CHAPTER III

DISSENT, PROTEST AND RATIONALISM:
A SOUTH INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Society and religion of our country had passed through numerous phases of change. There had been periods of progress, regeneration and reform as well as periods of decay, dissolution and degeneration. The problem of religion stimulated the philosophic spirit and led to great movements in the history of thought. They seemed to be recurrent phenomenon in most societies, which had grown beyond the simple, localized tribal state.

Speaking of India, we seem to have a long history of movements of protest, dissent and reform. Yet movements are characterized by identifiable patterns of behavior. Movements are collective attempts to bring about a social change or to create an entirely new social order or to prevent such changing of specific social institutions. When the structure of social ensemble is transformed for any reason the ideology also will be affected. It is impossible to work out any change in society, without taking in to consideration the nature of man in his different aspects – psychological, sociological, ethical and metaphysical. Social theories have pointed out how man needs his fellow men; how in the absence of co-operation with them he finds it difficult to live in society and how society plays its fruitful role by freeing the individual from the oppression of the others.\(^1\)

Many individuals attempted to change the system in order to save the mass of people from degradation, preached brave action and strong initiative among the common people. They tried to support humanism and rationalism in their own way. Right from the early revolts like Buddhism and Jainism

down to the Bhakti movement in the medieval age, we can find articulation of opposition to the caste system materialising in a religio-ideological idiom. This trend in fact extends well down to modern times that mark a new awakening of the oppressed castes and the birth of the contemporary Dalit movement.

A host of towering personalities emerged in the intellectual scene of South India during this period and attempted to observe and transform the society around them. The enlightenment was a set of ideas than it was a set of attitudes. At its core was a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs, and morals – typically known as the Age of Reason or Age of Rationalism. As a mental attitude, rationalism gives supreme importance to reason for understanding and solving the problems of life. A rationalist believes in the truth of a conclusion only to the extent of the evidence in support of its truth. If in any sphere of knowledge, sufficient evidence is not available for arriving at any conclusion, a rationalist suspends his or her judgment. In other words, a rationalist uses logic and scientific method for understanding this world. Rationalism is not a closed set of conclusions, but a method of arriving at conclusions.

Thus modern rationalist movement is a philosophical doctrine which asserts that truth can best be discovered by reason and factual analysis, rather than faith, dogma or religious teachings. The rationalist movement has some similarities in ideologies and intent to secular humanism. These movements' aims to provide a frame work for social and philosophical discourse outside of religious or supernatural beliefs. It also bears philosophical similarities to atheism. The term "Age of enlightenment" can more narrowly refer to the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment which advocated reason as the primary basis of authority.

While evaluating Brahmananda Sivayogi’s thoughts and actions one has to take into account that the liberal rational spirit which was permeating the whole country, especially in South India. Founding fathers of modern
Indian rationalism are Mahatma Phule (1827—1890), Brahmananda Swami Sivayogi (1852—1929), Periyar Ramaswami (1891—1973) and Gora (1902—1975). These intellectuals can be credited with taking the principles of Indian scepticism, rationalism and humanism to a mass audience, though they rarely appear on western list of rational heroes. We have often had several movements occurring simultaneously in different regions of South India in different segments of society and seeking to achieve different goals. These movements which took place in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh at different times with some overlap, had its impact in the societies of these three states in India. These states had popular movements for the enhancement of the common man and produced literature dealing with issues of common man. In this chapter an attempt is made to bring into focus the philosophical ideas of three rationalist, humanist and atheist thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This chapter seeks to identify the elements of dissent and protest in the rationalist ideology of these three great reformers who called for change in religious beliefs, change in society and change in social set up.

**Jyotirao Govindrao Phule**

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, also known as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was an activist, thinker, social reformer and revolutionary from Maharashtra in the 19th century. He occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra. Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born in Satara district of Maharashtra in a family belonging to Mali, an inferior caste in 1827. Since Jotirao’s father and two uncles served as florists under the last of the Peshwas, they came to be known as 'Phules'. His father, Govindrao, was a vegetable vendor, and his mother died when he was nine months old. After completing his primary education, Jyotirao had to leave the school and help

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his father by working on the family's farm. He was married at the age of twelve.

Impressed by Jotirao's intelligence and his love for knowledge, two of his neighbors - Shri. Munshi Gafar Beg and Mr. Lijit - persuaded his father Govindrao to allow him to study in a secondary school. In 1841, Jotirao got admission in the Scottish Mission's High School at Poona. It was in this school that he met Sadashiv Ballal Govande, a Brahmin, who remained a close friend throughout his life. Both Jotirao and Govande were greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's ideas and they read with great interest Paine's famous book 'The Rights of Man'. After completing his secondary education in 1847, Jotirao decided not to accept a job under the Government.

Phule identified and theorized the most important question of his time – religion, the caste system, ritualism, the gender question, the lot of the peasantry. He analysed the society and rejected Chaturvarnya system (the division of society on the basis of four varnas). He formulated a two fold division of society: the Brahman and the shudratishudra. The latter group has to forge a unity going beyond their respective castes.\(^3\) Thus he sought to create a dichotomous conception of the Hindu social structure.

The dichotomous conception is a generalisation for the entire society of a two- term asymmetric relation in which one side is the privileged at the expense of the other. In this conception society is divided into two correlative and diametrically opposed classes in such a way that each of these classes is characterized by the relation of its members to the members of the opposed classes.\(^4\) Jotirao called the opposed groups by their varna names – brahman and shudratishudra.


For Jyotirao Brahmanism was constructed over time. Since it was the ideology of oppression and dominance, it had to be opposed and ultimately destroyed. There was nothing sacred or divine about it. He identified shudratishudra as the leading agency of a social revolution. The shudratishudra will lead the revolution on behalf of the whole society, to liberate the entire people from the yoke of Brahmanism. He optimized a total smashing up of the entire oppressive structure, ideological and material.

Jyotirao insisted that this is both necessary and possible. Jyotirao attacked the religious texts. His attempt was to subvert the Brahmanical structure of ideas and beliefs, so that a new, more equitable order can emerge. He rejects the centrality of the pollution principle. His attack on brahmanical dharma necessarily involved rejection of the notion of pure and polluted, touchable and untouchable, and so on. The main object of his attack is on the exploitative and oppressive nature of Brahmanism.

Jyotirao thinking on religion cannot be separated from his thinking on caste. His method in the analyses of caste was not to separate Jathi from Varna. He saw caste as a category in the productive process, and as something that facilitated the dominance of the Brahmans in the ideological sphere. Caste, then, for him, was a category both of the base and the super structure of Indian society. If the caste system itself had to be destroyed, it had to be done by attacking the central element of the system. The roots of Brahmanism went deeper, and its hold was more tenacious. The reform of Brahman consciousness was a necessary condition for any successful change in Hindu society at large.

Jyotirao refused to regard the Vedas as sacrosanct. He questioned "if there is only one God, who created the whole mankind, why did he write the Vedas only in Sanskrit language despite his anxiety for the welfare of the

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whole mankind? What about the welfare of those who do not understand this language?" Phule concludes that it is untenable to say that religious texts were God-created. To believe so is only ignorance and prejudice. He opposed idolatry and denounced the Varna system. In his book Sarvajanik Dharma Pustak published in 1891, his views on religious and social issues are given in the form of a dialogue. According to him, both men and women were entitled to enjoy equal rights and it was a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of sex. He stressed the unity of man and envisaged a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He was aware that religious bigotry and aggressive nationalism destroy the unity of man. Jyotirao subjected religious texts and religious behavior to the tests on rationalism and rejected the misleading myths that were ruling over the minds of women, sudras and ati-shudras. Yielding to God or fate, astrology and other such rubbish rituals, sacredness, god-men, etc. was deemed irrational and absurd.

