

Periyar in the Context of Socrates and Max Weber

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Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periyar_E._V._Ramasamy

Abstract

Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (1879-1973) is well known as *Periyar*, the great man. He is also referred to as *Thanthai* Periyar, the great fatherly man. He was an activist and politician who started the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. He is known as the 'Father of the Dravidian Movement'. He has spoken against caste prevalence and women oppression in Tamil Nadu. This paper aims at studying seminal concepts of Thanthai Periyar on caste system in India. It brings in the thought processes of Socrates and Plato linking them to the concept of justice for which Thanthai Periyar spoke across the State of Tamil Nadu. It also brings in the

argument of Max Weber's remarks on the caste system in India. Periyar's thoughts are analyzed in the context of the works of Socrates and Max Weber in this paper.

Keywords: Periyar, Plato, Socrates, Max Weber

The question of justice has been taken up by the Greeks millenniums ago and they asked questions like: What is justice? Why do men behave justly? In the ideal state, how should women, children, and property be treated in the ruling middle class? Plato's *Republic* has been acknowledged as his culminating achievement which analyses questions regarding justice and its political implications. Thinkers and philosophers have engaged themselves in political philosophy and have analysed how human societies have handled justice. Max Weber and Periyar have analysed human justice as it is practiced in India. Being an activist, Periyar suggests radical changes in society to bring in social and political justice.

Periyar demands egalitarianism and equal opportunities to everyone and says in his speech in Kanyakumari in 1958:

Today, we are citizens of one country. We are Tamilians of Tamilnadu. We are today brought together. Our unity is strengthened. We are today linked as one family because we are all now citizens of one country. We have to work together for achieving our ideals as we are all classified under one caste. So far as I am concerned, even before 35 years ago, I led the agitation in Tamilnadu to eradicate the social evils particularly the hateful 'untouchability.' For over thousand years we were not allowed to enter some of the public roads. Those who are now aged at least 50 years may recollect those days. Youngsters of this generation may not know these things of the past. If there had not been the agitation in those days, today many of us would not have the right to pass through many of the roads. In those days, conditions were very bad in this country. The Government was in the hands of the orthodox Brahmins. The Varnashrama Dharma was in its full sway. In our country, the advent of the Non-brahmin Movement redeemed a number of rights to the non-brahmins. The Non-Brahmin Movement successfully combatted the Brahmin domination. That Non-Brahmin Movement was popularly known as the Justice Party, named after its journal *Justice*.

The Justice Party enabled that all the people could make use of all the roads and even brought in a legislation for everyone to make use of the water from the wells. It helped all the people enter the Panchayats, Municipalities, Taluk Boards, District Boards, and Legislative bodies. Nominations for official posts were accepted from all people in an equal manner. These changes were brought in before the days of Gandhiji's radical reforms in the country. When Periyar was the Secretary of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, a sum of Rs.48,000 was sent to Tamilnadu as grant from the AICC to construct separate schools and temples for poor people.

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Dr. S. Sridevi

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But the state was very progressive and allowed *all* the students irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds, to study in the same school. Justice Party carried a propaganda in Tamil Nadu for the abolition of castes and untouchability and encouraged Inter-caste marriages. ‘Samabandi Bojanam’ (Inter-dining) became the order of the day. Leaders such as Dr. T.M. Nair and Sir P. Theagarayar educated the masses by their incessant and extensive propaganda.

Caste was the major obstacle in carrying out these social reforms in Tamilnadu, as the intelligentsia believed in racial superiority and hierarchy. Democratic ideals still had not made inroads into the minds of educated people who held on to social hierarchies as positions of political power. Periyar argues that it is caste that helped people to build a guilt-less attitude to suppress fellow human beings. Further, in India, caste is sensitively interwoven with legends, myths, epics and religious rituals and finally temples. The roots of caste are very deep and intertwined with various cultural and political reasons. He says in a speech in 1961:

It is not enough if you say that caste has to be removed in our society. We have to uproot the beginnings of caste – from which it is born. To do this, one needs boldness and courage. Thinking that caste will go away if we change our gods, is foolishness. The roots of caste are deeper. (*Periyar Inrum Enrum* 190)

In an essay in *Kudiarasu* in 1949, he says that the concept of religion has to be examined carefully. Mankind needed certain codes when they began living in huts after evolving from the world of animals. Men needed an association, a common front and got ready to live in society. These codes are now known as religion. Men created more codes to make sure people fall in line and live accordingly, and it is at this time the concept of god is born, to make sure that everyone abides by and agrees to respect the common code. People have to be told there will be punishment, if they do not abide by the general principles of society. These codes are created according to the geographical location of a people, the level of intelligence and the quality of mind and strategic thinking and so on. The intelligent man among these societies might change the codes to suit his convenience and it is highly possible the rest of the innocent people might have simply believed these codes without questioning and changing them (*Periyar Inrum Enrum* 210).

