

'Aryan' Rama and 'Dravidian' Ravana: Emergence of the *Ramayana* Criticism in the Self-Respect Movement

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This paper explores the emergence of the Ramayana criticism within Periyar's Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s. While existing scholarship has emphasised Periyar's antagonism towards the epic, it often treats his critique as static and focuses narrowly on a few selected texts. By examining Periyar's early life experiences, the influence of anti-caste thinkers like Phule, the neo-Shaivite reinterpretations of the Ramayana, and his complex relationship with Gandhi, this study argues that Periyar's engagement with the epic was historically contingent and politically evolving. It shows how this epic, widely reread in Tamil society as a tale of Aryan domination and Brahminical oppression, became central to the ideological battles of the Self-Respect Movement. The paper highlights three key factors shaping the Ramayana discourse: Periyar's iconoclastic childhood questioning of religious authority, the diffusion of Aryan invasion theory through non-Brahmin intellectual circles, and the shift in his attitude towards Gandhi from reverence to confrontation. By situating the Ramayana polemics within these contexts, the study demonstrates how Periyar and his movement transformed the epic into a site of resistance, one that linked social reform, anti-caste struggle, and Dravidian identity.

Keywords: Dravidian Movement, Gandhi, Ramayana

Introduction

At the annual celebration of the Tamil magazine *Tughlaq* on 14 January 2020, actor Rajinikanth honoured the magazine's legacy by recounting how it had bravely exposed the "horrors" of the Superstition Eradication Conference held at Salem in 1971, organised by Periyar and his Dravidar Kazhagam. According to Rajinikanth, images of Rama and Sita were displayed without clothes and garlanded with chappals during the conference procession and this incident, he claimed, was reported only by *Tughlaq*. Senior leaders of the DK immediately clarified that while Rama's statue had indeed been garlanded with footwear and burnt at the end of the procession, neither his nor Sita's

images were displayed naked.¹ Though Rajinikanth's speech became a state-level sensation for the next few days, it was certainly not the first time in which Periyar's antagonism towards Rama was revealed publicly. Not only did Periyar's ardent critics, like *Tughlaq*, frequently refer to his attacks on Rama and the Ramayana, but his followers also mentioned them with a sense of pride on every possible occasion.² In 2016, an organisation called the Thanthai Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam (TPDK) announced that it would burn effigies of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in Chennai as a protest against the celebration of *Ram Lila* in northern India. Although the organisers were arrested before the event could take place,³ the announcement and preparations for a "Raavana Lila" itself served as a proof of the continuation of a tradition that Periyar had initiated.

Periyar, whose original name was E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, was born in 1879 to non-Brahmin parents of the Balija Naidu community in a small town in western Tamil Nadu called Erode. Though not formally educated, Periyar inherited his father's business and established himself as a successful merchant in the local wholesale market. He began his political career at the age of forty as the Municipal Chairman of Erode and soon became associated with the Madras Presidency Association, which had been started by the Congress to represent the interests of non-Brahmins and counter the influence of the Justice Party. He officially became a member of the Congress during the upsurge of the Non-Cooperation Movement and was soon elected president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. Despite his popularity and stature, Periyar left the Congress in 1926 following the Gurukulam Controversy and the Kanchipuram Congress Conference, as both incidents convinced him that

¹ Ilangoan Rajasekaran, "Flawed Script: Rajinikanth's Comments on Periyar's 1971 Rally," *Frontline*, February 14, 2020, accessed on August 21, 2022, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article30682576.ece>.

² For present-day articulations of Ramayana hermeneutics among Periyarists, see Senthalai Gowthaman, "Iramayanathai yen Periyar edhirthaar?" October 16, 2021, YouTube video, 39:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1TCzPFVt04&t=624s> and Thozhar Manjai Vasanthan, "Raman kudhiraikku piranthavan...! Itho aatharam," January 24, 2020, YouTube video, 25:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_CbgRIRUjo.

³ Sanjeev Kumar, "Periyar Was the Initiator of Ravan Leela in Tamil Nadu," *Forward Press*, October 25, 2018, accessed on August 21, 2022, <https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/10/periyar-was-the-initiator-of-ravan-leela-in-tamil-nadu/>.

Brahmin dominance within the party could not be challenged.⁴ Immediately afterwards, he launched the Self-Respect Movement, which was more concerned with social reform than electoral politics. In 1938, he was elected president of the Justice Party, which he later integrated with his Self-Respect Movement, renaming it the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in 1944. However, in 1949, C. N. Annadurai broke away from the DK, taking a large number of its cadres with him to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which then went on to emerge as the ruling party of Tamil Nadu after its resounding victory in the 1967 elections. Despite this split, Periyar remained politically active and continued to influence the state's politics until his death in 1973. Throughout his long public career, he launched several campaigns, including protests against Brahminical Hinduism and the caste system, advocacy of women's rights, the anti-Hindi agitation, the demand for a separate Dravidian nation, and the promotion of atheism and rationalism.

In all these campaigns, Periyar persistently invoked and attacked the Ramayana, which he understood as an epic that celebrated northern imperialism over the South and Brahminical oppression of the Shudras. According to his reading, Rama was not a divine being but a mortal Aryan invader driven by lust for power and domination, while Ravana was portrayed as an egalitarian and courageous monarch of the Dravidian land. Therefore, unlike the Indian nationalists who imagined "Ramarajya" as a synonym for utopia, Periyar saw it as a dystopia in which women, Shudras,

⁴ A residential school called *Gurukulam* was established in Cheramandevi town of Tirunelveli district to promote nationalist education and it received funding from the Tamil Nadu Congress. In 1925, Periyar learnt that the Brahmin and non-Brahmin students were made to dine separately in *Gurukulam*, and started a campaign with other non-Brahmin Congressmen like Varadharajulu Naidu to stop this practice. For more on Gurukulam controversy, see Pazha Athiyaman, *Ceeramaateevi Kurukula Poratamum Dravida Iyakkathin Ezhuchiyum* (Nagarcoil: Kalachuvadu Publications, 2014).

