

Women's Education as Social Revolution: A Study of Periyar's Rationalist Framework

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Abstract: Women's education in early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu developed within a society structured by caste hierarchy, Brahmanical authority and deeply rooted patriarchal customs. Formal schooling for girls remained limited and where it existed, it often reinforced ideals of domestic obedience rather than intellectual autonomy. Within this setting, Periyar advanced a radically different understanding of education. Grounded in his rationalist critique of religion and social inequality, he treated women's education as a means to dismantle inherited systems of subordination. Through his speeches, essays and organisational work in the Self-Respect Movement from the 1920s onwards, Periyar argued that literacy and critical inquiry would enable women to question scriptural sanction, resist enforced marriage practices and claim property and civic rights. He rejected the notion that women's learning should serve family honour or religious duty, insisting instead on scientific temper and independent thought. His campaigns for widow remarriage, birth control and equal inheritance were closely tied to his insistence on educational access. Placed within the political climate of colonial reform debates and emergent Dravidian assertion, his position redefined education as an instrument of structural change. Women's education thus assumed the character of a social revolution aimed at reshaping gender relations and redistributing authority within Tamil society.

Keywords: Periyar, Women's Education, Rationalism, Self-Respect Movement, Gender Equality, Social Reform

INTRODUCTION

The question of women's education in Tamil Nadu acquired political urgency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when social reform intersected with colonial modernity. Missionary initiatives such as those of the London Missionary Society and the American Board had established girls' schools in Madras Presidency from the mid-nineteenth century, yet female literacy remained extremely low. According to the Census of 1901, female literacy in the Madras Presidency stood below one per cent, revealing the limited reach of formal education among women. Even by 1911 and 1921, progress was slow, particularly among non-Brahmin and depressed caste communities. Access to schooling was uneven, shaped by caste privilege, urban location and family attitudes towards female mobility.¹ Social practices such as child marriage, the prohibition of widow remarriage in many upper-caste communities and restrictions on women's public presence further limited educational participation. Legislative efforts like the Age of Consent Act of 1891 and later the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 indicated official concern, yet they did not fundamentally alter social attitudes. Education for girls, where permitted, was frequently confined to basic literacy and training in domestic skills. Curricula in many institutions reinforced ideals of chastity, obedience and religious instruction rather than intellectual independence.²

It was within this social climate that E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), later known as Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, articulated a systematic critique of caste, patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. His political career took a decisive turn after his resignation from the Indian National Congress in 1925, followed by the founding of the Self-Respect Movement the same year. Through journals such as *Kudi Arasu* (established in 1925), he addressed questions of women's subordination not as isolated social evils but as consequences of a hierarchical religious order. For Periyar, the denial of education was inseparable from the authority of scripture and priesthood, which he regarded as instruments of social control.³ The Self-Respect Conferences held between 1929 and the early 1930s repeatedly passed resolutions demanding equal educational opportunities for women and the abolition of practices that curtailed female autonomy. In 1930, at the Self-Respect Conference in Erode, emphasis was placed on women's right to property and choice in marriage claims closely linked to the need for literacy and critical reasoning. Periyar argued that education must cultivate rational inquiry rather than devotional conformity. He openly criticised curricula that prioritised religious texts over scientific knowledge, contending that such instruction perpetuated superstition and caste ideology. The political transformation of the Justice Party into the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 further institutionalised these ideas. Educational reform, in this context, was not conceived merely as social uplift but as a restructuring of authority within Tamil society. Periyar located education at the centre of a broader rationalist programme by connecting women's literacy to questions of inheritance, marriage reform and participation in public debate. His insistence that women acquire not only schooling but the capacity to question tradition marked a decisive departure from earlier reformist approaches that sought limited accommodation within prevailing social norms.