In his speeches and writings Periyar links this process of religion and code creation with the development of caste. He feels in this system of codes there has been no social justice practiced, and he wants it to be done as early as possible. Religion creates injustice, he says, and it does not encourage people to work hard. Instead it argues that a drop of ash on human body can clean all the sins of a man, and thereby it does not lead him into self-interrogation and self-knowledge. (*Periyar Inrum Enrum* 211)

In Book 1 of *Republic*, Socrates says that justice is conventionally established by the strong in order to ensure that the weak will serve the interests of strong. Some rich and powerful man or mighty man “who had a great opinion of his own power, was the first to say that justice is doing good to your friends and harm to your enemies” (37). Social justice cannot be segregated into two types: one for a set of people who are perceived to be good; and another for a set of people who are perceived to be bad. Justice has to go beyond the common perceptions of good and bad. The other person (Thrasymachus) to whom Socrates is speaking to says, “I proclaim that justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger” (40). Thrasymachus goes on to say:

And the different forms of government make laws democratical, aristocritical, tyrannical, with a view to their several interests; and these laws, which are made by them for their own interest, are the justice which they deliver to their subjects, and him who transgresses them they punish as a breaker of the law, and unjust. And that is what I mean when I say that in all states there is the same principle of justice, which is the interest of the government; and as the government must be supposed to have power, the only reasonable conclusion is, that everywhere there is one principle of justice, which is the interest of the stronger.” (41)

Traditionally, the concept of justice favours the ruler and aims at work efficiency and order and not social equality and impartiality. This is the ancient general establishment and it is this political philosophy that Socrates aims at breaking through projecting a new definition of justice for all.

Caste system must have been viewed as a just practice in a hierarchically ordered society and would have been considered as a system of social order. “These caste organizations, like quasi-trade unions, facilitate the legitimate defense of both internal and external interests of lower castes. To be sure, substitutes might well be found for these organizations (Weber 17).

Religion gave hopes to the under-privileged and the socially oppressed people did not resist the social order of the day, and it has to be analyzed and it is this angle Periyar takes up for enquiry. Instead of resisting the non-egalitarian social order, the suppressed people have accepted it meekly and this infuriates the reformer, Periyar.

Max Weber says that in India the “social order is expressed primarily in the interrelation of the doctrinal and ritualistic ethical aspects of religion” (Weber 21). Indian society was more ruled by a social code called *dharma* rather than by an institutionalized religion of the western world, and hence quite naturally social hierarchy was institutionalized and rigid where shifts were/are not possible. “The everyday dharma of the caste derives its content, in large measures, from the distant past with its taboos, magical norms, and witchcraft.” Moreover, this “dharma...

is more extensively, and in practice, more significantly an exclusive product of the priesthood and its literature than the present-day ritualistic commandments” of western religion (Weber 25). This fact has socially significant consequences.

In 1928, in essays in *Kudiarasu*, Periyar wrote that there was no such religion as Hinduism, and it was actually a ritualistic explanation given to a particular caste’s way of life. Hence, separate education was extended to separate groups to keep up this special learning. The system expanded even to general grammar later, and thus it kept this special education away from the general public (*Periyar Inrum Enrum* 76-77). It is actually the ritualistic commandments of a people which aimed at disciplining the body, mind and soul. The social order kept this discipline away from the normal man and excluded others so that the rigidity and the social power will be retained. Hence, Periyar argues, we can infer that Indian social order and organization aimed at empowering sections of society in different arena; and the systems of power devised rules to retain this social code. Social justice aimed at social organization was built in a hierarchical manner.

Rational thinking became very dominant in the West during the nineteenth century, and its impact was felt in India. Rationalism became a powerful and active social and political thought in India during the nineteenth and twentieth century (Quack 4). Indian social reformers began creating another social order of an egalitarian society, and wherever power structures were ruling high, these social activists cut them to normal size to bring about equality. Thanthai Periyar is one of these powerful reformers who brought equality among men and women and among various castes.

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