On November 21, 1925, Tamil Nadu Congress Committee met at Kanchipuram to discuss and decide about council entry. Periyar participated in this conference mainly to get a mandate from the committee on the question of communal representation, which he had been raising since 1925. At the Kanchipuram conference he proposed that there should be a representation in Legislative Council and other bodies proportionate to the population strength of Brahmins, non-Brahmins and Depressed-Classes. But his resolution was ruled out. For more on the Kanchipuram Conference issue, see Dr. E.Sa. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker* (Madras: Ravi & Vasanth Publishers, 1983), 55-62.

and southern India would be oppressed and subjugated.⁵ Apart from critiquing the Ramayana through print and oratory on numerous occasions, Periyar also launched a separate campaign in 1956 calling for the public burning of Rama's images.⁶

Since the Ramayana discourse was intrinsic to Periyar's life and his movements, every scholarship on Periyar and the Dravidian Movement must engage with it. While historians such as Irschick,⁷ Pandian,⁸ Venkatachalapathy,⁹ Geetha and Rajadurai¹⁰ have highlighted Periyar's approach to the Ramayana only in passing, articles by Richman¹¹ and Ram Manoharan¹² deal with the subject more directly. Though these works clearly delineate certain perspectives of Periyar on the epic and attempt to contextualise and interpret them through different frameworks, they suffer from two major limitations. Firstly, they tend to assume Periyar's criticism of the Ramayana as a static and non-evolving entity. Despite the fact that Periyar consistently spoke and wrote about this particular epic in detail throughout his life, only certain texts authored by him—such as *Iramayana Pattirangal* (The Ramayana Characters), *Iramayana Kurippukal* (Notes on the Ramayana), and *Valmiki Ramayana Sambashani* (A Dialogue on the Valmiki Ramayana)—have been taken into consideration for analysis. Secondly, scholars have

⁵ A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "Periyar E.V. Ram asamy," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 28 February 2020), <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-340> (accessed on 23 August, 2022).

⁶ Paula Richman, "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana," *Public Culture* 7, no.3 (Spring 1995): 641.

⁷ Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India the Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

⁸ M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016).

⁹ A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "Dravidian Movement and Saivites: 1927-1944," *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 30, No. 14 (April 8, 1995).

¹⁰ V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samaya, 1998).

¹¹ Paula Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Paula Richman, "Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana," *Public Culture* Issue 7, no.3 (1995).

¹² Karthick Ram Manoharan, *Periyar: A Study in Political Atheism* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2022).

predominantly focused on Periyar's own approach while overlooking the range of other interesting interpretations of the Ramayana formulated by cadres of the Self-Respect Movement and the DK. Only Buchholz has studied C. N. Annadurai's take on the Ramayana, and that monograph emphasises the necessity of studying diverse voices and perspectives on the epic within Periyar's movement.¹³

Despite the growing scholarship on Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, a comprehensive historical study examining the emergence, deployment, and evolution of Ramayana criticism within the movement remains absent. This paper, therefore, focuses on a more specific inquiry: what historical circumstances and factors prompted the Ramayana discourse to surface prominently within the Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s? To address this question, the study identifies and analyses three key factors that contributed to the discourse's sudden prominence: Periyar's formative experiences as an iconoclast, the diffusion of the Aryan invasion theory among non-Brahmin groups, and, most critically, the dynamics of his political engagement with Mahatma Gandhi, which precipitated a public confrontation with the epic's central figure, Rama. By tracing these factors, the paper aims to illuminate not only the historical origins of Ramayana criticism in the movement but also its broader significance within the politics of early 20th-century Tamil society.

Archive of this study

A. R. Venkatachalapathy observes that virtually no record of Periyar's ideas prior to 1925 survives which makes it difficult to trace the intellectual roots of his radicalism.¹⁴ To overcome this limitation, I draw upon a combination of biographical, autobiographical, and textual sources that allow us to reconstruct Periyar's early engagements with the Ramayana and related questions of caste and religion. Periyar's first biography, written by Sami Chidambaranar in 1939, provides invaluable insights into his formative years. As an active participant in the Self-Respect Movement, Chidambaranar was able to collect information directly from Periyar's family, offering perspectives

¹³ Jonas Buchholz, "Countering Kampan: C.N. Annadurai's Critique of the Rāmāyaṇa" *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasiastudien* 32/33 (2015/2016).

¹⁴ Venkatachalapathy, "Periyar E.V. Ramasamy."

that are otherwise absent in the archive. Supplementing this is Periyar's own incomplete memoir, which, though fragmentary, gives important glimpses into his youth and the evolution of his iconoclastic outlook.

Equally significant is *Kudi Arasu*, the weekly magazine founded by Periyar in May 1925 and published until November 1949. More than a personal mouthpiece, *Kudi Arasu* functioned as a collective forum, recording Periyar's editorials alongside microscopic details of his political activities and contributions from Self-Respecters and ideological allies. For the purposes of this study, I have undertaken a close reading of issues from 1925 to 1927, a period crucial for tracing the first articulations of Ramayana criticism. Finally, I situate these writings alongside earlier Tamil intellectual interventions in the Ramayana debate, such as P. Sundaram Pillai's *Iramayana Ullurai Porulum Thenninthaiya Saathi Varalarum*¹⁵ (Allegorical Meaning of the Ramayana and History of Caste in South India), published in 1907, and A. Perumal Pillai's *Aathi Dravidar Varalaaru*¹⁶ (History of Adi Dravidians History of Adi Dravidians), published in 1922. These texts not only provide a pre-history to Periyar's engagement but also reveal how the Ramayana had already become a contested site through which questions of caste, race, and Dravidian identity were being negotiated.

Periyar's early life and questioning the *Ramayana*

Childhood and early life experiences often play a crucial role in shaping an individual's outlook, which is why biographers frequently trace and narrate the formative years of eminent personalities. In his spiritual biography of Gandhi, Arvind Sharma speculates that Gandhi's later positions—particularly on Hindu-Muslim relations—may have roots in the ideals of the Pranami sect, to which his mother belonged. Founded in the seventeenth century by Prannath, the Pranami sect emphasised inter-dining between Hindus and Muslims and the reading of sacred texts from both religions during communal

¹⁵ Manonmaniam Sundaram Pillai, *Ramayana Ullurai Porulum Thenindiya Saathi Varalarum* (Trichy: Adiyalam publication, 2018).

¹⁶ Gowthama Sanna, ed., *Aadhi Thiravaaidar Varalaaru* (Chennai: Aazhi Publishers, 2019).

gatherings.¹⁷ Similarly, Gandhi's own writings reveal the lasting impact of stories about Shravana Kumar and King Harishchandra, which he encountered in childhood. Childhood episodes can also serve as profoundly transformative experiences. Ambedkar, for instance, recounts that at the age of nine, a harrowing encounter with untouchability during a journey to Koregaon left an "indelible impression" on his mind.¹⁸ As a member of the untouchable Mahar caste, he and his siblings initially struggled to secure a bullock-cart at Masur railway station; only after paying double fare and agreeing to ride the cart themselves did a driver lend it, walking alongside to avoid "pollution" from their touch. Though Ambedkar had previously faced discrimination in his village, this incident struck him with unprecedented force, compelling him to reflect seriously on the social reality of untouchability.¹⁹ In a similar vein, the roots of Periyar's later critique of the Ramayana can be traced to his early life, well before he became involved in politics or social reform.

