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Freedom from God: Periyar and Religion

Karthick Ram Manoharan

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Abstract

This paper looks at South Indian rationalist and anti-caste leader Periyar EV Ramasamy's approach to religion. Periyar saw Hinduism as a fundamental degradation of the non-Brahmin community in general, the Dalits in particular. Here, I draw parallels between Periyar and Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, especially with regards to their radical readings of religion and social power. Similar to Bakunin who inverts Christianity to look at Satan as the original free thinker, Periyar inverts Ramayana to consider the asura Ravana as a Dravidian hero and a victim of Brahminical supremacy. A militant atheist and an avowed enemy of God, Periyar was nevertheless aware of the importance of religion in social life, and I briefly explore his qualified support for Islam and Buddhism and his rationale for urging the lower castes to convert to these religions. I conclude that reading Periyar in the anarchist tradition might open up new ways of understanding his political thought.

1. Introduction

In 2018 and 2019, statues of 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar hereafter) were vandalized in places across the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, allegedly by Hindu nationalist activists. Separately, a petitioner had filed a case in the Madras High Court demanding that inscriptions below the statues of Periyar in the state—which read (in Tamil) “There is no god. He who created god is a fool. He who propagates god is a scoundrel. He who worships god is a barbarian”—be removed, for hurting religious sentiments. The Hindu reported on 6 September 2019 that the High Court dismissed this petition, stating that “The propagation of the philosophy of self respect, social reform, ending caste system, equal rights and Periyar's vision to establish a society of brotherhood can be deciphered, and according to him, the belief in God was the sole reason for the inequalities in society.” This however was not the first time a Periyar statue created controversy. Much earlier in 2002, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party had prevented the then Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati from installing a statue of Periyar in the city of Lucknow. In 1980, the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran denied permission for a Periyar statue in the town of Kanchipuram, allegedly be-

cause he wanted to appease the Kanchi Shankaracharya, a highly influential Hindu-Brahmin leader—however, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which was in the opposition, went to court and unveiled the statue that year (Kannan 2017, pp. 241–42). That the icon of Periyar would provoke Hindu upper-caste sentiments has been considered an unwritten truth over the decades.

Periyar (1879–1973) is seen by his supporters in South India as a rationalist, the key figure of the Dravidian Self-Respect Movement, an anti-caste campaigner, a champion of the social and political rights of the lower castes, a proto-feminist, and a fighter for greater autonomy for Tamil Nadu. He is however most popularly known for his atheism and, controversially, for his acerbic attacks on the Hindu religion and the Hindu gods.

This paper will provide a broad perspective on Periyar’s approach to religion in general. A comparative reading with the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) would be of much use here to look at Periyar in the anarchist tradition and to provide a basic theoretical ground to read him in this fashion. While there is evidence from history and from Periyar’s own writings that he attempted to engage with communist thought, there is little to suggest that he intellectually engaged with Bakunin or anarchism in general. Nor was anarchism of any political significance in south India in his time. Likewise, where the anarchists were opposed to the use of the state for even a transitional situation (Guérin 2010, p. 60), Periyar had a cautious approach to the state, and did not give a call for its immediate abolition. While his utopia of the future was a stateless society, he did fight for greater rights for the Dalits and lower castes, especially with regards to proportionate representation, within the existing state (Aloysius 2016). One might perhaps find here similarities to the strategies of state socialism than anarchism.

However, there is much in the essence of Periyar’s political thought to suggest a greater affinity with anarchist thinking, especially with respect to religion and social power. In essence, Periyar’s works reveal his greater interest in the ‘unmasking of power’ than replacing it with anything akin to a Soviet style dictatorship of the proletariat. Saul Newman argues that for Marx, the dominant class rules through the state, while, for Bakunin, the state rules through the dominant class (Newman 2007, p. 27). Bakunin further believed that the state and religion were bonded in a (un)holy marriage that prevented emancipation of the poor

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Volga. 2018. *The Liberation of Sita*. Translated by T. Vijay Kumar, and C. Vijayasree. Noida: Harper Perennial.

and the working classes, keeping them in a state of subservience. Periyar, while not explicitly anti-statist like Bakunin, nevertheless saw the Indian state as a hurdle for the emancipation of the Dalits and the other lower castes. Periyar argued that the Indian state and the Brahmins worked together to keep the lower castes as “children of prostitutes” (Ramasamy 2011b, p. 149). But, as Manoharan argues elsewhere, he does this without supporting an alternate nationalism or nation-state formation, with his argument as regards state power being that the Indian nation-state privileged Brahmins and condemned the Tamil people to being in the state of Shudrahood¹ and untouchability (Manoharan 2017, p. 77). He accused religion and law in general for “gender-biased moral prescriptions” which privileged men and curtailed the liberties of women (Ramasami 2009, p. 11), but it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore Periyar’s gender politics in detail. Periyar’s criticism of the Hindu religion, Brahmin supremacy and the Indian state was fundamentally a criticism of social power. In this, he has much in common with Bakunin and this comparison is worth pursuing, aiming to provide a coherent account of Periyar’s approach to religion.

