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Race Religion and Nationalism in Periyar's Thought
Caste Critique Dravidian Identity and the Limits of Historical Essentialism

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Abstract

This article examines E. V. Ramasamy's use of the Aryan–Dravidian distinction as an instrument of anti-caste criticism, cultural reconstruction, and political mobilization. Using a qualitative documentary approach, it reorganizes the principal themes of his racial thought around colonial knowledge, linguistic identity, religious authority, self-respect, and the demand for Dravida Nadu. The central argument is that Periyar's category of race cannot be understood adequately as either a consistent biological doctrine or a purely figurative language of resistance. It combined historical assertions about descent with a normative attack on inherited privilege. The article distinguishes the political efficacy of this framework from the evidentiary status of its accounts of ancient society. Particular attention is given to the difference between linguistic classification and racial ancestry, the uncertain relationship between the Indus civilization and Dravidian languages, and the limits of inferring secularism from archaeological remains. It also considers the tension between collective non-Brahmin solidarity and inequalities within that coalition. Periyar's enduring contribution lies in linking freedom to social dignity and the dismantling of caste authority. His historical binaries nevertheless require critical qualification when they assign permanent moral characteristics to communities or treat regional identity as proof of common ancestry.

Keywords: E. V. Ramasamy; Periyar; Dravidian identity; caste; race; rationalism; Self-Respect Movement; Dravida Nadu.

1. Introduction

E. V. Ramasamy, widely known as Periyar, occupies a distinctive position in South Indian intellectual history because he connected questions often studied separately: the authority of religion, the organization of caste, the public status of language, and the legitimacy of nationalism. His account of an Aryan–Dravidian conflict furnished these questions with a common historical vocabulary. In that account, inherited social subordination was neither inevitable nor sacred. It was the result of domination and therefore something that collective action could challenge. Understanding this vocabulary requires attention to both its emancipatory purpose and the historical claims through which it operated.[1]

The problem is interpretive as well as historical. Reading every reference to race as a literal statement about biological descent obscures the social transformations Periyar sought. Treating the same language as entirely metaphorical, however, conceals its recurrent claims about outsiders, original inhabitants, civilizational character, and collective responsibility. The article therefore asks how race functioned within his critique of caste; how language and representations of antiquity contributed to Dravidian solidarity; and how the ideal of self-respect connected religious dissent to political autonomy. It further asks where this framework becomes vulnerable to the essentialism it opposed.

[1] A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan, "Introducing an Iconoclast," in *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar*, ed. A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 8.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

The argument developed here is that Periyar's racial thought worked through a productive but unstable combination of historical narrative and political ethics. The historical narrative identified an original community and an intrusive order of domination. The political ethics demanded the destruction of humiliation and inherited privilege. These elements reinforced one another when ancestry supplied confidence to subordinated people. They became less compatible when common descent displaced the universal principle that no person should be subordinated by birth. A critical assessment must preserve this distinction rather than reducing the movement to either liberation or prejudice.

The discussion moves from method and conceptual distinctions to colonial classifications, community formation, archaeology and religion, de-Aryanization, cultural pride, self-respect, and territorial politics. A final analytical section evaluates the relationship between mobilizing identity and universal equality. The focus is intellectual history and political interpretation; the article does not attempt a genetic reconstruction of South Asian populations or a comprehensive assessment of contemporary Tamil electoral politics.

2. Method and Conceptual Distinctions

The study employs qualitative documentary synthesis and contextual interpretation. Its source base comprises scholarship on the movement, including studies of colonial caste classification, Dravidian cultural nationalism, Periyar's anti-Aryanism, and the Self-Respect Movement. Selected publication details are checked against publisher records, while an official archaeological account and the text of the Sixteenth Constitutional Amendment provide limited checks on two contested historical discussions. The analysis is thematic rather than a systematic review: it compares how related ideas function within an argument instead of counting positions across a complete corpus.

Three levels of statement are kept separate. The first consists of claims attributed to Periyar or to movement discourse. The second concerns historical and archaeological propositions that require evidence independent of their political usefulness. The third consists of the article's interpretation of the relationship between those claims and the movement's objectives. Accordingly, a statement that Periyar represented early Dravidian society as egalitarian does not establish that such a society existed in that form. Nor does recognizing the mobilizing power of an origin story require accepting its description of population history.

Race, language, caste, and nation are related here without being treated as interchangeable. A language family describes historical relationships among languages. It does not by itself establish a biologically uniform population, a single religion, or a shared political will. Caste refers to institutions and practices of ranked social differentiation; these can be racialized without becoming identical to ancestry. Nationalism is a political claim about collective membership, authority, and territory. These distinctions make it possible to explain how a linguistic designation became a political community while avoiding the inference that the community's boundaries were fixed by nature.[2]

The term Brahmanism is used analytically for the authority and social practices Periyar associated with caste hierarchy and scriptural sanction. It should not be read as a statement that all Brahmins held identical views or that all non-Brahmins opposed caste. Likewise, Aryan and Dravidian are presented as historically deployed categories, particularly when their meanings exceed linguistic usage. This terminology is necessary to represent the subject

[2] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 56–57.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

accurately, but the article does not adopt claims of inherent racial superiority or collective moral guilt.

