

# Revealing the Complexities of Periyar

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It takes a certain courage to envision and compose a book on E V Ramasamy, or Periyar, as he is most commonly known. This is undoubtedly due to the reformer's courage, perhaps more accurately captured as a mix of iconoclasm and enigmatic assertiveness distributed unevenly through a myriad of printed and spoken texts, and over the course of so many years of life. Periyar (1879–1973) is one of the most well-known reformers to emerge from modern Tamil Nadu, and one of the most difficult to fully grasp. In *Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism*, Karthick Ram Manoharan engages this important but challenging project of giving a systematic account of a thinker who was often less-than-systematic about his causes, arguments, and positions. The resulting work is a concise but very usable investigation of a leading voice in the non-Brahmin movement in India. Periyar's ideas are often described in partial form for argumentative engagement by a critic, Manoharan does an admirable job presenting them here in a fairly unified fashion so readers can construct a picture, albeit imperfect, of this mercurial thinker. For its scope amid its brevity, this book serves as a rewarding read into what he calls Periyar's "political atheism."

## Contextualising Periyar

Manoharan's book begins by contextualising Periyar as an activist and a thinker. It does this by tracing what the author calls the "formation of a blasphemer," an apt characterisation of Periyar's rather atavistic rhetoric aimed at sacred religious ideals of Hinduism throughout his life. Manoharan starts with Periyar's early activism, especially the formative role he played in the Vaikom temple-entry struggle that aimed at ending caste

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism** by Karthick Ram Manoharan, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2022; pp xi + 133, ₹225.*

discrimination. While many note the tense relationship, soon to fray, between Periyar and Gandhi and the Congress, Manoharan's prescient account notes the accompanying development of Periyar as a compelling and powerful speaker during the 1920s. As he puts it, Periyar's "speeches were filled with optimism, pathos when required, and most importantly, humour" (p 7).

I will return to this aspect of Periyar as a persuasive speaker—as a rhetor, as those in my area of study call eloquent speakers—in a bit, but here it is enough to note that this book is unique insofar as it gives a significant amount of its focus to Periyar's ability to construct and deliver powerful statements of critique. In the 1920s, Periyar begins his habit of making pointed, and some might say inflammatory, comments about religious icons and deities; in the Vaikom struggle, it involved him turning against the worthiness of the god in the temple given the location's conditions of discrimination against would-be "untouchable" worshippers. Such trenchant religious critique put him at odds with other Congress leaders, thus starting the split with the party that would be largely finalised when he walked away from that organisation in 1925.

In surveying his newspaper and speaking activity, the first portion of this book begins to make its general point: Periyar is not simply a reformer from Tamil Nadu, but, instead, he is a figure with a larger, more universal message of equality and self-respect. Accordingly, Manoharan places Periyar amid other members of the

non-Brahmin movement to demonstrate his still-coalescing thoughts on self-respect and equality. Beyond this contextualisation, Periyar is compared to Socrates and Rousseau in an effort to engage him as more than a historical figure that no longer speaks to us, or that cannot transcend the regional politics he is enmeshed in. Reading these pages, we start to see the contours of the point of the book—as Manoharan puts it, Periyar is an "anti-philosopher who can be philosophically read, a non-theoretician from whose thoughts a theory can emerge" (p 31).

## Periyar as a Political Theorist

*Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism* is a brave book precisely because it announces that it will try to extract a philosophy and a theory out of a thinker who seemed to explicitly or implicitly resist producing such unified or hermetically sealed intellectual products. Over the course of the middle chapters of this work, Manoharan constructs a vision of Periyar's political theory: "Periyar's anti-Brahminism was a political atheism that sought to critique, demystify and dismantle the political theology of Brahminism" (p 32). For Periyar, Brahminism was the predominant interpretation of Hinduism that led to caste inequality and the oppression of so many categories of people around him and all over India. Social hierarchy was the root of the problem, and it only became more pernicious as it was internalised as a form of self-depreciation. Self-respect became the sustained bass note of his life, a value that became inflected in different ways as Periyar explored various courses of advocacy in his activism against Brahminism.

Manoharan brings out these tensions in his thought—different emphases or even directions, depending on what Periyar was engaging—by comparing Periyar's political atheism to that of the anarchist critic of religion, Mikhail Bakunin, in addition to comparing his thought to that of classical Marxist critiques of theology. While Manoharan points out the moments of interest in

Marxism evinced by Periyar, he describes the reformer as closer to Bakunin's anarchism insofar as both placed more faith in the erosion of religious oppression than its replacement by any quasi-state power like the dictatorship of the proletariat. The relationship of Periyar to Marxism will surely not be settled by this book, but that is part of the inheritance of a richly complex thinker like Periyar who eschewed mindless and doctrinal consistency in all utterances for more nuanced, even if bombastic, appeals to the needs of the situation.