After providing the historical context in which Periyar worked, I summarize Bakunin’s arguments from God and the State, his key text that discusses the interconnection of religious and secular power. Following that, I discuss Periyar’s inversion of the Hindu epic Ramayana to read the asura antagonist Ravana as a chivalrous Dravidian hero and the protagonist Rama, the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, as an enforcer of Aryan caste hierarchy. This builds on Paula Richman’s much earlier intervention that interrogated the radically different reading of the Ramayana in the Dravidian tradition. I then discuss Periyar’s approach to Islam and Buddhism, briefly comparing his approach with that of Malcolm X and Ambedkar. The reading attempted in this paper hopes to provide a holistic picture of Periyar’s approach to religion and atheism with respect to the emancipation of lower castes and the Dalits. He saw freedom from God to be a fundamental step towards freedom from the state of oppression, freedom towards a rational society and eventually, freedom from the state.

¹ Shudras were the lowest rung in the Hindu varna hierarchy, immediately above the untouchable castes.

2. Periyar's Historical Context

It is hard to establish the exact origins of Periyar's atheism. But it is worth discussing in brief the historical context and Periyar's own personal journey. Aloysius argues that the arrival of colonial modernity opened up new spaces for Dalit-subaltern groups. "Religious mobility, reinterpretation and reshaping of the existing religions, reviving of suppressed and forgotten ones, invention of new ones and even renouncing of all religions" was resorted to by such groups (Aloysius 2004, p. 8). The Madras Secular Society, which originated from the Hindu Free Thought Union, was very active for a decade between 1878 and 1888. They criticized Hindu scriptures and re-read the asuras and the rakshasas (generic names for demons/adversaries of the gods in Hindu mythology) as the native Dravidians who opposed Aryan domination (Kaali 2018, p. 45). Critical debates on the Hindu religion, whether it was to be reformed or done away with altogether, took place in the last decades of the 19th century, spilling over to the 20th century. Further, Dalit-subaltern intellectuals rediscovered the Buddha's teachings for "the greater purpose of expressing the modern value-form of egalitarian fraternity, solidarity and identity of the larger and inclusive society" (Aloysius 2004, p. 21). One such important figure in this period was the erudite Dalit scholar Iyothē Thass whose propagation of an emancipatory Tamil Buddhism greatly contributed to the school of Dravidianist thinking (ibid., p. 24). I will discuss Periyar's approach to Buddhism in a later section of this paper.

The Tamil poet Bharathidasan's Iraniyan Allathu Inaiyattrā Veeran (Iraniyan, The Hero Without Parallel) was a popular play in 1934 that revered the asura Hiranyakashipu as a noble figure and saw Narasimha, the man-lion avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, as a deceitful being. In the play "The asura is seen as representing the once-subjugated Dravidians whereas the god and his avatars are nothing but a hoax" (Kaali 2018, p. 47). Similarly, several plays were also composed by pro-Dravidian writers glorifying Ravana, the asura king and prime antagonist of the Hindu epic Ramayana, despite attempts at state-censorship. These readings aimed to subvert the Aryan "socio-cosmic order of the puranas" (ibid.). Not only the secular-rationalists, even non-Brahmin Saivite thinkers in the 19th century saw Ravana as a "primordial Dravidian person", who was "lauded as egalitarian, casteless, exemplary in moral terms, a democrat avant la lettre", while Rama was seen as "the anti-democratic oppressor" (Shulman

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2016, pp. 307–8). Social critics of this period “identified the creatures called rakshasas in Ramkatha² with indigenous inhabitants of the South whom they classify as ‘Dravidians’” and glorified Ravana (Richman 2008, p. 14). The influential neo-Saivite thinker Maraimalai Agidial criticized the Kamba Ramayana for “distorting reality and fooling the masses into believing in fabulous and fantastic tales” (Vaithees 2015, p. 244). Periyar operated in such a socio-political scenario.

Periyar was born in a religious, conservative family, in the intermediate Balija Naidu caste. Periyar's father Erode Venkatappa Naicker was a devout Vaishnavite. He named his second son ‘Ramasamy’ after the Hindu god Rama—little did he know that Ramasamy would later earn the reputation in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere for being the most trenchant, relentless critic and declared enemy of the god he was named after, and for pledging his loyalty to the cause of Ravana.

Periyar had but a five-year formal education from the age of six to eleven. Part of the reason why his education was stopped was because of his rebellious streak which made him defy caste boundaries and ritual prohibitions and fraternize with lower castes. Sami Chidambaranar, who wrote the authorized biography of Periyar, says that, as a teenager, Periyar used to mock the gurus, mendicants, and priests who visited his house to seek favors from his father (Chidambaranar 2016, p. 60). After facing troubles at home, Periyar decided to try the life of a wandering mendicant and travelled to Kasi. Facing the brunt of casteist discrimination—he was denied lodging while Brahmin mendicants were provided—and also witnessing the vices of the priests, he lost what little respect for religion he might have had. One can argue that Periyar's pilgrimage to one of the holiest places of Hinduism converted him into its inveterate enemy.