Periyar's father, Venkata Naicker, was a staunch and pious Vaishnavite who devoted considerable wealth and time to religious activities.²⁰ The first two children of Naicker and his wife, Muthammal, died at a young age, prompting the couple to immerse themselves in prayers and rituals such as fasting and listening to the recitation of the Ramayana and the *Bhagavata Purana*.²¹ When Periyar was born, he was named after Lord Rama, the very deity he would later challenge and critique throughout his life. During his childhood, Periyar's house was regularly visited by ascetics, Vaishnavite devotees, and Bhagavatas seeking donations and gifts from his father. Elder Naicker generously contributed to temple activities and the feeding of Brahmins, and Periyar observed that his parents imitated and behaved almost like orthodox Brahmins.²²

¹⁷ Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 18, Kindle.

¹⁸ Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol. 12* (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 670.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 665- 671.

²⁰ Sami Chidambaranar, *Sami Chidambaranar Nool Kalanjiyan 2: Tamilar Talaivar (Periyar E. V. R. Varalaaru)* (Chennai: Tamilman pathipakam, 2013), 19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 27.

Unlike his elder brother, E. V. Krishnasamy Naicker, who obediently followed religious practices, Periyar was a rebellious youth.²³ He transgressed caste boundaries, freely interacting with children and elders from lower castes, and even ate food prepared in their homes. He constantly debated with the sannyasis and Brahmins who visited his father's home and workplace, often embarrassing them with satirical questions about gods, fate, the puranas, and religion.²⁴ When he married Nagammai at the age of nineteen in 1898, he insisted that she cook non-vegetarian meals for him—an act considered taboo by other family members. On one occasion, he even tricked her into removing her thali/*mangalsutra*, a symbol that a married woman cannot remove until her husband's death. Because of such an "unclean" lifestyle, his mother sometimes avoided touching him.²⁵

At the age of 25, following the death of his five-month-old daughter and a quarrel with his father over a minor issue, Periyar resolved to abandon householder life and become an ascetic in Varanasi. There, he gained firsthand knowledge of caste injustices and witnessed the exploitation of illiterate masses by Brahmin priests in the name of religion. During his journey to the holy city, Periyar was accompanied by two Tamil Brahmins—Venkatramana Iyer and Ganapathy Iyer. To raise funds for their travel, the three temporarily stayed in the Andhra region, publicly singing verses from the Ramayana and other Puranas while collecting donations.²⁶ While the Brahmins recited the verses in Sanskrit, Periyar translated them into Telugu, adding his own commentary, which was filled with humorous criticisms and satirical comments.²⁷ This episode provides the first direct evidence of Periyar's engagement with the Ramayana, although the exact content and nature of his rhetoric remain unknown.

Through a Freudian framework, Ram Manoharan argues that Periyar had an antagonistic relationship with figures of parental authority from his childhood—be it his father, teachers, or priests.²⁸ This reading is largely

²³ Ibid., 31.

²⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁵ Ibid., 35-36.

²⁶ Sami Chidambaranar, *Sami Chidambaranar Nool Kalanjiyan 2*, 45.

²⁷ Ibid., 46.

²⁸ Ram Manoharan, *Periyar*, 5.

persuasive, as Periyar may indeed have felt suffocated living in a devout Hindu household. Later in his life, he referred to his father as a “Brahmin loyalist” and proudly implied that he was free from his father’s influence.²⁹ While this interpretation helps explain his rebellious disposition, it raises another question: from where did he derive the inspiration to satirically debate and critique the Ramayana? Although we cannot locate his exact source of inspiration, his biographies and autobiographical writings suggest that it was not political in nature. Rather, Periyar likely posed commonsensical questions in a humorous manner—questions that would naturally occur to anyone familiar with the basic storyline of the Ramayana.

Richman notes that certain actions of Rama—such as the banishment of Sita to the forest, the mutilation of Surpanakha, and the shooting of Vaali from behind—appear to deviate from dharma. While some devotees reconcile themselves with these ambiguities, others openly express their doubts.³⁰ Oral narratives and folk performances of the Ramayana across India often reflect such dilemmas within the epic. I propose that Periyar’s early rhetoric against the Ramayana similarly stemmed from doubts and dilemmas that arise in the common person’s mind. Much like audiences of folk performances, who enjoyed satirical and irreverent commentary on divine beings, people who gathered around Periyar in marketplaces and streets listened to his mockery of the Ramayana and other Puranas with curiosity and amusement, rather than anger. This formative experience indeed prepared E. V. Ramasamy for the decisive critique he launched against Vishnu’s avatar, ‘Ramaswami’, a few years later.

Reading myths through Aryan invasion theory

Although Periyar had been ridiculing the Ramayana from his youth, we cannot say that his rhetoric at that time had any political purpose or ambition. It was only in 1922, at the 30th Tamil Nadu Congress Committee Conference held in Tiruppur, that Periyar made his first political comment on the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Paula Richman ed., *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 6.

Ramayana.³¹ When asked about the means of annihilating caste, he replied, “If caste ought to be destroyed, then the gods who protect the caste system should cease to exist. If the Ramayana ensures the preservation of caste, then it should be burnt.”³² Periyar could make such a daring and outrageous statement at a Congress conference cannot be explained solely because of the irreverent attitude he had developed towards the Ramayana in his early life. Rather, he was able to make this claim at Tiruppur because, by that time, the Ramayana had already become an arena of cultural conflict between Brahmins and South Indian non-Brahmins, drawing inspiration from the Aryan invasion theory.

The invention of the Aryan race in nineteenth-century Europe became foundational to the interpretation of early Indian history during the colonial era.³³ Some Orientalists proposed that the original homeland of the culturally elevated and superior Aryans lay in Central Asia. Over time, they branched off in two directions—one toward Europe and the other toward Iran and later India. The Aryans who migrated to India were fair-complexioned and, according to this theory, conquered the dark-skinned indigenous population called the *dasas*, who were not only different from the newcomers but also considered inferior. The Aryans, who developed Vedic Sanskrit as their language, are said to have invented the institution of caste to segregate and protect themselves from the “barbaric” non-Aryans. In modern interpretations, the Aryans are often identified with Brahmins, while the lower castes, untouchables, and tribes constitute the pre-Aryan indigenous population.³⁴

This theory was readily employed by upper-caste Indian scholars, social reformers, and later nationalists to claim descent from the “glorious” Aryans, who civilised the subcontinent by founding Hindu religion—a civilisation purportedly in decline following Muslim invasions.³⁵ Conversely, the Aryan invasion theory was radically used by modern anti-caste thinkers from

³¹ S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar: Suyamariyathai – Samadharmam* (Chennai: New Century Book House, 2017), 30.

