
REVOLT AGAINST HIERARCHY: THANTHAI PERIYAR AND THE IDEOLOGICAL CORE OF THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT – A CENTENARY CELEBRATION OF RATIONALISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Article Received: 06 November 2025

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Article Revised: 26 November 2025

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Published on: 16 December 2025

DOI: <https://doi-org/101555/ijrpa.4609>

ABSTRACT:

The paper aims to explore the ideological foundation and enduring relevance of Thanthai Periyar's Self-Respect Movement as it marks its centenary (1925–2025). It examines how the movement emerged as a powerful revolt against caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy, redefining the principles of rationalism, social justice, and equality in Tamil society. Periyar's radical thought challenged the dominance of Brahminism, questioned authority, and emphasised the liberation of individuals, especially women and the marginalised, from oppressive traditions. Through a critical analysis of Periyar's writings, speeches, and reformist activities, the study highlights how his advocacy for self-respect, women's education, and Tamil linguistic identity became instruments of social transformation. The paper also investigates how the core ideals of the movement, rational inquiry, human dignity, and equality, continue to influence contemporary debates on caste and social reform. By situating Periyar's ideology within the broader framework of the Dravidian movement and modern Indian thought, the paper underscores his contribution to constructing a secular, democratic, and egalitarian social order. Eventually, this centenary reflection

reaffirms that Periyar's message of self-respect and rationalism remains not only a historical legacy but also a living force guiding present struggles for social and cultural emancipation.

KEYWORDS: Thanthai Periyar, Self-Respect Movement, Rationalism, Social Justice, Equality, Dravidian Movement, Anti-Caste Reform, Women's Education, Tamil Identity, Humanism, Social Transformation, Centenary Reflection.

INTRODUCTION:

As Bharathidasan praises, "The ripe fruit born of service falls upon the pure-bearded chest; the world bows to the noble head; and in the cave of the mind, a leopard awakens — He is Periyar" (translated by B. Vivilia Arivu Mani). The year 2025 marks the centenary of the Self-Respect Movement (1925–2025), a historic milestone in Tamil Nadu's social and political history led by Thanthai Periyar, one of India's most radical and visionary reformers. Born in 1879 in Erode, Periyar dedicated his life to dismantling hierarchical structures rooted in caste, religion, and patriarchy, laying the foundation for a new social order based on rationalism, equality, and self-respect. His ideological framework anchored in humanism and social justice challenged Brahminical dominance, advocated women's emancipation, and emphasised the dignity of labour and Tamil linguistic pride. A century later, reflecting on Periyar's legacy is crucial, as contemporary India continues to grapple with caste discrimination, gender inequality, and communal polarisation that contradict his rationalist ideals. The paper aims to examine how Periyar's reforms revolutionised Tamil society by reimagining social relations, education, and identity through the lens of self-respect and reason. It also seeks to understand how his philosophy transcends regional boundaries, influencing global discourses on equality, secularism, and human rights. This centenary reflection, therefore, reasserts the relevance of Periyar's ideology as a timeless blueprint for resistance against oppression and for the realisation of an inclusive, egalitarian society.

Historical Context and Ideological Foundation:

The Self-Respect Movement, founded by Thanthai Periyar in 1925, emerged as a radical response to the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy and religious orthodoxy of early twentieth-century South India. Rooted in the broader Dravidian renaissance, the movement sought to reconstruct society on the principles of equality, rationalism, and human dignity. Philosophical Roots: Drawing inspiration from Enlightenment thought and global humanist traditions, Periyar emphasised reason over faith, self-respect over servitude, and individual liberty over inherited privilege. His philosophy was grounded in rationalism and atheism,

challenging the authority of religion and the divine sanctioning of social inequality. Critique of Hierarchy: Periyar's intellectual rebellion targeted Brahminical dominance and the perpetuation of social stratification through myths, rituals, and scriptural authority. He exposed how patriarchy and caste mutually reinforced each other, subjugating both women and lower castes under a rigid social order. Global Resonance: The Self-Respect Movement paralleled global struggles for emancipation, echoing the secular humanism of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau while adapting their ideals to the Tamil sociocultural context. Thus, the movement not only redefined the contours of social justice in colonial India but also situated Tamil reform within a universal discourse of equality, rational inquiry, and human liberation. As N. Ram observes, "Periyar was the prophet of a new social order who tore through the veils of superstition and hierarchy, proclaiming the rights of reason and equality" (Ram 5).