A further methodological caution concerns chronology. Nineteenth-century philology, early twentieth-century political mobilization, later archaeological discoveries, and present-day assessments belong to different evidentiary settings. Later discoveries may illuminate questions that concerned Periyar, but they cannot be described as evidence that he possessed at the time. Similarly, recent scholarship may reconstruct his thought without making its authors contemporaries of the movement. Maintaining these distinctions prevents retrospective confirmation from taking the place of historical explanation.

3. Colonial Knowledge and the Aryan–Dravidian Framework

E. V. Ramasamy, popularly known as Periyar, located the discourse of race at the intersection of caste, language, and cultural authority. His racial paradigm emphasized a politically consequential distinction between an allegedly intrusive Aryan order and a subordinated Dravidian population. Its practical concern was how inherited classifications organized power, status, and the possibility of resistance.[3]

E.V. Ramaswamy, the leader of the Dravidian movement in South India, rejected much of what is commonly regarded as Hinduism, portraying it instead as an Aryan imposition upon the indigenous Dravidian population. In his interpretation, the Aryans, upon invading the ancient land of the Dravidians, mistreated its people and constructed a false and distorted history.

At the heart of his racial theory was the dichotomy between Aryan and Dravidian, a formulation that gained traction during the colonial era when Western Indologists posited the Aryan Invasion Theory. Periyar appropriated and inverted this colonial narrative: whereas colonial scholars like William Jones (1746–1794) often valorized the Aryans as civilizers. Periyar painted them as colonizers who brought with them caste, Brahmanism, patriarchy, and religious obscurantism. He argued that Dravidians were the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, egalitarian, rational, and matriarchal who were subjugated by incoming Aryans.[4]

Periyar's concept of race was greatly influenced by anti-caste ideology and early twentieth-century Dravidian linguistic nationalism. Periyar used the term 'Aryan' to refer to both oppressor races and repressive religious-cultural ideology.He saw Brahmins as racial outsiders representing Aryan intruders who continued to dominate socio-political and religious spheres through Sanskritization and caste hierarchy. He urged the non Brahmans that they should not internalise casteism and should not subscribe to the notions of caste hierarchies rather they should have egalitarian spirit themselves, and this very much sums up Periyar’s ideal of self respect as well. His opposition to Brahmanical rule was not only cultural, but also racially, identifying it as an alien imposition on Dravidians.

Furthermore, he used "race" as a rhetorical instrument to foster solidarity among non-Brahmin castes, advocating for a pan-Dravidian identity. Collin Sibley sees it as a deliberate counter-hegemony aimed at dismantling caste and restoring indigenous dignity. Periyar's

[3] Karthick Ram Manoharan, “Periyar’s Anti-Aryanism: A *Genealogy*, a Synopsis, and a Critique,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar*, ed. A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 129–46, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605342.009.

[4] Edwin F. Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 40–50.

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Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

racial theory thus served not as a biological determinant, but rather as a historical-political concept for decolonizing South Indian identity.[5]

This racial theory was influenced by colonial-era Indological and anthropological study, which divided Indian inhabitants into Aryan and Dravidian races based on language, physical characteristics, and socioeconomic standing. While much of this literature was Eurocentric and even pseudo-scientific, Periyar took these concepts and politicized race as a strategy of resistance. He stressed genetic, linguistic, and cultural differences to promote Dravidian identity and undermine the Brahmin caste's claims to social and religious superiority. His paradigm connected race directly to caste oppression, describing the caste system as an Aryan instrument to perpetuate racial and social superiority over Dravidians.

Periyar's theoretical framework has a strong rationalist and anti-religious component. He denounced Brahmanical Hinduism as an alien, superstitious religion created by Aryans to control Dravidian culture. Instead, he proposed that early Dravidian culture was free of caste and religious dogma, with a focus on practical rationalism and social equality. This rationalist critique was not just a rejection of religious authority, but also a call for social reform and self-esteem among Dravidians, pushing them to discard caste titles and practices that maintained their servitude. He mentioned two years before his death that caste will only disappear if one of the four things i.e, God, Religion, Shastras and Brahmans disappear since he believed that caste was constructed out of these four.[6]

Politically, Periyar's racial theory gave momentum to the desire of Dravida Nadu - a sovereignty of the Dravidians, free from Aryan and North Indian political control. He considered both the Indian National Congress and larger Indian nationalism a vehicle for maintaining Aryan domination. Accordingly, his racial schema provided the basis of a larger national project incorporating other objectives: social justice, linguistic rebirth, and political self-rule for Dravidians; this fusion also entangled race with nationalism and anti-colonial resistance. The demand for separation eventually waned, but the racial paradigm left an indelible impact on the Dravidian political identity and social movements of Tamil Nadu.

The significance of this appropriation lies in its reversal of the moral meaning attached to classification. A narrative that could celebrate an incoming civilizing people was recast as a narrative of conquest and degradation. The same distinction that supported hierarchy could then be used to contest it. Yet reversal did not necessarily remove the underlying structure of the explanation. If civilization and oppression were still attached to apparently stable peoples, the argument could replace one hierarchy of collective character with another. Periyar’s anti-caste purpose and the inherited categories available to him must therefore be examined together.