³² K. Veeramani, *Periyariyal Iramayana Aaiou Sorpozhiougam* (Chennai: Dravidar Kazhaga Veliyeedu, 2003), 4.

³³ Romila Thapar, “The Theory of Aryan Race and India: History and Politics,” *Social Scientist* 24, no 1/3 (January – March, 1996): 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

marginalised communities to critique and subvert Brahminical oppression. For instance, Jyotirao Phule, from the Maratha region, regarded the era before the Aryans as a golden age for the natives of India, who were later subjugated and forced into lower-caste status by the invading Aryans. Phule unearthed this history from Hindu texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, which depict the original inhabitants as gory and repulsive *Asuras*, while the Aryans who defeated them are symbolically represented as the first five avatars of Vishnu—Matsya, Kurma, Narasimha, Vamana, and Parasuram.³⁶ This interpretive move demonstrates Phule's brilliance in applying the Aryan invasion theory to interpret Brahminical texts and myths, narrating the fall of egalitarian native rulers, peoples, and cultures following the invasion. Moreover, Phule's approach stands in sharp contrast to Max Müller's reading of the Rig Veda as an account of civilised Aryan invaders subjugating lesser-civilised natives.

Aryan Rama versus Adi-Dravida/ Dravidian Ravana

If Phule used the *Bhagavata Purana* to present the conflict between Aryans and non-Aryans, in the Tamil country the Ramayana served a similar purpose, initially employed by neo-Shaivites. In 1880, Somasundara Nayakar—the main spiritual inspiration behind the Saiva Siddhanta revivalist movement—read the Ramayana as a history of Vaishnavite subjugation of Shaivites.³⁷ However, the ideological descendants of Somasundara Nayakar, such as Sundaram Pillai, Ponnambalam Pillai, and J. M. Nallaswami Pillai, reinterpreted the Ramayana as a text that recorded the conflict between Aryans and Dravidians. Unlike Somasundara Nayakar, his successors were mostly English-educated, non-Brahmins of the Vellalar caste, well-versed in contemporary scholarship and discourses. They quickly embraced the new Dravidian identity, constructed by colonial administrators and missionary

³⁶ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 143.

³⁷ A. Gangatharam and A. Gangatharan, "Epic, Epistome and Ethnicity: Re-reading of the Ramayana in Modern Tamil Context," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 63 (2002): 881.

scholars in the Madras Presidency, linked it with their religion, and declared Saiva Siddhanta as the original religion of the Dravidians.³⁸

According to these neo-Shaivite interpretations, Rama's arrival in Southern India and his victory over Ravana—a staunch devotee of Shiva and an ethical ruler—marked a pivotal historical moment that led to the decline of Dravidian civilisation.³⁹ Sundaram Pillai, a Tamil scholar and philosophy teacher in Travancore, argued that caste based on birth was non-existent in the pre-Aryan Dravidian society, where social classification was determined by landscape and occupation. This system was highly flexible, allowing social mobility, inter-dining, and intermarriages.⁴⁰ It was only after the events of the Ramayana that a rigid caste system based on birth emerged in the Tamil region.⁴¹ Beyond discussing these social transformations, Sundaram Pillai also defended Ravana's actions and raised a series of critical questions about Rama's ideals, including his alliances with betrayers of his own clan such as Sugriva and Vibheesana, the brutal killing of the Shudra Shambuka for performing Vedic rites, and the attack on Vaali in violation of battle rules.⁴²

The perspectives of Sundaram Pillai and other neo-Shaivites on the Ramayana were not only published in journals such as *Malabar Quarterly* and *Tamilian Antiquary* and as standalone books, but were also popularised through public meetings of the Shaiva Siddhanta Sabha held in district towns across Tamil region.⁴³ Consequently, the neo-Shaivite reading of the Ramayana as a semi-historical narrative of Aryan invasion began to influence other non-Brahmin groups in the Madras Presidency and evolved into a widely circulated discourse. Members of the Justice Party, who, unlike the Tamil neo-Shaivites, used the term "Dravidian" to identify all non-Brahmin castes of South India across linguistic boundaries, condemned Aryan Brahmins for introducing their Puranas and the Ramayana into Tamil Nadu while neglecting indigenous

³⁸ For more on the engagement of Tamil neo-Shaivites with the Dravidian identity, see V. Ravi Vaithees, *Religion, Caste, and Nation in South India: Maraimalai Adigal, the Neo-Shaivite Movement, and Tamil Nationalism, 1876-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 882.

⁴⁰ Sundaram Pillai, *Ramaayana Ullurai Porulum Thenindiya Saathi Varalarum*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9-12.

⁴³ Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India*, 294.

literature.⁴⁴ Even non-Brahmin leaders within the Congress were influenced by this reading. Varadarajulu Naidu, a prominent congressman who later joined the Hindu Mahasabha, cited Rama's killing of Shambuka as a metaphor to describe the Brahmin domination within the Congress party in Madras Presidency.⁴⁵

Apart from the neo-Shaivite reading of Ravana as a Dravidian, a devotee of Shiva, and an egalitarian ruler, since the late nineteenth century some thinkers also interpreted Ravana as a Buddhist king. For instance, Masilamoni Moodaliar, who was associated with the Madras Secular Society—an organisation that actively promoted atheism and rationalism between 1878 and 1888 in Madras—identified Rama and Krishna as naive rulers manipulated by Brahmins to serve their interests. He further interpreted demon figures in Hindu mythology, such as Hiranya and Ravana, as indigenous Buddhist kings who resisted Brahminical dominance and were subsequently expelled from their kingdoms.⁴⁶ Interestingly, Iyothee Thass, a Tamil Dalit Buddhist icon who founded the Sakhya Buddhist Society in the final years of the nineteenth century and argued that Dalits in the Tamil region were originally Buddhists rendered untouchable after the advent of Brahmins, adopted an approach to the Ramayana that differed from that of Moodaliar. Despite his belief that Brahmins had 'invented' Hinduism by appropriating Buddhist elements, Thass did not interpret Ravana as a Buddhist king; instead, he subscribed to the Ramayana version preserved in the Buddhist Jataka tales, which depict Rama as one of the previous lives of the Gautama Buddha.⁴⁷ While the Jataka narrative may have prevented Iyothee Thass from reinterpreting Ravana as a Buddhist king, in his writings he portrayed other *asuras* in Hindu mythology—particularly Hiranyan and Mahabali—as just and egalitarian Buddhist rulers who were later demonised by Brahmins in the myths they composed.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 291.

