

In his able address, the learned Doctor has over-proved his case. Can a religion that was professed by Chaitanya, Jnanadeva, Tukaram, Tiruvalluvar, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, Vivekanand and a host of others who might be easily mentioned, be so utterly devoid of merit as is made out in Dr. Ambedkar's address? A religion has to be judged not by its worst specimens but by the best it might have produced. For that and that alone can be used as the standard to aspire to, if not to improve upon.

[CWMG 63:153-154.]

## PERIYAR RESPONDS TO GANDHI ON CASTE

Sometimes referred to as EVR, but more often as Periyar ("Great Man"), E. V. Ramasami (1879-1973) was born into an affluent orthodox Hindu family of Erode, Tamil Nadu. Like Gandhi, his early education, travels, and independent spirit led him to criticize Hinduism, especially the institution of Untouchability, and he soon devoted his life to social and political reform. As an advocate of social equality, he moved quickly from leadership in local politics to a strong commitment to the Indian National Congress, where he showed a Gandhian flair for involving the masses. He championed the Non-cooperation Movement in 1920, sharing all of its goals, including its loyalty to Gandhi's leadership. By 1922, though, as this phase of the freedom struggle ended, the first signs of his disenchantment with the Congress appeared. Focusing on his primary concern of caste reform, he clashed sharply with Brahman Congress leadership in Madras; but soon his opposition to them was augmented by his disillusionment with Gandhi. As Ambedkar also discovered, at this time Gandhi was not ready to oppose unequivocally all the caste institutions of Hinduism. Periyar quickly became a genuine radical in this respect. His sweeping social critique took him even further than Ambedkar, since he attacked not only Gandhi, the Brahmanical caste system, and Hinduism, but all religion. His special ire was reserved for people of his own, Hindu background; he seems not to have targeted Islam or Christianity, but he criticized the *Rāmāyana* and the *Laws of Manu* for their oppressive stances toward non-Brahmans and non-elites.

In 1925 Periyar started his own "Self-Respect Movement." This led him, like Gandhi, to imprisonment for his resistance to unjust laws, but Periyar concentrated on the injustice of the Brahmanical social system rather than that of British rule. Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Periyar were all three prominent critics of caste, but the last was the most extreme, as well as the only one among them who led an anti-Brahman effort, known as the Dravidian movement, in the heart of the conservative south of Tamil Nadu. When he left Congress, Periyar expressed his creed and policy in heretical terms: "No god; no religion; no Gandhi; no Congress; and no Brahmins."<sup>34</sup> Among our responders to Gandhi, this decree might have been shared completely only by M. N. Roy, because even Ambedkar had his religion, and accommodated Congress.

After years of service in state and national politics, and nearly two decades of involvement in the social reformist Justice Party, in 1939 Periyar demanded an independent

Dravida Nadu, which would be free from the domination of Brahmans, caste hierarchy, and Hindi-language imposition. In 1944 he changed the name of his party to Dravida Kazhagam, and in 1948 this split to give rise to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Largely because of agitation spearheaded by his party, the compulsory learning of Hindi was abolished in 1948, and the separate state of Tamil Nadu was carved out of the Union in 1956.

In an incisive comparative analysis of the ideas of Periyar, Ambedkar, and Gandhi, Nicholas B. Dirks makes it clear that although all three critics of caste recognized its profound roots in traditional India, and strongly opposed the tyranny of social hierarchy, Gandhi's persistent defense of *varnashrama dharma* was intolerable to the other two. This was the tipping point, or the test that Gandhi failed. With the same logic and language that led Gandhi, the caste reformer, to defend and embrace the inclusive spirit of Hinduism, both Periyar and Ambedkar deemed Hinduism hopeless, incapable of eradicating its worst evil. Both were "obsessed," as Dirks observes,<sup>35</sup> with Gandhi's dominant role in the whole project of Indian nationalism. They came to view him as ingenuous or misguided, and moved off in a different direction. From their perspective, Gandhi argued that "caste must go," but then offered up, as a sop to hierarchical Hinduism, a perverse interpretation of *varnashrama dharma*. Far better than this, in their view, would be a democracy, free of all vestiges of caste and Untouchability.

The excerpts from Periyar below show that his definition of both India's damnation and its hope for future redemption revolved around principles of equality and justice, always tested in the context of caste and Brahmanism.

### *ON HOW GANDHI'S PROGRAM INITIALLY DIFFERED FROM THOSE OF OTHER CONGRESS LEADERS*

Although initially a Gandhi supporter and member of the Tamilnadu Congress Party Committee, in the mid-1920s Periyar broke with both over the issue of guaranteed reservations for low- or out-caste people in a putative free India. The first two selections show his change in attitude between 1926 and 1927.

Some people ask me why I continue to stay in the Congress. I do so only because of the desire to reconvert the Congress that [presently] works for Brahmin career opportunities into the organization that existed prior to the past couple of years, the Mahatma Gandhi Congress. This worked for the welfare of everyone, and is therefore the real Congress of Non-cooperation. If such a reconversion occurs, then the selfish leaders of today will disappear. When one listens to Gandhi's words sometimes the precarious hope remains that such a restoration is still possible. If the hope completely disappears I will leave Congress.

