

Periyar's Spatial Thought: Region as Non-Brahmin Discursive Space

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'To change life,' 'to change society,' these phrases mean nothing if there is no production of an appropriated space.

— Henri Lefebvre¹

Abstract

Even as historical studies of the conceptualisation of the region in Tamil Nadu invariably trace it back to the early Dravidian movement, 'region' is seen as peripheral to Periyar's radical anti-caste thought in existing scholarship. This flows from both a limited focus on the spatial aspects of Periyar's thought and a narrow conceptualisation of space itself. Diverging from the dominant physicalist view of space, this article views Periyar's politics of space as a radical attempt to subvert the cultural logic of hegemonic nationalism that sustained caste and its privileges through modernity. Outlining Periyar's criticism of the nation as a 'dominated space', it explores Periyar's conception of Dravida Nadu as an 'appropriated space' that attempted to further the pursuit of self-respect as a rationally conceived regional utopia. By doing so, the article tries to contextualise Periyar's spatial thought not as secondary to his anti-caste politics but as its fullest expression.

Keywords

Periyar, Space, Region, Caste, Indian Nationalism, Tamil Nationalism, Dravida Nadu

Introduction

Much of the existing scholarship on the Dravidian Movement traditionally theorises the self-respect years of the Dravidian movement, led by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar,

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¹(Lefebvre, 2009, p. 186).

as a primarily anti-caste movement and the latter part of the Dravidian movement led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D.M.K.) as more spatially oriented and regionalist. It is argued that Periyar's anti-caste thought is deterritorial, concerned with universal themes of equality and justice and by spatialising the early Dravidian thought, D.M.K deradicalises the anti-caste zeal of the self-respect movement.² Even as historical studies of the conceptualisation of the region in Tamil Nadu invariably trace it back to the early Dravidian movement,³ region is seen as peripheral to Periyar's radical anti-caste thought. This flows from both a limited focus on the spatial aspects of Periyar's thought as well as a limited conceptualisation of space itself. As political geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja explains, the 'physicalist view of space has deeply influenced all forms of spatial analysis, whether philosophical and theoretical or practical and empirical', imbuing all things spatial with a 'lingering sense of primordality and physical composition, objectivity, and inevitability' (Soja, 1980, p. 209). If there is anything we have learnt from the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre, it is that space is inherently political and that organised social space, as opposed to contextual space, is never explained solely by nature, history or culture. Lefebvre argued that, in modernity, there is a passage from production in space to production of space where it is interposed by mediations and mediators with reasons derived from knowledge, ideology and meaning systems.⁴ Lefebvre argued that all social systems produce space within the framework of the society they exist in and they enact a logic of homogeneity and repetition making the social relations reproducible. This makes the spaces we inherit 'dominated spaces'. A society transforming itself cannot accept space as produced by the existing system because while doing so it inherits the mechanisms of reproduction of existing structures (Lefebvre, 2009, pp. 186–194). A transformational politics of space becomes crucial for Lefebvre not because it is autonomous from or superior to politics of social relations but precisely because it is intertwined with it. Lefebvre argues that while dominated space is oriented towards the reproducible, it is inevitably surrounded by the non-reproducible elements, sometimes proposing a 'counter-space'. Transformational politics has to mobilise the contradictions of space to threaten its reproducibility and thereby, 'appropriate' the space. This article argues that Periyar's spatial politics was motivated by such a critical understanding of space—that spatial relations were inseparable from social relations. This article argues that it was only because Periyar was convinced that the annihilation of caste was non-negotiable for the pursuit of self-respect, that the articulation of an alternative spatial politics became critical for him. Periyar was convinced that Indian nationalism as the 'purest manifestation of political brahmanism' conceived the nation as a dominated space that would ensure the reproduction of caste and, therefore, to subvert the cultural logic of Indian nationalism became inevitable for the pursuit of self-respect. This article puts forward that it was towards this end that he mobilised his vision of rationally conceived regional utopia, as an appropriated space, as Lefebvre

²For a clear exposition of this position: Pandian (1993).

³Such a genealogy is traced in: Barnett (2015) and Geetha & Rajadurai (1998).

⁴Contextual space corresponds to the passive space where production takes place while social space is the space that is produced by and produces social relations. Production in space does not disappear in social space but is oriented differently.

would call it. In this article, through a close reading of Periyar's critique of Indian nationalism and careful construction of his regional utopia, I intend to contextualise Periyar's spatial thought not as secondary to his anti-caste politics but as the fullest expression of it.⁵

A Structural Turn in Periyar's Anti-Caste Thought

Early in his political life, Periyar prioritised the politics of social change above the pursuit of power. This was how Periyar reasoned his joining the Madras Presidency Association, the non-brahmin branch of the Indian National Congress, over the Justice Party. Periyar's discomfort with the Justice Party brand of politics was that it prioritised the pursuit of power by non-brahmins to the harder work of reform of society, and by doing so, it reduced the issue of caste to that of Brahmin domination. This deep suspicion of power politics made the Gandhian constructive programme attractive to Periyar in the early days of his political life. He championed Gandhian constructive work and the Non-Cooperation movement in Tamil Nadu. He remarked that as Gandhi had already been appropriated by the Congress Brahmins, the non-brahmins should, at least, try and appropriate Gandhian Constructive work. He considered that the Justice Party pursuing the 'politics of vote and council' did not seem disturbed by the practice of untouchability or the broader Adi Dravida cause (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 212–213). For these reasons, he still considered the Gandhian Social programme to be valuable because he believed it could address the issue of untouchability, build a popular base and ideological credibility for the non-brahmin movement.