⁴⁵ Athiyaman, *Ceeramaateevi*, 156.

⁴⁶ M. Masilamoni Moodaliar, *Varunabeda Vilakkam* in *Chennai Laukika Sangam*, ed. V. Arasu (Chennai: New Century Book House, 2012), 618-619.

⁴⁷ G. Aloysius, eds. *Iyothethasar Sinthanaigal – II* (Palayamkottai: Folklore and Research Centre, St. Xavier's College, 1999), 105.

⁴⁸ Stalin Rajangam, "Iyothee Thaasar Ezhuthiya Iraniyan Kathai," Neelam, October 1, 2020, <https://theneelam.com/a-story-on-fictional-character-iraniyan-in-ayothidasars-context/> (accessed on January 4, 2026).

Some Tamil Dalits also interpreted the Ramayana as a narrative about the subjugation of Dalits by both Brahmins and upper-caste non-Brahmins. For instance, in 1922, Tirisirapuram A. Perumal Pillai, a Dalit writer, published *Aathi Thiraavidar Varalaaru*, tracing the history of the *Adi-Dravidas*—a term he used for certain Dalit castes, including the Pariyars. Perumal Pillai read events from the Ramayana as a conflict between Aryans and the original inhabitants of Southern India. He also adopted Sundaram Pillai's view that the institution of caste emerged in South India after Rama's arrival.⁴⁹ However, Perumal Pillai distinguished between the Dravidians and the *Adi-Dravidians*, claiming that Ravana and other native Southern inhabitants were *Adi-Dravidas*, the original Dravidians.⁵⁰ Accordingly, some Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu were represented as descendants of Ravana, vanquished by the Aryan Rama. Interestingly, Perumal Pillai depicted Dravidians (non-Brahmins) as less civilised than the *Adi-Dravidas*, portraying them as assisting Rama in his conquest, while the Ramayana casts them as monkeys.⁵¹ Despite drawing inspiration from Sundaram Pillai and being a devotee of Shiva, Perumal Pillai was not associated with the Saiva Siddhanta revivalist movement, which was predominantly composed of upper-caste Vellalas. His interpretation, therefore, reflects the double oppression experienced by Dalits—first by the Brahmins and subsequently by non-Brahmin Dravidians.

From this range of interpretations produced by different groups in the Tamil region, it is evident that by the 1920s the Ramayana had become part of the discourse and polemics of several non-Brahmin groups, serving as a medium to express their opposition to Brahminical domination. Hence, it is not surprising that Periyar—who had ridiculed the Ramayana since his youth and advocated for the interests of non-Brahmins within the Congress party—declared that the epic should be burnt if it served to maintain the caste system. However, because Periyar's writings and speeches prior to 1925, the year he launched his weekly magazine *Kudi Arasu*, are not adequately available, the extent to which the Ramayana featured in his early rhetoric remains unclear. It is noteworthy that even after launching *Kudi Arasu*, neither Periyar nor the cadres of the Self-Respect Movement expressed substantial criticism of the

⁴⁹ Gowthama Sanna, ed., *Aadhi Thiraavidar Varalaaru* (Chennai: Aazhi Publishers, 2019), 78.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

Ramayana until the end of 1927. In fact, a contributor named Uthamar expressed disappointment in *Kudi Arasu* as Periyar rarely wrote against the Ramayana and its Aryan philosophy, and even then, only in an indirect manner. This contrasted with figures like V. S. Raman, who, in the Justice Party's mouthpiece *Dravidan*, openly argued that the Ramayana had deprived Tamils of dignity and self-respect for centuries.⁵² Therefore, in the following section of this paper, I will argue that Gandhi was a major reason why Periyar remained largely silent about the Ramayana for this brief period, despite having declared in 1922 that the epic should be burnt and now also owning a magazine through which he could freely express his opinions. Before delving into that argument, it is necessary to briefly examine Gandhi's influence on Periyar.

The Gandhian phase of Periyar

Periyar associated himself with the Congress through the Madras Presidency Association from 1917 onwards. However, it was only after his visit to Amritsar, where he witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre firsthand,⁵³ and on Rajaji's persuasion that Periyar officially became a member of the Congress towards the end of 1919.⁵⁴ Even before formally joining, he was influenced by Gandhi. When the Mahatma called for the observance of April 6, 1919, as a day of Satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act, Periyar helped organise meetings across several district centers in the Tamil region and participated as a speaker. After formally joining the Congress, a biographer notes that he began to "fanatically" support Gandhi's campaigns and methods of agitation,⁵⁵ immersing himself in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the temperance campaign, and the promotion of khaddar or khadi. Among Gandhi's initiatives, Periyar considered the campaign to abolish untouchability the most important, speaking extensively against both the caste system and untouchability.⁵⁶ During this Gandhian phase, he was invited by the leaders of the Kerala Congress to participate in the Vaikom Satyagraha, a movement

⁵² Uthamar, "Iraamayanam Paarpana Pracharam," *Kudi Arasu*, October 23, 1927, 12.

⁵³ Thanthai Periyar, *Thathai Periyare Ezhuthiya Suyasarithai* (Chennai: Dravidar Kazhaga Veliyeedu, 2021), 31.

⁵⁴ Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker*, 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁶ S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar*, 29.

aimed at allowing untouchable castes to use public roads around the Mahadeva temple.⁵⁷ Though he was arrested multiple times during this struggle, his efforts earned him the title *Vaikom Veerar* (the hero of Vaikom). Periyar's active involvement in Gandhi's campaigns also caused him financial loss. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, he refrained from collecting surety bonds and documents worth fifty thousand rupees from the court, in accordance with the campaign's boycott of colonial institutions.⁵⁸ Later, during Gandhi's temperance campaign in 1921, Periyar successfully implemented the program in Erode—not only by organising picketing in front of arrack and toddy shops but also by cutting down thousands of palmyra and coconut trees on his estate, thereby suffering a permanent loss of income.⁵⁹