[*Kudi Arasu*, 8 August 1926, 22; page numbers here and below refer to S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar: Suyamariyathai Samatharmam* (Coimbatore: Vidyal Pathipagam, 1999), trans. Rajan Krishnan and slightly emended for English by R. F. McDermott.]

*ON GANDHI'S LUNACY OR STRATEGY TO BUILD  
CONSENSUS AT THE COST OF COMPROMISING  
HIS COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL REFORM*

Periyar, like many other critics, faulted Gandhi for his sacrifice of political to religious principles.

Giving up his own basic principles for the sake of consensus and unity, Mahatma withdrew himself into his ashram like an ascetic or a Sankaracharya. It led to a situation that resembled a religious Mutt [ashrama] where rituals are regularly performed and devotees go to sing the praise of the saint and are rewarded with fame and glory. The reason why Gandhi's principles came to be undervalued and the Gandhi Mutt was established is because of the lunacy of seeking consensus and unity at the cost of principles. Since lunacy is a mark of a saint, it might suit Mahatma Gandhi. He could still return to his original principles but now that seems unlikely. I am certain that any institution, individual or country divorced from its core principles can only go astray, and Gandhi has lost sight of his.

[*Kudi Arasu*, 12 June 1927, 23.]

*ON GANDHI'S APOTHEOSIS AND ASSASSINATION*

Late in life, when asked to ruminate on Gandhi's legacy, Periyar made the following observations.

Why did the Brahmins make Gandhi Mahatma?

Comrade Gandhi proclaimed: 1) I am a conservative Hindu; 2) I believe in the prescriptions of the Vedas and the Epics; 3) I believe in the various incarnations of God; 4) I believe in the Varnashrama Dharma as laid down in the Vedic texts; 5) I believe in worshipping these idols. He also acted in accordance with these beliefs. Therefore, he was made a Mahatma.

Why did the Brahmins assassinate him?

He came to say that: 1) I don't believe that something like the traditional concept of God exists; 2) There is no truth exclusive to Hinduism; 3) Both Allah and Ram are the same; 4) It is not the privilege of only Brahmins to be educated; 5) I value the Koran as much as I value the Vedas; 6) The mosques seized by force should be vacated and returned to Muslims. Therefore, he was killed.

[*Viduthalai*, 12 April 1951, 735.]



## SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE: FERVENT NATIONALIST AND SOCIALIST

Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945), Indian political leader and head of a provisional government of free India during World War II, worked in the Indian National Congress for two decades before the war, but was impatient with Gandhi's non-violence and leadership. Bose was born in Cuttack, Orissa, a high-caste Bengali of the Kayastha caste.

He grew up during the Swadeshi period in Bengal, and his heroes were Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghose. Expelled from Presidency College for his role in assaulting a British professor who he thought had insulted India, Bose graduated later from another college with high honors.

His father sent him to England to take the Indian Civil Service examination, which he passed with brilliant marks. But since Bose felt that the Raj represented slavery for India, he decided not to accept an appointment into the elite service of the Raj. He met Gandhi upon his return from England, and although he was not completely satisfied with Gandhi's approach, he joined the Congress movement nonetheless.

In Calcutta, Bose worked in the Congress; as a favored lieutenant of C. R. Das, he was chosen Chief Executive Officer of the Calcutta Corporation in 1924. He worked for Hindu–Muslim amity and the improvement of civic life, but was jailed for involvement with acts of violence against the British Raj. No formal charges were made, but Bose served about three years in jail, two of them under unpleasant circumstances in Mandalay, Burma. Released for health reasons in 1927, and with Das now dead, Bose quickly rose to the leadership of the Bengal Provincial Congress. In 1928 he was chosen as a general secretary of the Indian National Congress, helped to prepare the Nehru Report on Indian self-rule, and became a widely popular leader of the younger leftists. He had strong support from urban workers, middle-class nationalists in Calcutta and towns through the countryside, women, and students. Bose pressed Gandhi to move more quickly and forcefully for complete independence. He began to call himself a socialist, and advocated a socialist program for the reconstruction of India once independence was gained.

As commander of the Congress volunteers at the 1928 Congress session, he drilled young Indians to help control the meeting. Some of these Indians later formed an underground revolutionary group, the Bengal Volunteers, or BV, which carried out acts of violence. Bose's ties to this group, along with his mass following as a Congress leader, made him a marked man to officials in the Raj and untrustworthy to Gandhi.

Bose was in and out of jail from 1930 to 1933, and was even elected mayor of Calcutta in 1930 while imprisoned. He spent a good deal of the period from 1933 to 1937 in Europe recovering his health. While in Europe he wrote *The Indian Struggle*, an account of Indian politics from 1920 to 1934, and *An Indian Pilgrim*, a brief, insightful autobiography. Based in Vienna, he also did propaganda work for Indian nationalism