

CHAPTER III

PERIYAR'S RATIONALISM ON THE TAMILS

The philosophy of Periyar is said to be a universally accepted one that preaches human actions should be based on rational thinking. It is an outcome of the natural instinct of human beings to examine every object and every action and even nature with a spirit of enquiry and to refuse to submit to anything irrational as equivalent to slavery. His philosophy teaches that human actions should be guided by reason and right and wrong should emerge from rational thinking. Conclusions drawn from reason should be respected under any circumstances. Freedom means respect to thoughts and actions considered right by human beings on the basis of reason.¹ Periyar remarked that the freedom fighters of India were showing disrespect to Self-Respect, and this was really an irrational philosophy.²

Started as a movement to promote rational behaviour, the Self-Respect Movement acquired much wider connotation within a short time. Self-Respect was as valuable as life itself. To a human being, it is protection of his *suya mariyadai*, Self-Respect that is his birthright and not *swaraj*, political freedom³. Periyar described the movement as *Arivu Viduthalai Iyakkam*, that is, a movement to liberate the intellect⁴.

The First Provincial Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalput on 17 February 1929 appealed both to the government and the public on grounds of humanity and national advancement alike to take steps for the

¹ Tantai Periyar, *Suya Mariyadai Iyakkatai Tottuvittattu en?(T)*, Madras, pp.13-14.

² *Ibid.*, p.14.

³ *Kudi Arasu, Madras*, 24 January 1926.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 August 1929.

abolition of the institution of casteism and to ensure free and unrestricted access to all public roads, tanks, wells, schools, choultries, water-sheds, and temples.⁵ It was at this conference that Periyar announced the deletion of his caste title Naicker from his name. The conference resolved that all suffixes and terminations connotative of caste should be given up and no marks denoting any specific caste or sect should be worn on any part of the body. In furtherance of its basic policy, the conference expressed an opinion that no expenditure on worship of Gods should be incurred and no priest should be employed for the purpose of worship and public funds should not be utilized for propagation of *vedas*, Sanskrit or Hindi in the educational institutions.⁶ Furthermore it was resolved that all text books tending towards inculcation of superstitious ideas should be proscribed and no license should be granted for enactment of dramas showing a similar tendency. Authors, play wrights, actors, and proprietors of theatres were requested not to compose or enact stories and plays opposed to reason and rational thinking and discourage self-reliance and Self-Respect or had a propagandist tendency in the direction of inculcating false and absurd notions on religion.

Periyar raised a slogan; *suya mariyadai izhandu manithan euru vazathe* means that one should not live as man by losing one's self-respect. The conference recommended that not a single pie or a single pie's worth of material should be used in the cause of worship in the temples or elsewhere in the name of God, no priest or intermediary between the worshipper and the worshipped should be employed, no new temple should be built, and that

⁵ *Revolt*, Madras, 30 January 1929.

⁶ This seems to be the first public expression of opposition to Hindi in Tamilnadu.

the income and properties of the existing temples and *mutts* should be utilised for the promotion of technological studies, vocational education and industrial research. In the place of temple festivals, the conference recommended the organisation of exhibitions for dissemination of knowledge on health, sanitation, etc... The conference further recommended enforcing compulsory elementary education for boys and girls encouraging of public expenditure on education to elementary stage and admission of various communities in educational institutions.⁷

The conference referred to the status of women, which was considered crucial to generate self-respect in a community. It declared its conviction that women should be given the same rights to property and inheritance as men and urged that the age of marriage of girls should be raised to eighteen, and law should prohibit infant and child marriages. Marriage should be terminable at the will of either party and no restriction should be placed on remarriage of widows. Marriage should be based on free choice irrespective of caste and creed and women should have equal rights to join any profession.⁸ Conventional notions prevailing in the society should be subjected to a thorough examination without fear and without bias. As humanity was acquiring more and more experience and knowledge and newer concepts were being evolved, he felt that to remain a slave to old ideas and customs would mean destruction of the roots of truth and knowledge.⁹

⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 18 February 1929.

⁸ Legislations have been made on these at various times.

⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 29 March 1931.

The movement was opened to the people of any religion as its basic ideal was removal of superstitious beliefs and irrational rituals. Periyar specifically pointed out that the movement had not adopted atheism as an ideology nor was it formed as an anti-God or anti-religious movement.¹⁰ For the critics it was a propagation of atheism and caste hatred where Periyar was always positive in his approach and advocated that any adverse comments about priest craft, rituals and temple festivals were considered atheistic in India. He retorted: 'we do not know what is not atheistic in this country'.¹¹

The movement faced a great deal of opposition from different quarters. The orthodox Brahmins and some of the Tamils condemned it as atheism and disapproved its interference with any religious beliefs. Political allies felt that it was redundant since the Justice Party was looking after non-Brahmin interests. However, opponents of the movement feared that it was a reactionary wave that would retard political development and obstruct the national movement. Periyar travelled throughout Tamilnadu and by his direct approach to the Tamils, he popularised the movement. He made it mass-based and supported by certain elite sections also. Among the socio-politically influential personalities who were with the movement in various capacities was Raja of Panagal, W.P.A. Soundrapandian, Dr.P.Subbarayan, T.K. Shanmugam, Dr. A. Ramasami Mudaliar, S. Ramanathan and others.¹² In his presidential address at the Tiruvannamalai Congress in 1924 Periyar said that the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5 December 1937.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1929.