Even after exiting the Congress, V. Geetha and Rajadurai write, he continued to find Gandhi's insistence on spinning, abolition of Untouchability and Prohibition 'worthwhile and useful principles of action and conduct' (Ibid). While he repeatedly condemned the Congress Brahmins for working against wider Tamil interests and wondered why Gandhi remained silent in the face of it, he remained convinced that khadi, non-cooperation and national unity were imperative in the fight for human dignity. This changed gradually with the indifference and unyieldingness of Congress leaders in their refusal to address the issue of social inequality, and was accelerated by a series of declarations made by Gandhi defending Varnashrama Dharma himself during his successive visits to Tamil Nadu. Despite efforts to persuade Gandhi to modify this position, Gandhi remained adamant in his public support for Varnashrama dharma. During his visit to Madras in 1927, he applauded the Brahmins as 'finest flowers of the country' for preserving Varnashrama Dharma and warned the non-brahmins for trying to rob it of its fragrance (Pandian, 2007, p. 191). These continued statements angered the non-brahmin leaders of the Tamil country who felt that whatever Gandhi's intentions were, he was adding strength to the brahmin conservatives of the Madras

⁵The difficulty in theorising Periyar comes from the fact that Periyar did not write in an academic fashion. The major sources of his thought are his speeches and writings, where he wrote as he spoke. Here even though Periyar does not resort to an alliterative or poetic language, he employs a great deal of rhetoric and appealing argumentative devices which sometimes lend themselves to crude oversimplified analysis. But when one avoids such a literal interpretation, we find in Periyar a powerful critique of dominant ideologies and discursive practices which is what the article aims to lay out.

presidency who were strongly against any measure for reform or representation. Even for Periyar, who continued to support Gandhi despite his complete fallout with Congress, these statements proved to be the final straw. He declared,

“If we are to follow the Mahatma’s creed, we will slip into the very abyss of that untouchability we are attempting to abolish. We have been patient, very patient and tight-lipped but today in the interests of abolition and self-respect we are, sadly enough, forced to confront and oppose the Mahatma.” (as cited in Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, p. 287)

Periyar later revealed that he met Gandhi in Mysore to discuss his ideas regarding the necessity to abolish Brahmin hegemony and that Gandhi not only refused to consider the arguments valid, but also made it clear that he indeed believed in varnadharma, in principle and form (Ibid). This led to a complete fallout, and Periyar decided not to meet Gandhi again. Periyar became convinced that Gandhi wasn’t an exception in the Congress but a crucial player in the construction and deployment of Congress-brahmin hegemony. Within a few years, he would become severely critical not only of Gandhi but of khadi, Gandhian constructive programme and the nationalist movement itself. These disagreements represented not personal resentment, but a structural turn in Periyar’s thought concerning caste and brahmanical ideology. Periyar became convinced that the nationalist movement not only lacked commitment towards the annihilation of caste but considered such a project detrimental to their cause. The question that began to pre-occupy Periyar was this: why was it that the anti-colonial nationalist movement that polemised extensively about poverty and degradation of masses was unable to address social inequality as manifested in caste, which for Periyar was the single greatest threat to national unity. The answer for Periyar could only be that the national movement simply did not see caste as a *threat* to Indian unity but as its very *basis*.

Unity without Fraternity: Interrogating Indian Unity

As Periyar became disillusioned with the political practice of Gandhian nationalism, he subjected its philosophy, discourse and practice to serious ideological interrogation. Periyar criticised the Indian national movement for seeking to create a unity that wasn’t based on egalitarianism and therefore was bereft of any real sense of fraternity. The sole purpose of this unity was to enable action against colonialism to further the nationalist cause of Swaraj. For Periyar, achieving swaraj always remained secondary to achieving social equality. Periyar had embraced Gandhi’s vision of Swaraj because he thought it held a promise for egalitarianism and was amply clear that without this promise, Swaraj meant nothing to the vast majority of the poor and oppressed. For him, the sidestepping of this question of egalitarianism was the biggest betrayal of the Nationalist movement for Swarajya. Even as Gandhi largely widened the support for the national movement by recasting Indian nationalism in ethical and moral terms, he retained an inegalitarian and explicitly hierarchical view of society that is varna dharma in his vision of the Indian nation. Benedict Anderson famously wrote, “The nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”. “Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of

people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings”, he added (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). But how did a profoundly inegalitarian Indian nationalism under Gandhi popularise itself? What does it reveal about the space that it envisioned? Gandhi’s nationalism might not have sustained itself simply through communal passions. But Periyar argued that Indian nationalism was unable to embrace fraternity, which was inconsistent with brahmanism and therefore embraced an egoistic passion consistent with it. While Gandhi elevated himself as a Mahatma through the practice of his philosophy, he also elevated swaraj from a mere political ideal to a moral ideal. The emerging nation was now a moral imperative. The urgency of a united national consciousness given that the morality of the cause of swarajya thrust the cause of unity and self-rule into the status of the ‘political’ and confined the cause of human dignity and self-respect to merely the ‘social’. Periyar challenged this through the self-respect movement. Bringing to the forefront of politics the idea of self-respect, he pitted self-respect against self-rule and questioned the morality of the latter without the former (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 284–285).

Periyar consistently refuted moralising the political end of the nation because he considered that it made the nationalists oblivious to the barbarity and dehumanisation that was ingrained in the national self. He insisted that anyone who pretended that a nation free from British rule but still plagued by the dehumanisation called caste was somehow a moral ideal was being deeply immoral. Contrary to the nationalistic attribution of purity and divinity to the motherland, Periyar labelled the country that sheltered the barbarity of untouchability and discrimination as ‘wretched’.