Jyotirao realised the fact that education is an effective medium for the upliftment of society. Education of women and the lower caste, he believed, deserved priority. With this realisation, Jyotirao started schools for women and the downtrodden in society. He also encouraged the efforts of others in the same field. Jyotirao gets the credit of being the first Indian who started education for women. Untouchables were admitted as students. Jyotirao prepared his wife Savitribai to teach in the girl's school, with a view to educating the women first, in order to bring in the value of equality at home. He started the first school for girls, at Pune, in the year 1848. He established institutes like the 'Pune Native Schools' and the 'Society for Promoting Education for Mahar, Mangs'.

The orthodox opponents of Jyotirao were furious and they started a vicious campaign against him. Savitribai had to face bitter opposition from the orthodox section in the society for teaching girls and people from the unprivileged groups in the school. Stones and brickbats were thrown at her
when she was on her way to the school. Despite this severe opposition, Jotirao and Savitribai continued their work with sincerity. The reactionaries threatened Jotirao’s father with dire consequences if he did not dissociate himself from his son’s activities. Yielding to the pressure, Jotirao’s father asked his son and the daughter-in-law to leave his house as both of them refused to give up their noble endeavor.

Jotirao was aware that primary education among the masses in the Bombay Presidency was very much neglected. He argued that a good deal of their poverty, their want of self-reliance, their entire dependence upon the learned and intelligent classes could be attributed to the ‘deplorable state of education among the peasantry. He blamed the British Government for spending profusely a large portion of revenue on the education of the higher classes. According to him, this policy resulted in the virtual monopoly of all the higher offices under the Government by the Brahmins. Jotirao boldly attacked the stranglehold of the Brahmins, who prevented others from having access to all the avenues of knowledge and influence. He denounced them as cheats and hypocrites. He asked the masses to resist the tyranny of the Brahmins. All his writings were variations on this theme.

Besides he explained his thoughts through lectures and discussions. His earnest representation to the Hunter Commission emphasised upon universalisation of primary education, to make compulsory primary education, jobs to the downtrodden in accordance with the proportion of their population. He emphasised that children of farmers should be given concessions for higher education. He started boarding for students from backward castes. The poor children were exempted from payment of fees.

Jotirao was the first Sudra thinker to have thought about the gender question. The approach of the so called thinkers of the renaissance was liberal, progressive, but their upper-caste basis was clear in what they did or advocated. Jotirao is more radical than his contemporaries. Manu’s system

\[7\] Ibid, pp.146-156.
treats women as sudras or dasa, irrespective of Varna. Accordingly Jyotirao included women, all women, in his notion of shudratishudra. The first school he started, in 1842, was for girls. In 1846, he set up a home for widows who were often forced to abort or kill their children because they lack social legitimacy. Phule himself adopted the son of a Brahmin widow as his own. He did not think of women’s problem in terms of Brahmin or shudratishudra. In his Satya Dharma Pustak, he talks of, all women and men together. He insists on using, “Stree-purush”, thus emphasizing gender differentiation, while pleading for equal and common human rights for women and men.

Widow Remarriages were banned and child-marriage was very common among the Brahmins and other upper castes in the then Hindu society. Jyotirao encouraged widow remarriages. Similarly he started the infanticide prevention centre (‘Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha’) for infants born to helpless widows because of their deviant behavior or exploitation. The centre for safe deliveries for widows was started at his own house in 1863. Jyotirao got invaluable help from his wife Savitribai and some of his associates in this work. Jyotirao Phule established an orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu. Jyotirao gave protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the orphanage would take care of their children. It was in this orphanage run by Jyotirao that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jyotirao adopted him as his son.

In order to institutionalise social education, and have a continuous follow up, Jyotirao established 'Satya Shodak Samaj' (Society of Seekers of Truth) on 24th September, 1873. A meeting of his followers and admirers was convened for this purpose and decided Jyotirao as its first president and treasurer. Every member had to take a pledge of loyalty to the British Empire. When Phule established the Satya Shodak Samaj, Savitribai became the head of the women's section which included ninety female members. The main objectives of the organisation were to liberate the Sudras and Ati Shudras and to prevent their exploitation by the Brahmins. All
the members of the Satya Shodak Samaj were expected to treat all human beings as children of God and worship the Creator without the help of any mediator. The membership was open to all and the available evidence proves that some Jews were admitted as members. In 1876 there were 316 members of the 'Satya Shodak Samaj'. In order to destroy social and religious slavery the Satya Shodak Samaj, emphasized and re-emphasised the following:

Humans are great by their qualities and all of them are equal.
Incantations, penance, rituals, rebirth- do not have any reality.
Bhat (Brahmins) or middlemen are not at all necessary for the worship of the Almighty.

Thus the Satya Shodak Samaj stressed the great ideals of Equality, Brotherhood; Non-requirement of middlemen in religious matters. This message spread throughout Maharashtra. The required educational system for the downtrodden, women & underprivileged sections of society- was mentioned in various programmes of Satya Shodak Samaj and it is also reflected in Jotirao's writings.

Jyotirao tried to help the people in the famine stricken areas of Maharashtra when a severe famine in 1877 forced people in the rural area to leave their villages. Some of them had to leave their children behind and an appeal issued on 17 May 1877 by Jyotirao indicates that the Victoria Orphanage was founded under the auspices of the Satya Shodak Samaj to look after these unfortunate children. From the beginning of the year 1879 Krishnarao Bhalekar, one of his colleagues, edited a weekly called Deenbandhu which was the organ of the Satya Shodak Samaj. The weekly articulated the grievances of the peasants and workers. Deenbandhu publication, the mouthpiece of the Satya Shodak Samaj, played an important role in Satya Shodak Samaj's movement.

Jyotirao adopted different methods in his mission for social education and social transformation. Jyotirao produced ample literature with
a view to promote social education and not degrade it into mere entertainment. He also resorted to effective letter writing in prose and poetry to convey his principles and thoughts regarding social education in public life and at the family level. He disseminated his thoughts and feelings effectively through this medium. Jyotirao sent request letter to the members of the Satya Shodak Samaj, for helping the famine affected people and to the British Government regarding the firm actions to be taken by the Government for preventing child marriages and for encouraging Widow re-marriages. He accused them of upholding the teachings of religion and refusing to rationally analyse religious teachings.

He maintained that at the root of all miseries was the blind faith that religious books were created or inspired by God. So, Jyotirao wanted to abolish this blind faith in the first instance. All established religious and priestly classes found this blind faith useful for their purposes and they tried their best to defend it. All religions and their religious texts are man-made and they represent the selfish interest of the classes, which are trying to pursue and protect their selfish ends by constructing such books. In his view, every religious book is a product of its time and the truths it contains have no permanent and universal validity. Through his writings and activities, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule openly condemned:

The inequality in the religious book.
Orthodox nature of religion.
Exploitation of the masses through the medium of religion.
Blind and misleading rituals.
Hypocrisy in the prevalent religion.

