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Periyar E. V. Ramasami's[1] Critique of Priestly Hinduism[2] and its Implications for Social Reforms

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1. Introduction

Protests against superstitious beliefs and practices associated with religion and the caste system is exceedingly old in India.

The indigenous, ascetic and pre-Aryan religious movement called the *Sramanas* was the first to oppose priestly rituals, superstitions and caste system. Its two offshoots, Jainism and Buddhism laid greater emphasis on reason and disapproved irrational practices and inequalities in the society. The materialist *carvaka* system insisted that there is no necessity for faith in religion, rites, priests and vedas. The Upanishads are earnest quest for truth beyond externals of religions. Bhakti movement in Hinduism, to some extent, disfavored mechanical rites and caste system. *Siddhars* in the South and *Sants* in the North India advocated simple life and negated ritualism. Ramalinga Swami, in Tamil Nadu condemned caste and superstitious beliefs. Sikhism was still another attempt in this direction. With the influence of British, people like Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chander Sen and Ranade initiated many social reforms. Mahatma Jotirao Phooley and Ambedkar radically criticized priestly exploitations.

It was in this context that Periyar E. V. Ramasami is significant. He was of the opinion that all the inequalities and oppressions found in the society were created by priestly/Brahmanic religion. Rather than opting for a new religion, Periyar thought, religions should be rationally evaluated from the perspective of human life. Any religion or religious practice that obstructs human dignity should be abandoned. He stood for self-respect (individual freedom and dignity).

2. Reasons for Critiquing Priestly Hinduism

Periyar can be understood only from the point of the environment in which he grew up.[3] His personal encounters with evils of religion and caste had directly contributed to his rationalist thinking. He was born on September 17, 1879 in Erode (Tamil Nadu).[4] He belonged to the Naicker caste the upper stratum of the *Sudras*.[5] His father was a well-to-do business-man.

At the age of six, his father admitted him in a school.[6] His interest toward education was

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insignificant. Yet the dehumanizing experience that he underwent in the school motivated Periyar to be stoutly critical about the social system and religious practices around him.

During school days, his parents instructed him that he should drink water only from his teacher's house. When he went to the teacher's house, he came across a very unpleasant and unforgettable experience. Periyar writes:

> The teacher was a strict vegetarian. He belonged to a caste called 'Oduvar'. I went to his house once or twice to drink water. In that house a small girl used to place a brass tumbler on the ground, and pour water in to it. I was instructed to lift the vessel and drink without sipping it. After that she would pour water on the vessel, lift it and wash inside and then take it into the house. Because I am accustomed to sip water from the vessel, little water would fall on my body. Only a little water would go in to the mouth. Some times water would enter my nose and cause trouble. I had to spit out the water instantly. Sometimes the girl would get angry on seeing this.[7]

Paulraj describes another, almost similar experience of younger Periyar and remarks that "the boy made a pledge to himself that he should eradicate this demeaning and dehumanizing caste discrimination."[8] In the words of C.J. Anantha Krishnan, "this incident first sowed the seeds of revulsion against casteism in the impressionable mind of young Ramansami."[9] Contrary to Periyar, his parents were very pious and religious people. Because of his irreligious behavior and their orthodoxy 'he was treated as untouchable at home.'[10]

On the basis of these harsh experiences, Periyar declared that caste is a social issue but enjoys religious sanction; hence religion should be rationally evaluated. Visswanathan writes "... his early experience of the rigidity of the caste system and the practice that went along with it created in him a feeling of revulsion against those who strove to uphold it as the core of the Hindu way of life."[11] In the words of John Kumar, "in spite of the enviable position enjoyed by this family, Periyar as a young man had encountered humiliating experiences of the caste discrimination. This was the main impetus that made him anti-Brahministic..."[12]

His hatred to caste system was gaining ground. Rajagopalan writes, "from his boyhood he was questioning why his parents prohibited him from drinking water in some houses, why he was prevented from joining Muslims boys and play, why lot of Brahmins are fed by his father when lot of poor non-Brahmins are starving..."[13] Periyar's continued reflection convinced him that the priests/Brahmins used religion and god to impose caste system upon people. In other words, Periyar was convinced that the caste discriminations were the result of misuse of religion by a group of people.