As a devoted Gandhian, Periyar was deeply unhappy with the developments in the Congress following Gandhi's arrest in 1922. With the campaign against untouchability visibly slowing down, the question of Hindu–Muslim relations received far less attention than it deserved. Around this time, the Swaraj Party was formed by prominent Congress leaders such as Motilal Nehru and C. R. Das, and soon the Congress abandoned its boycott of council entry. Periyar sided with the “no-changers,” who opposed council entry and advocated for a full programme of boycott and non-cooperation. For Periyar, the Congress had, since its inception, been largely dominated by Brahmins who were primarily interested in securing employment in government institutions.⁶⁰ It was this self-serving attitude, he believed, that left Muslims in northern India feeling neglected and marginalised, leading to communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims.⁶¹ Yet, according to Periyar, this Brahminical character and outlook of the Congress underwent a drastic transformation with the arrival of Gandhi, who came from a non-Brahmin community. In a speech on “Gandhism” delivered at Thiruvavur, Periyar explained that Gandhi's idea of ‘swaraj’ essentially meant liberation for the poor and self-respect for the

⁵⁷ Visswanathan, *The Political Career*, 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁰ E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, “Congressil Iruppathaivida Irappathe Mel Yen? Ippothulla congress parpana congressaeh,” *Kudi Arasu*, August 8, 1926, 3.

⁶¹ “Hindu Muslim Abipraya Pethangalum Kalahangalum Yerpada Kaaranam Enna?,” *Kudi Arasu*, July 11, 1926, 3.

oppressed.⁶² Gandhi emphasised the use of khaddar (khadi), which he believed would eradicate rural poverty, and the abolition of untouchability, which he saw as essential to dismantling inequality and hierarchy. Moreover, his programme of non-cooperation was, for Periyar, the most effective method of achieving independence, as it united diverse sections of the population in the freedom struggle while simultaneously uplifting their social status.⁶³ However, the Brahmins—already dissatisfied with resolutions to boycott councils and government jobs—feared that Gandhi’s plans, if fully implemented, would erode their hegemonic position in both political and cultural spheres. Gandhi was therefore consciously sidelined within the Congress by Brahmins in Tamil Nadu and North India,⁶⁴ who eventually captured the party for themselves. Periyar declared that it was “better to die than to remain in this Brahmin Congress” and longed for the return of the Mahatma’s Congress.⁶⁵

Such commitment to Gandhi’s ideals did not diminish even after Periyar dissociated himself from the Congress.⁶⁶ When he launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1926, Periyar made the promotion of khaddar, the abolition of untouchability and other forms of inequality, and the temperance campaign among the key doctrines of the movement.⁶⁷ Having established Periyar’s allegiance and respect for the Mahatma, I propose that his temporary silence on the Ramayana can nonetheless be attributed to Gandhi’s devotion to Rama. While Richman and other scholars present the Ramayana as a continuous element of Periyar’s rhetoric since 1922, they tend to overlook this period of silence. In the next section, I highlight and analyse this brief interlude and conjecture how Gandhi was a major reason for it.

⁶² E. V. Ramasamy Naicker, “Thiruvaruril E.V. Raamasamy Naicker Avargal Pesiyathin Saaramsam,” *Kudi Arasu*, April 18, 1926, 2.

⁶³ Naicker, “Congressil Iruppathaivida Irappathe Mel Yen,” 3.

⁶⁴ “Hindu Muslim Abipraya Pethangalum,” 3.

⁶⁵ “Suyarajyam,” *Kudi Arasu*, November 12, 1925, 7.

⁶⁶ S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar*, 47.

⁶⁷ “Parpanarallathar Maanadu,” *Kudi Arasu*, December 12, 1926.

Gandhi's devotion and Periyar's silence

Though Rama was the reigning deity of Gandhi's family, it was only at the age of thirteen that Gandhi became familiar with Tulasidas's *Ramacharitamānas*. When his father was ill, a Ram devotee named Ladha Maharaj would sing verses from Tulasidas's text and explain their meaning to the family. This early exposure laid the foundation for Gandhi's deep devotion to the Ramayana.⁶⁸ However, Gandhi's devotion to Rama extended beyond the text itself. Initially, he worshipped Rama as a divine figure in the Hindu epic—the husband of Sita and son of Dasharatha—but over the years, the meaning of Rama expanded for him.⁶⁹ In 1924, when a Vaishnavite objected to Gandhi referring to Rama in the singular, the Mahatma replied in *Navajivan*:

I myself am a Vaishnava and that 'Shri Ramachandra Prabhu' is the *ishtadevata* worshipped in my family. Still, to me the name Rama is dearer, though I have written 'Shri Ramachandra Prabhu' for once here to satisfy this friend. 'Shri Ramachandra Prabhu' gives me the feeling that He is far away from me, whereas Rama is enthroned in my heart. Wherever I have made use of the sacred names, Rama...it seems to me that they express my overflowing love.⁷⁰

Gandhi went on to write that Rama was his mother, father, brother, and everything else; he saw Rama in all men, which allowed him to keep everyone close to his heart.⁷¹ Apart from this deep personal connection, Gandhi creatively used verses from Tulasidas's Ramayana to support political arguments and often explained his political activities by referring to Ramayana narratives. For instance, when asked about his inspiration for the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi cited a passage from *Sundar Khand* in which Sita boldly refuses to submit to Ravana's wishes, despite being his prisoner.⁷² For Gandhi, the present British rule was '*Ravana Rajya*' and needed

⁶⁸ Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmacaritamānas of Tulasidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 378.

⁶⁹ Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography*, 30.

⁷⁰ Narendra Kaushik, "The Influence of Rama on Mahatma Gandhi," (Paper presented at World Ramayana Conference, Jabalpur, December 2016), 2.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, 379.

to be replaced by ‘*Ram Rajya*,’ which he defined as something higher than ordinary political emancipation. To achieve this *Ram Rajya*, he urged people to renounce all luxuries and live on bare necessities, enduring hardships as Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana did during their exile.⁷³ Moreover, Gandhi frequently invoked the Ramayana in his campaigns against untouchability, citing episodes such as Rama embracing Guha, the untouchable boatman, and pleading with caste Hindus to emulate this act of inclusion in contemporary India.⁷⁴

Given that the Ramayana occupied a significant place in both the spiritual and political life of the Mahatma, I speculate that it was a major factor in Periyar’s decision to remain largely silent about the epic and its protagonist, Rama. While he frequently translated and re-published Gandhi’s articles from *Young India* and *Navajivan* in *Kudi Arasu*, none of these were primarily about the Ramayana, although a few referred to the epic in passing.⁷⁵ This selective re-publication indicates Periyar’s discomfort in employing the Ramayana for nationalist purposes. Since reading the Ramayana as a tale of Aryan invasion and as a historical account of the introduction of caste in southern India was already popular among various non-Brahmin groups in the Madras Presidency, I argue that Periyar—well aware of these discourses—could neither endorse Gandhi’s devotion to Rama nor, out of respect for Gandhi, openly attack the epic.