Chidambaranar speculates that two local personalities might have influenced Periyar's approach to religion and politics. One was Maruthaiya Pillai, a Tamil scholar, a strong opponent of caste, rituals and religion, who also belonged to Periyar's hometown Erode and was known as a blunt and bold intellectual (Chidambaranar 2016, p. 92). The other was Kaivolyasamiyar, a fierce critic of Brahminism (ibid.). Not much further is known about these personalities. K.M. Balasubramaniam, a contemporary of Periyar, calls Periyar a “utilitarian with a vengeance” (Balasubramaniam 2017, p. 7) and that while rationalism, atheism, and socialism

² Story of Rama.

are milestones in his career, the central theme that runs through them is anti-Brahminism (ibid., p. 26). In other words, Periyar was an atheist because he was anti-Brahminical.

Periyar set out on a tour of Western countries in December 1931. He travelled to England, France, Germany, Greece, USSR, Spain, and also Egypt and Turkey. He interacted with socialist groups in Berlin and Madrid. His longest stay in the West was in Russia, where he was greatly impressed by the socialist project. Periyar toured the Soviet Union for about three months, between February and May 1932. Venkatachalapathy provides an elaborate account of Periyar's travel in the USSR and his fascination with the Soviet socialist model, especially its promotion of atheism (Venkatachalapathy 2017, pp. 102–33). Periyar also registered with the Anti-Religious Propaganda Office in Moscow (Pandian 2007, p. 192). On his return, Periyar published translated works advocating atheism and socialism like *The Communist Manifesto*, Bhagat Singh's *Why I am an Atheist*, Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, Lenin's works on religion, Robert Ingersoll's essays and so on (Venkatachalapathy 2018, p. 9). His Soviet trip cemented his commitment to atheism. While he enthusiastically supported socialism, he was averse to the Indian Communist parties for being dominated by Brahmin leadership which would, he thought, not destroy but perpetuate hierarchy (Manoharan 2019, pp. 14–15). Periyar was fundamentally opposed to organized authority, even if he occasionally had to negotiate with it. Despite his stated sympathies towards the USSR, he did not believe that the Soviet model could be replicated in India without removing Brahmin supremacy and Hinduism.

Periyar wrote in his party paper *Kudiarasu* on 7 June 1931 that the non-Brahmins and the untouchable castes³, the poor and the working classes, if they desired equality and socialism, needed to destroy Hinduism first. In a speech in Colombo reproduced in *Kudiarasu* on 30 October 1932, he urges the rejection of god, religion, and nationalism in favor of humanism and self-respect. He further said, "Only in a country where there is no devotion to god or the nation-state will there be people who

³ The term 'Dalit' when it entered political parlance was meant to refer to members of all oppressed communities in India. Over the years, it has been used to refer largely to members of untouchable castes who fall under the administrative 'Scheduled Castes' category. I follow the same usage here. However, this term was unavailable during Periyar's time. Thus, while citing Periyar or paraphrasing his arguments with respect to such communities I use the term 'untouchable castes'.

tradition is the emphasis he places on freedom and his persistent criticism of all forms of social power. While he did not theorize about the state, he was of the opinion that in India, Hindu-Brahminical ideology informed the state. Where Bakunin believed that the state would use religion to mask its power, Periyar believed that Brahminism would use the state to mask its privileges. Bakunin wanted the individual to be liberated from god and the state simultaneously; Periyar believed that abolishing God was the first step towards abolishing the state.

A rationalist society, as imagined by Periyar, was fundamentally atheist and this was imperative to liberate the lower castes from oppression, as he believed that their material oppression was rooted in religious doctrine. Without freedom from god, men and women could not be free.

He noticed the conflation of the Hindu religion and its gods with the discourse of the Indian nation-state and, thus, he invoked the asura to not just lay claim to a non-Brahminic mythic past, but also to contest what he thought would be a Brahminical future in a neo-Ramraj. Like Bakunin, he believed that the state and religion were in an unholy nexus that prevented the liberties of the masses. Periyar was a relentless critic of social power, be it of religious or secular nature, and he believed in the power of reason to contribute to a genuine freedom of the people. Periyar's rationalist critique of religion came from below, from the vantage point of subaltern communities, as not just a commitment to a secular society, but more importantly as a radical opposition to the entrenched privileges of the elites. Placing him in the anarchist tradition might open up new ways of reading his approach to gender, nation and identity and contribute to new anti-caste critiques of social power in India.

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Buddhism an emancipatory option for the Dalits and the lower castes, but also a scientific, rationalist approach to life as such. “I certainly am a Buddha. Why, not only me, all of us who use our reasoning are the Buddhas,” Periyar asserted (*ibid.*, p. 27).