He was sympathetic to the victims of caste degradations. It is explained as "the question of the baleful custom of condemning a certain section of the society as unworthy of equality of the status and freedom of movement was perhaps the one that was uppermost in his mind."[14] Still further, "their state of penury and squalor on the one hand and on the other the disabling social handicap so deeply moved the tender heart of the young boy."[15]

At the age of twelve, Periyar, was introduced to his father's business. During his leisure he discussed religious matters with the pundits who visited his home. This helped him to know more about Ramayana, Mahabharata Puranas etc. Visswanathan says, "Through their religious discourses and discussions the young Ramasami learnt the rudiments of the

philosophical significance of Hindu Mythology and Theology."[16] Sometimes, the pundits had no answer to Periyar's demanding questions. Even if they answered "different pundits gave different answer."[17] This made him conclude that Brahmins and Sastras were lies.[18] In the words of Gopalakrishnan, "even from his boyhood Periyar had been feeling that the public discourses of *Ramayana, Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* were employed by the pundits and other religious men only as a means of livelihood for themselves and not in order to make people really pious."[19]

When only nineteen, Ramasami married thirteen-year-old Nagammai, his cousin. After six years of family life, he took to *sanyasi* life and traveled all over India as a religious mendicant. Charles Ryerson writes, "at twenty five he became a wandering *sanyasi,* traveling with two Brahmins and performing kalashepams."[20] It is commonly accepted that Periyar's quarrel or disagreement with his father on certain matter resulted in *sanyasin* life. On reaching Benares, the two Brahmin friends left Periyar, because they got free food and did not need any help from Periyar.[21] This made him think that the Brahmins were unreliable and untrustworthy.

Periyar was left alone in a helpless situation. Friendless and foodless, he wandered the streets of Benaras[22] because all the inns were opened only for the Brahmins. He was not allowed to enter an inn where Brahmin *sanyasis* are fed. Once Periyar was pushed out of an inn because he was not a Brahmin.[23] According to P. Vanangamudi, "without food he starved for days and one day, he even ate the left over (sic) thrown out on a leaf."[24] Rajagopalan says, "on one occasion he had to eat the food thrown in dust bin along with dogs."[25] Having realized that his long hair and mustache prevented others to accept him as a *sannyasi,* Periyar shaved them off[26] and looked for a job. According to Charles Ryerson, "finally he found himself in Benares working for a math by collecting leaves for puja."[27] When his real identity was betrayed by his life style, he became jobless.

Situation in Benares was contrary to his expectations. Anita Diehl says, "... he was disappointed with his experience in the holy city."[28] Among *sannyasis*, Brahmins were honored.[29] There was uncontrolled immorality and prostitution.[30] About Periyar's *sannyasi* experience Nambi Aroonan says, "he obtained an intimate knowledge of the evils widely prevalent in Hinduism, particularly in pilgrim centers like Benares."[31] Paulraj writes "during these visits to pilgrim centers he came to know of the evils of popular Hinduism and found out that the Brahmin priest used his priestly role to exploit the masses."[32]

Periyar realized that, it was not human value but caste was given priority in Benares. Religious centers are place of all kinds of hooliganism. This experience accelerated Periyar's anti-Brahminic attitude. About this process Visswanathan states, "Ramasami Naicker's opposition to Hindu orthodoxy and the caste system became more and more out-spoken in his later life for many incidents and his own personal experience as a sadhu in the holy centers of India contributed to the hardening of this attitude."[33]

After returning from the *sannyasi* tour, Periyar continued his business. His interest for social works, including protesting against social evils motivated him to join congress in 1920.[34] To his surprise he found that, in the name of nationalism congress was upholding caste system and Brahmins dominated it.

Periyar, as congress president of Tamil Nadu participated in the Vaikom Satya Graha, which taught him the gravity of untouchables. Gurukulam affair is another one of this kind.

