



## A Book Review on: 'Periyar and the Self Respect Philosophy'

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### Abstract:

*I have been interested in periyar's self-respect movement for the subalterns especially his idea that self-respect precedes swaraj. Others of his day loved to chant of political freedom, spiritual upliftment and other 'bigger' things of life, Periyar was down to earth enough to see that his people needed first and foremost their dignity to be salvaged and their self respect to be restored. That was Periyar's diagnosis of the society. He saw before him a society - one of the most backward on earth - where inequality was the order of the day, and where the majority, groaning under ignorance, and poverty and illiteracy were exploitation in the most ruthless manner by a greedy minority - the Brahmins. Taking full advantage of the people's ignorance and their blind faith in god, the Brahmins were seen resorting to some of the most sinister designs ever committed by man. The society had been so structured, the code so cast and the gods themselves so shaped to perpetuate their domination over the whole society. As Dr. Ambedkar put it later, "the Hindu religion was to be found as one which is not intended to establish liberty, equality and fraternity. It is a gospel which proclaims the worship of the superman - the Brahmin - by rest of the society." (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in "Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah".)*

**Keywords:** Periyar, Philosophy, Self respect

### 1. Introduction

The society had been so structured, the code so cast and the gods themselves so shaped to perpetuate their domination over the whole society. As Dr. Ambedkar put it later, "the Hindu religion was to be found as one which is not intended to establish liberty, equality and fraternity. It is a gospel which proclaims the worship of the superman - the Brahmin - by rest of the society." (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in "Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah".)

In short he saw that in the grand scheme of exploitation, the privileged class (the Brahmins) has fully exploited god, religion and superstition, so that his programme, if it were to be effective, should seek to contain these - god, religion and superstition. His attitude of defiance also seemed appealing. To put it short, it meant nothing but a fight extraordinary - a five pronged fight against god, religion, Congress, Gandhi and the Brahminism.

In addition, there were things like the viakom satyagraha and benaras stay where he argued about religious issues rationally, an attitude absolutely important even for contemporary times.

Periyar also addressed the issues very prominent and relevant in our times too, i.e. the problem and difference between growth and development, with the issue of just distribution and in some cases of equity at the core of it.

Periyar even brought up a very philosophical issue that is of rationality vis-a-vis submission to authority to the fore, discussing why there is a great need to act according to own reason.

## 2. Structure of the book

Largely speaking the book is a biographical reading into the philosophy of self respect i.e. Prof. Subramanian provides us with an aspect of the self respect movement and philosophy looking through the lens of the life of its main proponent i.e. E.V.R. Periyar. So, being biographical in outline the text progresses with the major experiences of periyar or his defining statements. This kind of reading tends to be very insightful as the reader is able to make rational relationship between the leaders ideas and his experiences.

In the reading of periyar's self-respect philosophy this approach (biographical) was more helpful as it very neatly traced out the stages through which the philosophy has taken its shape as we know it.

However, at the same time this book being a collection of author's contribution to various magazines on periyar and his thought at many a times is so opinionated that it overshadows a genuine reading of the philosophy and its underpinnings.

## 3. Author's Standpoint

The author Prof. Subramanian is an admirer of periyar and a follower of his principles. This is well reflected in his writing. The author is awed of periyar's instinctive rationalism and the focal necessity of self-respect to the building of an egalitarian society. Quoting the author himself in his review of periyar's self-respect philosophy, "self-respect is self-recognition of one's personal honour and dignity. Respecting one's self is again, in abstraction, giving respect to one's own reason and knowledge. Self-respect is thus self recognition both of personal honour and dignity and one's own rationality." The author feels that with such a respect for oneself and all others only can a egalitarian society can be built, not some prejudiced set of principles and strictures (periyar's tenet too) .

## 4. Content of the Book

The book has been divided into small chapters. Some of them flow into each other in some continuation. While the starting six chapters provide a justification for periyar's theory, the later part elaborates on the essential features of the philosophy.

In the first part, the author attempts to show us that a social worker's personality and actions should be akin to men like periyar i.e. a philosophy of deviance when the system has rotten to levels from where it can't be retrieved.

The author to solidify what he feels about the role of social surroundings and life on the individual posits Gunnar Myrdal vies. Myrdal also feels attitudes, institutions, levels of living and culture are more important than the purely economic reasons. Thus, myrdal says in the Indian case the factors that had to be included are more social than economic. To quote myrdal, "the entire structure of inequality is bolstered by the caste system, the colour line, ethnic discrimination, nepotism and the general set of social and religious taboos."