Periyar recognized that religion could provide a source of meaning and a resource for organization for the most marginal groups in the Indian society. This was a key reason for him to strategically endorse Islam. However, his perennial emphasis on the superiority of rationalism and his irreverence for a divine authority drew him closer to Buddhism, which he saw as a philosophy of reason that was a precursor to his own thinking. While he had great respect for Buddhism, he still did not formally convert because he believed that having no religion was better than following the best religion.

In a speech in 1972, a year before his demise, Periyar reiterated his admiration for Ambedkar’s contributions to the welfare of the oppressed castes, urging his followers that it was not enough to praise Ambedkar, but one must also follow his ideology. He defended Ambedkar as someone “who did not compromise on his ideas in face of opposition” and took issue with Gandhi for naming the untouchable castes as ‘Harijans’ (children of Hari, another name for the Hindu god Vishnu)—to Periyar, gods like Vishnu and Shiva were the reason for the oppression of the untouchable castes and hence, they should not be named after such deities (Ramasamy 2006a, pp. 42–43). In this speech, Periyar called for the oppressed castes to be politically united, for differences between Shudras and the untouchable castes to be shed, and for the total rejection of religion.

You should not have belief in god or religion. You must realize that the Hindu god and religion are responsible for your degraded position. You must primarily trust your reason. Your reason will help your emancipation, not god or religion.

(Ramasamy 2006a, p. 45)

6. Conclusions

In his criticisms of religion as an organized social power that protected the privileges of an elite at the expense of the masses, Periyar shared a lot in common with Bakunin. What brings him closer to the anarchist

do not suffer without proper work.” He condemned patriotism and nationalism for keeping the masses ignorant of affairs of other people in other countries and for preventing a global unity of the people, as recorded in an article on Kudiarasu on 20 November 1932. More than two decades later, he would write in *Viduthalai*, another party paper, on 3 December 1957 that the assumption that Hinduism is their religion and that India is their state led to the downfall of the Tamils as a nation. In 1969, he described his mission as the following “I am a reformer of the human society. I do not care about country, god, religion, language, or the state. I am only concerned about the welfare and growth of the human society” (Ramasamy 2006b, p. 95).

Periyar was militantly atheist and believed that religion and god were harmful for a progressive society. Yet, in certain contexts, Periyar recognized the strategic value of conversion, and he endorsed Islam and Buddhism. I argue in a later section that between the two, Periyar was more sympathetic to Buddhism, as he did not view it as a theistic system but as a philosophy of rationalism.

3. Bakunin—Against (Divine) Authority

Mikhail Bakunin, a leading figure in the anarchist movement, was a contemporary of Karl Marx and also one of the strongest critics of the Marxist variety of socialism. One of the key criticisms of Bakunin against Marxism was in its assumption that state power could be appropriated by the working class and be used as a power to replace former capitalist power. Chomsky notes that “The question of conquest or destruction of state power is what Bakunin regarded as the primary issue dividing himself from Marx”, further adding that Bakunin anticipated the oppressive bureaucracy of such a state (Chomsky 2014, p. 6). Bakunin believed that power and authority tended to reproduce itself and even the creation of a workers’ state would inevitably create a privileged class that would work against the interests of the majority. The essence of this anarchist tradition was that “power is always illegitimate, unless it proves itself to be legitimate” (*ibid.*, p. 110). Newman defines anarchism as “an unmasking of power” (Newman 200, p. 67) and argues that to the anarchists, the state was “an autonomous institution with its own logic” and, thus, it could never be a neutral revolutionary tool (*ibid.*, p. 22). Further, to the

anarchists, “Freedom can never come through the agency of authority” (ibid., p. 28).

Bakunin considers reason and rebellion as an innate faculty of humankind and believes that these should be mobilized in a struggle against both divine and secular authority. He believed that “the very essence of religion is the disparagement of humanity for the greater glory of God” (Arich 1970, p. vii). To Bakunin, the power to think and the desire to rebel were the faculties that differentiated man from the ape. Yet, social power gave birth to two institutions that prevented people from the full and free exercise of these faculties—namely religion and state. Bakunin’s main target here is Christianity, given that it was the dominant religion in Europe. In a brief but passionately argued section, he undertakes a hyper-literal reading of the Bible. To Bakunin, the Biblical god was “certainly the most jealous, the most vain, the most ferocious, the most unjust, the most bloodthirsty, the most despotic, and the most hostile to human dignity and liberty” while Satan, the arch-fiend, was “the eternal rebel, the first freethinker and the emancipator of worlds” (Bakunin 1970, p. 10). He sees Satan as an emancipator who compels the first humans to think and rebel against divine authority.

Bakunin, who obviously does not believe in the historical credibility of divine scripture, nevertheless uses it as a reference point to prove that this divinity is constructed on unjust, immoral principles and hence must be rejected. We will see how Periyar uses a similar strategy with respect to the Ramayana in the next section. Bakunin believed that the lack of critical education in Europe kept the masses, especially in rural areas, in the thrall of religion that over time, obedience to priestly authority became a “mental and moral habit” (Bakunin 1970, p. 16). Further, the miserable conditions brought about by capitalism in Europe made the poor seek refuge in alcohol and religion, “debauchery of the body or debauchery of the soul”—the third and only valid alternative for genuine salvation being the social revolution (ibid.).