¹² Saraswathi.S. *Towards Self-Respect Periyar EVR on a New World*, Madras, 1994,p.26.

grievances of the non-Brahmin Congress leaders of South India were not known to the public. Gandhi did not know them nor were there persons to tell him about them. If he would really know the truth, he could not say how many days of fast Gandhi would undertake.¹³ Ever since the Self-Respect Movement was started in the mid of 1920's till his death in 1973, removal of casteism was his object of whatever he said and did. Periyar was not a theoretician in any case, but an extremely a practical man, not a philosopher but action-oriented leader, not a mere thinker but a programmer.

Periyar was in forefront of the Vaikom struggle in 1924 to throw open public roads to the Ezhava, Pulaya castes who were considered untouchables and unapproachable. He used Congress platform to put forth his idea for removing caste differences and barriers which appeared to him to be the root of the problem of untouchability. His intense involvement granted the basic civil right of using public roads to the low castes. He believed that a remedy for the deteriorating social relationship among the Brahmin and non-Brahmins could be found in concentration on the constructive programme.¹⁴

Analysing the political situation in the Madras Presidency, Periyar in a public meeting at Coimbatore on 17 December 1925, spoke on the significance of the constructive programme and communal representation. He suggested that since the Congress had virtually abandoned the constructive programme, people could work for the constructive programme without joining the Congress. He remarked that, the Liberal Independent

¹³ *The Hindu*, Madras, 15 November 1924.

¹⁴ Under Secretary's Safe, File No. 688, 1 August 1925.

Party and the Justice Party were as good as the Congress.¹⁵ The rational remarks of Periyar created a commotion in the meeting and a section of the audience raised objections to Periyar who used the Congress platform to speak against the party and particularly to the remark that the Justice Party was as good as the Congress. Intense arguments were reported to have taken place between Periyar and the Secretary of the Congress.¹⁶

In December 1931 Periyar undertook a tour of Europe and England. He was accompanied by S.Ramanathan and Erode Ramu, who were personally acquainted with their political systems, social movements, and way of life, economic and social progress and administration of public bodies. On his return journey, he halted at Ceylon and returned to India in November 1932. This tour shaped the political ideology of Periyar to achieve the social concept of Self-Respect. The communist form of government in Russia found him best suited to deal with social ills of this country.¹⁷ Periyar realised that the inseparable link between politics and social movement would be the answer to social inequalities.

Socialism and the Movement

Even at this time, Periyar's ideas were turning towards socialism. J.S. Kannappar, the editor of the Justice Party newspaper *Dravidian*, very much supported the socialist resolutions passed at a Self-Respect meeting in Tuticorin and also expressed his admiration to Rajguru, Bhagat Singh and Sukhdeve, the three Indian terrorist nationalists. But he dissociated himself

¹⁵ *The Hindu*, Madras, 21 December 1925.

¹⁶ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 22 October 1933.

¹⁷ Periyar EVR., *Hindi Por Murasu* (T) Madras, 1948, p12.

from the meetings of anti-Gandhian resolutions.¹⁸ But Kannappar, the editor in 1930, struck out his own and began to publicise Congress thinking and the goal of Self-Respect meetings. On 1 December 1930, he urged members of the Self-Respect Movement at a Coimbatore meeting to join the Congress Civil Disobedience campaign.¹⁹ In July 1931, J.S.Kannappar addressed a Congress meeting and declared that the resolution on fundamental rights passed in the Karachi Congress reflected Self Respect ideals. Hence, he urged the people to join the Congress.²⁰ J.S.Kannappar, and many individuals began to question the leadership of Periyar and the goals of the movement. At the Viruthunagar Self-Respect Conference in August 1931 W.P.A. Soundarapandian admitted that the Congress had struck a blow to the Periyar Movement by declaring the need for religious tolerance and neutrality.²¹ Though the followers of the movement stuck on their goals, for a moment, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the temperance campaigns associated with the resurgence of the Tamilnadu Congress absorbed the energies of many young activists.²² By the end of 1931, when Periyar and S. Ramanathan left on a tour to Europe, popular support and monetary assistance for the movement had evaporated.²³ V.V.Ramaswami, W.P.A. Soundarapandian, S. Murugappah, T.V. Somasundaram and K.A.P. Viswanathan declared their intention to sever their relationship with the movement. In all the issues of *Kudi Arasu* during 1932-33 articles on

¹⁸ *The Hindu*, Madras, 7 April 1931.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 December 1930.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Madras, 3 July 1931.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Madras, 10 August 1931.

²² Sami Chitamparanar, *Tamilar Talaivar*, (T), Madras, 1983. p.125.

²³ Aiyymuttu.A.Kovai, *Rajaji: en tantai*, Cingarampalaiyam, 1970, p.29.

socialist ideology were published. “The dawn of Socialism”, “Socialist Methods and Ignorant Beliefs”, “What is Wanted? *Swaraj* or Socialism”, “The Triumph of Socialism”, “Socialism and Children” were some of the articles which appeared in the journals.²⁴

The most important person to join the movement while Periyar was abroad was M. Singaravelu Chetti, a fisherman intellectual. He was a prolific writer and authored several books. During 1932 and 1933, his articles, on Bolshevism, Fascism, Nazism, Communism and the Russian Revolution appeared in *Kudi Arasu*. A series by M.Singaravelu on “The Work Before us in India” dealing with religion, politics, economics and society were published. *Kudi Arasu Pathippakam* published his speeches and writings.²⁵ His presidential address at the first Provincial Socialist Conference in 1934 was on *Samadharma Upanyasam* (Lectures and Socialism) which explained the concept and characteristics of socialism. It entered on the themes of common ownership, equal distribution, socialist government, or a government of workers.

