

Periyar and Ambedkar Fight Against Social Injustice and Inequality

B. Mathivanan, M.Sc., M.Ed., M.Phil.,

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University)
Thanjavur – 613 403, Tamil Nadu.

Dr. D. Aarthi Saravanan

Head, Department of Political Science,

Periyar Maniammai Institute of Science and Technology, (Deemed to be University)
Thanjavur – 613 403, Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

Description of Religious Literatures – Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavat Geetha - Periyar and Ambedkar reject Birth - Based Caste System - Varnashrama Dharma and untouchability -Battle Against Varnashrama Dharma – Human Rights - Social Justice and Its Effect of Brahminism - The Bhagavat Geetha - Objectives of Periyar and Ambedkar.

Date of Submission: 01-02-2023

Date of Acceptance: 11-02-2023

I. Introduction

The article narrates the removal of varna system and Manudharma system. The epics Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavat Geetha with their contradiction and religious conventions are explained by Periyar and Ambedkar. They made an awakening in the minds of non-Brahmins and illiterate poor people.

Description of Hindu – Religious Literatures

The Hindu religion has an ancient literature in Sanskrit. It plays a major role in all varieties of Hinduism. The sacred literature of vedas is the backbone of Hinduism. Veda is the major Sruti work and the word ‘veda’ means knowledge or wisdom, and as applied to the scripture it signifies a book of wisdom. The Vedas are divided into four: Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. The four vedas in their totality make up the ‘Sruti’. Each veda consists of four parts i.e., Mantras, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.¹

The Smriti literature is divided into five groups that is the law codes, the Dharma Shastras the Itihasas, the Puranas, the Agamas and the Darshanas.² It gives detailed instructions regarding the duties of a man according to division of society in the hierarchical manner into class i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras.³

Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavat Geetha

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the two well-known epics (Itihasas), sung in praise of heroes. Valmiki is the author of Ramayana and it tells of the experiences of king Rama and his consort Sita. The epic is full of action, including a kidnapping of Sita by a demon called Ravana and her dramatic rescue by Rama and his friend Hanuman, the monkey headed God. Ramayana is the most popular scripture in the villages of India and its stories are often given dramatic and dance presentations.

Besides the main story, the work contains many digressions which deal with state-crafts, the art and science of war, rules of conduct for the four castes etc; side by side with these profound subjects are fairy tales, mythical geography and history; and idle passages which teach nothing. The sage Vyasa is believed to have

¹ Grober, Academic Encyclopedia, Vol.10, p.171.

² T.M.P. Mahadevan, op.cit., pp.28-29.

³ Donald, H. Bishop, Indian Thought : An Introduction, p.16 and Periyar E.V.R, “Research about Ramayana”, PSRP, Chennai-7, Edition : 1958.

composed Mahabharata. The sage dictated the work, and Ganesha, the elephant headed God of prudence is fabled to have written it.

Puranas are collections of legendary marital, religious instructions and devotional literature. The purpose is to broadcast and glorify the Gods Vishnu, Siva and Brahma.

The puranas are highly imaginative and mythical accounts of the genealogy and doings of different Gods and Goddesses.⁴

Due to the influence of Brahminic culture and domination different kinds of puranas came into existence in Tamilnadu. Puranas like Periya Purana, Thiruvilaiyadal Purana, Siruthonder Purana etc. depict fanciful mythologies and mystical genealogies carried to the Tamils. The Valmiki Ramayana had been reinterpreted in the Tamil language preserving the story intact. Kambar had done the same work in Tamil when he wrote Kambaramayana. This way both word and thing were introduced into the Tamil country by the Brahmins with the Puranic system of religion and worship of idols.

The Bhagavat Geetha

When Ambedkar wants to fight Varnashramadharma itself. He cannot be in his camp because Varnashram a Sanathana Hindu dharma has to be an integral part of Hinduism.

Bhagavat Geetha an ancient scripture considered the “Chaturvarnas” as an ideal social institution and it was a time honoured economic principle of division of labour. M.K. Gandhi was also sympathetic to this argument. Ambedkar severely criticized it as it is not merely division of labourers.