To Bakunin, the essence of every religious system was “impoverishment, enslavement, and annihilation of humanity for the benefit of divinity” and further, “The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice” (Bakunin 1970, pp. 24–25). God and religion are thus a condition of man’s slavery and an impediment to his freedom. Inverting Voltaire’s famous

and secular pieties. From his rationalist ethical standpoint though, he stood closer to Buddhism.

Aloysius argues that modern Buddhism in India was reworked by thinkers like Lakshmi Narasu, Ayothee Thass, Ambedkar and Periyar in a “uniform socio-political and moral trajectory”, moving away from nationalist perspectives of history and also from a rigid focus on rituals and personal salvation to “modern public virtues of universal justice, equality and liberty” (Aloysius 2005, pp. 4–5). Plausibly, Oriental scholarship as well as Dalit-Buddhist intellectuals who saw Buddhism as a revolt against Brahminism influenced Periyar. Aloysius claims that Periyar sought to follow the Buddha on social rationality towards “negation of caste in the public sphere and all round rationalization of the collective lives of the emergent masses” (ibid., p. 5). He considered Buddhism to be above all other religions “a sort of a natural-rational religion for the modern man” (ibid., p. 7). One could push this argument and say that Periyar saw Buddhism as a rational religion that was an end to all religions. He saw the Buddha as the only individual in Indian history who “opposed the concepts of god, soul, salvation, hell and propagated reason” (Ramasamy 2013, p. 80).

Ambedkar argued that “Inequality is the official doctrine of Brahmanism. The Buddha opposed it root and branch. He was the strongest opponent of caste and the earliest and staunchest upholder of equality” (Ambedkar 2009, p. 51). Complementing him, Periyar said that the “radical philosophy of the Buddha” was marginalized due to a “Brahminical conspiracy” and was confined to individuals and lower caste settlements (Ramasamy 2005, p. 10). He called Buddhism a “philosophy of reason” which, owing to its rational nature, evoked “fierce Aryan opposition” (ibid., p. 12). Buddhism, to Periyar, offered a freedom from God and a freedom towards rationalism.

Periyar saw in the Buddha an inspiration for the rationalist, atheist, and anti-caste politics of the Dravidar Kazhagam. Periyar argued that Buddhism was founded on the belief of no god, no soul, and no belief in the permanency of anything, and since it was based on investigation and reason, it could not be called a religion in the conventional sense (ibid., pp. 19–20). He called Buddhism “an atom bomb to Aryanism” and supported Ambedkar’s statement of his disbelief in the Hindu gods and his leaving the Hindu religion (ibid., p. 22). Inspired by the thoughts of Dalit leaders like Narasu, Thass and Ambedkar, Periyar not only saw in

only to fight “the devilish, dangerous and cruel snake of Brahminism and Hinduism or at least to escape from the effect of its poison” (Ramasamy 2004, p. 16). Periyar believed that if all Dravidians followed Islam “there would not be a caste or community called the Brahmins” because, according to him, only Islam transcended caste whereas other religions adjusted to it (ibid., pp. 18–19).

One might draw a parallel between Periyar’s advocacy of Islam and that by Malcolm X—like Periyar, Malcolm X believed that Islam was a transracial religion, “the one religion that erases from its society the race problem” (Malcolm and Haley, p. 454). He also saw Islam as the only religion that “had the power to stand and fight the white man’s Christianity for a thousand years” (ibid., p. 486). On a similar note, Periyar claimed in an article in *Viduthalai* on 27 January 1950 that the Mughals were a force who struggled to destroy Aryan culture for centuries. The arguments of both these leaders were rooted in a selective, even distorted, reading of history, but the idea of Islam as a muscular, confrontational, anti-establishment force suited their politics of the present. For instance, Periyar argued that M.A. Jinnah and his Muslim followers were able to attain their political demands only because of their ability to be violent (Ramasamy 2011a, p. 302).

Yet, the very same Periyar later, in the aftermath of the India-Pakistan war of 1965, would declare “I say that Pakistani aggression should be defeated ... Why? Because Pakistan seeks to annex our land with theirs and intends to make it an Islamic state” (Ramasamy 2019, p. 302). (However, he adds that he would welcome a Russian invasion because that would bring communism to India!) Periyar’s support to Islam, I would argue, was neither absolute nor unconditional but strategic and contextual. Malcolm X was a believer who saw Islamic states as egalitarian—Periyar was a non-believer who fundamentally opposed the idea of state religion and religious states. He encouraged conversion to Islam not because Islam was the best of all religions, but because he thought that Islam provided a social avenue for confrontation with Brahminism and caste. Like his appropriation of Ravana to fight hegemonic nationalistic narratives that celebrated Rama as an ideal, his support for Islam also intended to contest the imagination of Hinduness as Indianness. In Ravana and in Islam, he saw figures that were demonized by the Indian-Hindu nationalist elites and he sought to conjure these ‘demons’ to challenge the gods of the mainstream religious

phrase, Bakunin says that “if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him” (ibid., p. 28).