The socialist philosophy is based on five principles, common ownership, common distribution, and common use of profit, democratic control, and worker’s rule. M.Singaravelu’s *Samadharma* philosophy reflected in Periyar’s Self-Respect ideology. Both of them attributed poverty and ignorance were due to the conspiracy of kings and priests.²⁶ In addition, they traced the seeds of wars and international disputes to the spirit of

²⁴ *The Hindu*, Madras, 17 May 1932.

²⁵ G.O.No.998, Public Department, 28 November 1933.

²⁶ Singaravelu.M. *Samadharma Upanyasam*, (T) Erode, 1934.pp.3-20.

nationalism, and believed that socialism could not be the methods of propaganda and organisations.²⁷

Since then in all the platforms and on all occasions, Periyar spoke about the merits of dispensing with caste, religion, private ownership, and the difference between rich and poor, etc., and he expected them to be eradicated. He opposed that the caste system and the Brahminical rites. His articles on socialism, communism and materialist philosophy were published in *Kudi Arasu*. As a confirmed materialist, he opposed caste system and the Brahminical rites. He published articles on Bhagat Singh and praised his anti-imperialism and sacrifice. He was hauled up before the High Court and sentenced to one-year imprisonment for writing and publishing rational philosophy.²⁸

Singaravelu wrote in *Kudi Arasu* and urged the need to follow the footsteps of Russian Communism.²⁹ In 1932 he spoke about the failure of the Congress, the Justice Party, and even the Self-Respect Movement and extolled Lenin and Troisky. After the arrival of Periyar from Russia in late 1932, he articulated many socialist ideas but was not received warmly by his former Justice supporters. The hostility came to the surface in a Conference at Erode in December 1932. As a result of the opposition it was decided to divide the movement's activities between two formal bodies.³⁰

The Self-Respect Movement continued its social reform propaganda. The Samadharma Party of South India participated in elections and

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.48.

²⁸ Ramamurthy.P, *The Freedom Struggle and the Dravidian Movement*, Madras 1987, P.76.

²⁹ Singaravelu.M., *Vignana Muraiyum Mootanampikkiyum*,(T),Erode, 1934 p.2.

³⁰ Baker.C.J., "*Leading upto Periyar; The Early Career of E.V.Ramaswami Naicker*", Bombay, 1978, p.522.

Ramanathan and Sami Chidambaranar, Periyar's biographer, were the leaders of the group who sought to retain the social goals of the movement. Periyar believed that these newer, socialist goals should have precedence.³¹ As a result, he encouraged the celebration of May Day in Erode, Tirunelveli, Madurai and Tiruchinapalli.³² The net result was the formulation and announcement of the Erode Programme. Periyar organised a wing of his movement styled the Self-Respect Socialist Party, and evolved a programme, which came to be known as the Erode Programme. Some of their salient features of the programme were, to free Indian from capitalistic rule, to socialise all kinds of factories, railways, ships, boats and such means of transport: to abolish all the princely states and bring the whole of India under the direct rule of the workers, peasants and manual workers. The Erode Programme was a statement of social, political and economic goals, which included the nationalisation of utilities, transport, agriculture and industry and ameliorating the condition of both urban and rural masses. A criticism of Gandhi's Civil Disobedience and the Brahmin's *varnashrama dharama* continued to operate within the movement.³³

The socialist goals of the movement attracted the attention of the government. Self-Respect meetings were attended by informers of the government. Short hand versions of the speeches were filed for security proceedings and leaders came under surveillance.³⁴ Periyar was asked to deposit security money for his monthly journal, *Kudi Arasu* and on 19

³¹ *The Hindu*, Madras, 2 January 1933.

³² *Ibid.*, 24 May 1933.

³³ Ramamurthy.P., *op.cit.*, p.77.

³⁴ Sami Chitamparanar, *Tamilar Talaivar* (T), p.143.

November 1933, the publication was temporarily ceased.³⁵ In June 1933 Periyar was imprisoned for a month because he failed to pay a sum of Rs.1, 100/- stationary bill to a Madras firm. Periyar's sister S.M. Kannammal became the publisher of a new journal, *Puratchi*.³⁶ In December 1933 both S.M. Kannammal and Periyar were arrested for an editorial in the *Kudi Arasu* which advocated the destruction of the government.³⁷ Periyar met Rajagopalachari at Coimbatore prison. Rajagopalachari invited Periyar to return to the Congress. Periyar insisted on communal representation as a condition to join the Congress, but it was rejected by the Congress and Gandhi. Therefore, Periyar did not fulfill Rajagopalachari's desire. Nonetheless, Rajagopalachari made a sincere attempt to get Periyar back into the Congress but he failed.³⁸ However, government surveillance and harassment together with his own poverty made Periyar unable to continue his activities.

In 1934 and 1935 Government pressure on Periyar increased. In July 1934, the Government of India declared the Communist Party illegal. In November, the Madras Government placed the Young Workers League in the same category.³⁹ Many of the members of the Self-Respect Movement claimed that they were not communists and Periyar himself withdrew his support to communist principles entirely.⁴⁰ After the closure of *Puratchi*, Periyar started publishing *Pakuttarivu* but that, too became a focus for

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.139.

³⁶ *The Hindu*, Madras, 6 June 1933.

