

CHAPTER IV

PERIYAR MOVEMENT AND THE TAMIL SOCIETY

The social setting in Tamilnadu at the dawn of twentieth century had to be processed by analysing the nature of the social conflict and the cumulative effect of the forces generated by the conflict. The Brahmins as the apex of the Hindu society were ordained to be the masters in deciding social and religious values of the entire Tamil society. They had no serious threat until the rise of the non-Brahmin movement¹. It is well known that the Brahmins acquired position and power and claimed superiority.² The voice of their authority was unconditionally accepted in religion, politics, literature and social life. This situation continued even after the British rule and in spite of the introduction of English education. During the British regime, the Brahmins were able to hold command over the entire society with the help of religion and the caste system.³

The Hindu society was a complex one in which the religion and the caste system were inextricably intertwined in such a way that one could not be separated from the other. The western philosophies did not have any effect on the nature of the social setting in Tamilnadu during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In the beginning, the only beneficiaries of the western education and philosophies were the Brahmins. In fact, even after the spread of the new pattern of education, the social evils of the early period continued.

¹ *The Hindu*, Madras, 15 November 1924.

² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 8 August 1926.

³ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol-I, Delhi, 1960 pp.283-284.

The caste-ridden Hindu society enjoyed the backing of the *sastras* for its existence and the Hindu law perpetuates it to co-exist with all the paraphernalia of modernism. It has the support of the *varnashramadharma* and *Manusanriti*, the laws of the mythic legal codifier, Manu. With the introduction of the British rule in India, the foundations of the system got shaken and a number of social reformers throughout India tried to introduce changes in the existing social order. They have also gained moral and legal support for their designs.⁴

The concept of *varnashramadharma* has been interpreted in many ways. According to Gandhi, *varnashramadharma* is an ideal system of the society, in which full equality and free mobility among the people of different *varnas* or castes are guaranteed. To him, caste is the Hindu way of life but, in Tamilnadu it is considered as a system alien to the natives and it is argued that there exists no distinction among the different castes on the basis of *varna* or colour.⁵ *Varnashramadharma* is of Sanskritic origin and not a Tamilian concept.⁶ But, it cannot be denied that in the Tamilian concept of the social order too, there exists social distinctions right from the beginning of recorded history.⁷ Dr. Ambedkar pointed out the untouchables from the Tamil speaking region of South India look high caste Tamils, not like untouchable Punjabis in the North West, who are indistinguishable from higher caste Punjabis.⁸

⁴ *Young India*, Madras, 24 November 1927.

⁵ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.IV, Delhi, 1960, p.479.

⁶ Anaimuthu.V. Periyar E.V.R. *Chinthanaikal*, (T), Vol.I., Tiruchinapalli, 1974 p. 416.

⁷ Balasubramanian, C., *A Study of the Literature of the Chera Country*, Madras, 1980, p.70.

⁸ Barbara R. Joshi, (ed.), *Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, New Delhi, 1985.p-5.

In Tamilnadu, social divisions existed from the *Sangam* age down to the present day. These divisions were considered *kulams* or they were social divisions based on avocations to which the different groups of people were attached and as such they may be conceived as geographical divisions rather than social ones. Free social intercourse existed among these divisions and they became endogamous units with the fusion of the Sanskrit culture and the *varnashramadharma*.

These historical narratives seem to remain still as matters to be proved by authentic evidences. Identity of the Brahmins who migrated to the south with the Aryans from the north were considered Tamil Brahmins. They became the sole representatives of the indigenous Dravidian stock. But at the same time Brahmins were well versed in Sanskrit and their social life and customs were governed by the Sanskritic culture and the code of Manu. They valued the code of Manu more than the indigenous customs and practices of Tamilnadu. They formulated the concept that the Brahmins of Tamilnadu were the representatives of the Sanskritic culture.

Even today, among the non-Brahmins, there is an ardent desire to move upwards in the social order, at the apex of which they hold the position. Among the gold and metal smiths there is a belief that they all belong to a particular sect and they also claimed as Brahmins. Brahmins thus tend to rise in the social order.⁹ Prof. M.N. Srinivas is of the opinion that this tendency among the members of the lower strata in the Hindu society to rise in the social hierarchy to a higher level is the process of Sanskritisation.¹⁰

⁹ They call themselves as '*Vishvakarma Brahmins*'.

¹⁰ Srinivas, M.N., *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley, 1966, p.6.

Periyar was a strong critic of the Brahmanical doctrines. To Periyar, the term *sudra*, is a synonym for a slave and carries the implication that all *sudras* (non- Brahmins) must do all the manual work from which Brahmins alone are exempted by Brahminical doctrines.¹¹ It is argued that this system enforced social, legal and functional distinctions because of caste, which was unknown to the Dravidians. Brahminism and the Code of Manu which sanctioned discrimination and exploitation by Brahmins foisted the Dravidians.¹²

The Hindu society of India got its first jolt with the introduction of the British rule in the country and exhibited a willing submission to social changes towards the close of the twentieth century. Together with the British administrators, a number of Christian missionaries worked for a social change. The aim of those missionaries was to enlist as many votaries as possible to their religious fold. They propagated the gospel of Jesus Christ through the medium of service to the society and humanity. As the champions of education and medical care, they happened to be in a better position to make large scale conversions in India. Tamilnadu was not an exception to it. Conversion to the different Christian faiths has to be viewed from historical, social and political aspects. Economic and social causes also had its significant role in conversions.¹³

In the first instance the religions were politically in a better position, because it was patronised by the rulers. The rulers wielded sufficient

¹¹ Sami Chidambaranar, *Tamilar Thalaivar-Periyar E. V. R. Vazhkai Varalaru*, (T), Madras, 1939, p.202.

¹² Ramasami.E.V., *Dravidar Aryar Unmai*, (T), Collection of speeches, Erode.

¹³ *Ibid.*

support to those who desired to convert themselves to their religious faith. Economically, the rulers influenced the ruled by offering financial support and decent government jobs. However, in the case of India, more than the above incentives, the social restlessness of the lower section of the Hindu society formed a basic reason for large-scale conversions.¹⁴ This process was very rampant in the further south, particularly in Tamilnadu. It can be statistically established that almost all the converts to Christianity, with the exception of a microscopic minority belonged to the lower strata of the Hindu society. Thus, the inner contradictions in the Hindu society paved the way for large scale conversions of the *sudras* and *panchamas* in the Hindu society.

It seems that the *varna* model of the caste system was harmoniously suited to the different regional systems of the caste hierarchy.¹⁵ But the fact is that in the south, there emerged an opposition to the *varna* model with the spread of western education and the literary renaissance in the Tamil language and literature. Tamil scholars like Maraimalai Adigal, Devaneyya Pavanar and Manonmaniam Sundaranar noted the difference between the *varna* and the indigenous models from literature and pointed out that the Tamil concept of social organisation was a different entity which has nothing to do with the *varnashramadharma* of the Sanskrit culture. Their arguments centered round the immortal work *Tirukkural* which is a moral code for the Tamils.

Manonmaniam Sundarnar was very clear when he made his clarion call that one should think of the code of Manu that prescribes different laws

¹⁴ *History of Freedom Movement*, Bundle No: 72, 1921-36, 13 January 1923.