Periyar involved in the Gurukulam affairs in 1925.[35] Gurukulam was a school in the Brahmin village of Kallidaikurichi, Tirnelveli district, supported by the congress for the training of national heroes. Here the non-Brahmin students were served food separately and only after the Brahmin students had taken their meals.[36] Rajagopalan states that the non-Brahmin students "... were served food outside the dining hall of the Gurukulam, whereas Brahmin boys were served food neatly inside the hall."[37] Periyar being treasurer of Tamil Nadu Congress stopped Congress contribution to Gurukulam. This incident further aggravated his opinion against orthodox Brahmins.[38] He also felt that communal representation could help non-Brahmins. It included reservation of seats to the non-Brahmin communities in the legislature and in the services. Since Brahmins dominated the congress, the proposal was rejected.

Mangala Murugesan quotes an incident from Kudi Arasu, 12th July 1931, to show the Brahmin arrogance. Once when E. V. R. went with Srinivasa Iyengar to a Brahmin's house for dining, he was supplied food in a separate place, leaves used for serving morning tiffin were not removed during lunch and the leaves in which he ate both in the morning and afternoon were there till a night meal was served.[39]

The social, religious political and economic degradations imposed in the name of gods and religion, through the "structure" called Hinduism, by the Brahmins, gradually contributed to the anti-religious and anti-Brahminical attitude of Periyar.

3. Periyar's Critique of Priestly Hinduism

Periyar's acquaintance with priestly/Brahminic Hinduism convinced him that religion was responsible for all the evils, particularly caste system, in the society. Thus he began to scorn religion in general and priestly Hinduism in particular.

3.1 *Periyar and Religion*

For Periyar, two major aspects of religions are social and spiritual. Social dimension of religion accepts religion as a way of life at the exclusion of any divine or supernatural elements. Spiritual dimension of religion consists of beliefs and practices. He treated the former as essential and the latter as non-essential.

Periyar traces the origin of religion to the uncivilized age. According to him "when human beings were savages without the ability to think deeply about anything, the ideas that were propagated by some for the benefit of society came to be known as religion."[40] It is a set of rules and ideas framed for the life and conduct of man and help him to achieve his ideal.[41] It is obvious that, the very purpose of religion is the welfare of humanity. He states "... any religion however great it may be was founded by one who had at heart the good of public and not by one who had the grace of God or quality of God."[42] This social value of religion is further explained as "a religion should be for fostering love. It should induce one to be helpful to others. It should make everyone respect truth."[43]

Periyar considered religion as a way of life. He was against attributing supernatural/ spiritual elements to religion. He says, "It is money and propaganda that gives life to religions. There is no divinity or super qualities that keep the torch or religion bright and burning."[44] In the words of Anita Diehl "the religion that Periyar repudiates is the religion which according to him, upholds and gives sanction to religious, social and economic injustice."[45]

Unfortunately, spiritual dimension of religions finds more expressions than the social. As all religious activities were devised to hoodwink the mass, there was no chance for the molding of human character.[46] It also became the place of idleness.[47] This was the situation that called the attention of Periyar. He said, "religious activities are generally contrary to Nature[48] and religion makes people stupid."[49]

In short, it may be said that (1) Periyar accepted religion as a way of life in this world. It was founded for the wellbeing of humanity in this world. (2) There is no divine or supernatural element in religion. (3) The spiritual dimension of religion is the work of human mind and (4) there is no divine element (particle) in humanity. With these presuppositions, he critiqued Hinduism and priestly Hinduism in particular.

3.2 *Hinduism*

Periyar says, "The worst untruth that is in circulation is the claim that there is a religion called Hinduism."[50] The term Hindu originally means Indians, and not a religion.[51] He said, "It is a religion forced on the people with the primary intention of hood-winking the people."[52] M. M. Thomas remarks "for him (Periyar), Hinduism is founded by Brahmins for their own power interests; they built on ignorance, illiteracy and poverty of the people and exploited them."[53]

Periyar attributes the degraded situation of the non-Brahmins in India wholly to their accepting Hinduism. It considered them as slaves.[54] In the view of S. Manickam, slavery in India, which is closely related to caste and untouchables, is primarily based on religion, i.e. Hinduism.[55]

Periyar went to the extent of saying that, *sati*, child marriage, polygamy, superstitions, rituals and ceremonies, the obscenity in Sanskrit literature and on temple walls and towers, the *devadasi* system, women's slavery are the products of the Hindu religion which is stated to be God-given.[56]

