

# Never mind the bollocks, here's Periyar!

The iconic punk band, the Sex Pistols, might be best known for their debut single, *Anarchy in the UK* (1976) — a song that the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame believes changed the future of rock music. This fiercely rebellious song, later released on the band's only studio album, *Never mind the bollocks, here's the Sex Pistols*, began with unforgettable lyrics:

*'I am an antichrist/And I am an anarchist.'*

The admixture of anti-religious and anti-State sentiments, although shockingly radical, has — surprisingly — not been altogether uncommon in modern Indian political thought and practice. This, despite the dominance of both nationalist ideology and vocal religious conservatism. There are elements of anarchism and/or atheism in Bhagat Singh, Har Dayal, and even Gandhi. But the apotheosis of anarchic-cum-atheistic thought was surely Tamil activist-intellectual Periyar (E V Ramasamy).

Periyar called himself a 'complete rationalist', and sought to cultivate complete rationalism in others. This entailed the constant and fearless use of human reason, a commitment to the empirical and provable over the ideological. The logical result of all this, Periyar argued, was atheism. But atheism as a rational estimation of the religious sphere was complemented by an analogous perspective on the political sphere. That is, Periyar was a 'political atheist'.

Political atheism entails not only skepticism about the dogmas of theology, but also about the dogmas of the State. Political atheism, then, is not only atheist in the religious sense, but naturally leads toward an anti-State, anarchist position. The atheism and anarchism unapologetically espoused by Periyar, complemented by his prodigious intellect, autodidactic learning, and tireless public speaking, always free of haughty language and targeted toward common peo-

ple, all combined to make Periyar a force to be reckoned with.

In a new book, *Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism*, the talented young Tamil — or rather, rooted cosmopolitan — author, Karthick Ram Manoharan, does such a reckoning. He eloquently presents the main thrusts of Periyar's life and work, and then seeks to bring Periyar into the kinds of conversations — on secularism, on the resurgence of religious orthodoxy, on authoritarianism, on identity in politics — that

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so many of us are having today. Manoharan's key take on Periyar is that his political atheism was emancipatory, critiquing, demystifying, and dismantling the political theology of brahminism.

This expression — 'the political theology of brahminism' — needs unpacking. It refers to the usurpation of sovereign power, both sacred power (like mandated rituals, religious and social customs that bind us), as well as political power by expansive brahminical ideology. The political theology of brahminism effectively inserts brahminical hierarchy (caste-inequality) into the very structure of the State and its institutions.

If the political theology of brahminism infuses India's political system with the same social hierarchies, inequalities and denials of personal liberty that characterise its *varna*-based, orthodox theology, then Periyar's

political atheism functions as a hammer to smash these idols and fetishes.

In short, as Manoharan puts it, "Periyar's political atheism was a critique of all forms of established power".

If this represents Periyar accurately, it would certainly help to explain the total inability of contemporary Indian right-wing political parties to assimilate Periyar into their political discourse. Although Ambedkar was organically radical, anti-brahminical and egalitarian, the right has nevertheless managed to appropriate a mock-up version of a Babasaheb amenable to their ideology. But with Periyar, no such advances even seem to have been attempted — he is treated only with irrepressible contempt.

But there's a constructive aspect of Periyar's anarchism that we should not miss. In the quest for liberty and dignity, in our efforts to achieve all that we can as individuals and as a society, what, really, is the role of the State? Philosophers have long queried this. The Greek philosopher Aristotle, the German philosopher Hegel, and our own Ambedkar seem to have believed that true human freedom and flourishing could only be achieved through and by means of a rational State. But many others, including Marx and Periyar, argued instead that achieving true human potential and flourishing would only be possible beyond and outside of the State. For political philosophers, this remains an open question.

If you don't mind the bollocks and think about Periyar reflectively, it is clear that his vision was one of a heroic social emancipator. It is fascinating that the right, however, is only able to view him as a threat. Like some dangerous, destructive punk rebellion:

*'And I wanna be anarchy/  
And I wanna be anarchy/  
And I wanna be anarchy/*