¹⁵ Srinivas, M.N., *Social Changes in Modern India*, Berkeley, 1966. p.5.

to different *varnas*, in case he has understood the *Thirukkural* of Thiruvalluvar flawlessly.¹⁶ Thus began the new era of Tamil scholarship to some extent aided by European savants like Beschi, Caldwell and others. In his book *Arivuraik Kothu*, Maraimalai Adigal condemned the Brahmins, and raised the question, 'do you think that the non-Brahmins will get fair justice'? The book invoked a hue and cry from the Brahmins.¹⁷

The social situation in Tamilnadu, as was the case throughout India, seems to have remained unabated and unaffected in spite of the spread of the new ideas that emerged because of English education and the resurgence of ancient literature. The tragic situation of the *sudras* and *panchamas* was that they were destined to be the untouchables.¹⁸ C.A.Aiyamuthu, a Gandhian social worker who took part in the Vaikom satyagraha, against untouchability, gives a picturesque description of the pitiable condition of the untouchables in the society, in his autographical note, "My Reminiscences". In the street in front of the Thanumalaiyan temple in Suchindrum, a town in the Kanyakumari District of Tamilnadu, animals like pigs, donkeys and dogs are free to move about and they are free to use the street for excretion. But a section of the human beings are not at all permitted to walk through those streets nor worship the God in the temple. Such a fate has gripped Hinduism.¹⁹ This is not an isolated instance; it was the situation throughout the country until recent times.

¹⁶ Valluvan cey Tirukkuralai maruva Ra nankunarntoorkal ulluvaroo Manunvaathi oru Kulattukku oru niithi.

¹⁷ Maraimalai Adigal, *Arivu Kothu*, Madras, 1970. p.20.

¹⁸ Srinivas. M.N., *opcit.* pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ Aiyamuthu, C.A., *Enatu Ninaivukal*, (T), Madras, 1973. p.116.

Social equality is denied to non-Brahmins in the field of religious rituals. In the temples of Tamilnadu, only after the chanting of the *vedic* hymns, the Brahmins served the offerings of the devotees and the non-Brahmins are permitted to chant the hymns from the Tamil *Thevaram* and to receive the *prasatams*.²⁰ It is also said the Brahmins do not usually visit the houses of the non-Brahmins even to enquire condolences. The men of the higher castes are permitted to have marital relationship with the women of the lower castes, either as their wives or as concubines. But a male member of the lower caste should not marry a woman of the higher caste, and he should not even think of such a relationship. If a person with such a desire is found, he shall be inflicted with cruel punishment inflicting such punishment Justifiable.²¹

However, no one can say the course of incidents that induced a number of castes in Tamilnadu to follow the *varna* model of caste system. The circumstances that led to the Tamil castes had to reconcile with the *sastras* and protected the *varna* model in case they had to secure status in the society and for that purpose a number of Tamil castes mentioned themselves as *vaisyas*. One among the castes was the Nattukkottai Nakarattaar. They considered themselves as Buu-vaisyars.²² Whatever may be the arguments put forward to disprove the existence of Aryan and Dravidian cultures, it is an accepted fact that the two cultures are different. But it can be said that both the cultures have mingled in such a way that it is futile to distinguish one from the other. Those who tried to prove the two

²⁰ Annadurai, C.N., *Ariya Maayai*, Tiruchinapallai, 1974. p.46.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.48.

²² *Ibid.*, p.57.

cultures are different and they are influencing two different sections of the society in Tamilnadu.²³

Scholars are of the opinions that, only a particular section of the society are mainly responsible for the evils of the society. The caste distinctions and untouchability prevailed even among the non-Brahmins and were protected. It existed everywhere but only the degree of the pollution varied from caste to caste and depending on the position of the caste in question in the hierarchy. The villages were scenes of these evils of the caste system. Untouchability was rampant even among the well educated people. It is to be noted that such havoc existed not only among the Hindus but also among the Christians too, but in the Islamic faith there is no room for any such distinctions.²⁴ It may be possible because of the intention of the Christian missionaries to strengthen their camp, irrespective of the social imbalances which the converts demanded to be carried over to their newly found religious faith. That is the reason why, there are caste distinctions in the fold of Indian especially Tamilnadu Christians.²⁵

Periyar is of the opinion that an untouchable can escape from untouchability by his conversion to the Islamic faith. He advised the untouchables to join the Islamic faith and not because he considered the Islamic faith better, but to avoid the untouchability and *sudhrahoo*d. So large scale of conversions happened due to the inhuman treatment meted out to

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 58-59 Here he quotes the judgment pronounced by two judges in the Madras, High Court on 5 February 1946. In support of his arguments, a Brahmin advocate by name Janaki Ramamoorthy married a non-Brahmin lady namely Nilavenkatasubamma on 16 October 1926.

²⁴ Interview with Anaimuthu, V., Chennai, 25 December 2006.

²⁵ Among the Indian Christians, there are Pallar Christians, Parayar Christians, Asari Christians, Naidu Christians, Nadar Christians, Vellala Christians, etc.

their brethren by the so-called high castes in the Hindu society.²⁶ In this context, the Christian missionaries seemed to have shut their eyes against perpetuating the caste hierarchy even after the conversions of the people belonging to various castes. It is of course, a fact that the nature of the Hindu society during the eighteenth, nineteenth and in the first quarter of the twentieth centuries was responsible for the conversions. Official favours, educational facilities, financial help and the like induced the people to change their religious faith in this category.

Apart from the details enumerated in the foregoing paragraphs about the nature of the social setting at the dawn of the twenty century, it will not be complete, if the social status enjoyed by the different castes are not fully analysed. The Ezhavas and Pulayas of Travancore were not permitted to walk through the street in front of the Vaikom temple, but a Muslim was permitted to pass through it.²⁷ Same was the case in Palghat. A Kerala cheruman considered a member of untouchable caste, after embracing the Islamic religion passed through the street prohibited for the member of that caste. A Brahmin cloth merchant and a Nair betal shop owner gazed at him but soon a traditional Muslim scolded them in obscene words and the two gentlemen put their head down in disgrace, while the cheruman proceeded laughing at the Brahmin and the Nair merchants.²⁸ In the society, the place of the various castes depended on the position they enjoyed in the caste hierarchy. The distinction and status are settled by the degree of pollution

²⁶ During the Vaikom *Satyagraha* against untouchability, which he led during a stage of the *Satyagraha*, E.V.Ramasami noted that the *Ezhavas* belong to the untouchable caste.

²⁷ *Young India*, 1 May 1924; The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Delhi, 1960.

²⁸ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 2 August 1931.

that existed between the various castes. With respect to the ritually high castes in the rural areas, there seems to have existed the question of dominance. In villages, it all depended on the size of the arable land possessed by the individual caste groups. In some regions, a ritually lower caste might command dominance over the immediate ritually higher caste. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the ritualistic conception of high and low castes in the hierarchy remained unaltered throughout the formative periods of the history of Tamilnadu.²⁹ Owing to westernisation of administrative and industrial positions, the rest of the castes might have recognised the dominance of a particular community, but the degree of pollution ritually still remains in tact.

This position continued to dominate the social structure in Tamilnadu. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Tamilnadu witnessed the emergence of a new movement to counteract the domination of the Brahmins as the highest caste in the caste hierarchy.³⁰ It is still a matter to be seen whether the new movement was able to bring forth desired results in establishing social equality in Tamilnadu. It is really a fact that no incident originates from vacuum and every effect in history, of course, has a cause or causes, which form the basis for the effect. It is the case with the particular type of movements that emerged in Peninsular India in general and that of the Madras Presidency in particular.

Two movements, one in the political field and the other in the social sphere emerged in the Madras state spearheaded with the aim to uplift the

²⁹ Eugene, F.Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916 to 1929*, California 1969, pp.188- 89.

³⁰ Eugene, F.Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*, Madras, 1986 pp.72-73.

socio-political status of the backward and the down-trodden communities. The causes for the emergence of these movements are many and varied. Indeed, it should be observed that there existed a few nauseating situations which were immediately responsible for the emergence of the political movement, the South Indian Liberal Federation in 1916, later known as the Justice Party. Since there was no justice in the Tamil society, there arose the necessity of the emergence of Justice Party which fought for social justice. The year 1916 is a turning point in the history of Tamilnadu for the first time the domination of the Brahmin was challenged which directly paved the way for the decline of the community, gradually in the later days³¹.