Understanding race as a cultural and political instrument is useful, provided it is not converted into a claim that descent never mattered. Periyar’s discourse moved between a critique of institutions and a story about peoples. At one moment Aryanism designated priestly authority or ranked social power; at another it identified an allegedly intrusive population. The political vocabulary was flexible enough to mobilize different audiences, but that flexibility also made it difficult to determine whether an individual could reject the oppressive order without being permanently identified with its supposed ancestry.

For intellectual history, this ambiguity is more revealing than an attempt to classify the entire framework under one modern definition of racism or anti-racism. The relevant questions are

[5] Collin Sibley, “Social Progress and the Dravidian ‘Race’ in Tamil Social Thought,” *Genealogy* 8, no. 1 (2024): article 6, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8010006.
[6] Manoharan, “Periyar’s Anti-Aryanism,” 129–46.

ISSN E: 3006-1466
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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

what a category explained, whom it assembled, what conduct it challenged, and which boundaries it hardened. Periyar used historical difference to expose inequality, but the success of that exposure does not settle the accuracy of every account of difference. The distinction between political function and empirical warrant remains central throughout the article.

4. Community Origins and the Making of Non-Brahmin Solidarity

Both colonial historiography and anti-caste subaltern reinterpretation shaped E.V. Ramasamy's view of the Dravidian community's beginnings. He suggested that before the so-called Aryan migration, the Dravidians were the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. Robert Caldwell (1875) also mentioned that Dravidians were there before the Aryans.[7]

Periyar thought that the Dravidians were superior to the Aryans in terms of ethics and culture in addition to having a unique language. He portrayed them as a caste-neutral people with egalitarian ideals, matrilineal systems, and a rational religion. He asserted, however, that the Aryans created a patriarchal, hierarchical society based on the Brahmanical caste system. Instilling a sense of ethno-historical grievance and group identity through this narrative was crucial for the mobilization of the Dravidian movement.

Periyar's arguments had a powerful emancipatory effect, despite lacking the archeological rigor of contemporary historical approaches. Rather than being historically accurate, his depiction of the Dravidian past was based on cultural resistance. It helped create a new racial-political consciousness based on anti-Aryan sentiment and regional pride by fostering the growth of a collective identity that could bring oppressed groups and lower castes together against Sanskritized hegemony.

The account of origins needs qualification at precisely the point where political unity appears most self-evident. Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam belong to a Dravidian linguistic family, but their speakers do not constitute one unchanging social body. Regional histories, caste relations, religious affiliations, and political loyalties vary within and across linguistic communities. A claim about related languages cannot establish that all their speakers shared the same institutions before an external intrusion. The argument for equal rights is stronger when it does not depend on proving a uniformly innocent ancestral society.

Colonial classifications also entered a social world already marked by multiple forms of status and exclusion. The category non-Brahmin grouped together people who did not necessarily occupy the same economic or ritual position. It could include communities with substantial local power alongside people subjected to untouchability. The political value of the category lay in identifying a common obstacle, but common opposition did not erase differences among its participants. An account of solidarity must therefore ask how far the coalition challenged hierarchy within its own ranks.[89]

The term “non-Brahmin” is widely used now to represent all the Dravidian communities and castes. Marguerite Ross Barnet mentions that the “non-Brahmin” was not a relevant political, cultural or social category before the non-Brahmin movement .The non-Brahmin groups were earlier known as Jatis (castes). To put it in other words, there were no non-Brahmins in south India prior to the politicization. The concept of non-Brahmin holds the idea of cultural unity

[7] Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (London: Trübner, 1875), 497.
[8] Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 56–57.
[9] Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 17.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

and integrity of South India which is based upon the Dravidian past. Earlier this term literally included Muslim, Christians ,Anglo-Indians and Untouchables .But with the later evolution of Dravidian politics , the support from Muslims and Untouchables was short-lived.[10]

This process is best understood as political community formation rather than the simple rediscovery of a community that had always acted as one. Shared language and stories of ancestry offered resources for unity, while organizations, print, public speech, and campaigns gave that unity practical form. The resulting identity could be historically constructed and politically meaningful at the same time. Constructed does not mean fictitious in its effects; it means that membership and significance were produced through social action rather than merely inherited as a complete program.

The central test follows from Periyar's own egalitarian commitments. If non-Brahmin solidarity remained a strategy for abolishing humiliation, it could connect groups without requiring identical ancestry or belief. If it became a claim that one set of communities possessed superior inherited moral qualities, it risked reproducing the logic of status by birth. Recognizing this tension does not negate the importance of collective organization. It clarifies the conditions under which a broad identity advances equality rather than concealing domination within the group.

5. Antiquity Archaeology and the Problem of Dravidian Religion

Accounts of Dravidian origins frequently connect linguistic identity to the Indus Valley civilization. In Dravidian historical argument, this connection supports a contrast between an earlier egalitarian civilization and a later Brahmanical order. As an interpretation of political memory, the contrast helps explain the appeal of an alternative antiquity. As a historical proposition, it requires separate demonstration. The identification of an archaeological civilization with a language family, a religion, or a modern community cannot be established merely because the proposed identification serves an anti-hierarchical purpose.[11]

The Indus script and the religious meanings of individual objects remain interpretive problems. A suggested Dravidian reading of the civilization does not by itself establish the language of every inhabitant. Interpretations of figurines, seals, animal imagery, or ritual spaces also cannot be combined automatically into a complete system of belief. Descriptions such as proto-Shiva, fertility religion, or nature worship are hypotheses about material evidence, not direct records of what ancient people called their gods or how they organized social authority. The historical argument should retain that uncertainty.