“Men should not touch each other, see each other; men cannot enter temples, fetch water from the village pond: in a land where such inhuman practices are rife, it is a wonder that earthquakes have not destroyed us, volcanoes not burnt us; it is a wonder that the earth has not split at its heart and plunged this land into an abyss, that a typhoon has not shattered us.” (Ibid., pp. 272–273)

Periyar argued that the nationalists who were convinced of the urgency of the moral project of national self-rule were bound to be incapable of recognising the horrors that plagued this country that were indigenous to this land. Not only were they indifferent to the horrors, more often than not, they also ventured to defend it. In an article titled “The madness of nationalism”, Periyar wrote that one can remain a nationalist in India only when he agrees with the most regressive ideas and practises of its most reactionary masses. He held that the word nationalism had become a tool through which leaders can ignore the cause of upliftment of their people and keep them forever as backward classes and asked those who believe in an egalitarian project to stay away from it (Periyar, 2008, pp. 111–117). As early as 1927, Periyar declared that his position is that the concepts of ‘Nation’ and ‘nationalism’ are fraudulent from their very foundation as they are constructed to obscure our reality. He considered that the national movement fundamentally set up the social space of the nation in a way that ensured the social reproduction of caste relations for perpetuity in the emerging nation. I identify three important ways in which Periyar argued Indian nationalism ensured the reproducibility of caste: (i) Universalisation of the sectarian-communal (ii) Nationalisation of Brahmanism (iii) Conversion of Caste relations into Capital relations.

Universalisation of the Sectarian-Communal

Periyar believed that the facade of nationalist unity was but a cloak for its partisan interests. In his words, “Nationalism is communalism that doesn’t announce itself gleefully” (Periyar, 2008b, p. 84). He added that he was ready to bear the label of a communalist for advancing the politics of oppressed classes but insisted that nationalists do not become non-communal because of their universalist rhetoric. The universal rhetoric of Congress leaders, he argued, preserved the collective interests of those benefiting from the traditional social order by precluding any critique of it. The Karachi resolution of 1931, which vowed to protect the beliefs and practices of people of faith from regulation, was clearly communal and sectarian because while it argued for drastic changes in the formal domain of politics, it only prescribed status quo in the social domain, thus preserving narrow sectarian interest.⁶

“When he argues that every Varna has a right to profess their beliefs, Gandhi is being communal. When it is arguing that all religious beliefs have to be safeguarded from government interference, the Congress is being communal. When he asks us to act in a way that no beliefs of individuals from any caste or class are hurt, the ‘bolshevik hero’ Nehru is being communal. When it doesn’t allow those without the knowledge of Hindi to its working committee, the Congress election committee is communal. When he asks for separate schools, temples, and ponds to be constructed for the use of untouchables, Mr Malviya is being communal”. (Ibid., p. 164)

And this sectarian-communalism, for Periyar, was not nationalism corrupted, but its very core. He elaborated that as the Western world is organised as classes, in Western countries, nationalism represents bourgeois class interest, and as Indian society is organised as castes, Indian nationalism represents brahmanical class interest (Ibid., p. 85). If nationalism’s primary message is that the power should be Indianised but impedes any debate over the principle on which this power should be wielded, Periyar asks what else can this be called but sectarianism. Even as Periyar always opposed the moralisation of empty nationalism, he would soon identify and dub it as the moralisation of Brahmanism. He argued that resolutions passed by Brahmins in Varnashrama dharma conferences and resolutions passed by nationalists in Congress conferences were essentially the same, only phrased differently. Indeed the latter is more dangerous than the former because the former only ask the state to not interfere in their discriminatory sectarian practices, but the latter pledges to safeguard them through the state. But just like how a cult denounces every other cult, nationalism is quick to denounce any attempt at power-sharing as ‘sectarianism’. When the oppressed, tyrannised, and dehumanised masses begin to express their difficulties and their interests without any empathy, the nationalists decry it as sectarianism. For

⁶The Karachi resolution, for the first time, listed out a list of socio-economic principles that a future Indian state would adhere to. But Periyar and the self respecters found the promises of the Congress hollow, especially as they followed the execution of Bhagat Singh and his comrades, whom they strongly believed Gandhi and the Congress betrayed. They also insisted that the philosophy that the resolution adopted to end poverty without ending class distinctions was akin to ending untouchability without ending caste distinctions. But it was the Section 14 and the Section 17 of the charter of rights discussed at Karachi which assured ‘the state will not interfere in religious matters’ and not ‘wound the susceptibilities of any of its citizens who profess opinions or a creed different from their own’ that Periyar repeatedly criticised as shielding the caste society against any reform. For more on self respecters critique of Karachi resolution: (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, 443-447)

nationalists who want to build a nation that is nothing but an exhibition of different and unequal castes, classes and religions, Periyar asks what damage is caused by these classes having their own representatives.

Periyar's criticism of the sectarian nature of Gandhi and Congress was expressed most strongly during the second roundtable conference and the Poona Pact. Periyar and the self-respect movement resolutely took the side of Dr. Ambedkar and Mr. Rettaimalai Srinivasan, who insisted on separate electorates for the Adi Dravidas and condemned the 'political cunningness' of Mr. Gandhi.⁷ Gandhi's proclamation of himself as the sole representative of Adi Dravidas and his ridicule of Ambedkar's right to represent his people generated much anger and resentment among the Adi Dravidas of Tamil Nadu, and the self-respect movement took upon itself the role of channelising and directing this rage. Articles, editorials, protests and demonstrations by prominent self-respecters condemning Gandhi and Congress were organised throughout the Tamil Country. Between 1932 and 1944, *Kudi Arasu* published 37 articles in support of various political positions of Dr. Ambedkar (Manoharan, 2020, p. 139). When the Poona Pact was signed, Periyar condemned it as Gandhi's cunningness prevailing over Adi Dravida welfare. A *Kudi Arasu* editorial argued that Gandhi would put his life at risk to prevent a separate electorate for Adi Dravidas was proof of the fact that 'Gandhi and Congress were intent on wrestling political control from the British only to enthrone the authority of varna dharma'. It was clear that Congress wanted power from the British but were afraid of the power slipping to the Adi Dravidas as it would 'undermine the basis for the desired Brahminical dominance in a future, free polity'. Prominent self-respecter Guruswami wrote in *Kudi Arasu* that the Gandhi who argued that he doesn't want swaraj without the abolition of untouchability was long gone, and this Gandhi was no different from those Hindus in Devakottai who demonstrated the 'worth of their Hindu faith' by setting fire to Adi Dravida homes⁸ (Periyar, 2008, pp. 19–24) (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 346–347).