The social reform of the Justice Party and the Self-Respect Movement had direct impact on the Tamils. However, there existed and still exists a widespread allegation that these movements are communally oriented one and it seems that it cannot be condemned as a movement fanning communalism out right. Indeed, it is a fact that they were sponsored by and stood for not the entire communities in the Madras Presidency, but against a particular section of the society.³²

The Justice Party was able to secure enough majorities in the Provincial Legislature to form the ministry to work the transferred half of the Dyarchical System of Government envisaged in the Government of India Act, 1919 in the Madras Presidency. This fact shows that the movement enjoyed the support of the majority of the non-Brahmins. Similarly, the Self-Respect Movement also got the support of the non-Brahmins, because of its

³¹ Rajayyan,K., *History of Tamilnadu 1565-1982*, Madurai,1982,p.46

³² Anita Diehl, *Periyar.E.V.Ramasamy- A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India*, Madras, 1978, p.9.

rationalistic approach to problems and the call for the eradication of caste, inequalities, untouchability and superstitious beliefs.³³

As Prof. M.N.Srinivas points out, high-caste dominance in education and in the new occupations thus provided the reason for the backward castes movement. It is no accident that the movement was strongest in Peninsular India where only one caste, the Brahmins, enjoyed preponderance in higher education, the professions and government services.³⁴ It is also an area where a wide, social and cultural gap between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins existed. Further, the British administration in India gave a greater role to Indians in administration which benefited mostly the Brahmins.³⁵ The extension of governmental control in all fields of social life gave the officers of the government tremendous powers over the lives of the common people. Government officers, to whatever caste they belonged, formed the elite of the society. These factors aroused the feeling of resentment among the high-caste non-Brahmins. This took the shape of non-Brahmins movement in the early years of the twentieth century. It seems that it was a clash between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, to share the spoils of the British government with the entry of Indians into government service.³⁶

The social factors motivated the emergence of the social movement in Tamilnadu. However, the Periyar Movement was entirely different. In public

³³ M.L.C. Proceedings 1922, Vol.IV, Government of Madras, Madras, 1955,p.30

³⁴ Srinivas M.N., *Social Change in Mordern India* , pp 91-92.

³⁵ The Non-Brahman Manifesto issued under the Signatures of T.M. Nair and P. Thiyagaraya Chettiar, reproduced in *The Justice Party Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, Madras 1968 P. 2.

³⁶ NNPR, First Half, May, 1926 pp.636-637.

and social gatherings, the Brahmins preferred to be secluded in the matter of residence and dining.³⁷ Even in the matter of drinking water too, the Brahmins, considered it polluted, if it was touched by a non-Brahmin, irrespective of his social or positional or educational status. Pollutions of this sort were observed even by scholars in the various fields like education, art or music.³⁸ Such abominable instances seemed to have been not at all isolated incidents in those days.³⁹

Impact on Society

In the first half of the twentieth century, Periyar Movement considerably influenced the social and political life of the Tamils. Periyar's uncompromising attitude towards the religious practices of the Hindus, their beliefs religion and the caste system can only be explained and understood in the light of the environment in which he grew up. His early experience in the rigidity of the caste system and the practices created in him a feeling of revulsion against the Hindu way of life. As a result of his contempt for the inequalities engendered by the caste system in society he spearheaded social reform in South India. The social philosophy of Periyar has evolved because of the social situation that existed in Tamilnadu. Of course, it was only a continuation of what it was during the previous centuries.⁴⁰ But Periyar said that the reformers like the great Siddhas, Buddha, Valluvar, Ramanujar and others, who were reputed to have attempted social reform, and yet they

³⁷ Kamaliah, K.C., 'Periyar-A great Social Reformer of the Twentieth Century, *The Periyar Memorial Souvenir*, Madras, 1969, p.24.

³⁸ G.O. No.513, Public Department, 1 August 1925.

³⁹ Karunanidhi, M., *Nanchikku Neeti*, (T), Madras 1975, p.18.

⁴⁰ Ramanuja, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Vallalar can be cited as examples.

failed miserably.⁴¹ According to Periyar the Brahmins were the descendants of the Aryans who were the first to introduce the status based caste system. This gave them high ritual status and the power to monopolise all secular and religious knowledge, thereby degrading the native Dravidians to an inferior position.⁴² As a result of sectarian laws, based on *Manusmriti* a large segment of non-Brahmins society was degraded to an inferior position. This anomaly could be changed, Periyar contended, only by liberating non-Brahmins from Aryan cultural helotry.⁴³ To do this, he first began to popularise his theory that the Hindu religion was alien to Tamils. Again, he said, Hinduism was not known to Tamils. Likewise, the prevailing type of religious rites, rituals and ceremonies in vogue in the present day Tamilnadu did not correspond to the religious practices of the ancient Tamils.⁴⁴

The chief weapon that the Aryan Brahmins pressed into service to subdue the Dravidians was the complicated system of rituals which the Tamilian kings and the merchant communities naively accepted, believing that they would bring them immense benefits in mundane life. Thus, the Tamilian was forced to believe in the many ceremonies of Brahmins and to accept them a status for superior to their own. Finally, they enforced to accept their caste system. In the long run the Tamils were reduced to the position of Sudras.⁴⁵ Periyar Movement was indeed to rationalise the social and religious institutions and to make them egalitarian. To destroy the caste

⁴¹ Anaimuthu, V., *Periyar E.V.R.Chinthaikal*, Tirichinapallai, 1974. Vol.I. pp.18-20.

⁴² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras 5 September 1927.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12 September 1927.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 September 1927.

⁴⁵ Under Secretary's Safe File No: 839-A, 28 September 1933. *Revolt*, Madras, 10 April 1929.

system in its root and branch, the movement appealed to the government not to recognise any caste distinction either in the administration or in law of the country. The followers of Periyar as stories of the Aryans, depicting the ruses by which they subordinated the Dravidians, interpreted the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two most popular epics of India. The followers of the Self-Respect Movement burned the copies of *Manusmriti*, the law books of the Hindus. J.S. Kannappar, the editor of *Dravidian* made a public bonfire of copies of the *Manusmriti* at a Self-Respect meeting held at Lalgudi in Tiruchinapalli district in June 1928.⁴⁶

Tamil pamphlets like *Inthuk Katavulkalin Leelaigal*, and *Ariya Katavulka* published in 1928 and 1929 respectively, accused the Hindu Gods in coarse language of many acts of sexual perversity. Periyar did not believe in reforms as he believed that the social evils of the society were too serious to be treated by the application of any remedies but needed drastic surgical removal of the part from its roots. In late 1928, Periyar advocated measures to curb the very notion of caste. A government pledged to eradicate caste, must be in a position to proscribe all books and literature that glorify caste division, however ancient or sacred they may be. A public bonfire must be made of all those books that haven of superstition and caste. All those Sankaracharyas and *Matathipathis* practicing the caste system, either they must be left out or they should be exiled.⁴⁷ The philosophy of

⁴⁶ *Justice*, Madras, 12 June 1928; *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 18 June 1928.

⁴⁷ Dharmalingam, A.M., *Periyar E.V.R. Social Reform or Social Revolution*, Madras, 1965, P.18.