Nineteenth-century descriptions of southern religious practice raise a related difficulty. Caldwell contrasted Brahmanical traditions with practices he classified as demon worship and associated with communities outside orthodox institutions. Such descriptions are relevant to the history of classification, but their missionary language should not be adopted as a neutral account of a single original Dravidian religion. Local spirit traditions, household rites, sacrifices, and interactions with wider religious movements may indicate diversity and historical change rather than the survival of one untouched ancestral system.[12]

This distinction is especially important because two propositions can otherwise be confused: that some practices were not organized through Brahmin priests, and that the people performing them were nonreligious. The first proposition concerns institutional mediation; the second concerns belief and ritual as a whole. A community may reject priestly monopoly while maintaining elaborate religious practices. Conversely, an anti-caste movement may

[10] Barnett, *Politics of Cultural Nationalism*, 17.
[11] Bryant, *Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*, 40–50.
[12] Caldwell, *Comparative Grammar*, 580–83.

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

develop an atheist political program without accurately describing the beliefs of every population it claims as ancestral.

Keeladi illustrates how archaeological interpretation enters public arguments about Tamil history. The Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology presents evidence for an early urban settlement, craft activities, and writing, and reports dates extending into the sixth century BCE. Those findings are important to the chronology of settlement and material culture. They should nevertheless be distinguished from a definitive demonstration that an entire society lacked religion or that its inhabitants formed a biologically discrete people. The department's account is cited here for the reported material findings, not as proof of a comprehensive social philosophy.[13]

The evidentiary limit can be stated clearly. Absence of an identified temple or recognized deity within an excavated area does not prove absence of religious life throughout the settlement, still less throughout ancient South India. Similarly, resemblance between marks on objects can motivate further investigation without establishing an uninterrupted scriptural or linguistic lineage. These are reasons to formulate a narrower conclusion, not reasons to dismiss archaeological research. Keeladi can enlarge the history of Tamil urbanism without being required to authenticate every component of a modern identity narrative.

Periyar's historical importance therefore does not rest on the eventual confirmation of a perfectly secular and egalitarian ancestral civilization. His normative argument can stand on the proposition that hereditary degradation is unjust, whether ancient societies were equal or unequal. Detaching that ethical judgment from an idealized past protects the emancipatory claim from unnecessary dependence on unsettled archaeology. It also allows a richer history in which southern societies changed through contact, conflict, appropriation, and internal differentiation.

6. De-Aryanization as an Institutional and Cultural Program

E.V. Ramasamy's De-Aryanization movement was a program of political and cultural transformation based on the idea that Dravidian enslavement was primarily caused by the dominance of Aryan ideology, which was embodied in Brahmanism, Sanskrit, and Vedic religion. Periyar's De-Aryanization was a comprehensive process of destroying cultural hegemony imposed by centuries of Sanskritization and the dominance of inherited knowledge, as opposed to merely criticizing caste.[14]

Periyar's broader criticism of caste, religion, and nationalism was based on a racialized interpretation of Indian history and revolved around his concept of De-Aryanization. He claimed that the Aryans, particularly members of the Brahmin caste, were alien invaders who forced the ancient Dravidian population of South India to Brahminical Hinduism and a hierarchical caste system. According to Periyar, de-Aryanization entailed renouncing the cultural, religious, and social superiority of the Aryan-Brahmin hegemony in order to restore Dravidian self-respect and dignity because this imposition was the primary cause of social injustice and oppression.

In addition to being a statement of race or ethnicity, Periyar's De-Aryanization was a political and social goal that aimed to abolish caste-based injustice. He demanded the burning of the Vedas and the eradication of Brahminical gods and rituals because he saw them as tools of Aryan rule. His movement promoted reason, atheism, and social reform, including as intercaste marriages and the absence of Brahmin priests from rituals, undermining the religious underpinnings of the caste system. This drastic rejection of Aryan cultural markers

[13] Tamil Nadu Department of Archaeology, "Keeladi,"
[14] Manoharan, "Periyar's Anti-Aryanism," 129–46.

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

was supposed to empower the Dravidian people to construct a civilization founded on equality, rationality, and self-respect.

De-Aryanization operated at more than one scale. At the level of knowledge, it questioned accounts that treated Sanskritic traditions as the sole measure of civilization. At the level of everyday conduct, it challenged titles, ceremonies, and assumptions that made some people dependent on the recognition of ritual superiors. At the political level, it denied that national unity could justify the preservation of social subordination. These scales were connected because authority reproduced itself through both institutions and ordinary habits.