Objectives of the Study

The study examines the philosophical basis of Periyar's rationalism and its critique of religion, caste and patriarchy; situates his advocacy within the historical conditions of women's education in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu; analyses his speeches and organisational efforts; explores the link between education and the Self-Respect Movement's social reforms and evaluates the enduring impact of his educational vision on gender relations in South India.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a historical-analytical method based on primary sources, including Periyar's speeches, writings in *Kudi Arasu*, resolutions of Self-Respect conferences and contemporary legislative records. These materials are examined alongside census data and secondary scholarship to situate his educational ideas within their socio-political context and assess their long-term implications.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The philosophical foundations of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's thought emerged from his sustained engagement with caste discrimination, religious orthodoxy and Brahmanical authority in the Madras Presidency during the early twentieth century. Born in 1879 in Erode into a prosperous trading family, Periyar's early experiences in public life shaped his later rationalist convictions. His participation in the Indian National Congress between 1919 and 1925 exposed him to what he perceived as the persistence of caste hierarchy within nationalist politics. The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) in Travancore, in which he participated actively, proved decisive. The agitation sought the right of lower castes to use

roads surrounding the Vaikom temple. Periyar's arrest during the protest reinforced his view that religious institutions functioned not merely as centres of devotion but as mechanisms sustaining social exclusion.⁴ Following his resignation from the Congress by 1925, he founded the Self-Respect Movement. Its ideological premise rested on rational inquiry, rejection of scriptural authority and opposition to hereditary caste privilege. His rationalism was not abstract philosophical speculation but a political method. He repeatedly argued in his journal *Kudi Arasu* (established in 1925) that religious texts such as the Manusmriti and certain Dharmashastric traditions had institutionalised women's subordination by prescribing obedience to father, husband and son.⁵ In his speeches during the late 1920s, he cited scriptural injunctions that denied women property rights and independent agency, contending that such injunctions were human constructions designed to maintain male control.⁶

His critique of caste and patriarchy was interconnected. He maintained that caste purity depended upon controlling women's sexuality and marriage choices. Endogamy, in his analysis, ensured the continuity of caste hierarchy. Consequently, he regarded the education of women as central to dismantling caste boundaries. At the Self-Respect Conference held in Chengalpattu in 1929, resolutions were passed supporting inter-caste marriage and the rejection of priestly rituals. Women's literacy was treated as essential for understanding and asserting these rights. Without the capacity to read legal documents or engage in public debate, women would remain subject to familial and religious authority.

Census data from the Madras Presidency illustrates the context within which Periyar articulated these arguments. Female literacy in 1901 stood at approximately 0.6 per cent; by 1921 it had risen but remained below 2 per cent. Access was particularly limited among non-Brahmin and so-called depressed communities. Brahmin women in urban centres such as Madras city had relatively greater access to missionary and government schools, whereas rural women in districts like Salem or Tirunelveli often lacked institutional support. Periyar drew attention to this disparity, arguing that education had become another instrument through which caste privilege reproduced itself. His rationalist framework rejected the idea that women's education should be confined to domestic science or moral instruction. In several speeches published in *Kudi Arasu* between 1927 and 1932, he criticised curricula that emphasised religious epics while neglecting scientific subjects. He argued that teaching women to memorise devotional hymns did not equip them to challenge child marriage or demand inheritance rights. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, though a legislative step, could not be effective unless women possessed awareness and confidence to resist familial pressure. Education, therefore, had to cultivate critical reasoning.⁷

His position on widowhood and property further demonstrates the link between his critique of religion and his educational advocacy. In orthodox Hindu law, widows often faced severe restrictions and were denied equal inheritance. He campaigned for women's right to remarry and to own property independently. At the 1930 Self-Respect Conference in Erode, resolutions demanded equal inheritance rights for daughters. He maintained that literacy and knowledge of legal procedures were indispensable for enforcing such claims. A woman unable to read a property deed or understand court proceedings would remain dependent on male relatives. The transformation of the Justice Party into the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 consolidated these ideological commitments. His public burning of the Manusmriti in 1956 symbolised his rejection of scriptural authority as a source of law and morality. His speeches during the 1950s repeatedly asserted that education must promote scientific temper rather than religious obedience. He criticised state-supported religious instruction in schools, arguing that it perpetuated hierarchy. In this respect, his rationalism aligned with the constitutional commitment to equality adopted in 1950, yet his emphasis remained rooted in social practice rather than legal formalism. He also addressed the

economic dimension of women's subordination. He argued that economic dependence reinforced patriarchal control. In articles published during the 1930s, he advocated vocational training and professional education for women, including medicine and law. He pointed to examples of women doctors and lawyers in Madras city as evidence that professional education enabled autonomy. By encouraging women to enter public employment, he sought to weaken the economic basis of male dominance within the household.