In a sense, Bakunin was a child of the Enlightenment insofar as he believed in the supremacy of reason over religious beliefs. He did not reject the role of social power provided it was democratized—for instance, the power of society to regulate the behavior of its constituent individuals from doing harmful activities. This power, he believed, became less effective as a universal moral authority and served the interests of particular cliques when it became invested in, and the exclusive property of, oppressive institutions, most notably, religion and the state. In this, he saw irrationalism as a weapon in the hand of the statist, be they theological or secular, to dupe the masses and curtail their liberties.

Privilege and power for an elite class would lead to their tyranny and, thus, the only valid and universal social law was the law of equality, “the supreme condition of liberty and humanity” (Bakunin 1970, p. 31).

4. Defying the Hindu God and the Hindu State

Periyar also believed that an elite ‘class’ in India stood in the way of the law of equality. This elite class, the Brahmins, used the Hindu religion to ensure their superiority in society and the state was an instrument to cement this. Pandian details how Periyar used the dominant narrative of Hinduism, as shaped by Orientalist scholarship and the native Brahmin intellectuals, to conflate Hinduism with Aryanism and Brahminism. He attacked the Hindu religion for degrading women, the lower castes and the Dalits and for posing obstacles to their emancipation (Pandian 2007, pp. 196–205). Pandian argues:

Setting up rationality and religion as oppositional, he also claimed that self-willed reason alone could restore the real worth of those enslaved by religion ... Treating reason as the foundation, he applied his rationality to religious texts and mythologies, and read them literally to show them up as tales of fantasy. He debunked religious practices, rituals, festivals. In short, basing himself on rationalism, Ramasamy engaged with Hinduism as a unified field of false beliefs.

(Pandian 2007, p. 197)

Fundamental thematic similarities with Bakunin can be observed here. Periyar saw religion as an institution of social power that privileged the Brahmins as an elite caste group to the detriment of equality and liberty of women and lower castes in the Hindu hierarchy. Periyar located the oppression of these groups not merely in class terms like Bakunin, but also with respect to their marginalized identities. He believed that Hinduism was incapable of self-reform and that only its removal could once and for all eradicate casteism. In a pamphlet published in 1944, Periyar outlined his utopian vision of what would replace religion (Ramasamy 2012). He believed that science and rationality would displace god and that the West (he was referring to the USSR) was setting an example of such a society. Along with god, states, wars, money, slavery, and oppression of women would also end and there would be a universal community where the oppression of any would provoke the indignation of all (Ramasamy 2012, p. 7). One of the key obstacles in the journey towards this utopia were the “Hindu religionists”, who were mired in superstition and an admiration for mythical pasts (Ramasamy 2012, p. 4). He saw the campaign for rationalism as vital to challenge the Hindu religionists and empower the lower castes. In his words, “What I am doing is not political work—but a work for rationalism! Rationalism must spread among the people. Rationalism must be taught to those people who have been brutally oppressed and they must be humanized” (Ramasamy 2013, p. 265). Rationalism was the life of humanity, and this life was denied to the lower castes by the Brahmins, god, religion, and the scriptures (ibid., p. 290).

Periyar was critical of both the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins who upheld the Hindu religion. He argued that the imitation of Brahmin practices “has resulted in our degrading and enslaving womankind and making women walking corpses”, calling for an end of such traditions (Ramasamy 1992, p. 97). He routinely condemned the Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Hindu puranas for their degradation of women. Locating the evils of misogyny and casteism in the Hindu gods, he called for their abolition. Echoing Bakunin’s rejoinder to Voltaire, he says in an article on Kudiarasu dated 17 February 1929, “It is said that God created untouchability. If that is true, the first thing to do would be to abolish such a God. If God is unaware of this cruel practice, then

that he supported at different contexts were Islam and Buddhism. With regards to Islam, Matthew Baxter convincingly argues that the core idea behind Periyar’s support for mass conversion to Islam was “a change of body, the somatic, where the embrace of different practices and an alteration of how one is seen in the world enables the fulfillment of democratic promise” (Baxter 2019, p. 266). Baxter traces Periyar’s support for Islam as an inspiration for the mass conversions of Dalits in the village of Meenakshipuram in 1981 and argues that this was a subaltern way of not just protesting against exclusion, but also negotiating with the demands of modernity and democracy. It is of interest to note here that T. Thirumavalavan, arguably the most prominent contemporary Dalit leader from Tamil Nadu, recently defended his Ph.D. thesis on the Meenakshipuram conversions. In his thesis, he argues that the leaders of the conversion keenly followed the self-respect principles of Periyar (Thirumavalavan 2018, p. 245) and that the Self-Respect Movement gave the marginalized a realization of the importance of their identity (ibid., p. 254).