The practical aim was not exhausted by symbolic opposition. A marriage performed without a Brahmin priest, for example, could challenge who was entitled to authorize an intimate social relationship. Opposition to caste titles could question how birth became publicly legible as rank. Rejection of a scriptural justification for inequality could withdraw moral protection from an institution that otherwise appeared divinely mandated. The examples show how a critique of ideas could become an attempt to alter the reproduction of hierarchy.[15]

Nevertheless, an institutional interpretation must remain attentive to the language of exclusion. A campaign against monopoly and privilege can be evaluated by whether it opens social participation. A campaign framed as purification from the influence of an inherently alien people can impose a different boundary on participation. The more de-Aryanization is understood as dismantling ranked power, the more closely it accords with equal dignity. The more it becomes a claim of permanent cultural ownership, the more difficult it becomes to reconcile with a general right to dissent and belong.

7. Critique of Aryanism and the Politics of Public Symbols

E.V. Ramasamy's critique of Aryanism was more than just an attack on a racial category; it was a subversive ideological intervention into the fundamental discourse of Indian culture. Periyar reinterpreted "Aryanism" as a code word for Sanskritic elitism, caste-based social hierarchy, and Brahminical dominance—all of which he saw as repressive structures imposed on an egalitarian Dravidian culture.[16]

His criticism centered on the assertion that casteism's cultural and spiritual foundations came from Aryanism. He believed that the Aryans, whom he called cultural colonists or northern invaders, had methodically established Varnashrama Dharma to uphold their supremacy over the Dravidians, an indigenous group. According to this perspective, the caste system was a politically driven racial hierarchy supported by religious texts like the Manusmriti and Rig Veda rather than a natural or divine social order.

Periyar confronted Aryanism from several perspectives. He started by criticizing Sanskrit as a symbol of cultural imperialism and calling it a "dead language" that is only used to limit religious knowledge and power to the Brahmin elite. Second, he denounced Vedic traditions as "mythologies of oppression" that justified untouchability, gender subjugation, and economic exploitation. He frequently quoted sections from these books that emphasized their disdain for women, lower castes, and working classes in an effort to garner sympathy from the afflicted.

His criticism also included dismantling the notion of Aryan superiority. He refuted the widely held notion that the Aryans introduced civilization to India by depicting them as the destroyers of an earlier, more advanced Dravidian culture. In this sense, he transformed the Aryan inheritance from a triumph of civilization to a historical usurpation. This reversal was

[15] V. Geetha, “Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 17 (1998): WS9–15, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4406695.
[16] Manoharan, “Periyar’s Anti-Aryanism,” 129–46.

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ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

necessary to achieve his larger ideological goal of resurrecting pride in Tamil culture and history, which he positioned as fundamentally rational, secular, and inclusive.

Periyar denounced nationalist discourse as well. He thought that Indian nationalism, particularly Gandhian nationalism, had been tarnished by Aryan ideals such as caste-based societal harmony, respect for the Vedas, and Sanskrit. Periyar claimed that nationalism was intrinsically oppressive if it did not first undermine Aryan ideology. Thus, he was criticizing both Aryanism and mainstream Hindu nationalism, which he saw as Brahmanical consolidation disguised as cultural unity.

Periyar's critique of Aryanism was essentially both intellectual and performative. He pushed his criticism into the sphere of popular politics through processions, public lectures, and iconoclasm, such as burning pictures of Rama or extolling Ravana as a Dravidian hero. These acts were intended to upset, disrupt, and reinterpret cultural symbols in order to shift public consciousness to a fundamentally different historical self-understanding.[17]

Periyar's anti-Aryanism was political and intellectual in addition to being racial. He saw the caste system as a social structure imposed by the Aryans with the intention of keeping Dravidians in subordination as Shudras and Untouchables. He pushed the intermediate castes to leave their subservient life and chastised them for absorbing Aryan ideas of hierarchy. In order to eliminate caste distinctions and advance equality, social justice, and self-respect, his movement turned to rationalism and atheism. Periyar argued for Dravidian political autonomy and denounced Indian nationalism, which he perceived as restrictive and dominated by Aryans.

Periyar's interpretation of Aryanism and its relationship to Brahmins, was historically straightforward. His anti-Aryan stance was in line with other anti-caste thinkers of the time, but it must be viewed within the intellectual framework of his time, when racialized ideas of Aryan superiority were prevalent. His critique was a radical counter-hegemonic strategy meant to expose and critique the historical reasons behind oppression in order to empower marginalized people.

There has been criticism of the violent and militant approach of Periyar in his activism. It was one of the causes of the rift between Anna and Periyar as well. The “Black shirt movement” which started on 29 September 1945, Anna asked the constructive workers of the D.K to wear the black shirts while Periyar made it compulsory for all the members of the D.K. Anna opposed this idea saying if any member misbehaves in public, there would be a bad impression of the DK. Later on Periyar made black shirts a regular attire of the DK.[18]

Public provocation must be distinguished from a simple opposition between reason and emotion. Iconoclasm, satire, dress, and dramatic reversals of familiar stories communicated an argument about whose dignity mattered. They could make inherited authority contestable for audiences excluded from learned debate. Their power came partly from their capacity to produce discomfort. Historical explanation should account for that communicative function without assuming that every provocative action was equally effective or that all opposition to it expressed support for caste hierarchy.

The same techniques also exposed strategic disagreements. An organization seeking electoral credibility, mass membership, or constructive local work could evaluate discipline and

[17] Antony Arul Valan, “Periyar’s Engagement with Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar*, ed. A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 186.