In the second chapter of the book the author is vehemently critical of the egalitarian aims of the Indian state in a caste hierarchised society. He rightly points out that in such a case all attempts towards progress is prosperity to a very few. The point made by the author about the Indian type of altruism is very different from its western version. The Indian type is primarily based on our **primary group association**. This refers to our tenacious clinging to family and caste. Our loyalties have quelled in us any spirit of social or national consciousness, have obstructed social, labour mobility and have thus resisted change and progress. Thus, only by overcoming caste factionalism and religious taboos and superstitions can one come to a true model of development.

The third chapter titled 'in search of god' is a satirical/sardonic questioning of "god". The author feels our differing deities reflect nothing else than our split personality. So, gods have representations like being wealthy, beautiful or ugly etc. Depending on the social location of the worshipper. Thus, he

justifies periyar's scathing critique of puranas and its characters, questioning their sacred status. God cannot be verified with evidence thus it is incommensurate with a notion of science.

Next the author coming to more individualistic aspects of periyar mentions some of his very genuine and significant merits. First could be called is simplicity, austerity in public life which provided a basis of his incorruptibility. He had a burning contempt for those who amassed wealth in public life. The author places periyar in comparison with ancient rishis on account of which he says that, periyar isn't an escapist like them, as he is not detached from public life but his life mission was to liberate the people from the yoke of tradition and from authority of religion and scriptures.

In his chapter on the evolution of self-respect marriages the author tells us why periyar advocated for them so ardently and rightly the marriages had many merits. It led to an emancipation of women and shift in marriages being profit-based and ritualistic to being those based on shared living only.

Periyar's philosophy was basically this – as men are born free and equal, they should not to anyone else, no authority but themselves. The term Self Respect, to Periyar, was more than this. To him it was the magic word that would restore to man his lost dignity. Yes, his dignity was first and foremost to man, which when preserved, Periyar thundered, would bring in its wake all other virtues.

At a time when the fashion of the day was to talk of political independence, Periyar was alone to lay stress on Self-Respect, as against the Congress which placed stress on political freedom, for it believed that once dawned, the rest would follow automatically. We now know and the nation has fully now realised what is political freedom without human dignity and self-respect.

## 5. Critical Review of the Text

The author falls into the same trap that most biographical have a chance to get into i.e. of being slightly biased. In this case the tilt is in favour of periyar starkly evident at places like this:

1. In public life, no leader other than periyar could have left property worth a crore in trust to the self respect movement.
2. Periyar was easily the 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddha. To the compassion of Buddha there is a parallel in periyar's humanism. (pg 39).

However, the author must be appreciated for laying out the self respect philosophy so neatly with its intricacies explained. Especially the distinction that Prof. Subramanian makes between revolution and reformation is a well merited one. Periyar has so cast it, that it was shorn of metaphysical subtleties in order to make it look simple and function better. For he was determined to communicate with the man in the street, the commoner, the teeming millions, the over-whelming majority of the society - the non-Brahmins.

Periyar was not the one who was satisfied with mere slogans, sermons and rhetorics. On the other hand, even before he could completely recast the society of his dreams, he saw no reason why the non-Brahmins who were virtually shut out of official position and educational opportunities, should groan indefinitely in poverty, illiteracy and ignorance.

Especially in the early years of his launching his movement he was to face an avalanche of opposition - the kind that would have swept away anybody of a lesser calibre. He was continuously described as pro-British and condemned as a trouble shooter and an atheist. Only brickbats and chappals greeted him wherever he went.

No other problem agitated his mind more than that of the unfortunate section - the Scheduled Castes - which has been virtually condemned to the lowest rung in the society as 'Neechas', 'Panchamas' and 'Pariahs', untouchables and 'unseeables'.

## 6. Conclusion

The differentiation between revolution and reformation significant to periyar's approach has been well laid out by the author, as periyar seeing his societal context stood for nothing less than destruction and recreation. I think the idea of ethical rationalism central to periyar's philosophy has also been well highlighted by the author.

So, for a conclusionary remark it can be said that the author has done justice to throw light on most of the significant aspects of both periyar's life and his self-respect philosophy. So the title of the book remains aptly justified. On the hand, the book also makes the reader aware of some of the lesser known aspects related to the great leader E.V.R.