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Anarchism In Periyar

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If a larger country oppresses a smaller country, I'll stand with the smaller country. If the smaller country has majoritarian religion that oppresses minority religions, I'll stand with minority religions. If the minority religion has caste and one caste oppresses another caste, I'll stand with the caste being oppressed. In the oppressed caste, if an employer oppresses his employee, I'll stand with the employee. If the employee goes home and oppresses his wife, I'll stand with that woman. Overall, oppression is my enemy”

– *Thanthai Periyar E. V. Ramasamy*

There is no better definition of Anarchism than the above quote by Periyar. Anarchism, also known as libertarian socialism, tries to question the coercive forms of power hierarchies that results in the oppression of people. It understands that the root cause of all oppression is power imbalances and every social structure that results in this creation of power hierarchies

in terms of gender, caste, class, religion, race, nationality, sexuality, language, etc. needs to be demolished. It attacks power by centering the idea of individual liberty and participatory democracy in all aspects of social and political interactions. Despite not following the emergence of anarchism or meeting with any anarchists, the vision and actions of Periyar closely align with the principles of anarchism.

The major difference of opinion between anarchists and Marxists is the idea of a centralized vanguard state that is needed as an intermediate before socialism can be achieved. Anarchists do not believe that centralization of power by a party or a few intellectuals who dictate the course of action to the masses is the right way for socialism to emerge. They know that forming a new power structure will again create new hierarchies which will replace the older systems of coercion with newer ones. Power and authority always tend to reproduce themselves, and even the creation of a communist vanguard state would inevitably lead to the creation of an oppressive bureaucratic privileged class that works against the majority to secure their self-interests. Therefore, change to socialism should not come from top-down imposition by a state or party, but should come from bottom-up, decentralized, from the grassroots, in the way people interact and practice democracy in their daily life. Freedom can never come through the agency of an authority.

Anarchists do not think capturing state power and imposing their will on people by forcing them to follow certain guidelines or laws is going to create a sustainable change in society. The work needs to be done with the people at the ground level and help them realize the power of democratic self-organizing, mutual aid, direct participatory democracy, and decentralized federated political systems. This will establish a cultural shift in the way people interact with each other, within families, workplaces, schools, hospitals, and other social institutions.

N Annadurai, who implemented many of Periyar's visions², in 1967. This statement needs to be contested because the social movement which Periyar started led to the victory of DMK in 1967 and they could emerge only due to the ideological and socio-cultural shift imparted by the self-respect movement. Even AIADMK, the chief opposition party to DMK could not move away from implementing strong welfare measures due to the strength of the self-respect movement which would otherwise hold power accountable. The legacy of Periyar is similar to that of Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar could not be erased from history despite the failure of Ambedkarite political parties to capture political power. The nurturing, cultivation, and resurgence of Ambedkarite philosophy by the people despite very little political will from the ruling powers clearly shows the strength of the socio-cultural movements they started focusing on the people which has kept their ideas and legacies alive even today. Any social movement today should focus on assimilating the ideas of personal liberty and self-respect and reject all authoritarian impositions.

“Liberty without equality is privilege and injustice,
equality without liberty is slavery and brutality”

— *Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin*

² See above source

Periyar's criticism of the communist parties in India which ignored the question of caste is precisely because of this centralization of power in Marxist parties, where the top-level decision-making is filled exclusively by savarnas and the party workers mostly come from the subaltern castes. Periyar understood that oppression is caused by power concentration and attacked the multiple hierarchies of power that exists in society and the need for social equality as a pre-requisite for economic equality. Anarchism understands the need to be intersectional in our understanding of hierarchies and not just focus on one aspect of it. People can easily understand hierarchies that oppress them but are oblivious to other hierarchies that give them the privilege. A savarna woman who is a feminist and attacks patriarchy can be blind to caste privilege, similar to how a Bahujan man might understand caste oppression but be blind to patriarchy. Periyar understood that what we need to attack is power in itself, and empowering people to question power and the unjust systems of oppression will invariably lead to the dismantling of these multi-dimensional hierarchies.