3.3 *Priestly Hinduism*

Priestly Hinduism or Brahmanical Hinduism is the expression used here to denote Hinduism as practiced by the Brahmin priests. Swami Dharma Theertha defines Brahaminical Hinduism as "it may be defined as a system of socio-religious domination and exploitation of the Hindus based on caste, priest-craft and false philosophy - caste representing the scheme of domination, priest-craft the means of exploitation, and false philosophy a justification of both caste and priest-craft."[57] P. D. Devanandan remarks that Periyar used the word Brahminism to describe the strategy, which Brahmins had used from the early days of the Aryan expansion in India in order to bring the entire religious and social life of Hindu India under their domination.[58] Brahminic Hinduism specifically implies the ways in which Brahmins used and interpreted Hindu scriptures, religious practices and caste system to accomplish their own ends. This is the religion that Periyar critiqued.

Since certain Hindu scriptures aided the interpretations of the Brahmin priests, Periyar starkly criticized their authenticity and validity. He out rightly condemned Manu for it upholds Brahmin supremacy on the one hand and social injustice to the non-Brahmins on the other.[59] Another reason is that it obstructs the self-respect of people. He disapproved of Mahabharata for it preserves caste system.[60] He has obnoxiously caricatured the characters of Ramayana

and interpreted it as the war between Dravidians and Aryans. Paulraj says, "Naicker openly ridiculed the Puranas (popular Hindu religious literature) and called them imaginary, irrational and grossly immoral fairy tales."[61]

Periyar often said that these scriptures should be burnt because "they are not helpful to us in any manner."[62] He also stressed, "it is because of these Puranas and Ithihasas that we are slaves to the Aryans."[63] According to Periyar Ramayana and Mahabharata were written in view of subduing the non-Brahmin kings who opposed the Brahmins.[64] Nambi Arooran says that they are the result of Brahminical scheming and they do not recognize the equality of all people.[65] From the moral point of views, he said, "indiscipline, prostitution and things devoid of self respect galore in this epics."[66] Anaimuthu remarks, "after long years of deep study and constant thought he said emphatically that those smritis and epics contained neither moral maxims nor political ideas."[67] Periyar says that Brahmin writers had no regard for woman and therefore they have written such things.[68]

The credibility of Periyar's critique of popular Hindu scriptures can be questioned. Periyar had attempted to render literal interpretation of these scriptures. He had failed to highlight the moral, ethical, social and religious contents of these scriptures. At the same time, his claim can be justified because, firstly, his main aim was to curb Brahminism. Secondly, this was the way in which Brahmins presented and interpreted the scriptures. Thirdly, his intention was not to probe into these scriptures and find out the truth, but just to make the people to disrespect and disregard them. It is very important to note that, Periyar has emphatically stressed the human authorship of scriptures. This is very much relevant to a religiously pluralistic society. It helps people to be critical of their own religious scriptures.

For Periyar, there is no meaning in religious rituals, practices and festivals. He found them all as the crafty work of Brahmins to maintain their standard of life at the cost of non-Brahmins. All rituals are designed in such a way that all material benefits would go to the priests. To obtain the benefits periodically, they have framed rituals that are to be celebrated from cradle to grave. As different rituals are prescribed to different castes, rituals also in a way ignite caste system. Periyar held the view that all religious ceremonies are the result of superstitious beliefs. "The astrologer, the magician and the temple priest have always been the prime and the best exploiters of the people's greed and superstition. The trade of these three parasites are inter-connected and of mutual benefit."[69] Periyar went to the extent of ignoring all religious ceremonies and suggested priest less ceremonies.

He held that festivals are nothing, but the mere construct of priest-craft. The Brahmins have given religious flavor to some incidents that happened in some one's life. They are good chances to young boys and girls and prostitutes.[70] During festivals lot of money is simply wasted while millions of people died without food and other basic materials. Festivals are season for spreading cholera because devotees from different places come together, bath together, and live unhygienically. He failed to consider the social dimension of the festivals. It is important because festivals help people come together, share their joy, exchange gifts etc. They can facilitate cordial relations among people of varied faith and cultural affirmations.