Consequently, during the first two years of *Kudi Arasu*, neither Periyar nor other members of the Self-Respect Movement wrote or spoke extensively against the Ramayana. Occasionally, however, Periyar made brief references to the epic while discussing Brahmin hegemony. For example, in a meeting held in Chennai on 29 July 1926, where he declared that it was better to die than remain part of the Brahmin Congress, he mentioned that texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Harichandra Purana*, and *Iranya Purana* reflected the conflict between Brahmins and non-Brahmins.⁷⁶ His declaration at the 1922 Tiruppur conference that the Ramayana should be burnt was an exceptional

⁷³ Kaushik, “The Influence of Rama on Mahatma Gandhi,” 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, “Hindu Samaya Maanpu Kurutu Nambikkai Vendaam,” *Kudi Arasu*, May 23, 1926, 5.

⁷⁶ Naicker, “Congressil Iruppathaivida Irappathe Mel Yen,” 3.

statement, and no similarly daring or unsympathetic remarks about the epic were recorded from Periyar until the end of 1927. Nevertheless, we should be cautious not to conclude that Periyar was universally reluctant to critique anything that was dear to Gandhi.

Let us take the case of the *Manusmriti*, another Hindu text that Periyar criticised throughout his life. Gandhi wrote,

I do not regard *Manusmriti* as an evil. It contains much that is admirable, but in its present form it undoubtedly contains many things that are bad, and these appear to be interpolations. Whilst a reformer would therefore treasure all excellent things in that ancient code, he would expurgate all that is injurious or of doubtful value.⁷⁷

Despite this nuanced view, Periyar was not interested in salvaging the “excellent things” from the *Manusmriti*. Even during his Gandhian phase, he attacked it vehemently, in stark contrast to his temporary silence regarding the Ramayana. He repeatedly wrote that the *Manusmriti* was responsible for the exploitation and humiliation of non-Brahmins at the hands of Brahmins, who, in his view, had caused more damage to Hindu religion than the British had done to India. He criticised the text for designating lower castes as Shudras, implying that they were offsprings of prostitutes or slaves.⁷⁸ From the beginning, Periyar also disagreed with Gandhi on the question of *Varnashrama Dharma*, a fundamental principle underpinning caste hierarchy. This divergence eventually led him to renounce Gandhian life and break his silence on the Ramayana.

Confronting Gandhi, confronting Rama

Towards the end of his life, Gandhi became a social revolutionary, advocating intermarriage between Brahmins and untouchables as a means to dismantle the caste system, and he hoped that “when all become casteless, monopoly of

⁷⁷ Pallikonda Manikanta, “Symbols Serve Oppressors, That is Why Manu Must Fall,” *The Wire*, November 3, 2020, <https://thewire.in/caste/symbols-serve-oppressors-that-is-why-manu-must-fall>.

⁷⁸ “Theendamaikku Yaar Poruppali? Palakkattil 144-kku Yaar Poruppali,” *Kudi Arasu* November 22, 1926, 2.

occupation would go.”⁷⁹ However, in the 1920s, despite launching campaigns to abolish untouchability, Gandhi strongly believed that caste preserved Hinduism from disintegration and argued that the hundreds of castes should be classified into four basic *varnas*. While maintaining that there was no question of superiority or inferiority within the *varna* system, he held that every Hindu must follow their hereditary occupation, and that prohibiting intermarriage between different *varnas* was necessary for the rapid evolution of the soul.⁸⁰ In contrast, Periyar regarded the annihilation of *Varnashrama Dharma* and the caste system as essential to abolishing untouchability and consistently expressed these views in his speeches and writings.⁸¹ However, according to Geetha and Rajadurai, Periyar neither addressed nor directly challenged Gandhi on the matter of *Varnashrama Dharma* for some time. He began to critique the Mahatma more vocally only from the mid-1927 onwards, in response to crucial political developments at both the national and provincial levels.⁸²

Despite Gandhi’s earlier strong opposition to council entry, the 1925 Kanpur Congress Conference marked the end of the rivalry between the Swaraj Party and the Congress, and it was decided that Congressmen would campaign for the Swarajists in the upcoming elections. In the elections held in the Madras Presidency in November 1926, the Swaraj Party secured a majority, defeating the Justice Party, which had been supported by Periyar and his Self-Respect Movement. Following this victory, at the Guwahati Conference, S. Srinivasa Iyengar—who had harshly criticised Gandhi’s methods of non-cooperation and joined the Swaraj Party—was elected as All-India Congress President.⁸³ For the preceding years, Periyar had focused much of his energy on attacking Srinivasa Iyengar and other Tamil Brahmins for opportunism. He regularly wrote that while several non-Brahmin Congressmen, including himself, took Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement seriously and went to prison multiple times, Brahmin Congressmen like Srinivasa Iyengar were unwilling even to

⁷⁹ Mark Lindley, “Changes in Mahatma Gandhi’s Views on Caste and Intermarriage,” *Hacettepe University Journal of Social Sciences* 1 (2002).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, *Periyar*, 34.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

renounce their professions or boycott government institutions.⁸⁴ Under these circumstances, in 1927, it was announced that Gandhi would tour Tamil Nadu to promote khaddar. Periyar, who had earlier believed that Gandhi's actions would liberate the oppressed and challenge Brahmin hegemony, began to question whether the Mahatma had ever truly considered the plight of the non-Brahmins. Surrounded by Brahmins who prevented him from witnessing the growing tensions between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Periyar concluded that Gandhi would not address this pressing issue any time soon, and that his Tamil Nadu tour would likely be little more than a ceremonial procession akin to that of a Shankaracharya.⁸⁵

Periyar's perception that Gandhi was aligning more closely with Brahmins and compromising with the Swarajists prompted him to openly challenge Gandhi's views on *Varnashrama Dharma*. A few weeks before Gandhi's visit to Tamil Nadu, at a public meeting held in Mysore on the abolition of untouchability, Gandhi asserted that *Varnashrama Dharma* was essential for Hindu society and that each *varna* must follow its assigned occupation. In response, Periyar wrote an editorial titled "*Gandhi and Varnashrama*," in which he argued that Gandhi's views were no different from the resolutions recently passed at a Brahmin conference.⁸⁶ Hoping to persuade Gandhi to reconsider his stance, Periyar and S. Ramanathan, a prominent member of the Self-Respect Movement, met Gandhi before his Tamil Nadu trip and expressed their deep concerns. However, neither side was able to influence the other, as their views were fundamentally opposed. In that conversation, Periyar emphasised that if India were to achieve both independence and self-respect, three institutions must be destroyed: the Indian National Congress, Hinduism, and Brahminism.⁸⁷ Significantly, in the article reporting this meeting, Periyar criticised Gandhi for employing Aryan Puranas—such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and *Bhagavata Purana*—in his speeches, warning that such strategies could ultimately harm Gandhi.⁸⁸ In the following weeks, *Kudi Arasu* continuously published articles highlighting Gandhi's propagation of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁸⁵ "Bayappadukirom Mahatma Gandhiyin Tamilnatu Vijayam," *Kudi Arasu*, August 21, 1927, 9.