³⁷ Sami Chitamparanar, *op.cit.*, p.141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

³⁹ Baliga.B.S, *District Gazetteers, Madras*, 1960,p.83.

⁴⁰ Visswanathan E.Sa. *The Political Career of E.V.Ramasami Naicker: A Study in the Politics of Tamilnadu*, Madras, 1983pp.156-157.

government security demands in 1935, because of its anti-catholic articles.⁴¹ The Madras Government came down hard on other journals owned by Periyar and he was forced to back away from much of his socialist orientation because of government pressure.⁴² Expressing the reaction of the movement, *Kudi Arasu* wrote an editorial comment that it could no longer be held that eradication of Brahmin-rule and Brahminism was more important than socialism or communist ideology. It pointed out that a group of Justicites had done more harm to the non-Brahmins than Brahmins by taking a Brahmin in the ministry and by giving up communal representation voluntarily.⁴³

Entry into politics was justified by Periyar as a means to realise many of the ideas of the movement through legislations like rationalisation of income tax, reformulation of school curriculum, removal of middle men in business, etc. The object was not to oppose the government or obstruct its functioning but to facilitate legislation that would promote self-respect ideals, to improve the socio-economic conditions of the non-Brahmin castes and to reduce the influence of Brahmins in the government.⁴⁴

The entry of the Self-Respect Movement into politics was a natural corollary of the growing complexities in social life when religion, society could no longer be kept as distinct fields. It is becoming increasingly evident that such irrational religious and caste habits and customs and their low economic conditions of life, cannot be done away with, except through direct action. It is

⁴¹ G.O. 296, Public Department (Confidential), 18 February 1935.

⁴² G.O. 323, Public Department (Confidential), 23 February 1935.

⁴³ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 22 October 1933.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20 August 1933.

further evident that the various political, social and religious bodies and institutions were even more determined to hold the masses in social, religious and economic bondage and degradation, through their political organisation all over the country.⁴⁵

Periyar considered the existence of princely states as one of the worst forms of exploitation. Before ending the capitalism of the British rule and their autocratic control, he said that it was urgently necessary to destroy completely the capitalism and irresponsible and tyrannical rule of the native states. The subjects of native states were treated worse than animals without any regard for their self-respect. The extravagant life of the princes, the concept of hereditary princely right, the belief in prince-hood resulting from the good deeds of previous birth, and the princes having divine qualities were incompatible with the Self-Respect Samadharma Philosophy. He was angry with the nationalist leaders because they were not worried about the people and complained that national newspapers were receiving financial support from the princes and hence they praised their administration.⁴⁶

The legislation prohibiting any propaganda likely to cast aspersions or create ill-will against the administration of native states was criticised by Periyar and pointed out the misdeeds of the government. He strongly condemned the governments of the princely states as much worse than that of the British in India, and described them as the regimes of groups of dacoits unconcerned about the welfare of the subjects. In this condition, Periyar totally rejected the federal idea under which the princes would get a right to

⁴⁵ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 10 March 1933.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 September 1933.

interfere in the affairs of the Presidencies. The only solution that Periyar envisaged in was the abolition of the Princely States.⁴⁷

Periyar took a leading part in anti-zamindar conferences. A Conference was held on August 1933, at Salem. Periyar made a lengthy speech dilating on the vices patronised in *zamindari* households, gambling, drinking and electoral malpractices and pleaded for the abolition of the *zamindari* system. He moved a resolution in order to abolish the *zamindari* system through methods suited to rationalism and economic justice and equality.⁴⁸ A committee led by Periyar, C. Natarajan, K.M. Balasubramanian, K.V. Alagiriswamy and V. Parthasarathy worked out the modalities for abolition of laws and regulations in favour of the *zamindari* system. Periyar studied the course of rational movements in the west and had knowledge of creating funds for the principles and methods. He was a member of the Rationalist Association of New York and Anti-Religious Propaganda of Moscow. His precepts and practices for religious revolution were adopted from western schools and modified to Indian conditions.⁴⁹

At the instance of Periyar observance of May Day as 'Worker's Day' was started in 1935 in Madras. He appealed to the workers to join together forgetting their attachments to the nation, religion and caste and work for equal rights and equal opportunities for all workers all over the world and create workers' socialism.⁵⁰ In all meetings, he addressed the audience as '*tholargal*' which means 'comrades'. He attacked the established religious

⁴⁷ Under Secretary's Safe, File No.897, 20 December 1934.

⁴⁸ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 27 August 1933.

⁴⁹ Under Secretary's Safe File No.39, 25 April 1951.

⁵⁰ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 28 April 1935.

manifested beliefs, practices, institutions and doctrines. They had several forms, different terms to describe movements and individuals expressing protest against established religions, irreligion, disbelief, unreligious, non-theist, unbeliever, unorthodox, heterodox, rational, religious radical, anti-religious, anti-clerical, pagan, ethicist, humanist, secularist, materialist, infidel, heretic and atheist. The substance and quality of non-conformity to traditional patterns of religion and its symbols and practices and the degree of non-conformity indicated by these terms are non identical.⁵¹

Periyar issued an unambiguous statement that he was not at all concerned with God or religion and that his concern was to remove human miseries and obstacles to knowledge, ability and happiness and create a free atmosphere. He confessed that he had no belief in salvation, sin and pardon, the kingdom of the God, soul and life. To him, all religions appeared similar to one another and contained similar basic elements.⁵² He was of the view that the idea of God was alien to Tamil society. The meaning of the word *kadavul* is to be given in Sanskrit. Even for Aryans, there is no *Kadavul* but only *vedas*. He mentions the term *kandaki* in Tamil said to be a term denoting God, but explains that even this term is not explained fully in Tamil but contains an Aryan word *tatvam* which means truth and is explained as something beyond truth implying thereby the non-existence of *kadavul*.⁵³

Periyar issued an elaborate statement explaining his reasons for using such offensive terms as fool, dishonest, and barbarian to the believers and

⁵¹ G.O.No.448, Public Department, 14 March 1935; Periyar E.V.R., *Puthiyathor Ulagu Seivom*, (T), Madras 1948 p.31.

