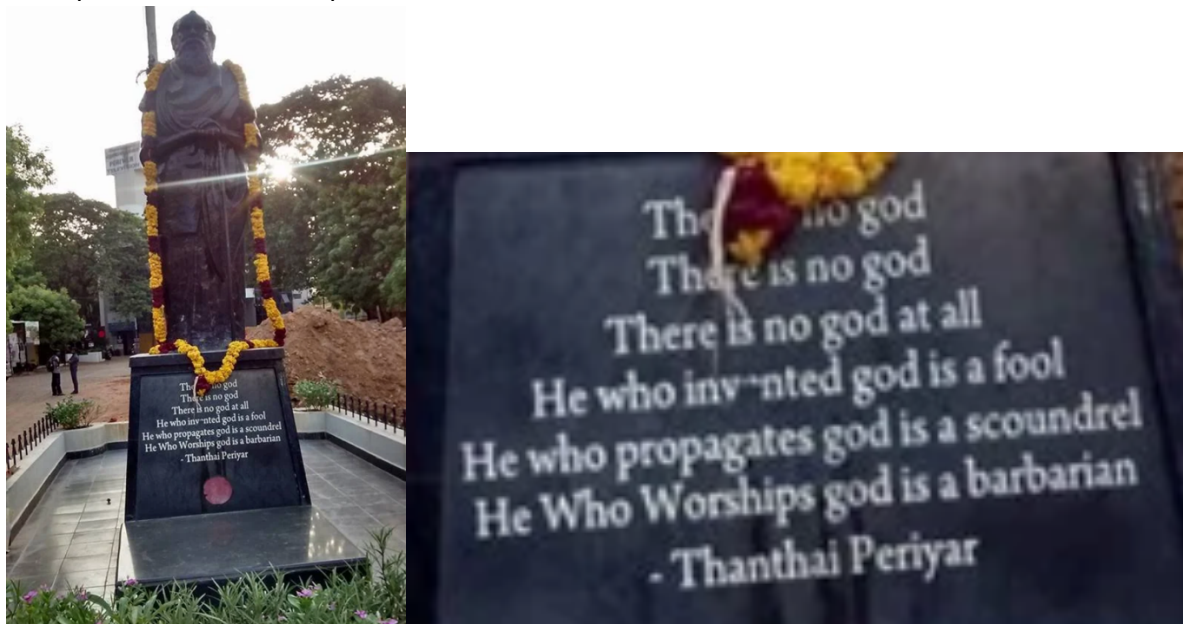


Periyar - Atheist/Feminist Hero of Southern India

The first three installments of this series looked at the ideas of Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindrinath Tagore, and Bhimrao Ambedkar, three humanists who are widely revered in India today, even by people who don't actually agree with their ideas. This month we look at the ideas of Erode Ramasamy (1879-1973), known as "Periyar" "(respected one" in Tamil). Periyar is intensely controversial in India today. Many southern Indians worship him because of his uncompromising hostility to all forms of oppression, particularly opposition to Brahmins who use their claimed descent from the Aryan invaders of the distant past to justify oppression of the Dravidian (pre-Aryan) majority of southern India.

In his native state of Tamil Nadu, political parties declaring their loyalty to Periyar's ideas routinely win over 80% of the vote. Statues of Periyar abound. The photo is of a typical example. Note the inscription.



The inscription says, in Tamil and English on different sides of the pedestal.

There is no god
There is no god
There is no god at all
He who invented god is a fool
He who propagates god is a scoundrel
He Who Worships god is a barbarian.

This is a statement of belief regularly recited at meetings of Periyar's political movement from the 1920s. It isn't subtle. How did someone so radical become so popular?

The centerpiece of Periyar's political philosophy was "self-respect". This meant hostility towards any sort of hierarchy. Periyar believed that all hierarchical domination, such as the domination of lower castes by Brahmins, the domination of Indians by the British, or the domination of women by men, was justified for most people by a belief in God, the ultimate oppressor. Most people in Tamil Nadu believe he is fundamentally right, and on their side, even people who themselves go to temples.

Periyar's view of women's rights was radical by the standards of 1928, or today.

Excerpt from Periyar's magazine *Kudiarasu* Dec. 8, 1928:

Masculinity must be destroyed for Women's Liberation

Everybody knows that the number of associations and activities in the name of women's liberation across the world keeps increasing day by day. Men pretend to be highly concerned and make a great deal of pretence. In our opinion, any liberation movement created by men cannot give real liberation to women. We think that not only do the current movements for women's liberation being run by men not yield any benefit, but they also continue to strengthen the restrictions that enable the enslavement of women.

This is like the situation where Brahmins, and foreigners who consider only Brahmins to be the representatives of this country, appear to work for the liberation of the Dravidian people; as a consequence of which the enslavement of the Dravidian people, and the restrictions ensuring that they never attain liberation, gains strength day by day. And, this is like the situation where the Brahmins and the Aryan orthodoxists donned the garb of reform and equality to infiltrate the reform movement; consequently social atrocities and hierarchies became established and reinforced by law and religion.

Likewise, not only does women's slavery grow because men toil for women's liberation, but the restrictions ensuring that women never attain liberation also become stronger. Men's pretence of respecting women and working for their liberation is nothing but a conspiracy to cheat women. Will rats be liberated because of cats? Will goats and cocks be liberated because of foxes? Will the wealth of Indians increase because of the British? Will the non-Brahmins attain equality because of the Brahmins? If one thinks over these questions, one can realize the truth.