⁸⁶ "Mahatmavum Varunasiramum I," *Kudi Arasu*, August 8, 1927, 8.

⁸⁷ "Mahatmavum Varunasiramum II," *Kudi Arasu*, August 28, 1927, 8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 9.

Varnashrama Dharma throughout his Tamil Nadu tour. One such article, titled “Mahatma Gandhi and the Brahminical Campaign,” condemned Gandhi for narrating the Ramayana at a women’s meeting in Vellore. Referring to Rama’s killing of Shambuka, the article warned readers: “If the Ram Rajya advocated by Gandhi and the Brahmins were to come into existence, could the Shudras even pray to their gods without fear?”⁸⁹

Hence, Periyar and other members of the Self-Respect Movement unleashed fierce criticisms of the Ramayana once Periyar began confronting Gandhi openly on the issues of *Varnashrama Dharma* and his alliance with Brahmins. This confrontation gave the Self-Respect Movement a new purpose: the annihilation of the Congress, Hindu religion, and Brahminical hegemony. This new agenda differed from the movement’s earlier aims—such as the abolition of untouchability, temperance campaigns, and promotion of khaddar—which had been largely derived from Gandhi’s ideals and vision. As the movement pursued its new objectives, the gulf between Periyar and Gandhi widened. This shift is reflected in the change of *Kudi Arasu*’s slogan. From its inception until November 13, 1927, the magazine carried the line, “Long live Mahatma Gandhi” on its front page. In the next issue, the slogan was changed to “Long live Khaddar,”⁹⁰ which was itself dropped by the last week of December—signaling Periyar’s complete departure from Gandhi.⁹¹

Since the Ramayana was central to the three elements Periyar sought to destroy, articles exclusively attacking the epic began appearing in *Kudi Arasu*. Not only did Periyar and the core members of the Self-Respect Movement critique the Ramayana, but allies of the movement, such as neo-Shaivites, and general readers were also given space in the magazine to articulate their perspectives. One columnist even adopted the pseudonym *Ravanadasan* (“servant of Ravana”) and wrote that, just as the humane and brave monarch Ravana is depicted as a demon in Brahminical narratives, Periyar himself might one day be remembered as a *Rakshasa*.⁹² In 1928, when the Self-Respect Movement launched the English weekly *The Revolt*, the Ramayana discourse

⁸⁹ “Mahatma Gandhiyum Parpana Pracharamum,” *Kudi Arasu*, September 4, 1927, 9.

⁹⁰ *Kudi Arasu*, November 20, 1927.

⁹¹ *Kudi Arasu*, December 25, 1927.

⁹² Thirisirapuram Ravanadasan, “Suyamariyathai Ethir Oli Iramayanathai Tholaikka Vendum,” *Kudi Arasu*, November 13, 1927, 14.

extended into that space as well. While some contributors, like Gurusami, read the Ramayana as a tale of Aryan conquest over the Dravidians, others exposed the sexual perversities and morally questionable qualities of its characters, stripping the epic of its sanctity. In 1930, Periyar published his most famous text, *Iramayanappatirankal*, which remains in print today along with English and Hindi translations. The rhetoric against the Ramayana was not limited to print media; it also resonated in the public meetings of the Self-Respect Movement, becoming an indispensable and enduring part of its activism.

Conclusion

Previous scholarship on Periyar's engagement with the Ramayana has largely focused on a few of his writings, rarely considering the perspectives of other members of the Self-Respect Movement. This narrow approach creates the impression that criticism of the Ramayana within the movement was static and unchanging. My study, in contrast, demonstrates that these polemics evolved over time, reflecting broader socio-political shifts, eliciting diverse reactions, and producing significant influence within Tamil society.

Three key factors contributed to the emergence and evolution of Ramayana criticism in the Self-Respect Movement. First, from his youth, Periyar exhibited an iconoclastic disposition, questioning and debunking core elements of Hinduism—including caste, Brahmins, rituals, and the Puranas. The Ramayana naturally became a target of his early irreverence, though this engagement lacked any larger political agenda. What distinguished Periyar was his ability to articulate these critiques compellingly, attracting audiences even in informal settings, and laying the groundwork for his lifelong antagonism toward the epic.

Second, the rise of Aryan invasion discourse provided a political framework for understanding the Ramayana as a narrative of conquest. Inspired by nineteenth-century anti-caste thinkers like Phule, Tamil neo-Shaivites and Dalit intellectuals, Periyar encountered interpretations of the Ramayana as the story of Aryan domination over the South, with Ravana reimagined as an egalitarian Dravidian king. This reading gave a historical-political dimension to the epic, culminating in Periyar's bold 1922 assertion at the Tiruppur Congress conference that the Ramayana should be burnt.

Third, Periyar's temporary silence on the epic following the launch of the Self-Respect Movement can be attributed to his respect for Gandhi, whose deep devotion to Rama and idealization of Ram Rajya made a direct attack politically and personally complex. During this period, references to the Ramayana in *Kudi Arasu* were rare and largely indirect, limited to discussions on Aryan invasions and Brahminical hegemony. Yet, Gandhi's influence was paradoxically also the catalyst for Periyar's eventual full-throated critique. By late 1927, as he openly confronted Gandhi on issues such as Varnashrama Dharma and Brahminical dominance, the Ramayana became a central focus of criticism, appearing consistently in *Kudi Arasu* and other Self-Respect Movement publications, and extending to public meetings and allied forums.

In conclusion, Periyar's engagement with the Ramayana cannot be seen as static or isolated. It emerged from a combination of early irreverence, exposure to anti-caste interpretations, and his evolving political and ideological relationship with Gandhi. Over time, criticism of the Ramayana became a defining feature of the Self-Respect Movement, intertwining social reform, anti-Brahminism, and political assertion, and continuing to shape debates on caste, religion, and cultural authority in Tamil society.

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