Periyar has been described, as a philosophy of destruction for construction.⁴⁸ He himself declared the destructive work in the South Indian Social Reformers Conference.⁴⁹ What he meant by destructive work was the total rejection of all religious customs and symbols with perpetuation of social inequality. He compared such customs and symbols to a polluted tank fit only to be filled up rather than to be used for public benefit.⁵⁰ Periyar also cited the efforts of Ramanuja, the Vaishnava Saint, who in his anxiety to upgrade the untouchables, and at the same time, preserve the ancient symbols, initiated the Pariah into Vaishnavism by decorating them with *namam* on their foreheads and by investing them with the *punul*.⁵¹ Ramanuja succeeded in preserving the old symbols but failed to bring about the much desired equality in society. Therefore, Periyar advocated that social reformers should not flinch in destroying at once the things which would not change with the changing conditions of the world.⁵²

By organising public meetings and also through the press, the movement led its virulent campaign against Brahmins, the Congress and the Hindu religion. Very soon it caught the attention and imagination of the people, including the Muslims. But propaganda alone was not enough to assure its survival in the long run. So its strategy was to identify itself more and more with causes and grievances of the various non-Brahmin Hindu

⁴⁸ Subramaniam, M.K. 'Creative Destruction in Self-Respect Philosophy'-in Janardhanan, A.P., (ed.), *Periyar Memorial Souvenir*, Madras, 1960, pp.22-25.

⁴⁹ *Revolt*, Madras, 5 December 1928.

⁵⁰ Dharmalingam, A.M., *op.cit.* pp.1-2.

⁵¹ *Pariah*: a former Untouchable caste in Tamilnadu. *Namam*: sacred mark put on the forehead mostly by the Vaishnavites, the worshippers of Vishnu. *Punul*: a cotton thread worn across the chest by the twice-born Brahmin.

⁵² *Revolt*, Madras, 5 December 1928.

castes that were considered to be socially depressed and economically backward.

Boycott of religious festivals, public ridicule of Hindu pantheon and mythology and public demonstration on disbelief and defiance by burning of the copies of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharatha* and breaking of idols are important cognacs in the programme of the part of Dravidian reassurance. The object of the movement, it is said was to release the people from the clutches of superstitious beliefs and practices. Series of articles were published in *KudiArasu*, *Viduthalai* and *Manram*, with severe criticisms and ridiculed the Hindu legends. A society would be nurtured not by *bhakti* based on tradition but by rationalism based on spirit of enquiry.⁵³ A movement known as *Pagutharivu Iyakkam* is silently in operation with its headquarters at Madras Pagutharivu Pasarai. A journal *Nastikam*, "Atheism" with the aim to destroy traditional religious beliefs and practices was also published.

Annihilation of caste

The movements fought for the annihilation of caste, eradication of untouchability, women's rights and liberation, and widow re-marriages. These were revolutionary as well thought provoking. Periyar was labelled after his successful campaign at Vaikom against untouchability in 1924, took up the task of educating the non-Brahmins, and helped them to realise their Self-Respect.⁵⁴ In 1926, at a Conference of the Sri Naraya Dharma Paribalana Yogam a resolution recommends the conversion of the untouchable castes to Islam, which frightened the people in general. In the

⁵³ *Manram*, Madras, 1 January 1955.

⁵⁴ Balasubramaniam, K.M., *Periyar E.V.Ramasami*, p.21.

meantime, Periyar suggested that the depressed castes should call themselves as non-Hindus for official purpose.⁵⁵

In the second anti-untouchability conference held at Madras on 9 and 10 February 1927, Periyar took a leading part. Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy and Dr.A.Ramasami Mudaliar were the strong supporters of Periyar. Periyar moved a resolution that untouchability should be abolished and God and religion had created untouchability and so God should be abolished on the ground that if God could not abolish the evil of untouchability, he had no place in the world. He moved this resolution seeking to pursue a ceaseless propaganda to rouse the people to remove the cruel impediments imposed on a large section of the people.⁵⁶ Any attempt to eradicate untouchability and liberate the untouchables from the cruelties done by the Brahmins and upper castes Hindus, is really a revolutionary attempt. The followers of Self-Respect Movement became model to other and dropped the caste appellations appended to their names, suffixes and terminations connotative of caste, sect or community were given up.⁵⁷ Ramasami Naicker, Soundarapandian Nadar and a host of others dropped their caste names like Naicker, Nadar, Mudaliar etc. forthwith and vowed not to use any mark, symbol or mode of dress indicative of caste.⁵⁸ The member of the Self-Respect Movement followed strictly what they preached and by 1932 there

⁵⁵ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 21 July 1929.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 February 1929.

⁵⁷ The First Provincial Self-Respect Conference at Chingalput on 17 February 1929.

⁵⁸ Nathan, T.A.V., (ed.), *The Justice Year Book*, Madras, 1929, p.127.

was 1, 50,000 people in the Province of Madras who dropped their caste names and caste marks.⁵⁹

Periyar made a special appeal to Adi-Dravidas to cultivate a sense of Self-Respect and learn to resist social degradation and realise that they were also human beings. He advised them no achievement would be possible unless they were prepared to undergo sufferings, break restrictions, and be prepared to die and it would be foolishness to expect that some one would come to their rescue.⁶⁰ In 1930 Dr.P.Subbarayan introduced a bill in the Assembly to throw open all roads and places of worship to the depressed castes maintained by public funds.⁶¹ In same year, when he introduced the common hostel system for girls of all castes in the city colleges, the volunteers of Self-Respect Movement extended their Co-operation and support.⁶²

Periyar deduced that the roots of all social evils emanated from Hinduism including the penetration of caste discrimination in Tamilnadu. This movement opposed the concept of pollution and purity practised in Hindu temples. In different parts of Tamilnadu they attempted to enter into the temples along with some depressed people. In their attempt, partially they succeeded and reversed in some other places.⁶³ The volunteers of the Self-Respect Movement in 1927 attempted to make entry at Maduarai Meenakshiamman and Tiruvannamalai temples. In 1928 and 1929 they tried

⁵⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 26 June 1932.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Madras, 16 June 1929.

⁶¹ Subbarayan, P., as First Minister of the Presidency of Madras from 4 December 1926 to 27 October 1930 was a social reformer. He was a Minister for Education and Law in Rajagopalachari's Ministry from 15 July 1937 to 29 October 1939.

⁶² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 11 May 1930.

⁶³ Chandrababu.B.S., '*Periyar E.V.Ramasami's Self-Respect Movement and Its Rationalist Solution to Social Justice in Tamilnadu*, Maduari, 1990,p.55.

to enter the temples at, Tiruchinapalli and Triplicane. However, these attempts were futile and hence, they decided to boycott the temples in a united stand and if it was not possible, they decided to neglect temples in toto.⁶⁴ True to his rationalistic convictions, Periyar warned the Adi Dravidas that temple entry was not intended to enable them to visit temples and offer worship to touch stones installed there, spend money like other fools or to make them devotees or take them to *moksha*. He remarked that if such were the intentions, the effort would harm the untouchables.⁶⁵ To emphasise and to keep in memory, the need for destroying Brahmanism, Periyar boldly gave a clarion call for observing annually the Brahmin Domination Eradication Day, the day preceeding or following Deepavali.⁶⁶ In the 1920s and 1930s, Periyar mostly concentrated on educating the public by harping on the absurdities in rituals and forms of worship. It was after the establishment of the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944, he started more radical step of campaign against idol worship. Even he affirmed that the object was not to prevent idol worships but hurt the feelings of those who worshipped and to make people think of using the wasteful expenditure to other useful purposes.⁶⁷

Owing to the struggle of the Periyar Movement, Rajagopalachari's *Kulakkalivi* system was withdrawn. A call was given by Periyar to dissolve Vinayaka idols made in mud on Buddha Jayanthi Day in 1953 with the object of eradicating *Varnashramadharma* and *Sudrahood*.⁶⁸ While it served as a symbolic protest to superstitious belief in idol worship, in fact it did not really

⁶⁴ Veeramani, K., *Koilgal Thontriathu Yen?*(T) Madras, 1986 p.16.

⁶⁵ Anaimuthu, V. *op.cit.*, pp.61-62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 430-431; *Paguttarivu*, Madras, 30 September 1934.

⁶⁷ G.O. No. 448, *Public Department*, 14 March 1935.