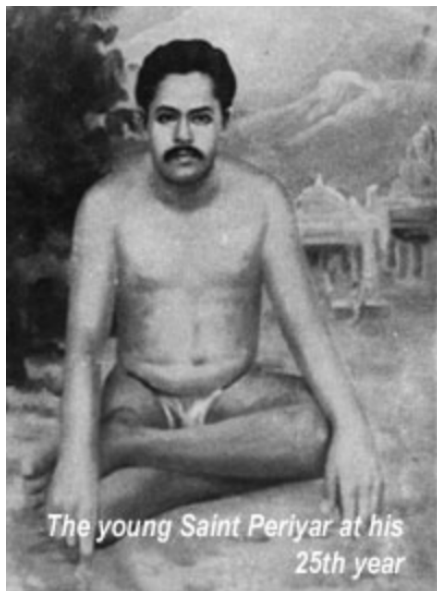
Even if liberation is somehow attained in these above cases, one can firmly believe that women will never attain liberation because of men.

Women shouldn't forget the fact that the word 'masculinity' is itself internationally used in a manner demeaning to women. Women should remember that as long as 'masculinity' exists in the world, 'femininity' wouldn't be respected. As long as

'masculinity' exists in the world, the enslavement of women will keep increasing. Unless women destroy the concept of 'masculinity', it is certain that they will not attain liberation. Women have been made into slaves because of 'masculinity'. All over the world, the words freedom and bravery have been made the property of 'masculinity'. Men have come to a conclusion that only masculinity possesses those qualities.

Moreover, women should realize that they have never been given deliverance or freedom in any aspect in Hinduism. With regard to women, not only does the Hindu religion say that God created women as prostitutes by birth itself, but also that they should never be given independence consequently; therefore, it says that women should be under the control of their father in childhood and under the control of their children in their old age. The sastras and puranas of Hinduism say that Arundhati and Draupadi proved their divinity by their statement, "Women can be chaste only if there are no men, no hidden locations and no darkness." There are many such evidences in the religious texts. Their scheme is nothing but to make women the slaves of men.

If women and men look at it from a neutral perspective they will understand that women were made slaves because of men; all men consider 'masculinity' and the enslavement of women to have been created by God, and the enslavement of women has gained strength because even women hold this true on the basis of tradition. If the birth-based hierarchy among the people should be destroyed, it is essential to burn the Hindu religious doctrine that teach it. Likewise, if women have to attain true liberation, it is essential to destroy the concept of godliness that is responsible for the god-created 'masculinity' and 'femininity.'



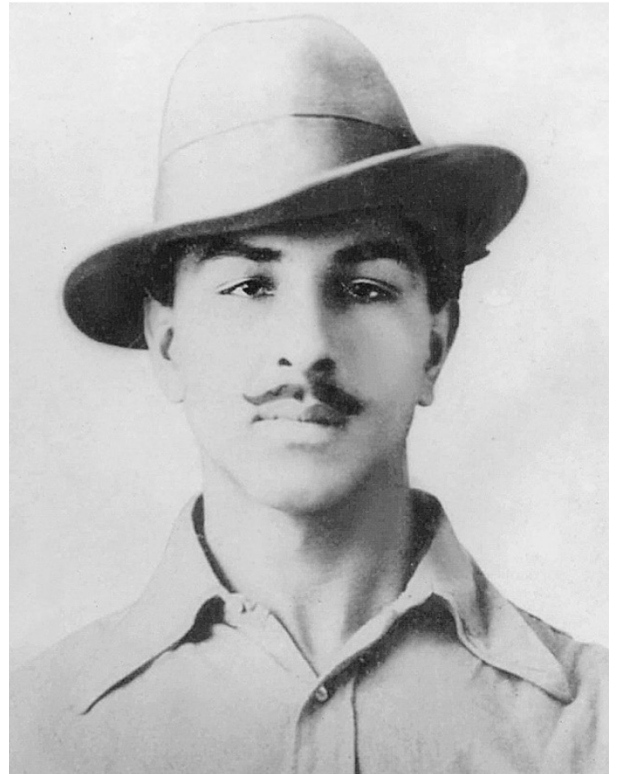
Periyar (right), aged 75, meeting Bhimrao Ambedkar in 1954

Bhagat Singh, Young Punjabi Militant Hero.

Another Indian hero is Bhagat Singh. An active revolutionary, he was executed at age 23 for protesting against British rule of India by killing a British police officer. Many Indians, including Gandhi and Periyar, while not supporting his use of violence, campaigned for his sentence to be commuted. It was not. While awaiting execution he wrote a famous article, *Why I am an Atheist*.

Excerpt from *Why I am an Atheist*

Judgment [that the British court would impose the death penalty] is already too well known. Within a week it is to be pronounced. What is the consolation with the exception of the idea that I am going to sacrifice my life for a cause? A God-believing Hindu might be expecting to be reborn as a king, a Muslim or a Christian might dream of the luxuries to be enjoyed in paradise and the reward he is to get for his suffering and sacrifices. But, what am I to expect? I know the moment the rope is fitted around my neck and rafters removed under my feet, that will be the final moment that -will be the last moment. I, or to be more precise, my soul, as interpreted in the metaphysical terminology shall all be finished there. Nothing further. A short life of struggle with no such magnificent end, shall in itself be the reward, if I have the courage to take it in that light. That is all.



Six months after writing the above, on March 23, 1931, Bhagat Singh was hanged by the British government.