⁵² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 31 May 1936.

⁵³ Periyar EVR, *Kadavul Enbadu, Viduthalai. Periyar EVR's 90th Birthday Anniversary Special*, Madras, 1968.p.51-52.

worshippers of God in the journal *Unmai* in a series of articles published on 14 March, 14 April and 14 May 1970. His object was not so much to deny the existence of God, as to ridicule the belief in God, and practices following the belief.⁵⁴ According to Periyar, creation of the God was foolish and it was doubly foolish to take offence at his attack on the creation of the God. He asked whether the God was really a creation or an invention or was a phenomenon existing in nature and observed that those who expressed anger at his statement only betrayed thereby their foolishness in admitting that God was a human creation. He remarked those who claimed to be superior under God's creation and who were making a living and hiding their dishonesty under the name of God would get angry at his statement.⁵⁵

Asserting that nobody who preached the worship of God or who created legends and stories on God or built temples and conducted rituals and festivals in honour of God, carried on such activities in pursuit of any honest, worthy and righteous conduct. Periyar claimed that propagation had only served to make the masses idiots. He explained that the propagandists started with the premise that the God was formless and propertyless and ended up with spreading a belief that He was omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, embodiment of kindness and love and source of all life and all activities and had built temples, created forms and introduced rituals and festivals that were inconsistent with the all-virtuous notion about God. This

⁵⁴ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 15 May 1970.

⁵⁵ Periyar E.V.R., *The Ramayana: Unmai Villakkam*, (T), Madras, 1942.p.7.

was condemned by Periyar as dishonesty designed to delude the masses and practised by a group for its own selfish interests.⁵⁶

Propagation of religion by legends describes the private lives of Gods, their family and property, wars fought and destruction. In addition, cruelty caused by the kindness personified gods. Periyar decried the unrighteous behaviour in which Gods indulged occasionally and by organization of public festivals at enormous cost to recelbrate the marriages and other festivals in honour of these Gods as very dishonest practices and they were intended to make the people lose their intelligence and self-respect. Opined that such propagation tended to blind even highly educated people.⁵⁷ Periyar was aware that such exposure would hurt the feelings of some people. However, there was no other means to liberate the millions of people made fools by religious propaganda. For the sake of educating millions of people steeped in ignorance, hurting the sensibilities of a few dishonest people appeared to him insignificant..

In one of his articles, Periyar wrote that God is worshipped not because of one's realisation or understanding of the substance, qualities and the virtues of the God but because of human qualities and virtues attributed to him. The worship is intended for repentance of unworthy actions and for seeking pardon or for seeking fulfillment of one's undue and disproportionate desires and ambitions. Periyar condemned this as dishonesty and compared such Gods and worshippers to the democratic government, people and people's representatives. He added that he could take a bet that among

⁵⁶ G.O.No.2845, Public Department (Confidential), 26 June 1950.

⁵⁷ *Fortnightly Report*, First Half March 1952.

Hindus no worshipper of God was intelligent, honest or truthful. To make images of the Gods in several shapes of human and animal forms, to attribute human qualities and weaknesses to the Gods, to waste enormous quantities of edible articles as offerings to the Gods and perpetuate legends about the love affairs, wars and marriages of Gods and celebrate these in the form of festivals were cited by Periyar as evidence of foolishness and barbarism in the name of God.⁵⁸

The philosophy of Periyar on the delicate subject of God and religion has been revealed to the Tamils through a great deal of his speeches and writings over five decades. He was accused of propagating a philosophy of atheism and organizing movements to destroy the belief in God.⁵⁹ Periyar asked whether it was theism to indulge in such savage behaviour and atheism to condemn that behavior. He was not afraid of being called an atheist in this context.⁶⁰

Periyar cautiously concluded his speeches on religion and Gods with an observation that his views could be accepted or rejected according to their rational thinking. He submitted that he was not trying to convert the masses to his line of thinking. At the same time, he did not ask the people to simply accept his thesis without giving much thought to the problems. There was no

⁵⁸ Ramasami, E.V., *Kudi Arasu Kalambagam*, Erode, 1934.p.30; G.O.No.3579, Public Department (Confidential), 23 October 1956.

⁵⁹ The term 'atheism' is derived from the Greek a ('not') plus Theos ('God') and denotes the doctrine of disbelief in a Supreme Being. This disbelief has found expression from ancient days and seems to have been in existence ever since belief in God originated. Hindu legends contain stories of Asuras who denied the existence of God. The term 'atheist' is applied to several kinds of disbelievers like Anaxagoras, Socrates, Theodora's and Spinoza. Marx and Freud believed that religion was founded on superstition, and in the more recent existentialist philosophy of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Sartre, the atheistic element is present

⁶⁰ Periyar EVR, *Suyamariyadai Iyakkattai Totruvittatu En,?* (T), Madras, 1982, p.10.

possibility of invoking blind faith in his philosophy.⁶¹ It seems that he was not preaching atheism although he could be classed as one having no faith in God.

