

# PROTESTS AGAINST CASTEISM IN THE SOCIAL REFORM DISCOURSE OF THANTHAI PERIYAR: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the anti-caste reformist interventions of Erode Venkata Ramasamy (*Thanthai Periyar*), focusing on his pivotal role in reshaping the socio-political landscape of early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. While critiques of caste hierarchy and untouchability had intermittently emerged within indigenous intellectual traditions, colonial transformations particularly the spread of modern education, liberal legal reforms, and print culture enabled such critiques to attain sustained public visibility. Through the Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925, Periyar advanced a systematic and uncompromising challenge to caste orthodoxy and religious conservatism. His rationalist, humanist, and egalitarian ideology sought the abolition of untouchability, the promotion of inter-caste marriage, the democratization of educational and occupational access, and temple entry for all communities. Despite resistance from dominant caste groups and religious institutions, Periyar's activism catalyzed enduring shifts in public consciousness. Though tangible structural changes during his lifetime were limited, his ideas profoundly influenced later struggles for social justice and equality in South India. This research adopts a historically grounded methodology, integrating primary sources including speeches, writings, and organizational documents with secondary academic scholarship. By situating Periyar's activism within broader anti-caste movements in colonial and postcolonial India, it underscores his enduring legacy in shaping contemporary debates on caste, identity, and structural reform.

**Keywords:** *E.V. Ramasamy, Self-Respect Movement, Social Reform, Caste Abolition, Rationalism, Untouchability, Tamil Nadu, Historical Sociology*

## Introduction

The caste system, one of the most enduring forms of social stratification in South Asia, has shaped the political, economic, and cultural fabric of Indian society for centuries. In Tamil Nadu, the early twentieth century witnessed a radical turn in the struggle against caste oppression, led by E.V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Thanthai Periyar. Through the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar launched a pioneering campaign against caste-based discrimination, Brahminical supremacy, and untouchability, positioning his activism within a broader framework of rationalism, humanism, and social equality. This research aims to offer a comprehensive historical analysis of Periyar's anti-caste ideology, its implementation, societal reception, and long-term impact on Tamil society.

## Research problem

Despite Periyar's seminal contributions to anti-caste discourse, scholarly engagement with his social reform strategies has often been limited to ideological interpretations rather than a critical historical analysis grounded in empirical and archival evidence. Furthermore, while his legacy is celebrated in Dravidian political traditions, the structural challenges he faced, the extent of his influence during his lifetime, and the transformations that emerged posthumously require deeper examination. This study seeks to fill these gaps through a historical review of Periyar's anti-caste interventions and their socio-political significance.

### Research questions

- What were the fundamental principles and strategies of E.V. Ramasamy's anti-caste and anti-untouchability reforms?
- How did Periyar's Self-Respect Movement challenge prevailing social, religious, and political structures?
- What forms of resistance did Periyar encounter from traditional institutions and dominant caste groups?
- How effective were his campaigns during his lifetime, and what was their immediate and long-term impact on Tamil Nadu society?
- In what ways has Periyar's legacy shaped contemporary anti-caste movements and social reform discourses?

### Objectives of the study

- To critically examine the historical development of Periyar's anti-caste ideology and activism.
- To analyze the methods and platforms used by Periyar to disseminate his reformist ideas.
- To investigate the sociopolitical responses to Periyar's anti-caste movements.
- To evaluate the long-term outcomes and limitations of Periyar's reforms in the context of caste eradication.
- To contribute to the broader historiography of anti-caste struggles in modern South India.

### Significance of the study

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the anti-caste movement in Tamil Nadu by situating Periyar's activism within the broader socio-historical context of colonial and post-colonial India. By engaging with both primary sources and critical historiography, the research challenges dominant narratives and brings attention to neglected aspects of Periyar's political praxis. It also aims to explore the intersection between caste, gender, and rationalism in Periyar's thought, thus offering a more nuanced appreciation of his contribution to social justice.

### Methodology

The research will employ a *historical-analytical methodology* combining qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources. Key methods include:

- **Archival Research:** Analysis of speeches, pamphlets, resolutions (e.g., Chengalpattu Conference, 1929), and official documents produced by the Self-Respect Movement.
- **Textual Analysis:** Critical reading of Periyar's publications, editorials in *Kudi Arasu*, and other contemporary journals.
- **Secondary Literature Review:** Engagement with existing scholarship on Periyar, caste politics, and Dravidian movements.
- **Oral Histories (if applicable):** Interviews with scholars, activists, or communities influenced by Periyar's legacy.

The study will be grounded in the theoretical approaches of:

- Anti-Caste Philosophy and Dalit Studies (e.g., Ambedkarite critique)
- Subaltern Studies, focusing on resistance from below and counter-hegemonic discourse.
- Social Movement Theory, to examine the dynamics of mass mobilization and ideological transmission.
- Feminist Historiography, given the intersection between Periyar's anti-caste and pro-women positions.