What the Bhagwat Geetha teaches is also beyond controversy. Its teaching may be summarised in the following four pronouncements made by Krishna in the Bhagwat Geetha. The Indian tradition of justice became imbalanced and partisan and this cost in its dignity. According to the Philosophy enunciated in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Geetha, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas etc., there is no place for Varnavyavastha on birth and discrimination.⁵

An Agama deals with four topics: temple construction, making idols, etc; philosophical doctrines; meditative practices; and methods of worship (Kriya, Jnana, Yoga and Carya).⁶

The name ‘India’ too is derived from Sindhu and means the land of the Indus. Hinduism means the faith of the people of the Indus land. The Indigenous name by which Hinduism is known as ‘Sanatana Dharma’ (eternal religion) and ‘Vaidika Dharma’

All other divinities are aspects of the one absolute and unknowable Brahm. The individual soul may finally become part of the absolute soul of Brahma when no one escapes the cycle or wheel of birth and rebirth.

Many social evils such as unusual caste and culture (casteism) and culture (superstitions beliefs) untouchability, traditional customs, religious superstitions, sex inequality, endogamy, devadasi system, wedding ceremonies and funeral rites, illiteracy and language problem, race and class differences of all the collections of different social evils weekend the whole Hindu society in Tamilnadu as well as whole Hindu religious activities in India.

Lunia described the Hindu society by saying that Hinduism has numerous social evils like the rigid caste system, untouchability, sati, child-marriage, enforced widowhood, devadasi system, illiteracy, polygamy, backwardness of women, religious superstition, meaningless rituals and expensive ceremonies affected the Hindus in all ways of life.

⁴ B.R. Ambedkar, Who were Shudras ? How they became to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society, Bombay : Thacker and Co. Ltd., 1946, pp-14-15 and Dr.Aasiriyar K. Veermani, “Geethaiyen Marupakkam” (Evidances with Research Articles) Edition : May 2001 Dravidar Kazhagam Publication, Chennai-7, pp. 116-125.

⁵ Mahendra Kumar Mishra “**Encyclopedia of Dr.Ambedkar**” Volume-3: Current Publications, Agra- 282 010 U.P., (India).

⁶ Periyar E.V.R., Golden sayings of Periyar, A Publication of Dravidan Kazhagam, Chennai-7, First Edition : 2015, p-25

The initial part of the twentieth century one could see that the Tamil society all religious activities and having meaningless customs were dominated and created or produced well planned by the Brahmins (very much superior caste by birth, religious and their God only).

The main story of Mahabharata is the war of accession between created powerful God and Goddess etc. the Pandavas and Kauravas.⁷

During the first and second decades of the twentieth century the Tamil society had been very superstitious and ignorant of the scientific progress. Looking at the enormous and cancerous spread of superstitious beliefs among the people one can understand that the Tamil society had been under the magic spell of superstition during the period.⁸

Periyar and Ambedkar Reject Birth-Based Caste System

According to Periyar, the Brahmins were descendants of the Aryans who were the first to introduce the birth-based caste system. This practice and precedence gave them high rituals and religious status thereby degrading the native Dravidians to an inferior position.

The basic ideas of Hinduism were rooted in the system of Varnashrama Dharma. This Dharma was unknown to the Tamils because their classical literary tradition was significantly silent about it.

Religion is the sum of the rules and substance related to co-operative living and code of conduct needed for humanity. Periyar's Self-respect Movement is not against such religions. But, if religion destroys the wisdom in the society, if it endangers rationality the Self-Respect Movement will not tolerate it.

People should not spend any money for worship in the temples and they should not recognize middlemen or Pujaris, that is abolition of Purohit system. The intrusion of Sanskrit or any of the north Indian languages in matters of worship and prayer should be got rid of. People should be discouraged from building new temples, mutts, choultries or vedic schools. People should drop their caste titles in their names. Common funds should be utilized for educational purposes and for creating employment opportunities for the unemployed.⁹

Periyar's propaganda against untouchability and his other words appealing for rationalism had influenced the thoughts of people in many states in India. His words have reached even the northern Himalayas. He had been the guiding light to many rationalist leaders who had appeared in various parts of the nation.¹⁰

Varnashrama Dharma and Untouchability

The cultural and religious invasion of Aryans brought into India Varnashrama Dharma and the hierarchical caste system which still continues to be the bane of this country. It created for the Brahmins the exclusive right to Priest-hood and vedic learning by virtue of their birth.

Social Justice and Its Effect of Brahminism

Both Periyar and Ambedkar believed in a caste or classless society. These, revolutionaries, think about the Socialism can be deliberately used to destroy the privileges of the higher castes.

The varna system which has completely denied the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. Of the four varna system, the first three are regarded as twice born and the fourth is identified with the untouchables.¹¹ The justification of this social scheme is found in the Purushasukta, a part of Rig-veda, advocates the principles of the graded inequality and caste discrimination in the Hindu religion. Ambedkar rejects it on the following grounds. He argues that the Shudra section is one of the sections of Kshatriyas that causes degradation and the tyrannies and indignities faced by shudras till now. Ambedkar stands for rejection and destruction of all the degrading principles enshrined in the Hindu religious texts.