He analysed the concept of God and all that it implied from a rational point. In his editorial in the *Kudi Arasu* on 11 August 1948 under the caption *Kadavulum, Manithanum* "God and man" he explained how the idea of God entered into human mind and had come to govern individual and social conduct.⁶² Periyar's contention is that the idea of God is a creation of mankind and the idea is propagated by spreading the belief. No man is born with a sense of belief in God but the sense is inculcated in a child by elders and furthermore, it is forcibly thrust into the man's mind.⁶³ He preached that the belief in God originated in the human tendency to attribute the appearance, existence and disappearance of matters for which no visible explanation could be found to an unknown power conceived as God. Therefore, he contended that the very concept of God originated in the irrationality of human beings and wanted to combat this by cultivating rational thinking. He believed that this was possible. The case of controlling cholera by better sanitation instead of propitiating an angry deity provided a hope. Belief in God was a farce and if anybody really had the faith, he could only be an irrational, senseless being according to Periyar.⁶⁴ He argued that it was a Himalayan blunder to propagate the existence of a formless, propertyless object and lack of integrity to assert that it was beyond the understanding

⁶¹ Dharmalingam.A.M., *Periyar E.V.R; Social Reform or Social Revolution*, Madras, 1965. *op. cit.* p.24.

⁶² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 11 August 1948.

⁶³ Tantai Periyar, *Kadavulum, Manithanum*, (T), Madras, 1970. p.12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

comprehension and realisation of human mind. A theory was built that God and religion were the tools made not for the good of man but to make him a fool and to impair his intellect.⁶⁵

The fact that God -feeling is not natural or in-born but inculcated in a child's mind from outside appeared crucial to Periyar in understanding the place of religion in society. The less the level of intelligence and knowledge the greater is the God-feeling and therefore Periyar believed that this feeling was artificially created. It could be conquered by science and knowledge. However, he was aware that it was not easy to remove this feeling, and full intellectual development was necessary and was hopeful that since superstitions had vastly reduced, God-feeling would also decline in course of time.⁶⁶

According to the philosophy of Periyar even those who believe in God do not have absolute faith in the omnipotence of God but claim credit for many things as being the results of their own work or they do not ponder why the all-pervasive God cannot make his existence felt by men, why men make safeguards for everything when everything is ordained by the God, and why there are atheists denying the presence of God. All these show that God is not capable of revealing himself and describe His form.⁶⁷

The deepest ignorance and folly of man lay in his thoughts about God, according to Periyar. An obvious but significant point made by him is that no other living being like an animal, bird or insect believes in God, and

⁶⁵ Periyar E. V. R., *Kadual Maruppu Tattavam: Ore Vilakkam*, (T) Madras, 1983.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁶⁷ *Viduthalai, Madras, 21 April 1952.*

man is the only rational being and man alone is suffering from the belief in God. Had there been no concept of God, Periyar imagined that the man's condition would have been different, and he would have become free from many worries and hardships. Those who had no faith in God would accept anything as natural and would become truly liberated wise men.⁶⁸ He explained that *moksham* or *mukti* meant a state without worries, sans grief and such a state could not be attained by one believing in the existence of one God or more Gods. Periyar commented, the deeper God-idea in a person, the greater is his miseries.⁶⁹

To Periyar, religion was only a set of rules framed by men when societies were formed to govern their social life and were alterable to suit time, place and convenience of the people. These were based on the social conditions, climate and the level of intelligence of the people. Conflicts between the two categories of the people led to the formation of new religions and had caused religious wars. Sometimes this resulted in re-interpretation of the old religion. In the course of time, the tenets of religions were said to have been disregarded, religions becoming mere rituals.⁷⁰

Periyar listed a number of evils arising out of religion that spoils the intellect; and makes men content with appearances. It creates agents between God and men and elevates their conduct and words above the dictates of one's intelligence and experience. Further it incites men to commit

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 October 1953.

⁶⁹ *Fortnightly Report*, First Half, October 1953.

⁷⁰ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 11 August 1929.

crimes and thereby amass wealth by the concept of pardon; encourages lazy living; makes men cowards; helps a few to live on the labour of many.⁷¹

The enemies of Self-Respect Movement of Periyar condemned it as an atheistic movement. He adopted the philosophies of the western atheists to suit Indian conditions and to reinforce the original-respect ideology of removing all signs of Brahmanism in social life and inequalities by birth perpetrated in the name of religion. Religions were established to promote a feeling of God and not for promoting social or economic freedom or equality to live as free human beings. He claimed that religion had not done any good to the masses and had not promoted good conduct. The object of Periyar and his movement in conducting this anti-religious propaganda was to emancipate the masses from darkness and ignorance. The ultimate aim was not the destruction of faith in God and religion but exposure of the absurdities in *vedas*, *shastras*, *puranas* and *ithihasas*. The temples and priest craft were exploiting the masses in the name of God by preaching concepts like heaven, hell, sin and virtue.⁷² The movement engaged a number of scholars to study the scriptures to expose irrational features, discriminatory ideas and immoral stories. The legends relating to the origin of every Hindu festival were published in rationalist journals with interpretation.

Periyar considered himself a *Manida Dharmavathi* 'humanist' instead of *Manu Dharmavathi* 'inhumanist' and composed that all that he preached was based on humanist approach, on a very frank consideration of any

⁷¹ Tantai Periyar, *Kadarulum, Manithanum*, (T) pp. 102-104.