Periyar understood the importance of ground-level work and its power to sustain the idea of social and cultural progress. His staunch objection to the capture of state power even to implement his own ideas was a clear indication of the fact that he knew top-down imposition of an ideology is not going to have a sustainable and lasting impact and that any progress will be undone when that power is lost. Instead of trying to teach people to follow power, people should be made aware to question power and reject its imposition and oppression themselves. He understood that any form of centralized institutional power or authority needs to be opposed, whether it is political, cultural, religious, or linguistic.

Periyar understood that the concentration of power was the root cause of all oppression and he attacked every system which was establishing these power hierarchies. He critiqued

religion for creating a gender and caste hierarchy. He attacked cultural practices that created hierarchies. His criticism was not just limited to the idea of complete subservience and uncritical worship of a god, he was also against any kind of blind worship, be it for a person or an ideology. Blind allegiance to any ideology, even an atheist ideology like Marxism, is assigning a power that is beyond criticism.

The anarchist motto of “No Gods, No Masters” is exactly similar to Periyar’s opposition to religion and the state as instruments of oppression. He understood the need to show the similarities between statism and theology and attacked both religious and political forms of oppression, defying the divinity attached to the unquestionable god and uncritical nationalism. He centers his ideology on the sovereignty of the individual, and their inalienable liberties, which is similar to anarchist thought. The self-respect movement can be considered an important step in making the masses realize their rights and liberties as individuals and making them identify and attack the power hierarchies which deny them their liberties. People should stop being enslaved to regulations, including those of nation, language, religion, gender, and caste, and must realize their own strengths and gain self-mastery to reject such oppressive structures and live as liberated individuals. This focus on the individual initiative rather than waiting for the emergence of a leader who can lead people to liberty is a key aspect of anarchism.

Periyar’s work highlights the importance of identifying coercive power, be it religious, social, cultural, linguistic, or political. We can find similarities between the ideas of Periyar and the Russian Anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin, and see that Periyar is similar in ideology to Bakunin than Marx¹. Like Bakunin, Periyar used references in religious texts to attack and show that

¹ K. R. Manoharan, Periyar A study in Political Atheism, Orient Black-Swan, 2022.

divinity is constructed on unjust, immoral principles and must be rejected. Like Bakunin, Periyar understood that an Indian state with savarnas at its helm will be a hurdle to the emancipation of the masses and will work to keep the Dalit Bahujan Adivasis in a perpetual state of subservience. He understood that any political state that forms in such a deeply hierarchical society will reinforce these hierarchies and benefit the ruling elites.

The anarchist critique of the state is not an attack on the idea of the state as an institution of democracy, but it is an attack on the idea of a centralized state which destroys or limits democracy and which is controlled and monopolized by a few dominant sections of the society to create laws and regulations to control the rest of the masses. Anarchists do not reject the idea of the state as a social power as long as it is decentralized, federated, and democratized. But such a democratic institution cannot be limited to just a representative parliamentary democracy but should be a social, economic, cultural, and political democracy encompassing all aspects of social interactions and decision-making. The fundamental idea of democracy is simple: in formulating any rule which affects an individual, their opinions should be considered and they should be part of the decision-making process.

Periyar displays anarchist ideals in his organizational politics where he criticizes the notion that society can be changed by capturing state power. He considered political power as a hindrance to social reform. Periyar favors collective action by mobilizing society to ensure that the state is kept in check by the people. He focused on increasing the collective social consciousness of the Dalit Bahujan communities and empowering them to change their conditions, rather than create a vanguard that can capture power over them. Periyar says, “We do not want political power. Only the power to think”.

It is often argued that Periyar’s legacy is cemented in Tamil history only due to the capture of political power by C