⁷ Aasiriyar Dr.K. Veeramani, The necessity of Scientific Temper, Dravidar Kazhagam, Chennai-7, First Edition : 2010, pp-8-15. and Viduthalai, 30 March, 1950.

⁸ Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, "B.R. Riddles in Hinduism" Vol.IV, pp-8-9.

⁹ Periyar, E.V.R., "Golden saying of Periyar", A Publication of D.K., Chennai-7, First Edition, 2015, p.25 and Venugopal, P., "Justice Party and Social Justice", p-27.

¹⁰ P. Venugopal, "Justice Party and Social Justice", p.27.

¹¹ Rajesh Kumar, Pankaj Mitra, K. "Voices from the Margin: The Dalit Face in the Indian. (English Novel) Edition: 2012, Satyam Publishing House, Daryagani, New Delhi-11000.

By 1927, Dr. Ambedkar decided to launch active movements against untouchability. He began with public movement and marches to open up and share public drinking water resources, also he began a struggle for the right to enter Hindu temples. He led a Satyagraha in Mahad to fight for the right of the untouchable community to draw water from the main water tank of the town.

But Ambedkar put things in the right perspective by saying “Caste cannot be abolished by inter-caste dinners (or) stray instances of inter-caste marriages. “Caste is a stage of mind. It is a disease of mind. The teaching of the Hindu religion are the root cause of this disease. We practice Casteism and we observe untouchability because we are enjoined to do so by Hindu religion. A bitter thing cannot be made sweet. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be changed in to nectar”.

Ambedkar began his civil rights campaigns caste discrimination and untouchability in the 1920s, mobilizing untouchables for access to public water tanks in the town of Mahad and entry in to temple in the cities of Amravati and Nasik. With these struggles and symbolic burning of the manusmriti (a traditional Ambedkarmanic law book) in 1927, the movement spread to the county side.

Ambedkar also won the legal suit field against him regarding this movement and thus showed a permanent solution to the problem of segregation. In 1928 the same year he had established the depressed classes education society in Bombay. In 1930, he had started a satyagraha at Kalaram temple, Nasik, which was continued for five years. He also became the first All India Depressed Classes Congress held at Nagpur 1930-1932 was a period which carried the potential to decide the political destiny of many marginalized communities in independent India including dalits and women.¹²

Now Ambedkar carries out his dramatic decision to have a mass conversion of SC/STs to Buddhist fold. Ambedkar in May, 1956, made an important broadcast in BBC in which he exposed the cause of Buddhism against communism and Marxism. Thus his conviction in religion was to free himself and his people from the Hindu religion.¹³

Objectives of Thanthai Periyar

Periyar realized that God, religion and caste make them strong to exploit others movement himself and enlisted the co-operation of others. While his aim was social reform, an as he was religion, caste, dharma, and shastras, he had to take steps to prevent Brahmin domination in politics. It is a glaring instance of how Hinduism is a denial not only of equality but how it is denial of a sacred character of human personality. This is not all. For Manu does not stop with the non-recognition of human personality. He advocates a deliberate debasement of human personality. He will take only two instance to illustrate this feature of the philosophy of Hinduism.¹⁴

The immorality and looseness of character among men and women of the four original castes must have been limitless to account for the rise of innumerable castes consisting of innumerable souls!

II. Conclusion

At the end of conclusion Hindu literature like, Manusmriti, Varnashrama dharma, Hindu Mythologies, Vedas, Puranas, Ithikasas, Manthras are studied. “Periyar and Ambedkar fought against Social injustice and inequality”. They attacked Varnashrmadharma and women enslavement. The order and code of Manushastras, the effect and activities of Brahminism affected much important in the life of untouchables, depressed downtrodden people’s life either directly or indirectly.

¹² Pandagale, S.K., “**Life, Ideas and Thought of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar**” – Ambedkar on Philosophy of Hinduism, First Edition: 2011 Swastic Publications, New Delhi – 110094 (India), p-339.

¹³ Akeel Bilgrami, “**Democratic Culture**” Historical and Philosophical Essays, Social Reform Thoughts of Ambedkar, Routledge Publishers, New Delhi, p-82-83.

¹⁴ Aasiriyar Dr.K. Veeramani, “**Geethaiyen Marupakkam**”, Evidences with Research Articles, Edition: May 2001, Dravidar Kazhakam Publishers, Chennai – 600 007, p-115.