Jyotirao felt that the organisations like Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, the Sarvajanik Sabha and the Indian National Congress were dominated by the Brahmins and were not truly representative in character. In his booklet called Satsara (The essence of Truth) published in June, 1885, he criticised the Brahma Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj. Addressing their
leaders he declared, “we don’t need to help of your organisations. Don’t worry about us”. In his book, *Sarvajanik Satya Shodak Dharma Pustak*, a posthumous publication, he observed that the peasants and the untouchables were not members of either the Sarvajanik Sabha or the Indian National Congress. He warned that the persistent demand made by these organisations for Indianisation of the administrative services, if accepted, would lead to Brahminisation of the services in India. He thought that it was difficult to create a sense of nationality so long as the restrictions on dining and marrying outside the caste continued to be observed by people belonging to different castes. Education of the masses would promote the process of nation making.

Jyotirao was fearless in criticising the decisions of the alien rulers which did not contribute to the welfare of the masses. When the Government wanted to grant more licenses for liquor-shops, Jyotirao condemned this move, as he believed that addiction to liquor would ruin many poor families. On 30th November, 1880, the President of the Poona Municipality requested the members to approve his proposal of spending one thousand rupees on the occasion of the visit of Lord Lytton, the Governor-General of India. The officials wanted to present him an address during his visit to Poona. Jyotirao did not like the idea of spending the money of the tax payers in honoring a guest like Lytton. He boldly suggested that the amount could be very well spending on the education of the poor people in Poona. He was the only member out of all the thirty-two nominated members of the Poona Municipality who voted against the official resolution.

Throughout his life, Jyotirao Phule fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden people and the struggle, which he launched at a young age ended only when he died on 28th November, 1890. Phule believed in overthrowing the social system in which man has been deliberately made

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depended on the others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. To him blind faith eradication formed part of a broad socio-economic transformation. Mere advice, education and alternative ways of living are not enough, unless the economic framework of exploitation comes to an end. He was a pioneer in many fields and among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never wavered in his quest for truth and justice. Though he was often accused of fomenting hatred between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, very rarely an attempt was made to consider his criticism in a broad perspective. After Jotirao’s death his spirited followers went on spreading the movement to the remotest parts of Maharashtra. Shahu Maharaja, the ruler of Kolhapur princely state, gave a lot of financial and moral support to Satya Shodak Samaj. In its new incarnation as non-brahmin party carried on the work of superstition removal vigorously. The later generations also took considerable time to understand and appreciate the profound significance of Jotirao's role in transforming the society.

Periyar (E.V) Ramaswami

Periyar or E.V.R. (1879-1973) is the senior most Indian rationalist, atheist and humanist of twentieth century. Periyar’s original name was E.V. Ramaswami Naicker. E.V. Ramaswami Naicker was born on September 17th, 1879 at Erode, Tamil Nadu in to a wealthy and orthodox Kannada Naidu family. His family belongs to the Naicker caste; the upper stratum of the Sudras. His admirers bestowed the title "Periyar" on him. In Tamil the word "Periyar" means "the great one". He is also referred to as “Thanthai Periyar” (“great leader” or “great father”). Periyar led a long and eventful life. His caste surname was “Naicker”, which he dropped in his later life because of his opposition to the caste-system. Both his father, Venkata Naicker, a leading Hindu business person of Erode, and his mother, Chinnathayi Ammai, were orthodox in their religious beliefs. Periyar could speak three Dravidian languages: Kannada, Tamil and Telugu. Though Kannada was his
mother tongue, he mostly used Tamil. According to traditional Hindu custom, he married very young.

Periyar noticed as a young man how the inequitable caste system had permeated the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian religions. The lowest caste had remained “untouchables” for more than twenty-five centuries before. They were denied education, participation in social and governmental activity, and contact with other castes, except when their services as scavengers, hide-flayers were required. From questioning, Periyar moved to rebellion from the 1920s onwards. The Vaikkom Satyagraha in Kerala plays an important part in the history of the struggle against untouchability. Periyar received a “private letter” asking him to join in the satyagraha. He proceeded to Vaikkom and violated the order not to address public meetings, and was imprisoned on the order of the Raja for one month. This agitation was put an end by the Travancore police and Periyar was imprisoned again for six months. While in prison he realised the futility of trying to reform the Hindu religion, or any religion for that matter, and decided that atheism, rationalism, and free thinking were the only way forward. This meant quite clearly that mankind would have to start afresh in a world where all men were really born equal, and lived in genuine equality of opportunity. The rest of his life was devoted for campaigning against Hinduism and attempting to reduce the privileges of the Brahmanical castes had given themselves. With this in mind he set up the Dravidar Kazhagam.

Dravidar Kazhagam or Dravida Kazhagam (Dravidian Organization) was the first fully Dravidian party in India. It was a radical party of erstwhile Madras Presidency. He organised this as a mass movement to propagate decency, to pioneer legislative changes to benefit all casteless Hindus and to provide decent education to those who had been denied the very right to study for centuries. The implementation of these ideas soon involved him in

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politics. The Party was well known for its hard line approach to fight for the Dravidian rights and was often involved in mass attempts to change the system outright. The work of the Dravidar Kazhagam largely centered around annihilation of caste, removing untouchability, opposing the Brahmanism often through nonviolent methods, denouncing Hindu gods and goddesses, seeking to educate people on superstitions and ignorance as well as women's liberation. It continues to remove astrology and other superstitions viz. numerology, palmistry, etc. Dravidar Kazhagam involved bringing in Adi Dravidas in to the sanctum sanctorum and asking Brahmin priests to worship in Tamil instead of Sanskrit, since Tamil was propagated to be inferior in comparison to Sanskrit, a language that was restricted only to the Brahmin community. With a firm belief that caste-based reservations are the only way to empower the under-represented, they supported reservations in education and employment right from 1919. Periyar was instrumental in introducing reservation in Tamil Nadu from 1921 even before independence.

Periyar has expressed his ideas on many issues. The implementations of his ideals soon involved him in politics. But here Periyar’s views on issues which are of relevance to dissent, protest and rationalism that led to social transformation will concentrate. Just like Phule, Periyar’s attempt was to subvert the brahmanical structure of ideas and beliefs, so that a new more equitable order can emerge. Periyar also shares the dichotomous nature of south Indian society. He emphasised the two fold division of society– the Brahmins and the Dravidians. Periyar repeatedly emphasizes like Phule that the socio – economic degradation of the Sudras is the result of Brahmin domination and exploitation. The term Sudras according to him comprises all non - brahmin caste groups. Periyar’s claim for equality must be seen in opposition to the domination of Brahmins. He believed that revolutionary thought has to be backed by revolutionary practices.
In many ways caste and inequality are at the centre of Periyar’s thought. Anti-brahmanism is the principal motive and foundation of Periyar’s message. His opposition to Brahmanism did not relate only to the casteism. It also related almost everything within the Hindu system. Periyar rejected Brahmanism along with the text that upheld it. He argued for its complete rejection and destruction. Periyar loudly and publicly attacked religion as superstition and exploitation.

Periyar’s thinking on religion cannot be separated from his thinking on caste. Religion is to Periyar the root of evil and injustice in society. It is used by Brahmins for domination. Periyar stressed that it should be replaced by rationalism in which he dedicated his life. Rationalism, for Periyar, implies materialism. God and other transcendental concepts have been repudiated, and religion is considered as being contradictory to reason, rationalism. He attacked Brahmins for their caste superiority. He pleaded for the eradication of caste system and for social uplift. He fought against untouchability and he initiate and led the Self respect movement.