⁷² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 14 April 1929.

question without concealing anything.⁷³ He once remarked that the good society he desired was a human society. In his view, a human society should be rational and should have the capacity to think, but the existing society is an animal society meaning that it is irrational.⁷⁴ He explains that man alone has six senses, which provide him with the capacity to think, to change according to the context and to progress and that in the reason that when all other living beings remain in the same state for several thousands of years, man alone is changing day by day. Periyar was emphatic that only those who think of any act with his intellect are men and all those who do not think are mere animals. In the technologically advanced world, when time and distance have been conquered, Periyar felt that man is not in need of being told by another man to become human and that his efforts were aimed not at creating but speeding up the process.⁷⁵

With the desire to change from his animal existence to a rational thinking being, Periyar advocated the destruction of religion, caste and Gods. The substance of his propaganda was that man should consider every thing with his own intelligence. He should think whether it was consistent with practice, experience and reality. He exhorted the society to become an intelligent and self-respecting society without any degradation. The differences, enmity, hatred, degradation, poverty and ignorance that prevailed in the society were caused due to the lack of rationalism. Man put restrictions on himself, on his own power of thinking, and came to be

⁷³ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 6 March 1962.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 26 November 1970.

⁷⁵ *Fortnightly Report*, First Half, November 1955.

controlled by Gods and religious commandments that were inconsistent with nature and truth. In addition, nation, language, religion and caste and other differences, further deprived man from free use of his rationalism. Man's leisure time has been used only for destroying his rationality and leading him to slavery, and not to make use of progress by rationality, said Periyar.⁷⁶

Periyar believed that in a genuinely good and just government, every man should be in perfect equality with every other like the two sides of a balance instrument. He argued that in truth, there was no distinction as high caste and low caste or rich and poor. Therefore to achieve a rational state and a government with rational subjects, the rulers, Gods and intermediaries had to be destroyed. The removal of the irrational regime and the installation of a rational regime were considered a surgical treatment necessary to save the society from decay. Periyar believed that drastic remedies through violent revolutions could be avoided if efforts were made, with rational understanding.

Periyar stated that the high caste and the wealthy were able to survive because of the consent and protection of the government as no status antagonistic to nature, justice and equality could survive for a moment on its own.⁷⁷ As a result of rationality, man had the right to live without worries, without grievances and with contentment. The ideas of 'conduct' were applied by the strong to frighten the weak and under conduct, several virtues like those that chastity, love, truth and justice had been devised. The righteous and unrighteous conducts were decided not objectively on the

⁷⁶ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 25 May 1935.

⁷⁷ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 12 August 1957.

basis of a particular act but on the strength and cleverness of the person committing the act. With the conviction that not a single individual could be identified for good conduct, the priests, traders, and advocates of the people, and nationalists were expletory agencies. He regretted that such groups were growing popular in the society.⁷⁸

To Periyar, eradication of social inequalities was a primary principle of socialism, without which economic equality could not be achieved. For, he believed that social inequalities derived from birth would remain active under any economic system and prevent any change in society. Hence he advised that there was no use in borrowing any socialist philosophy from abroad and the first duty facing a socialist in India was to abolish the *varna-jati* system.⁷⁹

Further he expressed that no amount of communism could bring about any reform in a caste-ridden society. It was under the caste system that several people became rich and acquired superior status.⁸⁰ For progress, a good government and people with intelligence, good conduct and discipline were necessary.⁸¹ *Samadharmam* 'socialism' was described as removal of the degradation of the Dravidian race, abolition of caste, equal property right and provision of food, education and housing for all.⁸² Periyar did not pretend to be a democrat. He professed to be a chief leader of the masses towards a life with self-respect. In this context, like other contemporary thinkers, Periyar completely broke attachments to tradition and totally devalued concepts like the people for the kind of society that he visualized was not built on the past

⁷⁸ Periyar EVR, *Arivu Chudar*,(T),Madras,1960. p.3.

⁷⁹ Anaimuthu .V., *Periyar EVR Chintanigal*,(T) ,Vol III,Tiruchinapalli,1974.pp. 1704-705.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.1713.

⁸¹ *Viduthalai*,Madras,6 August 1966.

⁸² *Ibid*,7 August 1966.

but on the contrary repudiated the past existing foundations. The functioning of the democratic government in independent India further hardened his dislike on the democratic system. He was a severe critic of the democratic government, the role of money power in elections, the voter's ignorance and unscrupulous detections.⁸³

The democratic corruption and misconduct were prevalent not only among the masses of the lower classes but also flourishing among the intelligent and the rich and in the government. Therefore these could not be legally abolished. He condemned the electoral system as a system that had made the candidates, the voters, and the general public dishonest.

Indeed, Periyar was so horrified at the demarcation of the electoral system and the parliamentary type of government that he even expressed that these were not suitable to India. He was of the view that politics has become corrupt and that it turned everyone dishonest and a cheat. To him, democracy had given the rulers great opportunities to exploit the people and was doing immense harm to the rules.⁸⁴

Periyar's strong criticism of democracy appeared as an argument for abolition of district boards. A good government is one that gives good protection to the people. The political system prevailing in India appeared to Periyar as neither independent nor democratic, for it protected many kinds of inequalities like master-servant, owner-worker, landlord-labourer, Brahmin-Panchama, etc.⁸⁵ In his concept, a wage earner working under a master for

⁸³ Periyar EVR, *Jananayakam*,(T), Madras,1956.p.5.

