetuated subordination. His organization established schools for girls and provided scholarships for female students. Periyar's advocacy for widow remarriage challenged deeply entrenched social taboos, while his support for women's property rights addressed economic vulnerability.

6.4 Anti-Caste Activism and Temple Entry Movements

Periyar's anti-caste work included direct action campaigns for temple entry rights. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) represented a pivotal moment in his activist career. In Vaikom, Kerala, lower-caste individuals were prohibited from using public roads surrounding the Shiva temple. Periyar led demonstrations demanding equal access, resulting in his arrest and imprisonment. The eventual success of this campaign—achieving road access rights—demonstrated the effectiveness of non-violent direct action against religious discrimination.

Following this experience, Periyar organized similar campaigns throughout Tamil Nadu, including the famous 1939 Guruvayur Satyagraha. These movements challenged the religious justification for caste exclusion and established precedents for subsequent anti-discrimination legislation.

6.5 Political Engagement and the Dravidian Movement

Periyar's political activism evolved through several phases. Initially associated with the Indian National Congress, he resigned in 1925 when the party refused to implement caste-based reservations in Tamil Nadu. He subsequently led the Justice Party (later renamed Dravidar Kazhagam, transforming it from an elite organization into a mass movement).

His political philosophy emphasized social reform over immediate independence, arguing that political freedom without social equality would merely transfer power from British colonizers to upper-caste Indian elites. This prioritization generated controversy within the nationalist movement, but established the foundation for Tamil Nadu's distinctive political culture emphasizing social justice.

Periyar opposed the linguistic reorganization of states that created a multilingual Madras Presidency, advocating instead for an independent Dravidistan or at least substantial autonomy for Tamil-speaking regions. While these particular political objectives were not realized, his activism established the ideological basis for subsequent Dravidian political parties that have dominated Tamil Nadu politics since 1967.

7. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Periyar's reform agenda offers actionable insights for contemporary social policy:

Educational Reform: Integration of social equality curricula at all educational levels, emphasizing critical

thinking and scientific methodology. Schools and universities should incorporate modules on social justice, caste dynamics, and rational inquiry to cultivate informed citizenship.

Anti-Discrimination Measures: Systematic awareness campaigns addressing caste-based discrimination in educational admissions and employment sectors. Organizations should implement unconscious bias training and establish transparent grievance mechanisms for discrimination complaints.

Scientific Literacy Promotion: Institutional support for rationalist education and critical reasoning skills development among youth populations. Science communication initiatives should address communities vulnerable to exploitation through superstitious practices.

Gender Equity Advancement: Targeted programs expanding women's higher education enrollment and workforce participation, with particular attention to rural and marginalized communities. Policy interventions should address structural barriers, including safety concerns, transportation limitations, and domestic labor expectations.

Superstition Eradication: Organized social campaigns challenging exploitative practices justified through religious or traditional appeals. Government and civil society collaboration can effectively counter harmful practices while respecting genuine religious freedom.

Equity Policy Support: Legislative and administrative measures ensuring substantive equality of opportunity across all community categories. Affirmative action programs require periodic evaluation and expansion to address emerging forms of discrimination.

7.1 Implementation Strategies

Effective implementation of Periyar's vision requires multi-stakeholder collaboration:

Governmental Action: Strengthening enforcement of existing anti-discrimination legislation, expanding educational access in underserved regions, and funding rationalist education initiatives.

Civil Society Engagement: Community-based organizations conducting awareness programs, supporting inter-caste marriages and providing legal assistance to victims of discrimination.

Educational Institution Leadership: Curriculum reform incorporating social justice perspectives, faculty diversity initiatives, and student support services addressing caste and gender-based challenges.

Media and Cultural Production: Responsible representation challenging stereotypes, promoting inter-community understanding, and highlighting success stories of social transformation.

7.2 Measuring Progress

Indicators for evaluating Periyar-inspired interventions include:

- Educational attainment differentials across caste and gender categories
- Labor market participation rates and wage differentials
- Incidence of caste-based violence and discrimination complaints
- Prevalence of superstitious practices and scientific literacy levels
- Political representation across community categories

Social attitudes regarding inter-caste marriage and gender equality

8. CONCLUSION

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy functioned simultaneously as a social reformer, political organizer, and philosophical innovator, fundamentally transforming public consciousness regarding dignity and equality. His systematic opposition to caste hierarchy, gender discrimination, and uncritical traditionalism established enduring foundations for progressive social change.

His conviction that education and rational inquiry constitute essential prerequisites for human progress continues to inform contemporary development discourse. The Dravidian political movements that emerged from his ideological influence successfully implemented substantial social justice measures in Tamil Nadu, including extensive reservation policies and comprehensive welfare programs. These interventions have significantly reduced historical disparities, though substantial challenges persist.

In an era characterized by persistent inequality and identity-based conflict, Periyar's message maintains profound relevance. His methodology—combining intellectual critique with mass mobilization, individual transformation with structural change—offers a comprehensive approach to social reform. His emphasis on self-respect as the foundation for social equality addresses both material conditions and psychological dimensions of oppression.

His life demonstrates that sustainable social transformation requires both individual courage to challenge injustice and mobilize for collective action to drive structural change. The persistence of caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and communal conflict in contemporary India validate Periyar's insight that political independence without social revolution leaves fundamental power structures intact.

Consequently, he remains appropriately recognized as a preeminent champion of social justice, human dignity, and rationalist humanism. His legacy continues to inspire activists, scholars, and policymakers committed to realizing the vision of an egalitarian society where human worth derives from our shared humanity rather than ascribed status. As India confronts contemporary challenges of inequality, majoritarianism, and social fragmentation, Periyar's insistence on rationality, equality, and human solidarity offers essential guidance for constructing a more just future.

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