The religious and social issues are closely linked. Ritual impurity leading to untouchability means social and economic degradation for non-Brahmins, and ritual purity leads to social supremacy of Brahmins. Periyar vehemently and repeatedly criticized Brahmins for grave misuse of their position. He argued that traditional social structures, based on religion, have been used by them to suppress and exploit the masses. He put forward his thought that God and religion are the social inventions of Brahmins with a view to securing their own superiority. There fore these have no value in themselves. A rational man does not need such concepts in order to lead a morally correct life and create a society of justice and equality. His attack on Brahmin’s role in the socio-religious structure consequently leads to a criticism of Hindu religion as such. Periyar attacked temple cult. He criticised...

10 Anitha, Diehl, op.cit., p.44.
the religious functions of temples as the abodes of gods and as places of worship." God is everywhere, they say. He has no form. Why then go into temples and worship a griding pistle, a linga. I am prepared to demolish temples". Application of untouchability is also associated with the temple cult. Because of his opposition to the caste-system, and because he worked in a predominantly Hindu atmosphere, he concentrated his fire on Hindu religion.

Periyar was opposed to all religions. He also raised the question of the conflicting truth-claims of different religions. Periyar has also questioned the alleged divinity of the founders of various religions. He pointed out that the number of persons claiming to have divine powers has been increasing day by day. There are many controversies and differences of opinion about them. It is very difficult to believe, according to Periyar, that religions were created by men with divine powers. Religious principles are not dependable for everyday worldly life. Religion is concerned, not with the physical existence of man, but with his soul. It explains the relationship between man and God and has nothing to do with the five senses of man and is concerned with the spirit or soul beyond human perception.

Religion ignores worldly life with its joys and sorrows, and enables man to reach the holy feet of God and attain salvation. Thus, Periyar is naturally opposed to religion in the foregoing senses. Expressing his opposition to all religions, Periyar says:

The enthusiasts of every religion think that the principles of their religion are suitable for all countries at all times and their religious leader should be acknowledged as the head of the religion all over the world. The stubbornness with which they hold on to this

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view makes it difficult for us to believe that any religion can be accepted as a dependable guide for society.\textsuperscript{14}

Periyar expresses the view that religion is a barrier, which has blocked human progress. People who follow religion do so blindly, just because their ancestors also did so. They do not bother to think about the nature or the utility of religion for human beings. According to Periyar, a person who wants to be serviceable to others needs no religion at all.\textsuperscript{15} Human beings should aim at finding happiness for themselves and others. One should accept only such good and truthful principles, which are practicable and useful. The principles and restrictions, which are imposed on the people by the various religions, but are difficult to practice, are not going to benefit humankind. It is best to discard such doctrines, which are contrary to human nature. Religion is the main root of social injustice, exploitation and suppression.

Periyar strongly opposed idol worship. In 1953 in order to discourage idol-worship, Periyar led a statewide campaign to break the idols of Ganesh at public places.\textsuperscript{16} Periyar has criticised various myths associated with the births and lives of different Hindu gods and goddesses. Periyar drew the attention to the fact that the varna-vyavastha had degraded the Sudras by placing them at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Besides, the sastras, Puranas, temples, prayers and gods, etc., have perpetuated their low position, and have been acting as hurdles to their advancement. Therefore, he strongly advocates that the society must get rid of all these things in order to secure the social, educational and the economic advancement of the Sudras.

Periyar campaigned throughout Tamil Nadu for social reform, especially empowerment for women and end to the social oppression of

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. pp.142, 186, 275.  
\textsuperscript{15} Periyar, On Religion, op.cit., p.458.  
\textsuperscript{16} Anitha, Diehl, op.cit., p.67.
religion. Periyar is best known as the founder of the Self-Respect Movement. Periyar started the Self-Respect movement, with the aim of establishing a casteless society in 1925. Eradication of social evils, promotion of rationalism, and freeing the society from the shackles of superstitions and blind faith in God and religion were high on his agenda. The movement has the aim of achieving a society where backward castes have equal human rights, and encouraging backward castes to have self-respect in the context of a caste-based society that considered them to be a lower end of the hierarchy. The movement was extremely influential not just in Tamil Nadu, but also overseas in countries with large Tamil populations, such as Malaysia and Singapore. This movement was dedicated to the goal of giving non-brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidian past, which also meant a denial of the superiority of the Brahmins.

According to Periyar we are fit to think of ‘Self-respect’ only when the notion of superior and inferior caste is banished from our land. The aim of a genuine self-respect movement is to change whatever appears to be adverse to man’s feelings of self-respect. Self-respect is man’s birthright. The word ‘man’ is itself a word based on dignity. Therefore, he who is called ‘man’ embodies dignity in himself, and only through his right to this dignity, reveals his human qualities. That is why ‘self-esteem’ is his birthright. Therefore, man must remove by himself his feelings of inferiority, the feeling that he is lesser born than other beings, and attain self-confidence and self-respect.

Periyar organized the first Self-Respect Conference at Chengalpattu, near Madras, on 17-18 February 1929. The conference passed resolutions against caste system, untouchability, priesthood and intrusion of Sanskrit or any north Indian language in matters of worship. The Conference favoured equal property rights for women. Resolutions were also passed urging

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people not to spend any money on worship in the temples, or for building new temples, Vedic schools, etc. People were exhorted to drop their caste surnames and to stop wearing caste marks on their foreheads or their bodies. It was emphasized that public funds should be used for educational purposes and for creating employment opportunities for the unemployed.

The next Self-Respect conference was held at Erode on 10 May 1930. The resolutions passed at this conference emphasized the need to end discrimination among human beings. This conference took a bolder step than the previous one, and condemned in strong terms the worship of idols in temples. It was declared that people had many social and financial problems to attend, and therefore, there was no need for them to waste time over an imaginary God.

In this way, Periyar organized several Self-Respect Conferences in Tamil Nadu. Periyar advocated man-woman equality in these conferences. One of the major sociological changes introduced through the self respect movement was the self-respect marriage system, where by marriages were conducted without being officiated by a Brahmin priest or religious ritual. Periyar had regarded the then conventional marriages were mere financial arrangements and often caused great debt through dowry. Self-Respect marriages encouraged inter-caste marriages and arranged marriages to be replaced by love marriages. It was argued by the proponents of self-respect marriage that the then conventional marriages were officiated by Brahmins, who has to be paid for and also the marriage ceremony was in Sanskrit which most people never understood and hence were ritual and practices based on blind adherence. Thus the Self – respect Marriages was a revolt against accepted dogmas and tradition, against religious rites and ceremonies. Furthermore, in order to break with the Hindu religious structure, and as a protest against “superstition’, and in accordance with Periyar’s rationalistic way of thinking, the Self-respect marriage should be
conducted at inauspicious hours, as the Hindu faith pays great attention to auspicious timings.19

Since the lower castes were forced to pay for all sorts of rituals from birth to death (and beyond), Periyar devised this very simple, priest- less marriage ceremony called the "self-respect marriage". This involves a simple pledge made by the bride and groom followed by an exchange of garlands before their families. Instead of a vast banquet, the guests raise a collection of money that is given the couple to help them establish themselves in life. Such simple, practical approaches were characteristic of Periyar. His view of rationalism was that it should extend to every facet of life, instead of being a mere tool for academic research.

Periyar was a champion of women's rights. Nearly in all societies women are the worst victims of various social impositions. In India religion, caste, tradition, family, and social prestige are the worst enemies of women. Periyar advocated man-woman equality, and equal property rights for women. Periyar noticed that the Manusmrity and other Hindu scriptures ranked women below all castes and even below animals. He advocated the unthinkable: widow remarriage, education of women, even abortion and sterilization as a means of birth control. Besides he suggested unisex dressing, common names for men and women, enlistment of women in the armed forces, even a dismantling the institution of marriage, which put considerably more pressure on women than on men. Among other things, he encouraged and supported were inter-caste marriages and widow- remarriages.