## Discussion

### Ideological and philosophical foundations of Periyar's anti-caste thought

E.V. Ramasamy's anti-caste ideology was fundamentally shaped by his rationalist worldview and his rejection of the Brahminical order. He consistently argued that caste was not a natural division of labor, but a carefully maintained system of exploitation embedded in Hindu religious texts such as the Manusmriti, the Ramayana, and the Puranas. Periyar viewed religion as the ideological apparatus that justified caste hierarchy, stating:

"If you want social reform, then religion must be destroyed" (Kudi Arasu, 1930).

His advocacy for atheism and rationalism aimed to dismantle the religious foundations of caste. He asserted that liberation from caste could only occur if people rejected the divinely sanctioned superiority of Brahmins. Influenced by Enlightenment principles and Western secular humanism, Periyar developed an indigenous framework of Self-Respect Rationalism, which he deployed to awaken the oppressed to their human dignity, independent of caste and religious identity (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998).

Periyar's philosophy was also deeply tied to gender equality, arguing that caste and patriarchy were mutually reinforcing. He believed that ending caste without addressing women's liberation was incomplete. His writings urged for inter-caste marriages, equal education for women, and property rights, thus drawing parallels between caste oppression and gender subjugation.

### The self-respect movement and strategic mobilization

The Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925, served as the practical vehicle for Periyar's anti-caste activism. It was characterized by a unique combination of mass agitation, public education, and cultural reprogramming. Through journals such as Kudi Arasu, Revolt, and Viduthalai, Periyar reached Tamil readers directly, challenging Brahminical dominance and advocating for egalitarianism. One of the pivotal moments of mobilization was the Chengalpattu Conference of 1929, where key resolutions were passed to:

- Remove caste identifiers in the population census.
- Ban religious institutions that promoted varna-based discrimination.
- Abolish untouchability in government offices.
- Promote inter-caste marriages without Brahmin priests.

This conference demonstrated a transition from ideological critique to policy-level proposals, offering practical steps toward dismantling caste. The resolutions also emphasized education reform, non-religious marriages, and temple entry rights, foreshadowing later legal reforms in independent India. Periyar's campaigns included street theatre, rationalist lectures, marriage reform festivals, and direct action at temples to allow Dalits access. His methods reflected both symbolic and confrontational tactics, marking a significant departure from reformists who focused solely on negotiation within religious orthodoxy.

### Challenges, resistance, and backlash

Periyar's anti-caste campaigns did not unfold without resistance. He was widely vilified by orthodox Hindus, upper-caste organizations, and even sections of the Congress party. Critics labeled his attacks on Hinduism as blasphemous and divisive. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25), which Periyar joined in solidarity, marked one of his earliest confrontations with Brahminical orthodoxy in Kerala. His insistence that temple entry and public road access were civil rights not gifts from caste Hindus was considered radical. He was imprisoned multiple times for inciting hatred against religion and caste elites. Furthermore, internal divisions emerged within the Justice Party and later in the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), as some supporters grew uncomfortable with his intense atheism and radicalism. Despite these

setbacks, Periyar's clarity of purpose and rhetorical skill enabled him to sustain a broad-based movement for over four decades.

### Societal impact and historical legacy

Though Periyar did not witness the complete dismantling of caste in his lifetime, his movement had far-reaching implications: Legal Impact: His advocacy prefigured several constitutional safeguards introduced post-1947, including Article 17 (abolition of untouchability), and influenced reservation policies in Tamil Nadu. Political Legacy: The Dravidar Kazhagam, and later the DMK and AIADMK, institutionalized many of Periyar's principles through political power. The rise of non-Brahmin and Dalit representation in the bureaucracy and legislature is partly attributed to Periyar's groundwork. Educational Reforms: The focus on universal education, especially for backward castes and women, transformed Tamil Nadu into a state with high literacy and progressive social indices. Cultural Secularization: Periyar's rejection of Sanskrit and Brahminical traditions led to a Tamil cultural renaissance, emphasizing Dravidian identity, language pride, and secular festivals. However, caste persists in new forms. While structural inequalities remain, the terms of discourse have shifted Periyar's radical vocabulary of social justice has become part of Tamil Nadu's political common sense.

### Contemporary relevance

In the current socio-political climate, Periyar's ideas are undergoing renewed relevance, especially amid:

- Hindutva resurgence, which seeks to restore upper-caste dominance.
  - Dalit assertion movements demanding political autonomy and cultural recognition.
  - Gender justice campaigns invoking Periyar's insistence on rational marriage, choice, and equality.
- New generations are revisiting Periyar not only as a social reformer but also as a public intellectual, feminist ally, and anti-fascist figure whose critique of caste has enduring relevance in debates on citizenship, secularism, and human rights.

### Conclusion

This analytical chapter has shown that Thanthai Periyar's struggle against casteism was not only a reaction to Brahminical dominance but a comprehensive social vision grounded in rationalism, equality, and human dignity. His strategies of mobilization, public education, and symbolic defiance contributed to lasting transformations in Tamil society. While the caste system remains an unresolved issue, Periyar's work has significantly altered the ideological and structural terrain upon which contemporary social justice struggles are fought.

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