[18] Balasubramanian Thirugnanam, “Periyar vs Anna: A Critical Study,” *Journal of Indian Art History Congress* 27, no. 1 (2021): 145.

ISSN E: 3006-1466
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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

symbolism differently from an organization committed to sustained social agitation. The disagreement over black shirts is significant in this respect: it concerned the relationship between visible collective identity, the conduct of individual members, and public reputation. The issue was not merely a difference of temperament; it reflected competing understandings of how a movement should act in public.

The critique of Aryanism was therefore neither a single doctrine repeated unchanged nor a purely academic debate about ancient migration. It became a repertoire through which religious stories, linguistic authority, political loyalty, and social hierarchy could be challenged together. Its analytical limitation appears when these different targets are collapsed into one cause. Caste power, state centralization, gender inequality, and religious belief may interact, but demonstrating interaction requires more than naming each as an expression of the same ancestral opposition.

8. Dravidian Pride Language and Cultural Reconstruction

In contrast to centuries of Brahmanical domination and Aryan cultural imperialism, E.V. Ramasamy envisioned Dravidian pride as a dramatic reaffirmation of cultural, linguistic, and social identity. Periyar's vision was socially emancipatory, historically revisionist, and locally situated, in contrast to nationalist pride, which was founded on the notion of a single Indian civilization. It was predicated on the idea that the Dravidian people, especially those who spoke Tamil, had a language that had been systematically suppressed by Aryan rule, an ethical heritage, and an ancient civilization.

Periyar's admiration for the Tamil language, which he regarded as superior to Sanskrit in terms of antiquity, logic, and aesthetic richness, was among the most potent expressions of this pride. He promoted Tamil's official and educational supremacy in the area and denounced the colonial Aryanization strategy of using Hindi. Decolonizing the mind and dismantling the power of a language (Sanskrit/Hindi) that was connected to caste, priesthood, and Northern superiority were the goals of this linguistic pride, which went beyond simple communication. He emphasised that the Tamil language has to be separated from religion. Social change was also closely linked to Periyar's invocation of pride. By transforming pride from a passive feeling into an active form of resistance and healing, Periyar demonstrated his intellectual prowess.[19]

Periyar believed that racial and social hierarchies were closely linked to religion. He was a scathing critic of Brahminical Hinduism because he believed it to be the religious justification for Dravidian oppression. Periyar encouraged people to reject scripture orthodoxy, priestly authority, and religious rituals in favor of reason and atheism. He promoted a rational, egalitarian society where social standing was decided by equality and merit rather than birth. The Self-Respect Movement, which promoted women's rights, organized intercaste marriages, and called for the public rejection of Brahminical conventions, put this anti-religious position into action.

The relationship between Tamil pride and rational criticism should not be reduced to unconditional celebration of every inherited Tamil practice. An emancipatory commitment can value a language as a medium of participation while criticizing literature, customs, or social habits expressed through it. In this reading, language pride concerns access, public authority, and the refusal of humiliation. It does not require a claim that one language's speakers possess greater natural intelligence or that linguistic antiquity proves moral superiority.

[19] Valan, "Periyar's Engagement with Literature," 186.

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

This distinction helps explain why cultural reconstruction could be both affirmative and critical. A subordinated public needed resources through which to contest the claim that valued knowledge belonged elsewhere. Yet a reconstructed public also needed the freedom to question its own traditions. Pride that forbids internal criticism would undermine the rationalist agency it was supposed to enable. The strongest account of Dravidian pride is consequently one that makes equal participation possible rather than one that converts identity into an exemption from scrutiny.

The wider political legacy includes regional assertions of linguistic dignity and resistance to centralizing cultural authority. Establishing the precise effects of Periyar's thought on any later welfare measure, party strategy, or electoral result would, however, require a separate institutional and policy study. The present argument is narrower: his vocabulary helped make language, social status, and political autonomy mutually intelligible as questions of dignity. It does not attribute the whole subsequent development of Tamil Nadu to a single thinker or movement.

9. Self-Respect Social Equality and Women's Agency

A transformative principle at the heart of the Self-Respect Movement, which was started in 1925, was the ideal of self-respect as envisioned by E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) which he started after quitting Congress in the late 1925. Periyar believed that self-respect was both a social and personal virtue, especially for those who were structurally marginalized in South Indian society as a result of long-standing caste systems and Brahminical dominance. He emphasized that self-respect was as essential as life itself and that its preservation was a fundamental right, arguing that complete freedom could not be achieved without the elimination of social and religious inequalities.[20]

Periyar's philosophy of self-respect was firmly rationalist, stressing that reason, not irrational belief in custom or superstition, should direct human behavior. He exhorted people to question customs, beliefs, and behaviors that upheld social stratification and inequality. Periyar claimed that accepting innate inferiority or being willing to submit to irrational authority was equivalent to slavery. The movement therefore called for the abolition of superstitions, needless rituals, and any social structure that created superior and inferior classes according to birth.