The philosophical coherence of his position lies in the integration of rationalism with social reform. Religion, in his analysis, provided the ideological justification for caste hierarchy; caste hierarchy relied on regulating women's marriage and sexuality; regulation required women's ignorance and dependence. Education disrupted this chain. By promoting literacy, scientific thinking and awareness of rights, he intended to undermine the intellectual foundations of patriarchy. His emphasis on self-respect (*suya mariyadhai*) was not rhetorical. It implied the cultivation of independent judgement, free from fear of divine sanction.

Unlike earlier reformers who sought scriptural reinterpretation to justify limited change, Periyar rejected the authority of scripture itself. This distinction shaped his advocacy of women's education. He did not argue that ancient texts supported female learning; rather, he contended that reliance on those texts perpetuated inequality. Education, therefore, had to detach itself from religious sanction and align with reason and equality. His speeches in the 1940s emphasised that women must question customs such as dowry, enforced widowhood and ritual purity. Questioning required literacy and intellectual training. The practical initiatives of the Self-Respect Movement further reflected this philosophy. Self-Respect marriages, conducted without Brahmin priests and often registered under civil law, depended on the informed consent of both partners. Women's capacity to consent presupposed awareness of rights and alternatives. In advocating for birth control during the 1930s, he linked reproductive choice with education, arguing that knowledge of health and science enabled women to control their own bodies.

Women's Education

The historical conditions of women's education in Tamil Nadu during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were shaped by colonial policy, missionary enterprise, caste hierarchy and entrenched patriarchal customs. The region formed part of the Madras Presidency under British rule and educational expansion during this period followed the broader framework laid down after the Despatch of 1854. While state policy formally endorsed female education, actual implementation remained uneven and socially restricted. Missionary activity played a decisive role in the earliest expansion of schooling for girls. The London Missionary Society, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established girls' schools in towns such as Madras, Tirunelveli and Madurai from the mid-nineteenth century. Sarah Tucker College at Palayamkottai, founded in 1895, became one of the earliest institutions in South India dedicated to higher education for women. The Women's Christian College in Madras was established in 1915 and provided collegiate education primarily to urban, Christian and upper-caste women. These institutions marked important developments, yet their reach was limited both geographically and socially.

Government statistics reveal the narrow base of female education during this period. According to the Census of India, female literacy in the Madras Presidency in 1901 was below one per cent. Although there was gradual improvement by 1911 and 1921, literacy rates among women remained very low, especially in rural districts. The gap between male and female literacy was striking and within the female population there were marked caste disparities. Brahmin communities in urban centres such as Madras city and Kumbakonam

displayed higher literacy rates compared to non-Brahmin and so-called depressed caste communities. Educational access, therefore, reflected existing social stratification rather than overcoming it.⁸ Social customs further constrained educational participation. Child marriage remained widely practised across caste groups. Girls were often married before puberty, curtailing opportunities for sustained schooling. The Age of Consent Act of 1891 raised the age of consent from ten to twelve, but it did not address the institution of child marriage itself. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 (popularly known as the Sarda Act) sought to raise the minimum age of marriage to fourteen for girls and eighteen for boys, yet enforcement was limited, particularly in rural areas. Married girls rarely continued formal education and widowhood imposed additional restrictions. In several upper-caste communities, widows were expected to lead lives of austerity and were excluded from remarriage, which reinforced economic dependence and curtailed intellectual development.⁹

Educational content also reflected prevailing gender norms. Government and aided schools often emphasised moral instruction, needlework and domestic skills for girls. The Hunter Commission of 1882 had acknowledged the need for female education, but it also recognised social resistance and recommended cautious expansion. As a result, curricular design frequently accommodated conservative sentiment. Religious instruction, particularly in missionary schools, formed a significant component of teaching. Even where secular subjects were taught, expectations regarding women's future roles remained confined to domesticity. The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Indian social reformers who addressed aspects of women's education. Figures such as Muthulakshmi Reddy, who became the first woman legislator in the Madras Legislative Council in 1927, campaigned for women's rights, including education and the abolition of the devadasi system. Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy's advocacy contributed to the eventual passage of the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act in 1947. However, reform initiatives often operated within existing religious frameworks, seeking reinterpretation rather than rejection of scriptural authority.¹⁰