As early as the 1920s, Periyar stated that those who believed in self-respect must encourage the conversion of the untouchable castes to Islam. He dismissed the critics who were worried about the ‘violent nature’ of Islam and argued that it was precisely this ‘violent nature’ that might gain respect for such marginalized communities. He writes:

Some have written to me objecting that the Mohammedan religion engenders violent nature I am of the opinion, that if this is true, then that itself is a good reason for recommending Islam to the Untouchables in order to abolish their untouchability. If it is true that Islam gives birth to violent tendencies, won’t it be that those who have joined it, at least hereinafter not behave so slavishly? And again, won’t it be that others considering their violent nature would, out of fear, likely to be respectful towards them?

(Ramasamy 2004, p. 13)

When Periyar talks about Islam, he rarely refers to the theological aspects of it, but more on what he believed could be its social impact. He argues that Islam is an antidote to the malady of Hinduism that degraded the lower castes and the untouchables. He says “I am not an agent of Islam nor do I preach Islam”, but he advocates conversion to this religion

social and political consequences. He also did not see moral qualities in the Ramayana, and he argued that the mere ancientness of a scripture was not proof of greatness but of its irrelevance. In a speech in 1963, he asked “Shouldn’t our scholars expose the limitations, crimes, foulness, and vulgarity in the epics? Shouldn’t they inform the Tamils and the south-erners that the Ramayana was composed to degrade them?” (Ramasamy 2013, p. 145) He attacked the DMK for building statues for Kamban, as he believed that Kamban’s work was inimical to social egalitarianism and, thus, its literary merit alone could not be considered positively. Periyar confessed “Since I work for social progress, not only do I have no affinity for god, religion and caste, I also have none for language and literature” (Thirumavelan 2018, pp. 292–93).

To Periyar, Rama represented an invading Aryan force that stood for Brahminism and the subjugation of the lower castes, while Ravana was a Dravidian native who resisted this invasion. Periyar engages in a blend of literal and metaphorical reading here. In Valmiki’s Ramayana, both Rama and Ravana are North Indian kings, whereas in Kamba Ramayana, both Rama and Ravana are implied to be Tamil-speaking kings. While Rama in both these texts is shown to uphold the Brahminical order, neither suggests that Ravana stood for an anti-caste egalitarianism. Periyar pursues here a strategy similar to Bakunin’s reading of Satan, where he sees Ravana as a figure that resisted divinely inspired tyranny. Periyar’s defense of Ravana should not be seen as his belief in the historical presence of this mythological character just as Bakunin’s inversion of Satan cannot be seen as his belief in the Antichrist. Periyar strategically appropriates Ravana to counterpose a Dravidian icon against what he saw as an Aryan icon, which he associated with the unjust exercise of high-caste social and political power. Ravana, the noble asura, to Periyar was a useful accessory from mythological sources to counter the hegemonic claims of the Hindu God and the Hindu State, nothing more.

5. Periyar, Islam and Buddhism

Despite his atheist convictions Periyar, like Ambedkar, recognized the socio-cultural importance of conversion. While atheism and rationalism remained Periyar’s lifelong commitments, at occasions, he urged the Dalits and the lower castes to convert to other religions. Two of the religions

he should be abolished sooner. If he is unable to prevent this injustice or stop the unjust, then he has no business to exist in any world.”

Periyar mercilessly lampooned Hindu scriptures and myths in his speeches and articles. The newspapers he edited, most notably Kudiarasu and Viduthalai, routinely carried satires and caricatures about Hindu gods. The Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and their avatars, other smaller but popular gods like Indra, Ganesha and Karthikkeya, found themselves to be the objects of critical ridicule. Besides seeking to show that the stories of these gods were fanciful and irrational, Periyar and his followers also sought to portray them as upholders of a Brahminical caste order. Of all the major Hindu texts, three were given special attention by Periyar—the Manu Smriti, the Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita—a key reason being that “all three texts attempted to transcend sectarian affiliations among Hindus and present a unified Hinduism” (Pandian 2007, p. 198). It is worthy to note here that no less a person than M.K. Gandhi placed the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita at the core of his Indian national(ist) imagination, while other more conservative Hindu leaders saw the Manu Smriti and its rigid social code as a guide book for an ideal social order. Ambedkar launched a rigorous and critical attack on these texts, especially the Manu Smriti and the Bhagavad Gita, and his work also greatly inspired Periyar’s critique of Hinduism. Periyar however gained considerable notoriety for his radical re-reading of the Ramayana and his inversion of the asura Ravana as a lower caste hero. That there were several other diverse, non-canonical, even transgressive readings of the Ramayana have been recorded by Richman (1991, 2008). As far as 20th century Tamil Nadu is concerned, Richman notes, that “the proponents of a separate Tamil state identified with Ravana” and that Periyar read Ravana in this political context, “as a paragon of South Indian virtue” (Richman 1991, pp. 14–15).