⁶⁸ G.O. No. 1814, *Public Department*, (Secret), 9 July 1953.

mean any offence as the custom has been to immerse the clay Vinayaga idol in water. The harshness of words that proceeded and accompanied the propaganda campaign was not reflected. Rajagopalachari as Chief Minister, instructed the district authorities not to take any action except when there was disturbance of law and order. Periyar can hardly be considered as an iconoclast. The case filed against him also failed, as the judge remarked that the act committed was breaking dolls and not idols that were worshipped. As a strategy of forcing quick response, Periyar issued a notice to the authorities to erase the word Brahmin within one week before 5 May 1957, failing which the Kazhagam would plunge into direct action. The Kazhagam volunteers indulged in direct action in some places and the boards disappeared gradually.⁶⁹

Periyar's method of work was to engage himself personally in a variety of propaganda and demonstrations for the removal of symbols and practices or to abolish casteism and Brahmin-Sudra differences. The campaign for the removal of the word 'Brahmin' in the name-boards in hotels and coffee-houses created tension throughout Tamilnadu. His contention was that caste domination in reality was mostly determined by food habits and therefore those who wanted to abolish caste should abolish it in the matter of food. He made an appeal to the government to disallow exhibition of such boards that provoked caste feelings.⁷⁰

More frequent and also stronger agitations were waged against anti-Rama as portrayed in the *Ithihasa* of Valmiki or Kamban did not possess

⁶⁹ G.O. No. 2203, Public Department, (Secret), 14 October 1957.

⁷⁰ G.O.No.2959, Public Department, (Secret), 20 October 1957.

God like qualities but on the contrary possessed so many infirmities that the character was not worthy to worship. It was in 1922 at the Congress Session of Tamilnadu, Periyar made his first public attack on *Ramayana* as a literature that deserved to be burnt. It seems that Rama was the most attacked legendary character at the Self-Respect Movement which spent a good deal of time in studying *Ramayana*.

In 1943, a debate on *Kambaramayana* was held under the presidentship of C.M.Ramachandra Chettiar, the commissioner of the Hindu Religious Administration. C.N.Annadurai initiated the discussion on *Ramayana* and explained the defeat of Dravidians at the hands of Aryans and the way it was written only gives a false impression. According to Periyar the Dravidians lose their Self-Respect and self-confidence. It was detrimental to the progress of the Dravidian nation and hence burning of the *Ramayana* was suggested.⁷¹ In the words of Periyar protest was an expression of anti-God or anti-religious sentiments. But a demonstration to show that Rama of *Ramayana* was a character in the puranas and not a God to be worshipped or an ideal to be followed, and to express protest to the burning of the effigies of Ravana as part of Ram Leela festival. A series of *Ramayana* discourses were presented by Periyar in 1966 in various places of Madras city. He campaigned for the burning of Ramayana. Periyar declared that Gods and Goddesses in legends were pimps, prostitutes or perverts and scathingly attacked the extra-marital relationship portrayed in legends. He

⁷¹ Annadurai,C.N.,*Thee Pravattum* (T) Tiruchinapallai, 1954, p.12.

used to carry volumes of books to the meeting to cite authoritative references.⁷²

In 1967 he undertook anti-Sankaracharya processions. These were aimed at canvassing votes for Self-Respect.⁷³ He instigated a campaign for *Muzhu Alaya Pravesam* “total temple entry” or *garbagraha pravesam* in 1967 to assert the right of entry of all castes into the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. It was a protest against what he termed as a practice of untouchability in preventing all castes other than the Brahmin from entering the innermost part of the temple or to touch the idol. He contended that under Article 17, of the Indian Constitution, this practice amounted to a practice of untouchability and was, therefore, punishable under law.⁷⁴

Repeated campaign of this type was planned on 26 January 1970. M.Karunanidhi, Chief-Minister of Tamilnadu assured Periyar that the government had been considering several questions related to removal of discrimination in the matter of entry into various parts of the temple, appointment of temple priests, and the convention of hereditary priesthood.⁷⁵ The campaign of Periyar resulted in the introduction of a bill in 1970 in the Legislative Assembly. The bill was enacted in the assembly and it became the Tamilnadu Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Amendment) Act, of 1970.⁷⁶ The Act abolished hereditary appointment of the *archakas*. It enabled a person of any caste qualified for the post of an *archaka* and to get the opportunity to be appointed. However, the orthodox *vedic Sananathanists*

⁷² G.O.No.583, Public Department, 21 March 1962; *Viduthalai*, Madras, 30 March 1966.

⁷³ G.O.No.3337, Public Department, 29 November 1957.

⁷⁴ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 28 April 1967.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7 January 1970.

⁷⁶ G.O.No.5 *Law Department*, 12 January 1971.

questioned the constitutional validity of the law. They argued that the appointments of archakas were made only because of *sruits*, *smirthis* and *agamas*. According to scriptures, the Brahmins are the only eligible caste to become *archakas*, other castes like, *Sudras* were not eligible. The Supreme Court also upheld this argument and gave a verdict in favour of the Brahmins.⁷⁷

Periyar was deeply pained about the verdict of the Supreme Court and became more determined to remove the scripturally and legally sanctioned stigma or indignity of *sudrahood*. Even in his ninety fifth years of age, he did not take rest, and continued to write and to speak to the people. He arranged conferences and undertook extensive tours and urged the public to discard the religion, traditions and scriptures which kept them socially low. He called upon the Tamils for a united struggle against the law that denied equal respect and honour in socio-religious setting.⁷⁸

Anti-Rama outburst became an extreme step at Salem in 1971. In the procession, pictures of Rama garlanded with footwear were carried as part of the conference for eradication of superstitions. It created a nation-wide stir but no outbreak of any violent clashes. Such processions became part of electoral campaigns of Periyar.

To achieve the human equality, Periyar announced a struggle in 1973. The principal purposes of his service for nearly three-quarters of century may be described as eradication of the degradation of the Tamils. This was the theme of Periyar's last speech and his last struggle organised at the

⁷⁷ G.O.No. 735, Public Department, 23 July 1970.

⁷⁸ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 17 September 1971.

conference for Eradication of Social Degradation *Ina izhivu ozhippu manadu* held in Madras on 8 and 9 December 1973 just a fortnight before his end.⁷⁹

Periyar's Advocacy of Conversion to Islam

Periyar viewed that propaganda alone was not enough to strengthen the Movement. So its strategy was to identify itself more and more with the causes and grievances of the various non-Brahmin Hindu castes. Through their propaganda machinery, the Periyar Movement championed the causes of the Muslims too and highlighted their grievances. There developed a relationship which inevitably was to have a lasting impact on the Tamilnadu Muslims.⁸⁰

Periyar not only participated in the conferences held by the non-Brahmin castes, but also actively encouraged such conferences. Similarly, he participated in many Muslim Conferences organised in Tamilnadu. He was invited to speak at the conferences, Further, he presided over the meetings and conferences of the Muslims. He used such conferences cleverly to air his religious and political views, with utmost care not to offend the Muslims.⁸¹ At the Prophet's birthday meeting at Satyamangalam on 8 August 1930, Periyar declared that the philosophy of Islam most probably suits all people of the world. Because it is a religion that came into existence recently and reformed one. More than the Muslims, Hindus are greater obstacle to unity. The Hindu policy is full of discrimination and

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 10 December 1973.

⁸⁰ Madan, T.N., *Muslim Communities of South Asia-Culture, Society and power*, NewDelhi, 1995, p.342.

⁸¹ *Revolt*, Madras 8 May 1929.

superstitiousness, where there is no place for love and unity.⁸² At the Coimbatore District Muslims Conference, Periyar came out strongly in favour of separate electorate for Muslim because the majority of the Muslim representatives were to be elected by Muslim voters.⁸³ He encouraged the so-called *sudras* and out-caste Hindu people to convert them into Islam if they really wanted equality. Christianity could not give freedom because of its caste structure and in Hinduism there was no freedom at all.⁸⁴

Periyar Movement did not stop with criticising Hindu religious dogmas and practices, but also directed its criticisms against the un-Islamic customs of the Muslims as well as their religious teachers, the *mullas*.⁸⁵ He condemned outright customs like worshipping at dragons and the extravagant participation of both Hindus and Muslims in *allasamy pandiga*⁸⁶ Mohurrum.