Periyar also supported the abolition of the Devadasi system under which young girls were attached to Hindu temples as sex workers. Periyar described this system as a disgrace to Hindu religion. Periyar's speeches and articles relating to women's rights have been published in the form of a

book titled Periyar on Women's Rights. Periyar supported women's education, property rights for women, Self-Respect Marriages, birth control and widow remarriages. Periyar has also expressed his views on love, chastity and "prostitution". According to Periyar, kindness, desire, love, lust, friendship, attraction and distaste of sex, etc., are private feelings of human beings. These should not be discussed, determined or imposed by any third person. Every one must have the freedom to settle these issues based on his or her taste, attitude and satisfaction. It is unnecessary and uncalled-for anybody to interfere into the private affairs of others.

Periyar has expressed unorthodox views on chastity as well. According to him, the concept of chastity is used only for keeping women in bondage. If women are to get real freedom, says Periyar, the practice of imposing chastity on women alone will have to be discarded. Chastity, then, will become a discipline "imposed by both men and women voluntarily on themselves". Periyar has opposed forced marriages, which compel women to live with persons whom they do not like. Similarly, Periyar has also opposed religions and laws, which force women to put up with the brutal behavior of husbands. As he says:

The cruel religions and laws, which force women to put up with the brutal behavior of the husbands for the sake of chastity, must die out. The wickedness of society, which, in the name of chastity forces a woman to suppress her real feelings of love and live with the man who has neither love nor kindness for her, should also go.20

According to Periyar, natural or voluntary and free chastity can only exist in a society in which the above mentioned evils have been eliminated. Otherwise, one can only have slavish chastity enforced on women in a one-sided manner. Periyar expressed the view that the word "prostitution", too, is

20 Ibid.
used only with reference to women. The concept that prostitution is a sin is applied only to women and not to men. In Periyar’s view, if such a discriminatory attitude to prostitution obstructs the movement for the liberation of women, it is the duty of public service-minded persons to discard the very idea of prostitution. As he says:

Like the word "chastity", word "prostitution" also is given a wrong and damaging significance and is applied to women unnaturally with the ulterior motive of enslaving them. For a life of equality and independence the concepts associated with the words, "chastity" and "prostitution" is utterly irrelevant and unnecessary. They may be considered necessary for a contract between a man and a woman for living together. Even there, restricting those words to women alone is unnatural.  

According to Periyar, "the sex urge and the feelings of passion and desire are all natural". The concepts of chastity and prostitution have been artificially and cunningly created to keep others under subjection. There is no point in framing rules, which go against human nature and create avoidable suffering. Periyar does not object to the belief that the human society needs certain principles and restrictions. According to Periyar:

The principles governing public life should not hamper or damage the personal freedom of any individual and should be such as not to give room in their application for partiality or discrimination between the high and the low. More important than these they should conform to nature. When we say that all principles should be justly applied, nobody needs to go to dharmashastras to find out what is justice. What one considers just should be such as to be accepted

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21 Ibid.
as just by others as well. Further, it should necessarily suit human intelligence, ability and experience.\(^{22}\)

Thus, it is obvious that Periyar has supported a rational and secular ethics based on the values of freedom, equality and justice. He emphasized that moral rules must take into account the realities of human nature. Rationalism, for Periyar, implies materialism. Rationalism liberates man. According to Periyar, adoption of a rationalist outlook in society would have solved many of its problems. Periyar emphasized that the capacity of reasoning alone distinguishes human beings from other animals. In case of human beings, sense of reasoning can lead to mental development and a happy life. Periyar gave an important place to rationalism in his philosophy. One of the Tamil journals published by him was named \textit{Pagutharivu} which means “rationalism” in Tamil. He was also the founder of the English journal \textit{The Modern Rationalist}. Periyar founded the Rationalist Forum in Tamil Nadu. In fact, Periyar gave an important place to rationalism in his Self-Respect Movement. A rationalist uses logic and scientific method for understanding this world.

Further, similarly, a rationalist also rejects the rigid and divisive morality based on blind faith in religious scriptures and on unreasonable and unscientific beliefs like God, soul, life after death, heaven, hell and rebirth. He or she uses reasoning in the sphere of ethics as well, and accepts a rational morality based on human desires and needs. In short, the rationalist philosophy of life is based on reason. Periyar was essentially a rationalist thinker.

True progress requires knowledge. Periyar asserts the importance of education. Only, education, self-respect and rational qualities will uplift the downtrodden. Periyar stresses that it is essential that education in our country should have two cardinal aims. Firstly education should foster rationality and feelings of self-respect. Secondly, it should be conductive to a

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
better life through a job or trade. Education plays a major role to bring a change of mind in the individual. More over, self-education and social education are needed for development of individual character and proper socializations. Periyar and Phule put every stress on education in their rural uplift as the sure way to rational thinking and action, which would lead to the abolition of all economic and social injustice in society.

GORÁ

Gora was another distinguished person who equivocally declared himself as an atheist and became a social reformer. He was a scientist, social revolutionary who bridged the gulf between precept and practice. Gora born and brought up in a high caste Hindu family was a highly influential social thinker who dedicated his life to developing rational thought in Andhra and beyond. He was born on November 15, 1902, at Chatrapur, now in Orissa. His full name was Gopraju Ramchandra Rao. He was born in an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family. His father, Gopraju Venkata Subbarao, was a head clerk in the Forest Department, when Gora was born.

Gora was orthodox and superstitious in his childhood. Like all Brahmin boys he accepted and practiced family ceremonies and rituals during his early days. Even at the age of 22, when he appeared for his M.A. (Botany) examination from the Presidency College (Madras), he kept in his pocket a small packet of "sacred ash" given to him by his parental aunt. At that time, he believed that the presence of the ash enabled him to pass examinations. He wrote that he grew up "conventionally orthodox and superstitious". He married Saraswati in 1922 when she was only ten. His activity in Brahma Samaj influenced Gora considerably while he was studying in P.R.High School, Kakinada to become a rationalist.

23 Gora , We Become Atheists (Vijayawada, 1975), pp.1-2.
24 Ibid.
He did not like the caste and religious associations with names. He put together the initials ‘Go’ from his family name (Gopraju) and ‘Ra’ from his name (Ramchandra) and made it GORA in the year 1940. When Gora and his wife became assertively atheist they named their children denoting different political, economic and social events which introduced changes in life.

Gora took his Masters degree in Natural Sciences in 1925 and taught in various colleges. Gora got a job as a lecturer in natural science at American Mission College, Madurai. This gave him a confidence that he could achieve success by his own efforts and also felt that he had secured a job without God’s help. He deliberately chose a “haunted” house as his home. However, he continued to be a vegetarian, which was the habit of the caste in which he was born. He also continued to wear the "sacred thread" which the upper caste (dwija) Hindu males wear. Thus, when the then principal of the American Mission College, Rev. Wallace, suggested to Gora that he could go to Yale University for his Ph.D. and become the Rector of the Science Department provided he embraced Christianity, Gora refused. As Gora himself says, his reaction to the suggestion was that of a Hindu. He was more a Hindu than an atheist at that time. Gora’s movement towards atheism was gradual.