John Kumar maintains that, according to Periyar caste system is reinforced by Hindu religion.[71] Anita Diehl says, "Periyar... became convinced that casteism and Hinduism were one and the same."[72] Periyar said, "Truly my endeavor is primarily intended to abolish caste.

But this matter of abolishing castes has made me speak about the abolition of God, religion, shastras and Brahmins as far as this country is concerned. Castes will go only after these four disappeared."[73] Periyar had rightly discerned that since religion is the source of caste it should be liquidated. When individuals begin to evaluate their own religions in the light of reason, many elements of exploitations and disharmony can be averted from the society and peace can be established. Ambedkar was of the view that, unless it is realized that, caste has religious sanction, it cannot be eradicated.[74] The same point is dramatically expressed by Periyar that, "when we meet a Brahmin we must greet him 'come on you bastard!' If he asks you why you say so, ask him why he used the term sudra in the sastras and statute books."[75]

Periyar's protest was vehement. During 1927-28, he campaigned, for burning Manu Darma Sastra and in 1942 for burning Ramayana and Periya Puranam.[76] In 1953 he broke images of Vinayaka (Ganesha).[77] Periyar and his followers burned parts of Indian constitution in 1957 because it encourages caste system.[78] The same year there was a great attempt to remove the title "Brahmin" from the hotel name boards. In 1960, Periyar burned pictures of Rama. In 1971 Periyar organized a superstition eradication conference in Salem. In this conference, Rama's image was taken in the procession and was beaten by sandals. Hindu deities were obscenely portrayed.[79] The effigy of Rama was burned publicly. Posters revealing the lust of and birth of Hindu deities were found everywhere. "A Salem poster portrayed Brahmin priests standing around Siva, looking as though, they were masturbating him while Parvathi, Siva's wife, held her hand out."[80] Many other photos depicted naked idols and erotic scenes from mythology.

He arranged remarriage to his niece when her husband died at an early age. Periyar also organized self-respect marriages, which are free from any Brahmin involvement. Without the aid of Brahmins, Periyar gave name to children. He even tried to cut the tuft from Brahmin's heads. He also effectively protested against temple prostitution. To propagate his ideas, Periyar started journals. His aim was to show that human dignity and welfare are more important than gods and religious affairs.

3.4 *Religious Concepts*

Periyar was of the opinion that the concepts of god, soul, sin, heaven and hell are unreal. These are fashioned after the interests of human beings. In his view "it is nothing but the existence of desires and unfulfilled wants that is responsible for the faith in God."[81] Man created God.[82] He argued against the existence of god. For instance, "if it is true, God cannot be seen or touched, is there any meaning in offering food for him and that too six times a day."[83] Why do people kill each other if god creates them all? His famous anti-god slogan is:

There is no god, no god at all
He who invented god was fool
He who propagated god was a scoundrel
He who worships god is a barbarian.[84]

In fact, Periyar's main aim was to reform the religion of its caste elements. Thus he said, "if the idol would get polluted by touch of the people, such a god is not required and the idol has to be broken to pieces and used for constructing good roads. Otherwise it may be put near the

river banks to be used for washing clothes."[85] Such gods are used to encourage discrimination in the society.[86]

Periyar said, "I can say that soul is a piece of protective false imagination to protect another false imaginary religion."[87] The idea of soul is developed to maintain the doctrine of rebirth. The idea of rebirth is the best means to preserve caste. Periyar asked, if the same souls are born again, how is it possible that the population increases. If some souls are saved, the population should dwindle. The idea that god will forgive sins persuade man to continue sinning. Heaven and hell are imaginary worlds of Brahmins to swindle money.

4. Implications for Social Reform

Following Periyar's rationalist interpretation of priestly religion it can be said that he did not reject religion as such. He accepted religion as a way of life. He was fully against superstitious elements and supernatural dimension of religion. He felt that, religion is the cause of all evils, particularly caste, in the society and source of exploitation. He stressed that doctrines and dogmas are mere human constructs. On the basis of these views, certain implications for social reform can be drawn.