Nationalisation of Brahmanism

The persistent theme in Periyar's critique of Indian nationalism was its attempt at the nationalisation of Hinduism. The early nationalist movement majorly derived its passions from the perceived glory of the country's Hindu past, and this has remained a reinforcement for nationalist passion for many ever since. However, Gandhi's nationalism was anchored not simply on the perceived glory of the past but on a new, and in many ways original, ethic. This wielded itself as acceptable and appealing to a larger public. But this supposedly new ethic, Periyar argued, preserved in itself the core of an older tyrannical ideology, that of Brahmanism. This nationalism not only sheltered the traditional oppressive ideology but also manifested it in the modern language of pure politics. This inflexion of politics and religion rendered

⁷For more on the 'intellectual comradeship' between Ambedkar and Periyar: (Geetha, 2017) and Manoharan, 2020)

⁸Though the incident referred to here is unclear, a *Kudi Arasu* editorial written two months ago on July 24, 1932 refers to frequent attacks on and plunder of Dalit households at Devakottai, a small village in the Sivagangai district of Tamil Nadu. The editorial alleges that the Zilla collector, sub-collector and Judge, all being Brahmins, turned a blind eye towards the atrocities. It is significant that a Hindu report records that Mr. Gandhi visited Devakottai two years later in 1934 to broker peace between the Nattars (Kallars) and Dalits.

religion more immune to criticism and made politics less conducive to reform. This way, Gandhi had truly nationalised Brahmanism. This was Periyar's central critique of Indian nationalism. This inflexion of old in the new was what Periyar sought to expose, for he was convinced that it is imperative for progressive politics to challenge and dislodge the old tyrannical social ideology. A new that retained the old was both inherently amoral and politically counterproductive. Thus Periyar took upon himself the task not only of critiquing the old, Brahmanism, but exposing the old in the new nationalism which was but 'the most complete expression of political brahmanism' (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998, p. 306). A satirical fictional conversation between a 'puranic propagandist' and a self-respecter published in *Kudi Arasu* sheds light on this (Periyar, 2008b, pp. 187–191). Lamenting that the divinely ordained authority of the Puranas has been completely destroyed by the rationalist propaganda of the self-respect movement, the 'puranic propagandist' says it is only because of Congress he still gets to do puranic sermons, and without it, he would simply have to torch his puranas. When the self-respecter asks how he can do puranic sermons on the stages of Congress, which is a nationalist organisation for self-rule, the puranic propagandist replies that there isn't much of a difference between the two types of sermons and if he simply adds 'Long Live Mahatma Gandhi' and 'Vande Mataram' no one would find the difference. He only has to call Mahatma Gandhi not a regular human being, but a divine incarnation as hinted by the *Mahabharata* for the purposes of a holy battle, after which he can go on talking about the greatness of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita* and no one in the audience would realise it is a puranic sermon. Periyar, through satire, tries to make transparent what is obscured—the nationalist movement sustained itself by infusing religious, brahmanical values in a new political vocabulary and therefore breathed new life into it. If the language and discursive power of religion served to justify exploitation and oppression in the past, Periyar argued it is precisely what nationalists achieved, albeit through a shrewdly modified vocabulary. This 'brahmanised' nationalism cannot tackle the hierarchisation of society and the subsequent dehumanisation of the non-brahmins because they have been moralised in the same scriptures that were being touted to define the national character. The legitimacy of the scriptures and faith that sustain the hierarchy has to be challenged, and therefore, nationalism that breathes life into it also has to be challenged. The transcript that *Kudi Arasu* published of the conversation between Gandhi and Periyar in 1927 reveals Periyar's conviction (Manoharan & Ramani, 2021). He tells Gandhi that Hinduism is different from the other religions because the spiritual core of Hinduism is so vacuous that those who have attained power through it will keep refashioning it to sustain the convenient hierarchy of the caste system. The brahmins are cheering on Gandhi because he has not been able to produce a fundamental change in the Hindu society, and they believe they can use him for their ends. Even if Gandhi does manage to produce a fundamental change somehow, Periyar argued, Hinduism is very capable of producing another Mahatma who will reverse the change. Thus, for Periyar, the task of social change is impossible without challenging the legitimacy of Hinduism, which only serves brahmanical interests and a nationalism that wouldn't venture to do it is ultimately useless for the cause of self-respect.

This was the key to his opposition to Hindi as well, which is often misread as 'linguistic chauvinism'. The attempt by the nationalist movement to impose Hindi on the entire country as essential for national unity, Periyar thought, was but a repurposed attempt following the failure to revive Sanskrit for sustaining the relevance of Aryan

sanskritic civilisational and religious values which are fundamentally inegalitarian. By imposing Hindi in schools in the veneer of nationalisation, Periyar thought it was Tulsidas' *Ramayana* that was being nationalised. For the self-respect movement, Hindi represented everything they resisted for the last two decades—caste power, brahmanic dominance, scriptural authority and the fictions of nationalism (Geetha, 1999, p. 2).