Periyar strongly criticised Muslim superstitious habits, though he conceded that Muslims gave more respect to reason than did the Hindus. He cautioned the Muslims against pulling their chariot on the occasion of festivals in limitation of the Hindus.⁸⁷ He further said, it will be a matter of laughter to others if Muslims after having criticised the Hindus for going to Kasi and Rameswaram and spending money in order to wash away their sins, Muslims go to Nagore, Muthupettai and Mecca to do the same thing.⁸⁸ However Periyar did not fail to point out the principle of brotherhood in

⁸² *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 24 August 1930.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21 June 1931.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 April, 31 May, 25 October 1931.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 25 October 1931.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 14 June 1931.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 August 1931.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 August 1931.

Islam, and respected the Muslims to make persons with other religious principle brothers too. He further said in the Prophet's birthday meetings at Coimbatore on 1931, in order to attain the brotherhood and equality superior religion like Islam should spread all over India and it should destroy all obstacles which are reasonable.⁸⁹ Such daring pronouncements of a non-Muslim in Muslim meetings, especially on the Prophet's birthday, were certainly unique not only in the history of the Indian Muslims, but also in the Muslims of the world. Therefore, the rationalist approach to religion found a considerable follower among the Tamil Muslims is a historical fact. For the Muslims who were plunged into reforming their community, the reform propaganda of the Periyar in their favour was a welcome moral booster.⁹⁰ To the propaganda of the Periyar Movement, the Tamil Muslims developed sympathy and goodwill for the Movement and its leader Periyar. Further their propaganada contributed to the increasing assertiveness of the low-caste Hindus. They converted to Islam to shake off social discrimination because of caste. In fact, the first major wave of conversions seemed to have taken place in Tamilnadu between 1925 and 1935.⁹¹ Conversion to Islam was largely a rural phenomenon. The conversions took place mainly in the villages of Seliyampatti, Gokilapuram, and Narayandevanpatti of Madurai district, villages around Kilakarai in Ramnad district and in the villages near Tenkasi in Tirunelveli district.⁹² Between 1930 and 1935 at

⁸⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 23 August 1931.

⁹⁰ Madan, T.N., (ed.), *Muslim Communities of South Asia- Culture, Society and Power*, New Delhi, 1995 p.345.

⁹¹ More, J.B.P., 'The Marakayar Muslims of Karikal, South India', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Oxford, 1991, pp.198-202.

⁹² *Madras Mail*, Madras, 24 May 1932.

Tippanampatti in Tirunelveli district, several untouchables embraced Islam. In Madurai district the Muslim proselytizing association, the Isha-at-ul-Islam, which functioned from 21 December 1929, appeared to have contributed for the conversion of 1,100 persons in the town of Cumbum and its neighborhood and 1400 persons from different regions of Tamilnadu and Travancore.⁹³

The press organs of the movement *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai* occasionally published articles urging the untouchables to embrace Islam.⁹⁴ On his part, Periyar continued to address many Muslim meetings, in which he carried on his usual propaganda and asked the Muslims, the Justice Party and Self-Respect Movement to work unitedly.⁹⁵ At the same time, a sustained propaganda was carried on as usual, exhorting the untouchables to convert to Islam was supposed to be the only way to their salvation.⁹⁶ This brought Tamil Muslims closer to the Self-Respect Movement. The Tamil Muslims attended the propaganda of processions. But it was also a question of race. It was claimed openly that the Tamil Muslims belonged to the Dravidian stock and therefore they had the right to participate in the anti-Hindi agitation.⁹⁷ Khalifullah who was closely associated with the Muslim League,⁹⁸ made an uncompromising attack against Hindi in the Assembly in the midst of the prominent leaders Abdul Hameed Khan and Basheer Ahmed Syeed. The raised their voice against the imposition of Hindi, Khalifulla

⁹³ *Hifazatul Islam*, Madras, May 1934.

⁹⁴ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 24 February 1935.

⁹⁵ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 5 Decemeber 1937 and 9 January 1938.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Madras 6 February 1938.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Madras, 26 June 1938.

⁹⁸ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 14 June 1938.

articulated his views not only as a Muslim leader, but also as a Tamil and a sympathiser of the Self-Respect Movement.

The Movement's Impact on Marriage System

Periyar Movement rejected the services of the Brahmin priests in marriages. In such Self-Respect marriages an elderly or a local dignitary will conduct the function without any religious rituals that normally go with the Hindu marriages. The bride and the bridegroom in the presence of their parents, relatives and friends exchange flower garlands on expressing their willingness to become husband and wife and remain equal partners in life. Periyar considered the *talis* a symbol of the eternal slavery of women and they show give up the custom of their marriages. Kunchitam Gurusami, the most powerful woman speaker in the movement, claimed that between 1929 and 1932 more than 8000 Self-Respect marriages were celebrated in the Tamil districts.⁹⁹ These Self-Respect marriages are still going on in Tamilnadu.

The most noteworthy impact of the movement is the removal of the superstition in the institution of marriage. The member of Self-Respect Marriages, caste opposed marriages and the widow remarriages have increased because of the moments of propaganda. Among the three, of the Self-Respect marriage is simple as sounds.¹⁰⁰ In reality, it is a revolution on the age old customs and traditional practices. After the growth of the Self-Respect ideas in large numbers, marriage functions were celebrated without a *purohit*, or Brahmin.

⁹⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 20 December 1931 and 26 June 1932.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 26 June 1931.

It seems to have a philosophy attached to the Self-Respect marriages, for it was enunciated as a form of marriage with the triple purpose of counteracting the Brahminical domination abolition of supersituation and liberation of women from the inhuman slavish treatment from the hands of men.¹⁰¹ Until 1967, when the Hindu Marriages (Tamilnadu Amendment) Act was passed granting legal validity to Self-Respect marriages,¹⁰² it was not at all given legal status and the marriage did not stand before a court of law. According to Hindu law, the Self-Respect marriage is no marriage at all, for any marriage that did not observe the rituals of the sacred fire, called *homam*, coming round and making *saptapati* “seven steps” and all the rituals being performed by a *purohit*, is not considered a marriage at all under the Hindu law. Such marriages had been annulled in the court of law. So in this sense, the Self-Respect marriage can be called a revolution. Definitely it is a revolutionary change in the Tamil society and the Act of 1967 validating the marriage is a revolutionary step which shook the very foundations of the established traditional legal system. Besides it provides a marriage system which is economically cheap and at the same time one cannot be imagined even in on advanced foreign countries. The Self-Respect marriage is viewed as a social contract between man and woman that may lead to social progress.¹⁰³ The basic philosophy is Self-respectivism; and the more the number of such marriages is being conducted, more will be the diffusion of the ideas of Self-Respect philosophy, which is nothing but the achievement

¹⁰¹ Subramanian, M.K., ‘*Evolution of Self –Respect Marriages*’ in *Viduthalai-Periyar Birth Day Annual*, 1973,p.32.

¹⁰² Hindu Marriages (Tamilnadu Amendment) Act 1967, (L.A Bill No.19 of 1967).

¹⁰³ Subramanian,M.K., *op.cit*,p.37.

of an egalitarian social order. It is worthwhile to note that even among many religious minded people, marriages without a Brahmin *purohit* has gained popularity. It was believed that in the long run this tendency will lead to the abolition of the unwanted superstitious traditions and beliefs.