Periyar, like Bakunin, emphasised the power to think and to rebel as the most valuable human traits. Periyar's rationalism becomes more than mere reaction, however, insofar as he constructively pairs it with projects such as women's liberation and social equality. For Periyar, "rationalism" was "intertwined with revolution" (p 55). This was a personified rationalism, though, as Periyar was addressing his readers and audience members as agents who could, like him, be part of this reformist blow against Brahminism. While Manoharan acknowledges that others will read Periyar's relationship to Marxism differently, he does an admirable job of providing a clear picture of what sense could be made of Periyar as a revolutionary figure outside of constraints and commitments to an overwrought allegiance to theory. Periyar was a man of this world, and this world held concrete problems which demanded different actions often in tension with the solutions to other situations.

### Periyar as Rhetor

Manoharan's book does an admirable job in providing a straightforward opening into the complex figure that Periyar represents. It does this while also acknowledging the existing interpretative disputes surrounding this important thinker, but without getting mired in the details of such debates. Its mission is to make a difficult-to-understand thinker accessible to us in a way that facilitates our own processes of sense-making. One of the important domains that Manoharan's concise work excels at doing all of this concerns Periyar's conflicting and often difficult-to-discern views on

religions he was inclined towards, namely Islam and Buddhism.

The book concludes by surveying Periyar's engagement with Islam, an engagement that seems motivated by its political usefulness for groups such as the Tamils primarily because of its forcefulness and equality. Periyar criticised the religion, according to Manoharan, on its prevailing treatment of women. Beyond the political efficacy of Islam for restoring self-respect and resisting caste hierarchies, rested Periyar's interest in Buddhism. As Manoharan's book discusses, Periyar and Bhimrao Ambedkar, both fellow travellers in the battle against caste and Brahminical orientations, met at the third conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, held in Burma in December 1954. Ambedkar was said to have tried to convince Periyar to convert to Buddhism, but Periyar indicated that it would blunt too much of his political force in his reform efforts. He did, however, fully support Buddhism insofar as it was a "religion" that resisted the harmful things associated with most religions—certainty in dogma, valuing of the divine over the human, and an inevitable tendency towards differential valuing of classes and groups. Manoharan places Buddhism closer to the heart of Periyar's "political atheism" than Islam, but reserves a role for the appeals to convert to Islam as an efficacious political manoeuvre itself. Periyar conceptualised, according to Manoharan, "the 'Muslim' identity primarily as a political identity that was casteless and different from, and opposed to, a 'Hindu' identity that valorised caste hierarchy" (p 108).

By the end of the book, we are still left with a tension—why did Periyar engage Islam if he was a political atheist as Manoharan maintains? Indeed, some might wonder about the problems of using any religion in Periyar's thought, given some of his virulent attacks on religion per se and Brahminical Hinduism in particular. Manoharan is not at fault for these remaining tensions, of course, since these contradictions and different directions seem built into the corpus of writings and speeches that we use now to gain access to Periyar the thinker. And this is one of the biggest lessons

that I have learned when dealing with anti-caste activists and intellectuals like Ambedkar and Periyar: they are highly rhetorical figures, and ignoring this fact renders their thought tougher to grasp than need be. What do I mean by rhetorical? With this term, I harken back to the sense bandied about in the Western rhetorical tradition, from the sophists through Cicero and Quintilian, of human political agents artfully adapting and contextualising their utterances to fit specific audiences and persuasive needs. This need not be a sense of "mere sophistry," as common (and unread) dismissals of the term "rhetoric" might lead us to believe.

Seeing Periyar as a rhetor, or an agent practising the art of rhetoric, would attune us to how certain arguments or styles of argument function in light of specific audiences. Manoharan's analysis, while not drawing on the concept or tradition of rhetoric, does get some mileage out of reflecting on how and why Periyar spoke in different ways to different audiences. Whether this makes his positive statements towards Islam and his negative critiques of religion coherent is a debate that will not be settled in this book. The point we must sense here is that taking Periyar as a rhetorical figure relieves us of the assumption that every utterance of a thinker must fit together into some contradiction-free mental tapestry resident in their head. Instead, we ought to engage him, and figures like Ambedkar, as thinkers with some sustained commitments threading throughout much of their advocacy, but as practical agents trying to get things done with words in often different situations.

Manoharan does a decent job pointing us to the power of communication and rhetoric in Periyar. For instance, he notes that "What made Periyar more popular was both the message and the medium. Periyar's deceptively simple anti-Brahminism ... appealed to diverse audiences in his time and retains relevance even today" (p 23). The book engages Periyar's harsh treatment of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, and frames it with this same evocative style that is shared by much of his rhetorical practice. Periyar, Manoharan explains, "conveyed his message