The first implication is *self-respect.* It includes human dignity and freedom. Periyar maintained that religions should contribute to the self-respect of humanity. Religions and practices that ransom self-respect of humanity should be discarded. Once Periyar said, "any religion that operates against human dignity or ill-treats human beings should be destroyed."[88] He emphatically said, "even if I were to lead to live in hell, I would deem it better than the earthly one, if I were regarded there as a human being."[89] Another lucid expression is that "even if I were to live in a place where I would have to experience much worse sufferings than those of a hellish life, I would consider it a pleasant life than this mean, caste-ridden existence, if only I were respected as a man there."[90] He was concerned with all that affected any human effort or human progress.[91] He puts his mission, as "my work is the emancipation of the society. I am for the eradication of the high and the low. I want to restore dignity and respect for all men. I want equal justice and equal treatment and equal opportunities of all. Redemption of self-respect and restoration of dignity to mankind is the dedicated task of mine."[92] Since priestly Hinduism perpetuated exploitation of human beings and caste discrimination he condemned it to the extent, nobody had ever dared. He would accept religions if they are subject to reason and committed to human liberation from any oppressive structure, mainly caste.

Second implication is *right perception* of religion and issues. Periyar said, "the two things that render people irrational are god and religion."[93] He also maintained "God and religion are confusing the society."[94] Current Indian situation particularly political, religious and social warrants right perception about religion and the issues that are rocking the fundamental fabric of Indian society. People should know, how and when politics, religions and social issues are mixed together to confuse people and ascend into power. In the words of Periyar, "Human knowledge alone can remove the pain caused by human ignorance."[95]

Third implication is *serving humanity.* According to Periyar, service is not in the hands of god, but in the hands of people. He says, "belief in God is not in any way useful to help others."[96] Further, "if we are to share the food and work equally, there is no necessity for god."[97] He also said, "complete in doing service to others and thus seek your glory and

joy."[98] Although religions can inspire serving others, they can also become stumbling block to broader concept of service. Periyar suggests that service should transcend all religious differences because human welfare takes precedence over religious periphery.

The fourth implication is *accepting religion as a way of life*. Periyar said that he had no problem with people who accepted religion as a way of life in this world.[99] His understanding of the way of life is distinct:

> People cannot live without religion. I do not mean relationship between man and god or salvation, fate, pardon, reward in heaven. What I mean is that there must be regard between man and man through love, devotion, peace, brotherhood, honesty and unity. To say the same in understandable language, I would say religion is a way of life, a human movement. If you want to call it religion I have no objection: without even a religion of this type it would be difficult for man to live in this earth.[100]

Periyar's interpretation of religion as a way of life is based upon the present requirements of human life here on the earth. It is enlightening and appropriate to the Indian context where religions are turning out to be weapons of large-scale violence and avaricious power politics.

The fifth implication is *human progress*. Periyar's concern was not limited to individual alone but to society as a whole. According to him real progress of a society can take place only when the leaders of the society stop infusing of blind faith in fate, destiny, religion and god in the minds of people.[101] He also said, "My only goal is the welfare of the people."[102] Periyar did not reject faith as such but blind faith or superstitious beliefs. He knew that under the disastrous caste hierarchy, non-Brahmins couldn't find hope of development. The harsh caste rules barred them from all progressive efforts. His expectation was that religions would contribute to the development of entire society but not to a group of people. This attitude is essential in a multi religious context.

Sixth implication is *high regard for morality*. Since Periyar has accepted religion as a way of life, he demands morality in religious exercises. For him morality is more important because it is concerned with this world and life in this world. He says, "Religious devotion is for the individual. Character is for all. There is no loss if there is no devotion. Everything is lost if there is no character."[103] Again "God, religion, salvation, etc are an individual's and not a society's concern. Character and honesty are social in the sense that they involve a man's relationship with others."[104] It is also crucial to recognize that Periyar realized the need of sound morality for societal life.