The Self-Respect marriages are unconventional but they are the concrete steps to counteract the evils of the caste system. The bill validating the Self-Respect marriage was passed unanimously in both houses of the Tamilnadu Assembly and it is a measure remarkable with changes which the Self-Respect propaganda has brought about.¹⁰⁴ As the marriage of this pattern was a revolution against the accepted dogmas, traditions and *dharma sastras*, it raised the status of women and created equality of sex.¹⁰⁵

Further a scheme of Planned Parenthood was envisaged. The new pattern of marriage paved the way for creating a congenial atmosphere for the implementation of family planning. The Self-Respect movement and its off shoots adopted it as one of their planks from the beginning. As early in 1930, Periyar considered the necessity of family planning as an urgent need and he gave it a prior importance to that of prohibition and the proposition to eradicate the contagious diseases ¹⁰⁶ N.T Sundaravadivelu rightly pointed out that whatever the state of Tamilnadu may lay claim on in family planning it is due in a large measure to the preparatory work of the mass Movement of Periyar.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Spratt. *D.M.K. In Power*, Bombay. p.74

¹⁰⁵ Rajalakshmi, V., *E.V.R.'s Philosophy in Periyar Memorial Souvenir*, Madras 1968.

¹⁰⁶ Annaimuthu, V., *Periyar E.V.R Chithanaikal*, Vol .I., Tiruchinapallai, 1974. p.156.

¹⁰⁷ Sundaravadivelu, N.T. *'He was a Movement' in Periyar memorial Souvenir*, edited by A.P.Janardhanam, Madras, 1968, p.185.

Women's Right

Periyar Movement championed for the cause of women. It believed that in the society women were subjected to severe restriction that prevented their legitimate place in society. The movement denounced child marriages, the dowry system, the prohibition of widow remarriage and the *devadasi* system. They upheld women's right to property and inheritance, to divorce, to practice the modern methods of birth control and to marry outside their caste group.¹⁰⁸ Even as early as in 1909 Periyar was shocked when his family members encouraged his niece to remarry after she had lost her husband at the age of eight. Hence Periyar was committed to do away with the child marriage system existing in the society.

As a champion of women's rights, Periyar called on the women to cast off their shackles and bondages, and to liberate themselves from the social slavery into which they were thrown by selfish men. Women were not to be considered as the mere object of enjoyment. Periyar criticised this concept tooth and nail. Womenfolk should revolt against the age old system of considering them as subservient to the men-folk. Real women's liberation movement should provide equal opportunities to women in the society on a par with their counter-parts.

In 1929 Dr.P. Subbarayan Ministry under Justice Party abolished the system of separate hostels for the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins and the Christian girls studying in the Madras city and introduced common hostel system where caste or religion was no criterion. Likewise in March 1929

¹⁰⁸ Nathan, T.A.V. (ed.), The Justice Year Book 1929, p.129.

hostels for widows were thrown open to all communities¹⁰⁹ Conscious efforts were made to advance social legislations for the removal of restrictions imposed on the scheduled castes in the use of roads and temples maintained from public funds and the abolition of the *devadasi* system. A Bill was introduced in the Tamilnadu Legislative Assembly in May 1930 for the removal of untouchability, preventing a section of people to enter the temple and the devadasi system practiced in temples.¹¹⁰ The members in the Madras Legislative Assembly supported S.Muthulakshmi Reddi's *anti-nauteh* Bill, which sought to abolish the devadasi system- a custom of dedicating young women to Hindu temples.¹¹¹

The Justice Party government's social welfare schemes establishing hostels and training centres for widows in various rural centres, supply of free books, education and midday meals for all depressed castes children and founding free boarding schools in important town centres were extolled by Self-Respect Movement. While the ministers undertook the work of social legislation seriously and carried out reforms, the movement built up a formidable public support not only in favour of Subbarayan's ministry but also for furthering social legislation.¹¹²

The degradation of women "*pen izhivu*" as Periyar put it was also attributed to the superstitious belief. He blamed men for degradation of women and was emphatic that for freedom of women it was necessary to eradicate the belief that manliness, "anmai" and slavery of women

¹⁰⁹ *Dravidian*, Madras, 8 March 1929; NNPR, Madras, 1929, p 382; *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 31 March 1929, NNPR, Madras, 1929, p.544.

¹¹⁰ *Madras Mail*, Madras, 12 May 1930; *The Hindu*, Madras 13 May 1930.

¹¹¹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 4 May 1930.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Madras, 30 May 1930.

“*penadimai*” were in the name of God’s innovations. Self-Respect marriage system approves love marriage as against arranged marriage and does not denote an irrevocable life-long partnership. It allows divorce at the instance of either partners and does not consider marriage as a sacrament. Under this marriage women have property rights equal to men.¹¹³

Periyar Movement advised the people that, from the birth, male and female should get equal treatment, should be fed alike, dressed alike, educated and get like opportunities to move in the world. He considered that by reserving fifty percent of jobs to women, the desire for having male child could be checked and this would also help in family planning.¹¹⁴ Women’s employment itself would directly lead to birth control and this could become an excellent method of family planning.¹¹⁵ In his characteristic technique of dealing with any problem at its roots, Periyar wanted to shake the roots of the slavery of women in their biological function of bearing children. Of real freedom of women, he advocated that the institution of marriage should be abolished.¹¹⁶ In his opinion, the propaganda for birth control was much more important than prohibition or eradication of epidemics and people should come forward to establish an institution and engage in propaganda.¹¹⁷ In order to liberate women from their slavery, radical changes in the traditional notions about virtues and conduct were advocated by Periyar. One was about the chastity attached to women. He said men should also be subjected to this virtue. He disallowed terms like *pattini* and *pativiratai* a chaste women

¹¹³ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 12 May 1935.

¹¹⁴ Kali Poonkuntran, *Tantai Periyar Arivuurai. 100*. Madras, 1983.p.26.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, No.58.

¹¹⁶ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 11 October 1948.

¹¹⁷ Periyar, E.V.R., *Pen En Adimai Anal*, (T); *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 6 April 1930.

holding that *Thirukkural*, *Chilappadikaram* and other ancient Tamil literature emphasising chastity of women had done a great disservice to the society in this regard.

Periyar wrote in the *Kudi Arasu*, that it is the duty of those who worked for the liberation of women to see women shedding fear and survive attitude that stand in the way of their husbands. The *Dravidian*, which carried the views of Periyar, observed that the objection of the Government to this bill no doubt caused much dissatisfaction to all persons. It is indeed regrettable that while the Government should help the progress of the country by accepting at least Bills introduced in the Legislative Assembly for effecting social reforms. Though they do not grant all facilities for such reform, at least, they should not have opposed the Bill while sympathising with its object in words.¹¹⁸ In fact, Periyar had an unflinching faith in the British Government in India that they alone could introduce reforms and did not expect anything from the *Sanatanists* and Orthodox reactionaries. The denial of rights to women or to inherit property, absence of love and widow re-marriages and the right to divorce would lead to other social evils like prostitution. Hence to eradicate this malaise from society Periyar advocated the need to attend to those causative factors by passing necessary laws.¹¹⁹ His followers set an example to others by adhering to the ideology of the Self-Respect Movement. He praised the bridegroom in whose marriage was held in September 1939 at Nagercoil. The bridegroom registered a property worth of

¹¹⁸ *NNPR*, Madras, January to March, 1932, p.172; *Dravidian*, Madras, 27 January 1932.

¹¹⁹ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 29, May 1932 and 16 June 1935.