The Non-Brahmin Movement, which gained momentum with the formation of the Justice Party in 1916, introduced a new dimension to the educational question. The Justice Party government in the Madras Presidency (1920–1937, with interruptions) implemented communal reservations in education and public employment through the Communal Government Order of 1921. This measure sought to correct Brahmin dominance in administration and education by allocating positions to non-Brahmin communities. While the order primarily addressed caste representation, it indirectly influenced women's access by altering institutional composition. Nevertheless, female participation continued to lag behind male enrolment across communities.¹¹ Urban-rural disparity further defined the historical landscape. Madras city, with institutions such as Presidency College and Queen Mary's College (established in 1914), offered pathways to higher education for women from affluent families. In contrast, districts like Ramanathapuram and Salem recorded minimal female enrolment in secondary education before the 1930s. Travel constraints, social conservatism and limited infrastructure hindered attendance. Boarding facilities for girls were scarce and parental concerns regarding propriety restricted mobility.

Debates on education had become intertwined with questions of social identity and political representation by the 1920s. It was within this environment that Periyar E. V. Ramasamy articulated his critique. His interventions must be situated against the background of persistent female illiteracy, caste-based educational inequality and curricular conservatism. The Self-Respect Movement, founded in 1925, addressed these structural conditions directly. Rather than treating women's education as a matter of incremental reform, it connected literacy with social power and legal rights.¹² The 1931 Census showed

improvement in female literacy compared to 1901, yet the percentage remained in single digits in most districts of the Presidency. This slow progress revealed the limitations of existing policy frameworks. Government expenditure on female education increased gradually, but enrolment growth was constrained by social resistance. Reports of the Director of Public Instruction during the 1920s frequently noted parental reluctance, early marriage and economic hardship as obstacles.¹³

In this context, educational reform could not be separated from broader social transformation. Legislative measures, missionary institutions and Justice Party policies had created partial openings, yet entrenched patriarchal and caste structures persisted. The historical conditions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu therefore reveal a complex interplay between policy expansion and social restriction. Women's education advanced incrementally but remained circumscribed by hierarchy and custom. Understanding this precise institutional and demographic setting is essential for situating the radical character of subsequent interventions that treated education not merely as schooling, but as a challenge to inherited authority within Tamil society.

The articulation of women's education in the thought of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy cannot be understood apart from his speeches, journal writings and the organisational practices of the Self-Respect Movement founded in 1925. Across the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, he repeatedly treated education not as a matter of literacy alone but as a disciplined training in rational enquiry, social awareness and personal dignity. His Tamil journal *Kudi Arasu*, first published in 1925, became the principal medium through which he addressed women directly and debated prevailing customs.¹⁴ In a series of articles during the late 1920s, he criticised the prevailing model of female instruction in the Madras Presidency. He observed that many girls' schools emphasised religious hymns, mythological stories and domestic skills, while neglecting science, civic knowledge and legal awareness. He argued that such instruction prepared women for ritual obedience rather than independent judgement. In speeches delivered at Self-Respect conferences in 1929 and 1930, he maintained that if education merely trained women to conform to caste rules, it reinforced subordination. Education, in his formulation, had to cultivate questioning rather than reverence.¹⁵

Periyar's published speeches on marriage reform illustrate how he linked literacy with intellectual emancipation. At the 1929 Self-Respect Conference held in Chengalpattu, resolutions were passed endorsing marriages without Brahmin priests and rejecting Sanskritic ritual. He contended that women must understand the legal validity of civil marriage procedures. He insisted that women should be able to read marriage contracts and property documents themselves. Without such knowledge, he argued, reform remained symbolic. Self-Respect marriages, which dispensed with ritual intermediaries, depended upon the conscious consent of both partners. Consent, in his view, required education and awareness.¹⁶

His criticism of scriptural authority formed the philosophical background of this argument. In numerous issues of *Kudi Arasu* during the late 1920s and early 1930s, he cited passages from the Manusmriti and other Dharmashastric texts that subordinated women to male guardianship. He did not seek reinterpretation of these passages; instead, he rejected their moral legitimacy. By exposing the textual basis of inequality, he sought to demonstrate that women's subordination was historically constructed rather than divinely ordained. Education, therefore, had to enable women to scrutinise such texts and to reject their authority. He repeatedly declared that reverence for scripture without understanding perpetuated servitude.¹⁷ His advocacy of birth control during the 1930s further demonstrates how he conceptualised education as emancipation. In speeches and essays published in *Kudi Arasu*, he discussed the economic burdens of large families and the physical toll of repeated childbirth on women. He argued that knowledge of reproductive

health was essential for women's autonomy. At a time when public discussion of contraception was controversial, his insistence on disseminating information reflected his belief that ignorance sustained dependence. Intellectual emancipation included awareness of one's body and legal rights.