Seventh implication is *harmonious life*. Periyar was eager to accept religion if it offered morality and harmony of life. He says, "I want a religion in which there is true brotherhood, unity and discipline."[105] He was of the opinion that the first obstacle for harmonious life in this world is religion.[106] Periyar's expectation has come as a prophetic realization in the present Indian context. Religions have been used to divide communities in an immoral way. He also suggested "people all over the world should untie. They should have an existence that does no harm to other beings. Means must be found for a peaceful life, free from envy, care, deceit, hatred and sorrow."[107] Further "we should not think that life is only for the sake of the individual. It is also for the welfare of others."[108] People should aim for a life, which is joyful, helpful to others and not causing difficulty to others.[109] Periyar's expectations look simple but that is what the whole world is longing for. Corrupt and

communalized power centers, looking for progress, can find appealing corrective measures from the harmonious vision of Periyar.

6. Conclusions

Periyar used "rationalist interpretation" as a hermeneutical principle to critique priestly Hinduism. His supreme aim was to eradicate caste discrimination from the society, which he suffered from his school days. Since religion was the cementing force behind the evil of caste, which is a social issue, he critiqued it from the point of life here in society. His entire contention was that religion as such is not abominable but the way in which it is interpreted to manipulate, subjugate, and enslave sections of the society. He was pained to witness the influence of caste even in the so-called national political party.

Since Brahmanic Hinduism perpetuated caste system with the aid of Hindu religious scriptures he condemned them and caricatured the scriptural characters to ventilate his unquenchable revulsion against the gruesome religious practices. His portrayal of religious doctrines further vindicates his utter unfaith and disappointment over the validity and utility of religions.

Periyar was unacceptable to many because his stark critique of priestly Hinduism unacknowledged the positive aspects of religions. Acceptance of the social dimension of religions alone does not suffice to the fuller realization of the positive potentials of religions.

Nevertheless, the implications from the critique of priestly Hinduism for social reforms stand stall. Periyar's persistent demand for self-respect for the people, earnest appeal for a right perception of religions and social issues, incessant plea for serving others, unremitting persuasion to the consideration of religion as a way of life, relentless urging for human progress, unwavering appreciation for morality and profuse summon for harmonious life are essential for any society aspiring for reforms. Although his approach was quite rugged, his contributions will always remain as beacon to many reforms.

NOTES

1. Periyar E. V. Ramasami is the founder of a Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu, called 'Dravida Kazhagam' (DK) in 1944. He is dearly called Periyar. He advocated social reforms prior to political.
2. The expression 'priestly Hinduism' is used as synonym to 'Brahmanic Hinduism'.
3. E. SA. Visswanathan, *The Political career of E. V. Ramasami Naicker,* Ravi & Vasanth Publishers, Madras, 1983, p.17.
4. Cf, John Kumar, S.J., "A Secular Response: Periyar E. V. Ramasami Naicker", *Emerging Dalit Theology,* Ed. by Xavier Irudayaraj, S.J., Jesuit Theological Secretariat, Madras, 1990, p.70.
5. Anita Diehl, *Periyar E. V. Ramasami: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India,* B. J. Publications, 54. Janpath, New Delhi, 1978, p.19.
6. M.D. Gopalakrishnan, *Periyar Father of Tamil Race,* Emerald Publishers, Annasalai, Madras, 1991, p.1.
7. *Collected works of Periyar EVR.*, 2nd revised ed., Vol.1, The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, "Periyar Thidal", 50, EVK Sampath Salai, Madras, pp, 2-3. Henceforth this book will be cited as collected works, Vol.1.
8. R. Paulraj, *Salvation and Secular Humanists in India,* The Christian Literature Society, Post Box – 501, Park Town, Madras – 3, 1988, p.111.
9. C.J. Anantha Krishnan, "The Early Years of Periyar", *The Rationalist,* Vol.XVIII, No.9, (September 1992), p.24.

10. Cf. A. Arivoli, *Periyar Sethathum Seiya Thavariyathum,* Anbarasi Veliyeetaham, North Street Porulvai, Sikkal, 1979, p.13.
11. E. SA. Visswanathan, *Op.cit.*, p.17.
12. John Kumar, S.J., *Op.cit.*, p.71.
13. E.M. Rajagopalan, *My Memories About thanthai Periyar Prior to 1930,* "Periyarism", G-6, Lloyds Estate, Madras – 14, 1985, p.28.
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