Conversion of Caste relations into Capital Relations

Periyar believed that behind the façade of the Gandhian spiritual economy through rural reconstruction, larger systemic change in the realm of production was setting up a powerful Baniya class that carried a disproportionate indirect influence over national politics. After his Soviet trip in 1932, Periyar became convinced that the struggle for self-respect should necessarily include, along with the struggle against the old social order, a struggle against the emerging capitalist order that only strengthens the former. Historian A.R. Venkatachalapathy infers from a secret police report that the colonial government, paranoid about the 'red spectre', suspected that Periyar showed an urgency in propagating the communist doctrine by organising more than 40 meetings within three months, expressing 'unbound admiration for the Russian regime', and harbouring the 'intention to end the present administration and establish a Socialist form of government' (Venkatachalapathy, 2017)! Even though paranoid, police report's observation about Periyar's 'unbound admiration' for Soviet Russia was not far-fetched. In the months following his Soviet visit, Periyar leaped praise on the efforts of the Soviet government towards destabilising religious authority, poverty alleviation and city planning. Periyar often drew inspiration from the Russian Revolution and adapted Marxist concepts innovatively for the Indian context. The victory of the Russian revolution, Periyar suggested, was in their realisation that 'to overthrow god is to overthrow the authority of rich men' and 'to abolish religion is to abolish forces sustaining the social inequality' (Periyar, 2008, pp. 191–194). Periyar refashioned his earlier critique of Hinduism in Marxist terms. He dubbed the Brahmin as a 'birth capitalist' as he converted his birth into economic and social capital and god as the 'stone capitalist' to explain the material exploitation that Brahmanism facilitates (Omvedt, 2011, p. 243). While addressing conferences of Dalits who have embraced Christianity, Periyar suggested that they should not be swayed by the promises of salvation offered by Christian priests but should follow the example of the Christians of Russia to demolish the authority of the Church and its priests and establish a society of equals (Subagunaranjan, 2018, pp. 38–39). He argued that the future to be constructed had to be a socialist world in which authority built on private wealth and power would have no rightful place (Periyar, 1981, pp. 374–376). State paranoia translated into police action against Periyar, his family, and his party, forcing Periyar to declare that he was withdrawing his socialist programme for the sake of his larger self-respect movement.

Though Periyar gave up overt advocacy of the socialist programme, the criticism of, what he dubbed as, 'the Brahmin-Baniya nexus' remained central to his politics. Indeed, S.V. Rajadurai argues that this critique hardened after 1936 when the cooperation between the Indian big business class and the Congress reached new heights. Rajadurai argues that the provincial governments formed by Congress in 1937 reflected this in many ways. First, the newly elected provincial governments implemented severe anti-labour laws gaining the confidence of the business class, but to the dismay of

labour unions. The Bombay Industrial Disputes Act of 1938, for example, sought to legalize strikes occurring without exhausting the arbitration machinery. It also made recognition of the unions conditional on the acceptance of the arbitration machinery, and provided more stringent punitive measures for participation in illegal strikes (Sharma, 2004, p. 792). The Madras government insisted that they supported conciliation and not arbitration but regularly used police forces inside and outside factory premises to 'regulate' workers and branded union activists as extremists and sought to curb their activities (Krishna, 1992, p. 1504). Second, the Congress won over the trust of the business class by ensuring the complete independence of the colonial bureaucratic apparatus during their provincial governments between 1937–1939, the disintegration of which the industrialists did not like. And third, native industrialists like G.D. Birla and Purushotham Thakurdas openly expressed their happiness that Nehru's occasional socialist tendencies did not translate into Congress policy resolutions and appreciated Gandhi's role in making sure that the Congress remained committed to supporting Indian industrialists (Rajadurai, 2003, pp. 154–156).

Rajadurai argues that it was these major changes that made the north Indian Baniya class a continuous target of Periyar who saw Congress' nationalism as a facade for Brahmin-Baniya interests. He began to argue that the nationalist movement was more interested in ensuring a seamless transfer of the economic advantage for the Baniya classes in the pre-modern economy to the modern national economy than it was interested in the freedom of ordinary people. He even argued, this was the actual purpose behind the spinning of khadi. The reason for making the entire country spin khadi, Periyar believed, was not to help the ordinary masses but the mill owners of Gujarat and Mumbai. Periyar quipped Gandhi only had two friends, the north Indian businessman and the south Indian Brahmin. These were the only people he respected and listened to. For others, he had nothing to offer but the task of spinning and a verbal assurance that he was against the practice of untouchability. But even this was dependent on what the mill owner and the brahmin might have to say at the moment (Periyar, 2008b, pp. 87–88).

Periyar considered that Hindi imposition, Hindu communalism and the Gandhian constructive programme were all aimed at maximising the profit of North Indian Baniya businessmen and minimising external competition from other groups. Periyar argued the motive behind pushing Hindi education beyond all odds was not just to establish a unity but specifically unity desirable for the Baniya classes, a seamless homogenous market that spoke in a single language in independent India (See: Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 387–398). Hindu communalism was consciously propagated by Hindu capitalists who sought to preserve existing tensions among castes and conflict with Muslims to ensure that others do not enter the arena of Industrial capitalism where they exercised dominance (Rajadurai, 1993, p. 164).

Periyar considered the Gandhian constructive programme not just to be inadequate, but consciously counter-revolutionary. The Gandhian programme of village reconstruction, Periyar argued in 1936, anticipated the problems of the new capitalist order and attended to it. For example, it asked how labourers thrown out of work by the expansion of machines can sustain themselves. But Periyar argued that the question that begs to be asked was why should there be a distinct group called the labourers and another called the capitalists. Periyar considered that by romanticising

villages instead of extending to them the comforts of the city, Gandhi gave a spiritual justification to the labourer-capitalist hierarchy, similar to the justification *varnashrama dharma* provided to the caste hierarchy. Just as the Brahmin leeches off the manual physical labour of the non-brahmin castes by adjudging it as their dharma, Periyar argued, the city leeches off the village's physical labour by attributing moral value to it. In other words, he argued that ascriptive hierarchies of the caste order were only strengthened by the occupational hierarchies of the capitalist order and the spatial hierarchy of village and town strengthened these hierarchies instead of challenging them. Periyar argued that while Gandhi presents the public a moral choice between nature and technology, the choice Gandhi obscures is between using technology to perpetuate existing as well as new hierarchies and using technology to abolish such hierarchies for an egalitarian socialist future (Periyar, 2013).