After this event, in May 1925 Gora shifted to the Agricultural College, Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu as cotton research assistant. However, his refusal to accept Christianity made Gora think deeply on religious issues. He started wondering how Hinduism and Christianity were different from one another. He read English or Telugu translations of the Bible, Bhagavat Gita, Koran, Vedas, Upanishads and other religious scriptures for making a comparative study of different religions. For five or six years, he made an

26 Gora, We Become Atheists. pp.57,58.
27 Ibid. p.3.
extensive general study of topics like God, soul, salvation, rebirth, spirituality, other worlds, etc. He was particularly interested in abnormal and religious psychology as he found in them the clue to understanding human belief in the existence of God and soul.

In 1927, Gora joined Ananda College at Colombo in Sri Lanka, which was managed by Buddhist Theosophical Society. In Colombo Gora met Buddhist priests. He listened to their discourses and studied the books given by them. In this way he gradually enriched his knowledge and moved towards atheism. Gora's wife, Saraswati, who had joined him at Coimbatore in 1926, further moved towards atheism during her stay at Colombo. She, too, like Gora came from an orthodox family. After joining Gora, she started shedding her orthodox habits and began adopting atheistic attitudes.

After one year's stay at Colombo, Gora joined P.R. College at Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh as a lecturer in botany. Gora's parents were living at Kakinada at that time. Besides, Gora had been a student of P.R. College. Thus, Gora was happy that he was going to serve his old college as well as live with his parents in their old age. But his changed atheistic attitudes resulted in clashes with the conservative and conventional ways of his parents and of his alma mater. In August 1928, Gora's father expelled him from his house because Gora refused to wear the "sacred thread", which he now regarded as a symbol of caste. The Principal dismissed Gora from service in 1933 for expressing atheistic ideas in an article titled "The concept of God", which he wrote for a manuscript magazine brought out by one of his students. In the article Gora had declared that God was a "falsehood" which ought to be "discarded".

After experimenting with a private "tutorial college" at Kakinada for some time, Gora again joined Hindu College, Masulipatam, as a regular lecturer. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, who later became the President of India, was

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29 Ibid, p.3.
the vice-chancellor of Andhra University at that time. Though he was not an atheist, he believed that a college lecturer should not be persecuted for his unorthodox ideas. Gora was offered lectureship in Hindu College on his recommendation. Gora worked in Hindu College for five years but he was dismissed again in 1939 for his atheistic ideas. The management of the college thought that Gora’s promotion of atheistic ideas was indirectly responsible for frequent strikes by students in the college. The college revoked the dismissal when the students took up the cudgels for Gora. However, the principal prohibited him from meeting students outside the classroom and banned the expression of his views on atheism, in speech or writing, either inside or outside the college! This situation was unacceptable to Gora. Therefore, he resigned and left Hindu College in 1940.

While working in Hindu College, Gora used his spare time for spreading atheism. Almost every weekend he used to go to villages around Masulipatam and address public meetings on atheism, emphasizing that God, soul and other worlds were non-existent. After his resignation from Hindu College, Gora was again offered some secured salaried jobs. He was now face to face with a difficult choice between the security of a salaried job and the freedom to promote atheism. By now he had had six children which made the choice even more difficult. With the consent and co-operation of his wife, Saraswati, and with a full sense of responsibility, Gora accepted the offer of Anne Anjayya, a freedom fighter, to settle in his village, Mudunur (twenty miles from Vijay Wada), in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, and to carry on public work in the manner he liked. Mudunur was one of the villages where Gora had earlier addressed a public meeting on atheism. Therefore, people knew him there. Two thatched huts were constructed for him on a private land just outside the village. It was called the Atheist Center (Nastik Kendra). The villagers collectively supported Gora and his family. In this way, the first known Atheist Center of the world came into existence.

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30 Gora, We Become Atheists, p.45.
His practicing and propaganda of Atheism brought him in to contact with Western countries and international recognition. In 1970, Gora went to Boston, USA, for participating in the fifth congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). He also visited West Germany, France, Italy, England, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Holland, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. In 1974, he visited USSR, some European countries and Egypt. This time he attended the sixth congress of the IHEU at Amsterdam, Holland. Gora addressed meetings and exchanged views on atheism in several countries of the world. A detailed account of his foreign visits is contained in *An Atheist Around the World*, which was published in 1987 on his twelfth death anniversary.

Throughout his life Gora was a teacher and learner at the same time. As a teacher he expounded the cause of atheism but, at the same time, he was ready to learn from life. At the age of 68 there are very few people who wish to learn. But Gora is an exception. One should be fearless if one has to learn. If one is not frank one sets his face against anything new. Like Periyar Gora expressed his ideas on many issues. He was active in social movement as well as in politics.

Gora, a world-renowned atheist, conducted experiments in and with his life with atheistic outlook. With a scientific and humanistic mind he looked at the problems of life, analysed and understood them and suggested solutions. He had an open mind. According to him verification is the demarcating line between truth and falsehood.

Gora’s fight against superstition increased rapidly. He has taken the unusual course of marrying his daughter to a Harijan youth. This has made him socially boycotted by many of his kinsmen and friends of the Brahmin and Savarna Hindu society. His own parents, sisters, and his wife’s relations dislike his heterodoxy and extreme zeal for social reform, and some of them too boycotted him for a time. But he loves them, understands their
limitations, and he and his wife and children suffer the ostracism patiently and without resentment.\footnote{Gora., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.1-2.}

Gora started his open propaganda in 1932 at a seminar on idol worship. He openly asserted that God was merely a concept, not scientific fact.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.27.} Gora’s Atheism caused him to be dismissed twice, in1933, again in 1939, but on each occasion his record as a teacher and as a social worker on week ends and during vacations led to his reappointment by higher authorities. In 1940, however, he decided to devote himself fully to the cause of atheism, socio-economic equality and the national liberation movement. Gora participated in the struggle for freedom of India, talked with Mahatma Gandhi on atheism, championing the cause of atheism, and was in the forefront of non-violent direct action programmes in upholding the dignity of humans.

The central point in Gora’s philosophy is atheism. According to Gora, “theism” and “atheism” express man’s attitudes to the world around him. Human reaction to his world has been of two kinds: one, of surrender to the forces of his world; and two, of assertion over his surroundings. Surrender is motivated by slave-mind, and assertion is motivated by a sense of freedom. Primitive man, with his poor and insufficient knowledge and weak sense of security, was more inclined to be timid and submissive than to be bold and assertive. His method of understanding was simple and analogical in anthropomorphous manner. Therefore, maintains Gora, “he imagined that a man-like God created and controlled the world and he surrendered to the concept.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp.19-20.} Along with God, man imagined the existence of soul, which could exist apart from the body. He conceptualized death as the “permanent escape” of soul from the body. As bodiless souls apparently needed some
place to live, the existence of other worlds, like heaven and hell, and of
rebirth were imagined by the primitive man

Gora, developed positive atheism and strove incessantly for the
welfare of humanity. Gora defined Atheism, as the freedom of the individual.
The surrender of man to God is only a part in the subordination of man to
something superior.\textsuperscript{34} The human is subordinating and surrendering himself
to God, and the associated theories of fate and soul. On the other hand
Atheism is the expression of the individual and his liberation from the
shackles of slavery and the feeling of helplessness, promotion of self-
confidence, and making him a responsible person. That is why atheism is
not mere intellectual exercise or scholarly exposition of philosophical debate.