The organisational initiatives of the Self-Respect Movement institutionalised these ideas. Conferences frequently included women speakers, which was unusual in many public forums of the time. Women such as Nagammai, Periyar's first wife, participated in campaigns, including the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25). Their presence in political activity exemplified the link between education and public engagement. He maintained that women must not remain confined to domestic roles but should participate in debate, administration and reform. He encouraged women to address gatherings, write articles and question elders in public settings. In the early 1930s, Self-Respect publications carried essays urging parents to educate daughters beyond elementary levels. He criticised the practice of withdrawing girls from school upon reaching puberty. He observed that while boys were sent to secondary and collegiate institutions, girls were often restricted to basic literacy. He linked this disparity to caste anxieties about female mobility and marriage prospects. By identifying the social logic behind educational restriction, he framed the issue as one of structural inequality rather than individual neglect.¹⁸

Periyar also connected women's education to property rights. In his speeches at the Erode Self-Respect Conference in 1930, he argued that daughters should inherit property equally with sons. He pointed out that without literacy and legal knowledge, such rights would remain theoretical. He cited cases in which widows were deprived of inheritance due to ignorance of legal provisions. Education was thus portrayed as the means by which women could assert claims in court and manage resources independently. The transformation of the Justice Party into the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 further broadened the organisational base of these principles. His later speeches during the 1940s and 1950s continued to emphasise scientific temper. He criticised religious instruction in schools and argued that state-supported education should be secular and rational. His public burning of the Manusmriti in 1956 symbolised his rejection of scriptural sanction as a basis for social order. In that act, he reinforced the message that emancipation required intellectual courage to repudiate inherited authority.¹⁹

Periyar's insistence on vernacular communication also shaped his educational philosophy. By publishing in Tamil rather than relying on English discourse, he addressed non-elite audiences. His speeches were often delivered in accessible language, using examples from everyday life. He contrasted the education available to urban Brahmin women with the limited schooling accessible to rural non-Brahmin women, arguing that caste privilege reproduced itself through educational access. By exposing these disparities, he linked intellectual emancipation to social equality. He also addressed the devadasi system, which involved the dedication of women to temples. While legislative action culminated in the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, debates preceding the Act included strong criticism from him. He argued that ignorance and economic vulnerability sustained the system. Education, in his analysis, would provide alternative livelihoods and awareness of rights. Intellectual emancipation, therefore, included economic independence.

Periyar's conception of self-respect (*suya mariyadhai*) formed the ethical core of his educational vision. Self-respect implied the rejection of humiliation rooted in caste and gender hierarchy. In speeches across the 1930s, he declared that women must refuse practices that demeaned them, such as enforced widowhood and ritual purity observances. He emphasised that questioning elders or priests was not irreverence but an assertion of dignity. Education was the discipline that made such questioning possible.²⁰ Unlike

moderate reformers who advocated female education to create better wives and mothers, he framed it as preparation for citizenship and equality. He urged women to enter professions such as teaching, medicine and law. By citing examples of educated women in Madras city who practised as doctors or lawyers, he demonstrated that professional education enabled financial independence and public authority. His argument was concrete: an educated woman earning her own income could resist coercive marriage arrangements.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy and the Self-Respect Movement

Since late-1920s first conferences, women have been discussed in the movement as the conditions to achieve the implementation of marriage reform, provide property rights, as well as promote social equality in the Madras Presidency. The Self-Respect Movement came up following the resignation of Periyar, in the Indian National Congress in 1925 and found acceptance among the non-Brahmin communities which had been mobilised before in the Justice Party (founded in 1916). Whereas the Justice Party dealt with representation in the government employment and education by taking action like the Communal Government Order of 1921, the Self-Respect Movement projected the critique to domestic and familial sphere. It held that the caste inequality was not only perpetuated by the state institutions but by the marriage arrangements, inheritance procedures and ritual practices, which regulated the lives of the women.²¹