Additionally, the Self-Respect Movement promoted equality and social dignity, particularly for women and non-Brahmin Dravidians. It demanded that caste-based benefits be eliminated, manual scavenging be stopped, and untouchability be abolished. To combat restrictions on temple admission and other forms of discrimination against the oppressed castes, its campaigns included public agitation against forms of social exclusion. In order to dissolve social barriers, the movement promoted love marriages, widow remarriage, and intercaste relationships. It also fought for equal rights for women and the underclass.[21]

Emphasizing the unbreakable bond between societal change and individual dignity set the ideal of self-respect apart. Periyar argued that swaraj (political freedom) is meaningless without social equality and self-respect, and he opposed the mainstream nationalist movement for emphasizing political independence above all else. He maintained that having self-worth and the capacity to live free from unreasonable traditions and authority were more important indicators of freedom than the absence of foreign domination. According to Arivu Vidutalai Iyakkam, the Self-Respect Movement aims to liberate the intellect in order to

[20] Venkatachalapathy and Manoharan, "Introducing an Iconoclast," 8.
[21] Geetha, "Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship," WS9–15.

ISSN E: 3006-1466
ISSN P: 3006-1458
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

establish a society in which each person is free to act in accordance with their conscience and reason.

Under Periyar's guidance, the value of self-respect changed from being a hierarchy based on caste, gender, and religion to becoming a rallying cry for a new social order founded on equality, reason, and human dignity. The movement had a long-lasting impact on Tamil society, inspiring subsequent generations to carry on the fight for social justice and self-affirmation by fostering pride in Dravidian history and contesting the validity of oppressive customs.

Self-respect supplies the clearest bridge between the critique of domination and a positive account of freedom. A person may possess formal membership in a nation while remaining subject to degrading social expectations. Political independence cannot by itself resolve that condition. Periyar's formulation places the social capacity to refuse humiliation alongside constitutional status and the departure of foreign rulers. Freedom becomes an everyday relation among people, not only a transfer of sovereignty between governments.

The place of women is particularly important to this argument. If a movement challenged the priestly authorization of marriage but left women unable to decide about intimate life, its transformation would be incomplete. Similarly, affirming the dignity of a linguistic community would not establish equality if the community continued to organize honor through women's subordination. The gender question therefore tests the substance of self-respect rather than serving as an additional reform theme. It reveals whether the movement's universal language extends into the household.[22]

There is also a question of agency within collective identity. Self-respect implies the ability to examine beliefs and decide without inherited claims of superiority determining the answer. That principle may require dissent from family, caste, religion, or movement leadership. A politics committed to reason cannot consistently reserve critical judgment for attacks on outsiders. Its own historical narratives, public practices, and relations of authority must remain open to the scrutiny it demands of established institutions.

The ideal should therefore be assessed through the relations it seeks to change. Does it reduce dependence on hereditary status? Does it permit equal participation across caste and gender? Does it enable people to challenge authorities who speak in their name? These are more useful criteria than measuring the intensity of cultural pride alone. They also explain why the ethical force of self-respect can outlast particular historical theories of race: the claim to dignity does not disappear when an origin narrative is revised.

10. Dravida Nadu and the Reconfiguration of Nationalism

The demand for Dravida Nadu translated social and cultural criticism into a proposal for territorial authority. The transformation of the Justice Party into the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 and the formation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam after the 1949 split marked different organizational trajectories within a shared political field. The relation between Periyar and C. N. Annadurai is important here because it shows that a movement's intellectual inheritance does not dictate a single institutional strategy.[23]

For Periyar, a sovereign political space for Dravidian-speaking peoples offered a response to what he understood as cultural and social domination. The proposal reached beyond a

[22] Geetha, "Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship," WS9–15.

[23] A. R. Venkatachalapathy, "The Double-Barrelled Gun: Periyar and Anna after the Split in the Dravidar Kazhagam," in *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar*, ed. A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 93–105.

ISSN E: 3006-1466
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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

narrowly Tamil identity, but its principal organizational force was concentrated in Tamil-speaking society. The distance between an expansive imagined community and the actual geography of support became a persistent problem. Shared opposition to central power did not automatically produce agreement among the different southern language publics.

The anti-Brahmin and social justice politics associated with the Justice Party provided a setting for the demand for Dravidian self-determination. Pan-Dravidian language widened the imagined political community beyond Tamil identity, while the proposed political separation sought protection from what Periyar regarded as northern cultural and political domination. His willingness to question the territorial premises of Indian nationalism followed from a broader argument: national unity could not take precedence over the abolition of inherited social subordination.

The pan-Dravidian proposal carried an internal difficulty. A common language family could support a criticism of northern domination, but it did not automatically generate agreement about a common state. Tamil leadership might itself be viewed cautiously by other southern language communities. The problem was structurally similar to the one regionalists identified at the all-India level: how could a larger political unit protect the dignity and autonomy of its constituent peoples? The demand for separation did not remove the need to answer that question.

Comparison with Muslim political mobilization also requires careful limits. Different movements could recognize a common problem of majority domination without possessing identical religious, linguistic, territorial, or constitutional aims. Strategic sympathy or a shared criticism of Congress cannot be converted into proof that their national projects were the same. An article centered on Periyar should therefore treat such comparisons as a context for his political imagination, rather than as evidence of a settled agreement whose precise terms have not been established.