The Atheism propounded by Gora is a positive way of life. Gora said
that atheism means promotion of humanity in humans and inculcation of
reality, social outlook and development of individual personality. Instead of
the imaginary "God" human beings should be the centre of social
organisation. Man and woman are the central and focal point. Economic,
social and political systems exist for the sake of humans. That is why,
human centred society is essential. The positive atheism which was
enunciated and practiced by Gora is distinctive and attracted wide attention
in India and abroad. Man is the master of his life and the maker of his
systems. Economic, social and political systems were created by him for his
own welfare and well being. But, now man became slave of his own
creations. The comprehensive development of the personality of the
individual alone would save him or her from the catastrophe.

There is no progress without freedom. The essence of atheism is the
freedom of individual. Equality, freedom, fraternity and social justice are
essential for every one. Humans have complete freedom, free to reshape
institutions and systems they have established. Thus, human freedom and

\textsuperscript{34} Gora, \textit{The Need of Atheism} (Vijayawada,1980), p.27.
progress are inherently inter-connected. But freedom has very wide connotation. Freedom is the very breath of human existence. Economic, social, political, cultural and psychological freedoms enable the civilisation to bloom. But the freedom should be associated with social outlook and sacrifice. Freedom and selfishness cannot co-exist. Freedom is the basis for cooperation. There is an inter-relationship between freedom and openness. Secrecy is anti-social, asserted Gora.³⁵

The attitude towards God changes progressively with one's advance in the understanding of the Self. So, one who wishes to be clear about God must first be clear about the nature of one's own being. Gora attributes his strength of will and the success he has been able to achieve in his field of service to his atheistic approach and appeal to atheism. He thinks that he has been able to make a better appeal to both the intelligent and the ignorant against the several moral, social, economic, and political evils of our day by this method than by appealing to them in the name of God or a religion.

Therefore, the adoption of atheism is the safe and stable method for fighting inequality and abolishing downtroddenness. All people are, of course, invariably atheistic in practice. If they also start thinking atheistically, they not only grow honest but they also remove restrictions on their initiative, act freely, achieve more and earn comforts in life. Stable progress, according to Gora, is possible when atheism is adopted in totality. Atheism in thought, word and deed asserts man's mastery over his world without reservation and thereby establishes equality with honesty in social relations. Gora believed in economic equality and social change through introducing Positive Atheism as an instrument. He viewed life like Periyar as an integrated whole and worked incessantly to liberate human beings from the bondage of religion, caste and other barriers that stood in the way of human progress.

Theism built up on a God-centered society. God is a mere human imagination and not a fact. Gora reiterated that God is not only a human imagination but also a falsehood. Instead of the imaginary God, human beings should be the centre of social organization. Social, economic and political system exists for the sake of humans. Therefore human centered society is essential. Atheism turns the attention of the people from imaginary world to the reality.

Gora said that atheism means promotion of humanity in humans and inculcation of reality, social outlook and development of individual personality. That is “VASAVYA” stands as enunciated by Gora in Telegu language. The abbreviation “Vasavya” stands for ‘Vasthavikatha’ (Reality with scientific outlook), ‘Sangadrusti’ (Social outlook) and ‘Vyaktitvam’ (Personality of the individual). It is atheism. Thus atheism is an embodiment of freedom, belief in innate abilities of humans and self confidence. ‘Vasthavikatha’ or reality is the basis of social organization. Scientific outlook, pursuit of truth, is essential. Though ‘Atheism’ looks negative in form, it is positive in content. In positive terms ‘Atheism’ means man’s mastery over his world.

All his life he fought against slave mind, blind faith, God and superstitions which made people close their minds against new ideas. To expose superstitious practices he organised open demonstrations of fire walking and of witnessing eclipse by pregnant women which is prohibited by custom. From 1932 to till his death on July 26, 1975, while speaking at a public meeting in Vijay Wada at the age of 73, he propagated atheism in towns and villages.

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36 Ibid.
custom. From 1932 to till his death on July 26, 1975, while speaking at a public meeting in Vijay Wada at the age of 73, he propagated atheism in towns and villages. Met Mahatma Gandhi and became one of his close associates. He was with Vinoba Bhave in the Bhoodan movement. He started a movement for economic equality. He led an 1100 mile foot march from Sevagram Ashram to New Delhi in 1961 against pomp of the government ministers who, he said, should be the servants of people and not their masters. The long foot march culminated in meeting the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in New Delhi. Gora appealed to him to set an example to people by leading an austere life and to shift from the palatial building of Teen Murthi to a modest residence. He conducted a campaign for party less democracy.

Both upper castes and lower castes need liberation from the oppressive religious ideology which is at the heart of this terrible situation. A permanent solution to this deeply rooted problem will require a social, cultural and moral transformation of society. Atheist and humanist reformer Gora fought against the indignity of the caste system and promoted inter-dining and inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. He set an example by encouraging inter-caste marriages in his family. His daughter and son married the so-called "untouchables" with a view to break the traditional barriers of caste. Keeping Mudunur as his basis he visited villages started his preaching inter-dining and inter-caste marriages and explained the illiterate masses the need for giving up superstitions. During these occasions he stayed with the local untouchables and ate with them especially with Malas and Madigas, the two sections of untouchables. But he found that the members of the lower castes were ready to dine with the higher caste but not with caste lower to them or with the untouchables.

Food habits of caste and communities are also restricted in India that led to social isolation. In order to develop communal harmony between

Hindus and Muslims Gora arranged the Beef and pork programmes. He arranged cosmopolitan dinners in the villages to make different caste of people to mingle together. In 1972 itself, on 15 August, Gora organized Pork and Beef Party at the Atheist Center. This was the most revolutionary social Programme of Gora. The idea was to "clear the mind of religious bias" and "shed sectarian associations". This was followed by several similar parties including one at Coimbatore, which was attended by Periyar.

He strove all his life for the eradication of untouchability. He struggled to eradicate many evils of the society and he made a call to fight against injustices. He proposed a revolution against God and institutionalized religion. For Gora “the essence of religion was man’s surrender to God” and the attitude of surrender has come to be known as “theism”. This attitude freed man from the sense of responsibility and afforded him the security and tranquility of a caged bird. The social mingling through common teas and dinners, on the one hand, and the scientific explanation and exploding of superstitions through demonstrations, on the other, created a new awakening among the people of Mudunur and the surrounding villages. In 1941 census, 142 persons from a population of 3,000 in Mudunur classified themselves as "atheist", and Mudunur soon became known as the "godless village".

Gora encouraged registration of marriages under the Special Marriage Act. He conducted marriages as secular social functions with out any rituals. Gora shared the revolutionary efforts of E.V.R in the so called Self Respect Marriages. He actively worked for women liberation. He tried to solve the problem of un-wed mothers on the basis of his atheist ideas. The Atheist Centre under his leadership sincerely worked for the liberation of women. They stressed that women’s liberation was not only a liberation of

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women from slavery and bondage but also liberation of men and children. Gora carried out reform activities like anti-dowry, widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages; Gora does not want man to subordinate to the imaginary power of God. In the name of God and “revealed” scriptures, the religious fundamentalists opposed social reforms, including changes in the direction of social equality.

Gora believed that human beings are free. In fact there is no God at all. As god is a postulate supposed by man, its usefulness consists in serving human happiness. The slavish submissiveness of the many provides power for the active few to exploit fellowmen. Consequently, theistic order of life seethes with inequalities and injustices. Belief in God does not promote free growth of human personality. In order to save the mass from this degradation Gora preached bold action and propagated atheism.