It was one of the most noticeable aspects of marriage reform where women education was associated with changing society. In the same year, the Self-Respect Conference at Chengalpattu in 1929 passed resolutions that approved marriages without the participation of Brahmin priests and without the Sanskritic rituals. These Self-Respect marriages demanded that the partners made the unanimous decision and frequently substituted the religious ceremonies with the mere public statements. Such marriages to be considered as the substitute of orthodox rites required the awareness of women of legal processes and rights. In his speeches, published in *Kudi Arasu*, he frequently wrote that women had to know about the civil aspects of marriage and registration as well as property implications. He argued out that it was the illiteracy that reduced women to the mercy of their male kinsmen and priests and consequently made them weak in their ability to make choices.²² These discussions were informed with the child marriage restraint act of 1929. The Act had determined that girls should not be below fourteen years old but the reality on the ground was that this was merely enforced based on the community consciousness and their readiness to ensure that this was done. Self-Respect Movement made the aims of the Act correlate with the educational campaigns. The women were empowered to resist early marriage since they had opportunities to read and interpret the law. According to Periyar, increasing the age of marriage could not be achieved merely through statute, but also through schooling, which did not ignore inherited custom but criticized it. Another important connection between education and reform was property rights. The right of women to inheritance was minimized in Hindu personal law during the early twentieth century and especially in joint family property under the rules of *Mitakshara*. Coparcenary rights were not usually conceded to daughters and widows only received small estates. In 1930 at the Self-Respect Conference held in Erode, the daughters were to be granted equal rights to inheritance. In his speeches the Periyar used to stress on the fact that it was impossible to assure such rights with the help of legal reform unless literate and able to navigate legal procedures. The awareness of property law, paperwork and the legal procedures was what was required to translate the abstract equality into the practice.²³ The discussions in the Madras Legislative Council in the 1930s on women's rights, including those that were affected by the Hindu Women right to Property Act of 1937, highlighted the need to be legally literate. Even though the 1937 Act did offer some of the widows some rights to inheritance, it did not provide full equality. Such partial reforms were seen

by the Self-Respect Movement as a sign that long-range advocacy and an informed participation would be required. Through education women were able to participate in the legislative change instead of being inactive beneficiaries of male-advocated change.²⁴

The fact that the movement criticized dowry and forced the girl to marry is another evidence of the interdependence of education and equality. Dowry requirements were a financial burden and a ritual that strengthened the belief that daughters were a financial liability in the orthodox setting. In early 1930s, in his speeches Periyar denounced dowry as an act based on caste anxiety and male domination. He claimed that women who had undergone education and in particular those who have acquired professional training were able to become economically independent and alleviate dependency on marriage as the only source of security. He aimed at undermining the economic basis of dowry transactions by encouraging women to develop higher education and employment.²⁵ The involvement of women in Self-Respect conferences shows how education ideals were applied to organisational practice. Women speakers spoke in meetings, expressed complaints and discussed changes. This involvement in the wider society needed literacy and self-confidence that had been developed in schools. The women in these forums opposed the existing norm that the public speech was a preserve of men. Education was, therefore, preparation to participation in civic affairs.

Caste reform also came into conflict with the relationship between education of women and social equality. The Self-Respect Movement fought against the supremacy of the Brahmin priests in religious rites and inter-caste marriage. According to Periyar, the caste endogamy lay on the manipulation of the marriage decisions of women. This system was challenged by educated women who were able to challenge caste. Through educating non-Brahmin women on literacy, the movement was to weaken the ideological foundations of caste purity.