Linguistic reorganization and electoral politics provided a different setting for regional claims after independence. It is more accurate to describe a reconfiguration of Dravidian nationalism than to assume that identity disappeared when an independent state was no longer the immediate objective. Regional autonomy, recognition of Tamil, social justice, and opposition to centralization could be pursued within the Indian Union. Continuity of vocabulary did not entail continuity of strategy, and the positions of Periyar's organization should not be merged automatically with those of the DMK.

The constitutional changes of 1963 altered the setting for separatist demands: the Sixteenth Amendment added the sovereignty and integrity of India to the constitutional grounds for restrictions on specified freedoms and changed certain oaths. The change should be distinguished from a comprehensive prohibition arising from a political announcement alone. The amendment helps explain the narrowing constitutional environment within which regional parties made strategic choices.[24]

The transformation from a separatist horizon to regional action within federal politics illustrates the adaptability of the original critique. A demand for dignity could persist even when its territorial expression changed. At the same time, successful participation in existing institutions could create new tensions between ideological consistency and administrative responsibility. The historical question is thus not whether later parties reproduced Periyar

[24] India, Constitution (Sixteenth Amendment) Act, 1963, secs. 2–5, Legislative Department, Ministry of Law and Justice, https://www.legislative.gov.in/static/uploads/2025/07/44c47a4fe2b7c4b4e9afb4509aeba383.pdf.

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CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

perfectly. It is how his concepts were selected, revised, and contested as political circumstances changed.[25]

11. Critical Assessment of Race Emancipation and Essentialism

The first strength of Periyar's framework was its refusal to isolate caste from the cultural authority that sustained it. His attack on humiliation was simultaneously an argument about religion, knowledge, language, and political power. The framework made it possible to ask why a social order was treated as natural and whose interests were protected by that appearance. This is a substantial intellectual achievement even when particular claims about ancient history cannot be accepted as established.

Its second strength was the conversion of stigma into collective agency. Identities used to mark deficiency could be reworked as grounds for solidarity and public assertion. The crucial analytical point is that empowerment was not delivered by ancestry alone. It required organizations, new interpretations, practices of refusal, and competing visions of public life. Race language mattered because it entered those processes, not because it independently produced a unified people.

The first limitation is historical essentialism. Describing a people as originally rational, equal, or peaceful risks making moral character hereditary. Describing another people as the source of domination can make individuals responsible for a historical identity rather than for institutions and conduct. An emancipatory argument is more consistent when its object is the reproduction of privilege and exclusion. This allows people from different backgrounds to participate in change without requiring an impossible escape from ancestry.

The second limitation is the compression of different inequalities into one binary. A non-Brahmin community can oppose Brahmin monopoly while reproducing hierarchy toward another caste. A movement can demand regional autonomy while neglecting women's autonomy. A language can be politically subordinated without all its speakers occupying the same economic position. These possibilities do not refute the relevance of the Aryan–Dravidian vocabulary. They show why that vocabulary needs to be supplemented by analysis of differentiated social relations.

The third limitation concerns the relation between evidence and political need. An origin story may offer dignity, but the need for dignity does not establish the story's factual accuracy. Archaeology, philology, and the study of social institutions have distinct methods and limits. Their findings should not be combined selectively to produce a verdict already required by a movement's identity. A defensible political ethics can recognize the value of historical inquiry even when its results complicate cherished narratives.

These qualifications point toward a more durable interpretation of Periyar's legacy. The universal claim of self-respect provides the standard by which the racial vocabulary can itself be judged. Wherever the vocabulary exposes hereditary degradation and expands equal participation, it serves that claim. Wherever it hardens inherited community boundaries or shields internal inequality, it conflicts with it. Critical interpretation can therefore acknowledge emancipatory effects without treating every historical proposition as beyond challenge.

12. Conclusion

Periyar's concept of race emerged from the intersection of colonial classification, anti-caste criticism, linguistic assertion, and dissatisfaction with national liberation that left social hierarchy intact. The Aryan–Dravidian distinction connected these concerns through a powerful historical narrative. It named an order of domination, provided subordinated groups

[25] Venkatachalapathy, "Double-Barrelled Gun," 93–105.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.03 (2025)

with an alternative collective identity, and helped translate claims of dignity into campaigns against religious and political authority.

The article has shown why the distinction should be read neither as an entirely consistent biological doctrine nor as an innocently metaphorical expression. Its meanings shifted between descent, culture, institutions, and political allegiance. That flexibility contributed to its public effectiveness, while also producing conceptual difficulties. Language kinship did not establish racial purity; archaeological antiquity did not prove an egalitarian social order; and non-Brahmin solidarity did not by itself remove differences of power within the coalition.

De-Aryanization, cultural pride, self-respect, and Dravida Nadu were different expressions of a linked challenge to inherited subordination. Their relationship is clearest when social dignity is treated as the central objective. Self-respect explains why political independence could be criticized as insufficient, why women's agency mattered to social reform, and why a territorial demand could later be reformulated without eliminating the underlying questions of recognition and equality.

The most defensible conclusion is therefore both appreciative and critical. Periyar enlarged the terms in which freedom could be discussed by insisting that birth should not authorize humiliation. His racialized accounts of history remain open to correction, especially where they assign fixed virtues or faults to entire peoples. The continuing value of his thought lies in subjecting every inherited hierarchy, including hierarchies reproduced within emancipatory movements, to the test of equal human dignity.

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CJSSR

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