Periyar's fierce critique of the North Indian business class neither brought him closer to the Dravidian business class, nor brought the Dravidian business class close to Periyar. When the Communist Party daily *Jana Sakthi* accused Periyar of using the 'Birla' name to scare the working class and divide them into Aryans and Dravidians and ensuring the prosperity of the Dravidian capitalists, Periyar published a harsh response through his daily *Viduthalai*. He argued that the self-respect movement's commitment to socialism has been consistent and that it was the movement that popularised communist doctrines in Tamil Nadu and translated communist works into Tamil long before the Communist Party ventured to do so. He argued that all major capitalists of the Tamil country have already surrendered to the Congress Party and no more small scale business people support Dravidar Kazhagam than they support the Communist Party. He argued that while he repeatedly insisted that his movement's goals and the Communist Party's goals were one and the same, the Communist Party continued to attack Periyar for not accepting the nationalist consensus. He argued that while he is committed to a socialist future, he (unlike the Communist Party members) could not ignore the contradictions of carrying the Tricolour in the left hand, red flag in the right hand, the sacred thread on the shoulders and the books of Karl Marx under their arms. While propaganda of communist doctrines were a regular feature of self-respect meetings, he asked why the Communist party refused to question the exploitative practices of North Indian Business class, Aryan brahmanical domination, and frauds committed in the name of Hinduism in communist party meetings. To ensure self-respect for the Dravidian masses, Periyar argued the above questions should accompany the critique of capitalism, without which it will be ineffective and unsuccessful (*Viduthalai*, 31.07.1947). Periyar argued that the nationalist consensus heralded by the Congress not only safeguarded Brahmin-Baniya interest but was inextricable from it. Thus, for Periyar, the national question and the question of labour were interconnected and the latter could not be resolved without resolving the former.

As Periyar thus systematically critiqued Gandhi and the nationalist movement for preserving the Hindu social order, the unilateral imposition of Hindi in the schools of the Madras presidency, became the immediate cause for the explosion of the demand for Tamil sovereignty. Periyar revolted against it as an attempt to infuse brahmanical values to school children, and this gave rise to the moment where he would most

acutely direct his antipathy of the Indian nationalist project into a demand for Tamil sovereignty.

‘Tamil Nadu for Tamils’: Periyar and the Tamil Region

Organising a huge gathering with about 50,000–70,000 people along the beach of Madras, Periyar raised the slogan of “Tamil Nadu for Tamils” in an impassioned speech starkly different from his general tone of rationalist inquiry (Kalimuthu, 2011, p. 72).

“We Tamils have lost 50 years due to this wretched nationalism. We have labelled anyone who wanted to usher progress to this country and its people as anti-national, disloyal, selfish and heretic and failed to utilise them.

We kiss and worship the very legs that kick us. We wholeheartedly revel in their shit. We’ve lost our dignity. We’ve lost our senses. We’ve become slaves to others. Is this why a Tamil should live?”

“At least now, “Tamil Nadu for the Tamils” should become an article of faith with the Tamils. Tattoo your hands with the slogan ‘Tamil Nadu for Tamils’. Write on the walls of each of your houses that ‘Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils’. Imagine an outsider sitting in your home and declaring that he is the master of your house. Think if there can be a greater shame and degradation for us. Get ready. Destroy the chains that have been imposed on Tamilnadu.

Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils! Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils!! Tamil Nadu is for the Tamils!!!” (Periyar, 2008c, pp. 222-223, translation mine)

However, this was only the immediate cause for the explosion of the demand for regional sovereignty. A longer historical view of what propelled Periyar to undertake this demand is necessary to understand Periyar’s spatial thought. A quick summary of the series of events from the 1930s that propelled Periyar and the self-respect movement to take up the demand for Tamil sovereignty would shed light on Periyar’s rationale for his complete rejection of the national space.

1. Periyar strongly believed that the Poona Pact, by foreclosing the possibility of separate electorates for Dalits in India, limited the radicalism of anti-caste politics, effectively sacrificing Dalit interests for national unity.
2. The resolutions of the Karachi conference prescribed a policy of non-intervention in religious affairs that assured that no attempts would be made to regulate people in matters of belief and practice. This for Periyar indicated that independent India would constitutionally prohibit attempts to challenge the poisonous core of Brahmanical ideology in the name of the right to faith.
3. Periyar grew highly sceptical of the increasing influence of Brahmin-Baniya nexus in determining Indian politics. Periyar considered the North Indian Baniya Businessman and South Indian Brahmin had gained a disproportionate say in national politics which ‘nationalised’ their self-interests.
4. A socialist alternative still held a promise for cultivating a meaningful national unity towards egalitarianism. The lack of a credible anti-fascist socialist alternative to challenge Gandhian nationalism meant that this also was not an available option (See: Rajadurai, 1998, pp. 64–82).

5. The rule of Congress in provinces, best exemplified by Rajagopalachari's rule in Madras Presidency and their readiness to use the same colonial laws of repression to suppress dissent against brahmanical consensus, signalled for Periyar that radical activism would be severely restricted in independent India.
6. The imposition of Hindi in the garb of national unity was a formal attempt to cement Brahmanical cultural hegemony throughout India and also create a national market readily available for Baniya business classes in independent India at the cost of linguistic and cultural diversity. This became the final immediate cause of Periyar's call for a separate Tamil nation.

We see in Periyar's pointed critique of Indian nationalism that it had in all functional realms of organisation of space instilled the logic of Brahmanism to serve brahmin-Baniya interests. What made him gradually but resolutely adopt a sovereign Tamil state as his political ideal was his firm conviction that the project of self-respect through annihilation of caste was impossible within the constraints of Indian nationalism and the Indian nation-state. Non-brahmin sovereignty was inconceivable within a nation whose fragile unity was preserved through anxious conformity with its brahmanical core. But this project, he believed, was workable through a rationally conceived Tamil state. For such a 'rational' conception, received and 'natural' commitment to the Tamil region must be subjected to critical scrutiny and a Tamil region has to be re-conceptualised in a way that furthers the pursuit of self-respect. This is what Periyar does through his conceptualisation of *Dravida Nadu*. In other words, Periyar did not pit the northern region against the southern region but pitted the nation that is anxious about social reform against a region that anticipates it. His Tamil Utopia was a space of possibilities.