These links were cemented any time in 1944 when the Justice Party was transformed into the Dravidar Kazhagam. The organisation became more open-minded on the ideological confrontation with religious authority and caste hierarchy. It continued to have educational reform as part of its agenda. These speeches in the 1940s by Periyar were based on the ideas of secular education and scientific temper. He condemned the inclusion of religious education in schools arguing that the education continued to promote hierarchical values that could not be reconciled with equality. In his opinion social equality meant an educational system that was based on reason and not ritual.²⁶ Education and reform also interacted in the abolition of the devadasi system in the Madras Presidency, which was finalized by the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947. Reformers like Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy took part in campaigns that overlapped with Self-Respect attacks on temple authority. Learning offered women alternative practices that were limited to rituals. The movement has promoted liberation by religious commitment and economic and intellectual growth by promoting schooling and vocational training.²⁷

Historical statistics of the first half of the twentieth century indicate slow growth in the enrolment of women in primary and secondary schools but the general illiteracy was still low. The poor level of improvement highlighted the extent of the task. The Self-Respect Movement was not conducted with the state control of the educational institutions; it only influenced people and shaped their attitude. Its conferences, pamphlets and journals provided forums where women education was discussed as a right and not concession.²⁸ When assessing the interconnection of women education and the movement Self-Respect, it is clear that education was considered as the organizational basis of reform. Marriage reform needed to be informed and conscious of the law; property rights needed to be literate and knowing of the law; social equality needed to be intellectually able to reject caste hierarchy. These areas were connected through education that provided women with

self assertion tools. Instead of making educational access a limited policy problem, the movement incorporated it into a wholesale attack on social order. Education of women was never encouraged to improve domestic efficiency only but to be able to think independently and participate in the society.

Long-Term Social and Ideological Impact

Periyar's insistence that women's education must cultivate rational inquiry, legal awareness and social self-respect did not remain confined to the Self-Respect Movement of the 1920s and 1930s. It influenced the ideological foundations of Dravidian politics, state policy and gender reform in the decades following Independence. The transformation of the Justice Party into the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 formalised the rationalist and anti-caste orientation that Periyar had articulated since 1925. Though the Dravidar Kazhagam itself did not contest elections, its ideological framework shaped the emergence of political parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), founded in 1949 under C. N. Annadurai. When the DMK came to power in Tamil Nadu in 1967, it brought into government an ideological lineage that emphasised social justice, secular education and gender equality. The expansion of educational access in the 1960s and 1970s, including increased state support for girls' schooling, reflected this intellectual inheritance.²⁹

Statistical data demonstrate substantial change over time. Female literacy in the Madras Presidency had remained below 3 per cent in the early decades of the twentieth century. By contrast, Census figures after Independence show steady growth. In Tamil Nadu, female literacy rose from 20.9 per cent in 1961 to 40.5 per cent in 1981 and continued to increase in subsequent decades. While multiple factors contributed to this rise including constitutional guarantees, national policy and economic change the ideological climate created by Dravidian social reform placed particular emphasis on dismantling caste and gender barriers through education.³⁰ One of the most direct institutional outcomes reflecting Periyar's long-term influence was the legal recognition of Self-Respect marriages. In 1967, the Tamil Nadu government amended the Hindu Marriage Act to recognise marriages solemnised without religious rituals, provided they met specified legal conditions. This recognition validated practices pioneered by the Self-Respect Movement decades earlier. The legal acceptance of such marriages strengthened women's rights by facilitating unions based on consent rather than ritual conformity. It also revealed the principle that education and legal awareness were essential to exercising marital autonomy.

Property rights reform in the late twentieth century further illustrates ideological continuity. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 had granted daughters inheritance rights, but coparcenary rights in joint family property remained unequal in many states. Tamil Nadu enacted an amendment in 1989 granting daughters equal coparcenary rights in ancestral property, preceding the all-India amendment of 2005. This legislative initiative aligned with Periyar's earlier insistence, voiced at Self-Respect conferences in 1929 and 1930, that daughters must enjoy equal inheritance. The amendment's practical effect depended upon women's capacity to understand and claim rights, reinforcing the connection between legal literacy and social equality.³¹ The abolition of the devadasi system in the Madras Presidency, formalised through the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, also reflects the broader rationalist critique associated with Periyar and contemporaries such as Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy. Though the legislative process involved diverse reformers, the ideological rejection of religious sanction for women's subordination resonated with Periyar's earlier writings in *Kudi Arasu*. Over time, the integration of former devadasi communities into mainstream education and employment demonstrated how educational access could reconfigure social status.