Gora, with the co-operation of his family members and others, published several journals in Telugu, Hindi and English from the Atheist Center for spreading atheism. In 1949 he started editing Sangham (Society), a Telugu weekly. After five years, its name was changed into Arthik Samata (Economic Equality). A Hindi monthly Insaan (Human beings), too, was published from the Atheist Center from 1957 to 1961. In 1969, Gora started publishing an English monthly The Atheist from the Atheist Center. His books Positive Atheism, An Atheist with Gandhi, Why Gram Raj, Party less Democracy and We Become Atheists can be considered as classics in their respective fields. Whatever Gora wrote was the result of the practice of his principles, struggles, experiences and achievements in the field of social change during the last five decades. In this endeavor he enjoyed the full support and participation of his wife, Saraswati Gora, and his entire family.

Apart from his work for promoting atheism, Gora also practiced and preached party less democracy and politics. Incidentally, he shared this idea

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40 Ibid., p.118.
with M.N. Roy and Jayaprakash Narayan. Gora regarded party less democracy as "the political program of atheism".

All the thinkers- Phule, Periyar and Gora- focused in this chapter are, broadly speaking rationalists. All of them supported logical and scientific thinking as well as a rational morality. Phule, Periyar and Gora have specifically given themselves the label of "rationalist". Rationalism rejects faith, intuition, authority and revelation as sources of knowledge. A rationalist uses reason for testing all conclusions, and accepts only those which are sound and which correspond with the reality. In other words, a rationalist uses logic and scientific method for understanding this world. Similarly, a rationalist also rejects the rigid and disruptive morality based on blind faith in religious scriptures and on unreasonable and unscientific beliefs like God, heaven, hell, soul and rebirth. He / she uses reasoning in the sphere of ethics as well, and accepts a rational morality based on human desires and needs. In short, the rationalist philosophy of life is based on reason.

They considered the promotion of rationalism as a part of their humanist movement. Mahatma Phule, Periyar, and Gora firmly believed that to create a new social system based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, human dignity, economic justice and value devoid of all exploitation, it is necessary to overthrow the old, unequal and exploitative social system and the values on which it is based. Realising this well, they attacked blind faith and faith in religious books and the so-called god's words. They worked for a casteless society based on the value of equality. According to them, reason alone distinguishes human beings from other animals.

The religious discourse is thus a common feature of all the rationalist movements. They all signify an overriding hatred for the religious code of Hinduism and a proposition of an alternate faith for themselves. It essentially embodied dejection with the Brahmanism, which was perceived to be the root cause for the sufferings. The most articulate expression of this dejection is found in Phule and Periyar. They analysed that overthrow of 'Hindu'
religious ideological hegemony as the necessary condition for the liberation of the depressed- Shudratishudra or Dravidas. They were uncompromisingly opposed to Brahmanism. They worked for a casteless society based on the value of equality and believed that this could be achieved only by the abolition of Brahmanism. Though Gora vehemently believed in the destruction of caste and class, he did not believe in anti-brahmanism and class struggle. Gora believes that society is an association of individuals. Society has no separate independent existence. It is only a collective concept. The nature of the society depends upon the nature of the individuals. The nature of society changes when the character of individual changes. Hence social change is possible only with the basic mental change of the individual. Indian society continues to be hierarchical in nature since there have been no alteration in the social norms and the personality structure of the majority of population.⁴¹

Gora believed social revolution can be brought about only with the elimination of ignorance and fear. He did not share the idea that the change in the modes of production or economic relations or a caste struggle exclusively against the high class could change fundamentally the unequal desperate social structure based on caste system. He argued that social change is possible only with the change in the basic mentality of individuals.⁴²

All the rational humanists discussed here except Phule clearly rejected the belief in God. Therefore, they are described as atheists. However, on taking a closer look, we find a difference in approach and emphasis. Gora used the word “positive atheism” for describing his ideas and emphasized atheism much more than others. In fact, Gora actively worked for making it an acceptable and respectable term. However, apart from Gora, Periyar, too, was very explicit and emphatic about his atheism. In

his later life, he used to start his public meetings by categorically asserting the non-existence of God. According to them, the superstition of God will die out with the growth of scientific thinking. But Phule had the softest approach towards God, though he wanted to establish a rational and scientific religious system. He attacked idol worship and made the case for monotheism. He stood for the elimination of middle men (between God and man) – the priestly class, the Brahmin.43

All anti-caste movements from the beginning to the present invariably appear engaged in religious confrontation with Brahmanism, in terms of its denouncement. Brahmanism had been given shape as the ideology of the ruling class in the middle of the first millennium BC, with an exclusive intelligentsia claiming cultural purity and sacredness. This ideology and caste hierarchy gained hegemony and succeeded in maintaining its dominance under vastly changed material conditions even during the colonial period. Most important aspect of its success was the ability of the elite to define the “Indian” identity in its own terms, claiming that the core of Indian culture laid in the Vedic tradition and the philosophy of Vedanta. Since the nineteenth century this has been projected as “Hinduism”. This was the great national tradition.

The non-brahmin movements all sought, in their own way, to challenge the claim that Brahmanism provided a national culture. These movements broadly exposed the fraud perpetrated by Brahmins in the name of religion. They realized that an alternative culture had to be created as a mass culture. Their efforts included projecting an alternative universalistic religion. For example, ‘Satya Shodak Samaj’(Society of Seekers of Truth) of Phule ; the ‘Dravida Kazhagam’ movement of Periyar EV Ramaswami Naicker, and Gora’s ‘Nastika Kendra’(Atheist Centre) created a stir in the society, embodied dejection with the Brahmanism, which was perceived to

43 Phule, Gulamgiri, op.cit., p.92-94.
be the root cause for sufferings. They all signify an overriding hatred for the existing religious code and a proposition of an alternate faith for themselves.

All of them pointed out that it is untenable to say that religious texts were God-created. To believe so is only ignorance and prejudice. All religions and their religious texts are man-made and they represent the selfish interest of the classes, which are trying to pursue and protect their selfish ends by constructing such books. Phule, Periyar and Gora were the sociologists and humanists in their time and could put forth such bold ideas. In their view, these texts can never be free from the prejudices and the selfishness of the authors.

All of them like Brahmananda Sivayogi thought that it was difficult to create a sense of nationality so long as the caste rules and restrictions to be observed by people belonging to different castes. It is a common feature of anti-caste movements that they did not support the freedom movements and to some extent saw the colonial rule in affable terms concerning their objectives of eliminating caste disability and gaining a due share of power. It is a fact that they denounced their exploitation and praised British rule as an enemy of the enemy. They upheld education of the masses would promote the process of nation making.

Like Brahmananda Sivayogi these enlightenment thinkers attempted to attack the religion for promoting superstition and ignorance. They all look forward and stood firmly for views which sometimes were out of phase with the existing dogmas and times. With them a new era of rationalism flourished in South India. Rationalism is not to believe, but to question and enquire. The biological heritage of rationality enables man to penetrate deeper and deeper in to the secrets of nature and discover truth. The outlook of static traditionalism was replaced by a new dogmatism in thought and action. They taught men to use reason, with irresistible logic and denounced the irrational customs, worship, rites and ceremonies. Their

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belief in scientific rationality and the accompanying critique of the existing form of religion and its institutions were essential components of this bigger agenda of Social and Cultural Revolution. They cherished liberty and freedom.

These movements opened the doors of questioning and reasoning and enabled the people to use their rational faculty even for their religious fervors. Though the movements have not completely eliminated the religious faith from the people, it totally wiped off the fear associated with it. Religious institutions of any kind cannot exploit the people as easily as they did before the movements. This is knowledge revolution and the battle was fought in human minds with intellectual weapon.