De-fetishising the Region

Periyar's uncompromising rationalism meant that he was highly critical of narratives that prescribed the recreation of a hoary Tamil past as a solution to the degradation of Tamil lives. He consistently challenged the uncritical celebration of Tamil literature as being embedded with the values along which Tamil society had to be reorganised. He challenged the great virtuosity of Tamil literature on two grounds. First, they lacked the rationalist scientific outlook that was needed to rethink our society and were too obsessed with religiosity. Second, there was nothing liberatory in Tamil literature for the Tamil woman to whom it only prescribed chastity and devotion. For Periyar, who made rationalism, annihilation of caste, and gender equality the cornerstones of his propaganda, Tamil scholars' indifference to these ideals was unacceptable. He held that in over a thousand years, Tamil had not produced any scientific literature worthy of learning and had been completely immersed in religiosity. While he appreciated the Tamil Saivites' critique of the obscenity and irrationality of Aryan epics, he criticised them for not applying a similar lens of rationality to the long list of Tamil devotional literature, be it *Periyarpuranam* or *Kandapuramam*. Periyar's radical views on gender show how untethered he was from tradition, Indian or Tamil. Periyar viewed the family structure as fundamentally flawed, the purpose of which was to protect private property and restrict the capabilities of women. Periyar advocated for the complete destruction of the family system as we know it. In his words,

“To discipline love and desire and direct it along particular channels and orient them towards particular persons does not seem to have any justification. To desire is human. To control it is to practise a kind of slavery” (Geetha, 2015).

Observing that no country in the world has ever committed as many atrocities to women in the name of marriage as we have, he held that the rituals and holy sanctions functioned as a cover-up obscuring this abject enslavement (Periyar, 1942, p. 32). He consistently insisted that patriarchy and caste reinforced each other and refused to prioritise one over the other. Thus naturally, the gender vision of Tamil literature greatly bothered Periyar. When Tamil scholars found in *Kambaramayanam* and *Silapathikaram*, two great Tamil epics, mesmerising visions of a Tamil utopia, Periyar found these epics as embodying superstition and patriarchy. The glorification of Kannagi’s chastity and devotion to her husband, who abandoned her, as a role model for Tamil women was unacceptable for Periyar. He expressed his distaste for Tamil literature which had elaborate sensual descriptions of a woman’s body but attributed her with no qualities of intelligent thinking beings. While he received a lot of criticism from respected non-brahmin Tamil scholars, he maintained his critique and even ventured to set these books on fire along with *Manusmriti* and *Ramayana*. While he generally celebrated *Thirukkural*, the Sangam era moral literature, for its insistence on equality, fairness and dignity of labour, he did not spare it of criticism for its insistence on chastity as a virtue particular to women. As a rationalist, a Tamil nationalism stemming from the perceived glory of a hoary past and its virtues or simple antagonism to an ‘other’ never appealed to Periyar and he never failed to contradict such visions. As Karthick Ram Manoharan (2020, p. 166) rightly argues, Periyar’s Dravidian identity was ‘resistance identity’ which sought to provide space to voices silenced by nationalist discourse as against the ‘legitimising identity’ of Indian nationalism.

Conceiving the Region – Actualising Self-Respect

While Periyar conceived the Tamil region in modernity as a rationalist utopia towards the ideal of self-respect, he deployed the narratives of difference between ‘Aryan’ and ‘Dravidian’ that had been previously fashioned by precursors of the Dravidian movement to cut the ties of Tamils to brahmanical religion and practises. The narrative borrows from the earlier expositions of the Saivites but goes far beyond them. Periyar explains this narrative in his address to the ‘Thiruvalluvar Nanneri Kazhagam’ (an organisation dedicated to advising the Tamil public on virtuous moral life) in 1942 (Periyar, 1996, pp. 3–13).⁹ India as a whole was the homeland of the Dravidians. Aryans came later. Through various means, they pushed the Dravidians to the south. From *Ramayana*, where Ram wins over the demon king of Lanka; to *Kandapuranam*, where Shiva’s son is sent to the south to win over the demon king of the south, the Aryan epics celebrated Aryan victory and domination over Dravidians as the victory of a new morality. The fact that these gods of the Brahmanical religion, that mark

⁹It has to be insisted here that the factual accuracy of such narratives and their acceptance among contemporary scholars did not bother Periyar. For him, like Pandit Iyothee Thassar who considered “the future of the pariah could not be resolved or even imagined without constructing a past that would explain and condemn Hinduism” (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1993, 2095), to explain and condemn the Hindu past was an ethical imperative for Periyar and a necessity for mobilising people against their past.

the supremacy of Aryans over Dravidians, are worshipped by Dravidians themselves is a reflection of hegemony achieved by Brahmanism and the loss of self-respect of Dravidians as a result. The Aryan gods are served in the Dravidian land by tales about the virtue of figures of complete devotion to the Aryan gods, the Nayanmars and the Alwars. The entire corpus of Bhakti literature is a celebration of this servitude. An attachment to the religion, its gods and myths, therefore meant for Periyar, a passive acceptance of the shudra-hood and loss of self-respect. For reclaiming self-respect, one has to completely cut their ties with the religion, its gods, myths and ultimately the nation that is founded on them. Here we see that Periyar has deployed the creative hermeneutic exercises of Tamil Buddhist and Saivite revivalists but while doing so, prioritised the loss of self-respect over the loss of culture or tradition. For him, the former was more fundamental and thus explained the latter.