⁸⁴ *Viduthalai*, Madras,29 January 1959.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15 August 1972.

daily or weekly wages without having any freedom in the work and without receiving the benefits of that work is a slave and not a worker, however high the wages are. Such wage earners, in his view, have no connection to the work or to the outcome of that work, and are not aware of the value of their labour. Periyar advised such workers to keep away from politics and to prevent external leadership over their unions. He held that while those in politics had no idea of freedom, rights, *swaraj* and workers freedom, the workers were not aware of their own conditions, problems and rights. The leadership of the unions should be held by the workers and not by political leaders and emphasised this point with a rather crude statement that fools were better than the dishonest people. He thought that they should trust the masters until they could form unions with leadership from among themselves rather than entrusting their unions to politicians.⁸⁶ The worker's problem was people's problem as ninety per cent of the people were labourers. He complained that it was not being treated as a people's problem but as that of a separate class because of the dominance of the non labouring classes and conspirators, in the role of owners and priests, on one side, and lack of power, mentality, and irrational faith in the existing order on the part of the workers. One of the reasons for the failure of many great men to relieve the people from their miseries like poverty, slavery, injustice, etc. was their inability to get at the root of the problem.

Periyar gradually developed the aims of the workers' agitation from 1920s to 1950s. In the beginning, he advocated that the object of the

⁸⁶ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 30 May 1926.

worker's agitation was not mere rise in wages, but abolition of the phenomenon of ownership and eradication of the distinction as owner and worker. According to him the main target of the worker's agitation was to remove the very thought of treating the workers as low and owners as high. In 1950's, Periyar exhorted the workers to fight against the government rather than the owners as the government was giving support to owners and ownership. The goal of agitation by workers was set as attainment of their rights. It was with a view to protecting the agricultural workers who were said to be mostly Dravidians, the Dravidian Agricultural Workers Association was formed in 1952. Its activities were extended to the fields as Periyar felt about the problem as the problem of Dravidians compelled to do manual labour under the Aryan *varnashramadharma*. He proclaimed that the communist, socialist and other parties were dealing only with the labour questions and not with the basic issue of caste-based occupations and their conditions.⁸⁷

Throughout October and November 1967 Periyar wrote several articles depicting that Tamils were backward and irrational, and had no self-respect, no nationalism, no racial feeling, and no humaneness.⁸⁸ He elaborated the idea at a speech at Pachaiappa's College, Madras. The substance of the speech is that the language is an instrument to explain the idea and it is not possible for men to progress through a language. Nobody has become rational by learning Tamil. Maraimalai Adigal has agreed that there is no informative literature in Tamil. *Thirukkural* is not totally faultless. Tamil is spoilt by the introduction of religion. His independent thinking, free

⁸⁷ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 22 March 1952.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 October 1967.

from political and social pressures could be seen in his vehement propaganda in favour of learning English at a time when there were protests against the Hindi policy of the Union Government. He first raised a question why not English, an international language when Sanskrit was included. He wanted to retain English in order to promote the capacity to think and to stop harping on the past glory of Tamils when people should move fast with changing times.⁸⁹ His ideology and deed show that Periyar's philosophy was radicalism and humanism. Rationalism thus stands for reason, development and equality, whereas religion confirms superstition, suppression and exploitation. Rationalism and religion do not go together. Religion goes hand in hand with superstition and fear. Religion prevents progress and suppresses man and exploits the suppressed classes. Religion makes men lazy as well as coward. Rationalism and atheism could alone liberate humanity.⁹⁰ Rationalism, for Periyar, implies materialism. God and other transcendental concepts have been repudiated, and religion is considered as being contradictory to reason. Periyar advocates a scientific alternative to religion. He ridiculed religion by contracting it with progress. While at Stanford in California successful heart transplantation had been made, in Madras about the same time only a new temple to Siddhi Kamal Vinayagar had been dedicated, 'What a contrast', says Periyar.

True progress requires knowledge. Periyar stresses the importance of education. What is practicable and natural to the world of men should be

⁸⁹ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 13 October 1967.

⁹⁰ Ponmudy, K., *The Dravidian Movement and the Black Movement*, Villupuram, 1998, p.218.

found a place in education. He criticised the prevailing educational system, and pointed out that the aim of education in Tamilnadu should be rationalism, a conviction that he maintained even in his last days. He said that worship of God, practice of religion and propitiation of the rulers were all calculated to keep men in mental slavery. Its aim should make people rationalists. Rationalism through education will conquer superstition, ignorance and improve justice and morality in society.⁹¹

To propagate rationalism, Periyar worked for the establishment of rationalist societies in various centres of Tamilnadu. Rationalist conference was organised in Madras in May 1972. Issues like the right for members of all castes to become *archakas*, the elimination of religion, scriptures, Brahminism and Gandhism, the use of Tamil language in temple worship, the removal of pictures of Gods from government and public places and the ending of *puja* and other acts of worship in offices and on factory premises were discussed elaborately in the conference.⁹²

The speeches of Periyar, Dravida Kazagam leaders and followers in the conferences were extensively quoted in *Viduthalai*. A study of the resolutions recorded in *Namatu Kurikkol* from 1929 onwards shows the continuity in Periyar's propaganda. An analysis of the regular features of the monthly, *The Modern Rationalist*, throws light on rationalistic messages of Periyar Movement.

⁹¹ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 15 October 1970; Periyar E.V.R., *Namatu Kurikkol*,(T), Madras 1948 p.27.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 20 May 1972.