Eradication of Oppression and Abolition of Caste:

In India, caste operated as a deeply entrenched system of hierarchy sustained by Brahminical authority. This dominance, legitimised by religion and sacred texts, created a rigid order in which purity and pollution dictated every aspect of human interaction from education and temple entry to social mobility and occupation. Periyar identified this system as the foundation of oppression and declared it incompatible with human dignity and rational thought. His uncompromising slogan, "No God, No Religion, No Caste," became the rallying cry of a movement that rejected divine sanction as a justification for inequality. Through the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar implemented radical measures such as promoting inter-caste marriages, discarding caste titles, and advocating temple entry for all, thereby attacking the symbolic roots of Brahminical supremacy. His reformist agenda sought to liberate individuals from inherited bondage and awaken a collective consciousness grounded in equality and self-respect. The Tamil struggle for equality under Periyar's leadership thus emerged as a powerful social and moral revolution challenging centuries of spiritual domination and redefining Tamil identity through the ideals of reason, justice, and human solidarity. A.R. Venkatachalapathy notes that "Periyar was a fearless reformer whose Self-Respect Movement reshaped Tamil consciousness by demanding dignity for the oppressed and self-determination for all" (Venkatachalapathy 42).

Temple Entry Movements and the Reclamation of Social Space:

Periyar viewed untouchability as the most visible expression of Brahminical oppression and social segregation. Denying entry to temples and public streets symbolised the systematic exclusion of the so-called lower castes from spiritual and civic life. His participation in the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) marked a defining moment in the struggle for equality, as he championed the right of all individuals to access roads surrounding temple spaces that had long been monopolised by caste privilege. For Periyar, temple entry and street entry were not merely physical acts but moral assertions of human dignity. He emphasised that reclaiming these public spaces was essential to restoring self-respect and social equality. Through protests, speeches, and the Self-Respect Movement's continuous efforts, Periyar transformed acts of defiance into a larger campaign for justice. These movements became powerful symbols of resistance, redefining equality not as charity granted by the upper castes but as an inherent human right

Family Occupation and Education

Periyar recognised that the perpetuation of caste hierarchy was closely tied to hereditary occupations, which confined individuals to the professions of their ancestors and denied them social mobility. This linkage between birth and labour served as a mechanism to sustain Brahminical dominance and economic dependence. Through the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar called for the dismantling of occupational heredity and asserted that every individual should have the freedom to choose their vocation based on ability, not caste identity. Education, for him, was the key to liberation. He championed universal education, especially for women and marginalised communities, as the foundation of a just and rational society. Rejecting religious instruction and superstition, he insisted on a scientific and rational curriculum that nurtured critical thinking and self-confidence. By linking education with social reform, Periyar transformed learning into a tool of emancipation, empowering individuals to question authority, transcend caste barriers, and reclaim human dignity.

Self-Respect Marriage, Women's Education, and Gender Equality

Periyar regarded the institution of marriage as one of the primary instruments through which Brahminical patriarchy sustained women's subordination. V. Geetha asserts, "Long before feminism became an academic discourse, Periyar articulated the necessity of women's liberation as the foundation of a just society" (Geetha 15). To challenge this, he introduced the concept of the Self-Respect Marriage, a union solemnised without priests, rituals, or

religious sanction, based solely on mutual consent and equality. This reform dismantled the monopoly of Brahmin priests and redefined marriage as a social contract between equals rather than a sacred bondage. Periyar's advocacy extended beyond marriage to the promotion of women's education, which he viewed as essential for intellectual and social emancipation. He vehemently opposed oppressive practices such as the Devadasi system and campaigned for widow remarriage, asserting women's right to dignity and self-determination. His powerful declaration, "A woman's womb is not her destiny," encapsulated his challenge to patriarchal norms. Through these reforms, Periyar envisioned a society where gender equality and rational freedom formed the basis of true self-respect.