The quest for Tamil sovereignty for Periyar was thus, in essence, a quest for non-brahmin sovereignty that required a complete disavowal of brahmanical values. As Geetha argues, "Periyar's agent of history was neither the shudra, nor an adidravida; nor was it a Tamil or a dravida. Instead, it was the non-brahmin historic bloc, in its entirety that was to undertake the tasks of creating a new social, economic and ethical order" (Geetha, 2001, p. 163). To construct such a non-brahmin ethical order, he considered it necessary to sever the ties of Tamils with Sanskritic texts and practises and emerging national consciousness that sought to legitimise them. As a counter, Periyar emphasised the civilisational ethos of the Dravidian past by a liberal reading of Tamil texts. Periyar praised the classical Tamil treatise of Thirukkural for exposing the differences between the Aryan and the Tamil culture and civilisation and for prescribing the virtue of equality as a remedy for the Aryan ills. He even went on to say that if a Tamil is asked what religion he belongs to, he should say that he belongs to the "Valluvar religion" (Periyar, 1981, pp. 505–508).¹⁰ The Dravidar Kazhagam adopted the Thirukkural and organised Thirukkural conferences across Tamil Nadu to spread its values. He proclaimed that for the Dravidians the Kural was the only moral text of any value. (Manoharan & Ramani, 2021)

He referred to the ancient Tamil book of *Tholkappiam* and interpreted its verses as an acknowledgement of the view that Tamil values were corrupted after Aryan influence and that they were corrupted in order to benefit them at the cost of others (Periyar, 2007, pp. 134–135). He often reiterated that concepts like *Atma* (soul) and *Jati* (caste) were alien to Tamils as there is not even an equivalent to such terms in Tamil. Periyar also referenced ancient Sangam literature to argue that the concept of marriages and their rituals were never present among ancient Tamils and that Sangam literature only referred to romantic relationships between men and women and never to an irrevocable bond of marriage as in the present. Periyar also played a huge role in popularising the usage of the name 'Tamilnadu', meaning Tamil Country, to refer to the Tamil speaking areas. Even as the name is found in *Silapathikaram* and is scattered sparsely through medieval literature, the name had not been in public parlance for centuries. For at least the last three centuries before Periyar, the Tamil country was referred to as the Madras presidency. Periyar popularised the name in the Tamil public sphere. Prof. Kalimuthu notes that starting from 1927, Periyar continuously used the

¹⁰It has to be insisted here that Periyar's position was not that Tamils should adopt a 'native' religion. He has even, in other instances, advocated conversions to Islam and accepting the creed of the Buddha to combat untouchability.

name ‘Tamilnadu’ to denote the Tamil-speaking areas in his speeches and writings in Kudi Arasu (Kalimuthu, 2011, p. 67). The usage of his term was not accidental or mechanical but an attempt to insist upon the primacy of ‘Tamilness’ as a marker of cultural identity to people immersed in nationalist passions. But unlike the Saivites or language purists, Periyar remained clear that recreating the hoary Tamil past was not the way out of the degradation of Tamils. Thus even as the distinctiveness of the Dravidian past was wielded by Periyar to delegitimise the virtue assumed of the Brahmanical religion and Indian nationalism that guards it, the legitimacy of the Dravidian counter imagination rested not in the glory of its hoary past but in what he characterised as the Dravidian ethic of self-respect and rationalism. In his own words, his receptiveness to and appreciation of Tamil was a rational choice.

“If I consider that my country will not help my ideals, will not help to foster them, I shall forthwith quit it. Similarly if my language is not conducive to my ideals or the advancement of my people to or to their living with self-respect, I will promptly discard it and follow what is useful. If I love Tamil, it is because I am aware of the advantages I expect through it and the measure of loss that will occur by the absence of it” (Periyar, 1981, p. 549)

He explained the rationale for his claim that Tamil sovereignty was necessary for self-respect in simple terms. For any society to gain liberty from an oppressive class, society or country, it is important that people of the society are made to realise the denigration they have attained due to their submission to the oppressive class. The work to bring this consciousness is the project of self-respect propaganda. But, Indian nationalism derives its unity by obscuring this history of oppression and preventing the emergence of this consciousness through a web of discursive restraints. When such attempts are made, it derides these attempts branding it as divisive and anti-national and doesn’t hesitate to directly suppress it when it wields power. Therefore, the consciousness of the loss of dignity cannot arise until Tamils accept the discursive boundaries of Indian nationalism. Tamil sovereignty facilitates the non-brahmin to free himself from the hegemonic grip of Brahmanism by stripping it of its political form (Periyar, 1996, pp. 8–10).

Distilling Brahmanism as the ideological essence of Indian nationalism, as Manoharan has argued elsewhere (Manoharan, 2019), he argued that the discursive space of the nation formed the vital frontier between the rarity and materiality of non-brahmin politics. The region, for Periyar, was the counter discursive space that would enable the ascendancy of non-brahmin politics from rarity to materiality. “Like the societies that preceded it, socialist society must produce its space”, Lefebvre argued, “but in full consciousness of its concepts and potential problems”(Lefebvre, 2009, p.191).

In Periyar’s conceptualisation of the region, we see such a careful exercise. The self-respect movement contributed immensely to the popularisation of the region as a counter-hegemonic force incorporating a distinctive set of egalitarian values to the Tamil region. It favourably read an egalitarian trait into Tamil literature and history and popularised it as an antidote to unequalitarian Brahmanical values that were unchallenged and indeed reinforced by the national movement. It brought an amalgamation of regional consciousness and non-brahmin consciousness not by emphasising the region’s historical or cultural values but by fundamentally investing

the region with this ethic of self-respect. This is the political dimension of the regional consciousness that Periyar propagated which has facilitated large scale social change in Tamil Nadu. The assertion of Tamil identity through cultural distinctiveness, when deprived of this political and ethical dimension, cannot mount an egalitarian critique of the dominant articulations of Indian nationalism which Periyar critiqued as shielding a rigid and hierarchical social order and thus risks the danger of seamless integration into hegemonic culture and discourse. This article aims to be an effort towards resuscitating the political dimension of the region and preserve its legacy from distortion, symbolisation and reductive culturalisation in lieu of a more just society.

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