The impact of the educational vision of Periyar in the realm of the public discourse was the fact that the aspect of gender roles debate changed its course. The language of self-

respect (*suya mariyadhai*) and rational inquiry were popularised in the Dravidian movement. Themes of agency and control over women, criticism of dowry and the reproach of caste discrimination were common in political speech, film and print media in Tamil Nadu throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As leaders like C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi pursued their own political goals, they did so in the context of social equality that was seen as an indivisible component of the educational progress.³² Other policies in educational expansion in Tamil Nadu was the noon meal plan which was extensively developed by Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran in 1982. This initiative had a significant effect on the enrolment of girls although it targeted the nutrition and school attendance in general. It assisted in long term attendance of the girls of economically disadvantaged communities by lowering the economic cost of attending school. The philosophical underpinning according to which the aim of education is to promote social equality and not to uphold the hierarchy may be dated back to the previous rationalist criticisms expressed by Periyar.

The last century experienced a significant improvement in the number of women enrolled in colleges and universities as well as women joining the professional world in Tamil Nadu.³³ There was an increase in female enrolment of arts, science, medicine and engineering in universities in the region of Chennai, Madurai, Coimbatore and Tiruchirappalli. The fact that females are represented in the public administration and the legislature is another sign of the changes in the gender relations.³⁴ Although such changes were influenced by national constitutional guarantees in Articles 14 and 15 that guaranteed equality and outlawed discrimination, these were reinforced through the social legitimacy and discourse of rationalism and anti-caste reform at the region.³⁵ The Tamil Nadu was not the only place affected by the ideological influence. In Kerala and Karnataka rationalist associations and social reform organisations were debating on caste and gender which echoed the criticism of religious orthodoxy by him. Although the course of different regions was different, the spread of Dravidian ideas with the help of print culture and political exchange led to wider discourses of South Indian about secular education and women rights.³⁶

Meanwhile, long-term effect will have to be evaluated critically. Systemic inequality has not been conducted away because persistent problems like dowry-related violence and differences in labour force participation show that the issue has not disappeared completely. Nevertheless, there is a change in the normative framework in terms of which these issues are disputed. The condemnation of dowry and child marriage as practiced in the past which was justified by custom is now justified by constitutional equality and rationalist criticism. Women education has grown to be a socially acceptable goal and not a reformist debate. The scientific temper highlighted by Periyar was a precursor of future constitutional pledges in Article 51A(h), which requires citizens to nurture scientific temper and humanism. His previous cause of rational education was in line with these principles virtue of the adoption of the Constitution of India in 1950. This orientation is manifested in the incorporation of the secular curricula in state schools and also in the decline in the importance of overtly religious instruction.

When assessing the long-term effect, one must differentiate between the ideological influence and writing direct policies. After the Independence, Periyar never took office in the state, however the parties that ruled the Tamil Nadu since 1967 was influenced by Dravidian social philosophy. The recognition of non-ritual marriage in the legislation, property reform in favour of daughters and permanent focus on the excellence of educational opportunities all testify to the fact that his vision of education helped to change the legal and social standards.

Thus, the enduring impact of his educational thought lies not only in rising literacy rates but in the transformation of gender discourse. Education came to be regarded as the foundation of autonomy, legal agency and social dignity. Marriage, inheritance and public participation increasingly operated within a framework that acknowledged women as rights-bearing individuals rather than dependants defined by ritual status. Through ideological transmission into political institutions and public culture, his rationalist conception of education left a durable imprint on gender relations and reform movements in modern South India.

CONCLUSION

The evidence considered here indicates that Periyar's intervention in the question of women's education reconfigured the structure of social authority in twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. Education was treated not as benevolent uplift but as preparation for contesting priestly control over marriage, for questioning Mitakshara-based exclusions from property and for resisting the ritual codes that confined widows and young brides. When Self-Respect marriages were later accorded legal recognition in 1967 and when Tamil Nadu amended succession law in 1989 to secure daughters' coparcenary rights, these measures reflected arguments first advanced in the conferences and journals of the late 1920s and 1930s. The significance of this trajectory lies in the shift from scriptural sanction to legal and rational justification as the basis of gender relations. Women's access to schooling altered courtroom claims, marriage registration practices and public speech in measurable ways. The transformation cannot be reduced to rising literacy figures; it involved the displacement of religious authority from the centre of domestic law. In this sense, his educational vision reshaped the grammar of rights within South Indian society and redefined the terms on which equality could be asserted.

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