Tamil Language and Cultural Reformation

Periyar regarded language as a vital instrument of self-respect and cultural liberation. His resistance to the imposition of Hindi arose from his conviction that linguistic domination was a continuation of social and cultural subjugation. Upholding the Tamil language as the voice of Dravidian identity, he emphasised its role in fostering rational thought and social equality. Periyar also identified oppressive attitudes embedded in Tamil naming traditions. In several Tamil households, girl children were given names such as *Vendam Ponnu* ("Don't want a girl") or *Podhum Ponnu* ("Enough girl"), expressing the family's desire for a male child next. Condemning this mindset as inhuman and degrading, Periyar urged parents to give positive, dignified names that celebrated intelligence and individuality, like *Arivumani*, *Gananaselvi*, etc. He also advocated discarding caste-based surnames and reinterpreted festivals such as Pongal as affirmations of labour and equality rather than religious observance. Through these cultural reforms, Periyar sought to purify the Tamil identity of patriarchal and Brahminical residues, redefining culture itself as a realm of reason, equality, and self-respect.

Social Policies, Reservation, and the Naming of Tamil Nadu

Periyar's social philosophy laid the groundwork for the Dravidian model of reservation, envisioning equality not as charity but as a rightful redistribution of opportunity. He argued that centuries of Brahminical privilege in government, education, and employment could only be corrected through systematic social justice policies ensuring representation for the marginalised. His ideas profoundly influenced later Dravidian leaders, who institutionalised reservation as a mechanism of empowerment and inclusivity. Periyar's advocacy extended beyond policy to symbolic politics, culminating in the renaming of Madras State as Tamil Nadu a historic assertion of linguistic pride and regional identity. This renaming reflected his

lifelong resistance to northern domination and cultural homogenization. Through these intertwined movements for social equity and linguistic recognition, Periyar not only redefined governance in Tamil society but also established a model where justice, representation, and self-respect became inseparable principles of a truly democratic polity.

Globalisation of Periyar:

Periyar's philosophy of rationalism, self-respect, and social justice has transcended the borders of Tamil Nadu to gain international recognition as part of a global discourse on human liberation. His ideas resonate deeply with anti-caste, feminist, and rationalist movements worldwide, aligning with the egalitarian visions of thinkers such as B.R. Ambedkar, Karl Marx, and Enlightenment humanists. While Ambedkar approached caste through constitutional reform and Marx through class analysis, Periyar fused both approaches, interpreting caste as a form of ideological slavery that could only be destroyed through rational awakening. His influence has reached the Tamil diaspora across Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America, where organisations such as Periyar International continue to promote his ideals of equality and secular humanism. In a landmark recognition of his global significance, Oxford University recently unveiled a portrait of Periyar along with one of his iconic quotations, symbolising his entry into the pantheon of world thinkers who championed social emancipation. This gesture marks not only an acknowledgement of Periyar's intellectual depth but also the enduring universality of his message, a call for humanity to reject all hierarchies and embrace the principles of reason, dignity, and justice beyond cultural and national boundaries.

Contemporary Relevance:

Periyar's rationalist philosophy holds profound relevance in today's world, marked by rising misinformation, religious intolerance, and the resurgence of caste and gender hierarchies. "Periyar's vision transformed Tamil identity into an assertion of self-respect, linguistic pride, and rational humanism" (Pandian 101). His insistence on critical inquiry over blind faith offers an intellectual antidote to the manipulation of belief systems in contemporary politics. The persistence of caste-based discrimination, gender violence, and linguistic domination across India underscores the unfinished nature of the social revolution he envisioned. In an era where identity politics often overshadows ethical governance, Periyar's emphasis on reason, equality, and self-respect provides a timeless framework for evaluating justice and human rights. Beyond Tamil Nadu, his principles have entered global discussions on social

equity and secularism, positioning him alongside major reformers and humanist thinkers. Thus, Periyar's ideology endures not as a relic of the past but as a living philosophy guiding movements worldwide toward a more rational, inclusive, and emancipated society.

CONCLUSION:

Veeramani summarises his enduring influence: "E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, known as Periyar, stands as one of the greatest rationalist thinkers of modern India, his thoughts rooted in humanism and social justice" (Veeramani 3). A century after the founding of the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar's vision continues to illuminate the path toward social equality and rational humanism. His tireless struggle against caste, patriarchy, and superstition transformed Tamil society and inspired generations to question inherited hierarchies. As the world confronts new forms of inequality and intolerance, the spirit of Periyar's rationalism remains indispensable. His philosophy urges humanity to uphold truth over tradition, equality over privilege, and justice over power. Sustaining his legacy in a globalised world means reaffirming the universal call for dignity, reason, and liberation that defined Periyar's life and movement.

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