Rs.5000/-in the bride's name.¹²⁰ Periyar never accepted the idea that women in society have been the real stumbling blocks to progress. On the other hand, he was strongly of the view that if the rights to education and property rights are given to them, they would not wish to confine their lives to the kitchens, is decks themselves with jewels and end up with innumerable problems of marriage.¹²¹

Among women, Periyar wanted to create a sense of perfect equality with men in every respect and an instinct to protest against every kind of inequality. His idea was that women should not be treated as precious possessions of men but they should become the creators of a new world.¹²²

Hindu Religion and the Movement

Periyar Movement finds that the Hindu religion gave Brahmins sacerdotal position in society. His opinion is that religious institutions like the temples were the sources of their income. As a result, the priestly class had been leading to the material resources of the community, while non-Brahmins toiled to earn their bread. The movement held that such hard-earned money was squandered in celebrating innumerable Brahmanical rites and rituals and in maintaining the Hindu temples. Of the total 5,715 temples in Tamilnadu by 1961¹²³ Brahmins officiated in 5151 temples and in the remaining 564 temples the non-Brahmins discharged priestly duties. A temple may have one or more priests depending on the popularity of the

¹²⁰ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 28 September 1939.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 21 September 1946.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 21 September 1946.

¹²³ *Census of India*, 1961 Madurai IX, part XI D Temples of Madras State Coimbatore and Salam Madras, 1968, p.3 p.335 North Arcot and Nilgiris, Madras, 1968, p.5 Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli, Madras, 1968.P.171.Tiruchinapalli and South Arcot, Madras, 1966. p.2 p.262. Chengleput District and Madras city, Madras, 1965, p.3p.154 respectively.Madurai and Ramanathapuram, Madras, 1969.p.5; p.188 respectively.

shrine. In Tanjore district a single priest officiated in two or three small temples. The temples in which non-Brahmins officiated as priests are said to have been insignificant in the society. Most of these temples look after the basic needs of their priests by providing them with free residence, rice, grain and other monetary benefits. In addition, they receive small sums of money as voluntary gifts from the devotees. The priests would get the minimum requirements to run their families. This system has been continuous from the early period and still it continues. For example a tenth century inscription issued during the period of the Chola king Parantaka I (907-955) indicates that a Brahmin priest officiating in a temple was provided daily with polished rice 5-1bs, three varieties of vegetables, curd 2-1/2 lbs; ghee 4 ozs and betal leaves and nuts¹²⁴.

The member of Self-Respect Movement considered that the religious institutions and the Hindu religious rites conducted by Brahmins were permanent sources of unearned income. This led to the opposition of the Periyar Movement to the Hindu law books which sanctioned the special prerogative of Brahmins. The very necessity of the Hindu temples and the property were questioned.¹²⁵ To prevent non-Brahmins from spending their money in temple worship and to deny the priestly class of Brahmins their traditional vocation, the movement urged the non-Brahmins to refrain from spending money on worship in temples should reject the services of priests and to cease building of new temples.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ South Indian Inscriptions, Vol.III, part III, no.106, quoted in V.Sundaresavandaiyar, *Kalvettu*, Madras, 1958, p.11.

¹²⁵ Nathan. T.A.V (ed), *The Justice Year Book*, Madras 1929, p.131.

¹²⁶ G.O.No. 1558, Public Department, (Confidential), 11 June 1952.

To Periyar Movement, there is no religion by name Hinduism which is derived from the name of a place. With no distinct doctrines and no particular sacred book, it was to be an imaginary religion preaching the superiority of the Brahmin, and the inferiority of the *Sudra* and *Panchama*. The movement of Periyar preached that Hinduism placed many restrictions on men by creating several Gods and festivals. The Hindu religion provides an assured income and prosperity to the small Brahmin group at the expense of all others.¹²⁷The income of the temples should not be spent for celebration of festivals but should be utilised for the promotion of technological studies, for education of industrial research and educating the masses in public health and general hygiene.

The Congress opposed the Periyar Movement in political considerations. Non-Brahmin leaders belonging to Vellalar or Pillai caste too raised objections. They were largely confined to Tirunelveli and Tanjore districts. They held a high ritual status and were first among the non-Brahmin castes benefited by English education. They were also deeply religious and highly sanskritised in their style of life. To counter the activities of the Periyar Movement the Saiva Vellalas organised religious conferences and to explain to the masses about the basic concept of Saivism.¹²⁸The Saivites were not alone the only section of the society who challenged criticism of Hindu religion by the Periyar Movement. The orthodox Brahmins decided to stall the spread of atheism and their anxiety to preserve the traditional values of Hinduism. Series of conferences on behalf of *varnashrama* and *Astiga*

¹²⁷ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 14 April 1929.

¹²⁸ Tirunelveli Saiva Siddhanta Conference Malar, Tirunelveli, 1929, p.98; *Revolt*, Madras, 10 April 1929.

Sangams were convened in 1929 and 1930. At a *varnasharma Sangam* conference held at Kumbakonam on 31 May 1930 the Brahmin leaders instead of condemning the Periyar Movement appealed to their caste members to probe into the cause of the spread of atheism and hatred of Brahmanism in the country.¹²⁹

Periyar wrote in *Kudi Arasu*, "If we just abandon the Brahmins, then what about the Saivites? Can they be then they are due just like the Brahmins! So, all people who claim to the upper caste are those who do not do any physical work but live on others' labour. Castes should be abolished. A law should be made that everybody should do physical work, and without toil, there must be no place in this nation. Only then the Brahmin will go away. But keep in mind that there is another group which lives on the labour of others and which practices caste system. And it is this group that protected the Brahmins. They are the rich people, the capitalists and the *mirasdhars*. They should also be reformed or annihilated."¹³⁰

When the ideal of Dravidian nationalism was projected in the 1940s Periyar's religious philosophy also underwent a modification to assert that Hinduism was not the religion of the Dravidians. There was no Dravidian veda and the Aryan vedas prevalent among Dravidians were said to be the sacred books which prescribed, how Dravidians should put a bar on Dravidians from acquiring knowledge of these texts. K.M.Balasubramaniam, a Vellala, was the first to give currency to the idea that the orthodox Brahmins were behind the Vellalar in their attack on the Periyar Movement.

¹²⁹ *Viduthalai*, Madras, 3 July 1937.

¹³⁰ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 31 May 1930.

P.Chidambaram Pillai in his serial articles in the *Revolt* entitled, *Saivism an Exposure and Saivite Mentality and Self-Respect*, suggested that the Brahmins and the Vellalas should pool their resources to fight the movement instead of working together in secret. He reminded them of the *Smarta-Saivite* alliance under the aegis of Tirunavukkarasar and Gnansambandar, which contributed to the extinction of Jainism and Buddhism and the emergence of the neo-Saivism, violent political Brahmana Saivism in South India.¹³¹ The Vellala caste should not shoulder the blame for the eclipse of the Periyar Movement by working in collusion with Brahmins. Instead, he wanted the Vellalas, chiefly the educated youths to join the ranks of the movement in order to remove the barriers of caste, religion and sex, the great barriers to the progress of the non-Brahmins.¹³²

To Periyar Movement, religion was only a set of rules framed by men based on social conditions, climate and the level of intelligence of the people. Conflicts between the two categories of the people led to formation of new religions and caused religious wars. In the course of time, the tenets of religions were said to have been disgraced and religions became mere rituals.¹³³

The object of Periyar Movement was to emancipate the masses from darkness and ignorance and lead them to light and learning. Further the ultimate aim was to expose the absurdities in *vedas, sastras, puranas* and *itihisas* from which caste, untouchability and slavery of women had emerged

¹³¹ *Revolt*, Madras, 8 September 1929.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 22 September 1929.

¹³³ *Kudi Arasu*, Madras, 11 August 1929, and 23 April 1949; K.Veeramani (ed), *Periyar Kalanjiam*, part IV,(T) see also *Arivin Ellai*,Madras. pp.100-101.

in the society. Removal of institutions like temples and priests who exploited the masses in the name of God was quite necessary. Traditional concepts like the observance of omens and auspicious times, like *raku kaalam* and *yama kandam* and *astami* are not strictly adopted by many people of the present day. This change in value is partly due to the higher learning and partly due to the rationalist propaganda of the Self-Respect Movement of Periyar.