Ramraj, literally, the Rule of Ram, was seen by prominent Indian-Hindu leaders as an ideal state “characterized by perfect justice, order, and stability” (Richman 1995, p. 633). Ramraj has been invoked by literal and metaphorical readings of the Ramayana and has been used by Hindu liberals and conservatives alike as a past utopia that serves as a model for a future nation-state ideal. C. Rajagopalachari, a prominent Congress leader from Tamil Nadu, “thought that the newly independent Republic of India should strive to recreate Ramraj, a vision of society he admired deeply” (ibid.) Rajagopalachari, a contemporary of Periyar, also

published popular retellings of the Ramayana, in both Tamil and English, which continue to have good sales in the market even today. In Tamil Nadu's politics, especially with regards to religion, he and Periyar were seen to be in opposite camps (though they were good friends in personal life). The Times of India in an article on 29 September 1954 called their longstanding disagreement "a battle for religion", with Periyar representing "iconoclasts relentlessly preaching godlessness" and Rajagopalachari representing "godfearing people urging with great zeal the need for piety and faith." One could be excused for thinking that Rajagopalachari stood for the devas (the Hindu gods) and Periyar for the asuras, their enemies.

Periyar vocally challenged the projection of Ramraj as an ideal state. To Periyar, Ramraj was symbolic of the supremacy of Brahminism against the interests of the lower castes, of North Indian-Aryans over the South Indian-Dravidians, of patriarchy over women's liberation, of hierarchy over equality. Paula Richman argues that to Periyar "Ramraj was a pernicious brahminic fiction designed to keep nonbrahmins from challenging the status quo" (Richman 1995, p. 633). Challenging liberal and conservative Hindu leaders alike, Periyar read the Ramayana "as a fictionalized account of the historical Aryan attack upon and subjugation of Dravidians" and "he sought to demythologize and discredit the epic" (ibid., p. 634). One could ask why Periyar should engage with Ramayana and its concepts in such depth if he did not believe in it. Periyar argued that the Ramayana, both Valmiki's Sanskrit version and Kamban's Tamil version, continued to have moral and social influence among the Tamils of his time, and, hence, it was a task of the rationalists to expose the true nature of these texts (Periyar 2012, pp. iv–v). In Periyar's view, Ramraj represented a Hindu dystopia that contributed to the benefit of the few at the expense of the many. Richman aptly summarizes why the opposition to Ramayana was seen as important by Periyar and his followers:

Ramasami also considered oppression by outsiders to be a historical fact, but the oppressors were located in or derived from the Aryan north, and were not external to the subcontinent. The imperial powers were Rama and his armies, who killed Dravidian leaders and imposed a brahminic social hierarchy upon them. Furthermore, the Aryan descendants of Rama were still at work in New Delhi, legitimating caste privilege to keep Dravidians subjugated. While others celebrated inde-

pendence, Ramasami saw himself as still struggling against Aryan tyranny.

(Richman 1995, p. 650)

Both God and State were seen as impediments to Periyar's project of creating rational, casteless, liberated individuals⁴. And in his struggle, he invoked the asura Ravana as an ally. Referring to the Valmiki Ramayana, Periyar praises the good qualities of Ravana (incidentally, he uses the same text to highlight the negative qualities of Rama!) such as courage, heroism, strength, knowledge and benevolence (Periyar 2018, p. 49). Periyar infers that Ravana opposed the devas and the priests because they conducted sacrifices of living creatures. He conducted his governance in a highly civilized manner. While his sister Surpanakha was insulted and mutilated by Rama and Lakshmana, he did not resort to violent behavior against Sita, though she was under his power.⁵ Periyar further fancifully alleges that Sita wanted to be taken away by Ravana⁶ (Periyar 2018, p. 50). Periyar selectively highlighted—even exaggerated—the virtues of Ravana and argued that "since Ravana and his group were the enemies of the Brahmins, they were shown as brutes and monsters" (ibid., p. 63). With his unique sense of satire, after enumerating the virtues of Ravana and the faults of Rama from the same sources, Periyar says that "Since the Brahmins have depicted the incarnation of God in such an irresponsible manner, we must wonder what glory is there to being God or an avatar of God" (Periyar 2015, p. 35).

Periyar also did not want to read epics like the Ramayana for their literary value and instead sought to attack them for what he saw as their

⁴ In her essay, Richman also notes how the ideological state apparatus of the Indian state, like government-run radios and schools, propagated Rajagopalachari's Ramayana, while the repressive state apparatus clamped down on Periyar and his followers when they sought to publicly challenge the Ramayana.

⁵ Several versions of the Ramayana say that Ravana was unable to lay his hands on Sita against her will because of an earlier curse from a minor deity which prevented him from touching any woman against her consent. Periyar, however, omits this and reads Ravana as an inherently chivalrous person.

⁶ Volga, a prominent Telugu feminist writer, who herself is the author of a critical retelling of the Ramayana from Sita's vantage point, records similar perspectives from her predecessors. She notes that Chalam, a highly acclaimed Telugu writer, presented Sita as someone who saw Ravana's love for her to be more sincere than that of Rama (Volga 2018, p. 102). Chalam was also a rationalist and a contemporary of Periyar and one may speculate whether he was informed by the latter's critique of the Ramayana.