

# Is This a Sudra Critique? Periyar and the Intermediate Castes

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## Introduction

When Kancha Ilaiah published his controversial book *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996), he subtitled it *A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Ilaiah's output in contributing to this "critique" has been quite prolific, the most recent being the co-edited volume, *The Shudras: Visions for a New Path* (Ilaiah and Karuppusamy 2021). But why use a Sudra critique when Ilaiah himself identifies that the concept of "Sudra" is derogatory in the Brahminical vocabulary and that "It does not communicate a feeling of self-respect and political assertion" (Ilaiah 1996:vii)? For political purposes, Ilaiah prefers the term "Dalitbahujan"—building on the concept introduced by Kanshi Ram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party—and defines it as "people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority" (Ilaiah 1996:ix). The "Sudra" concept, thus, is used as a critique of Brahminical ideals so as to arrive at a Dalitbahujan politics. The Sudras—"the numerous productive castes which have historically built the material basis of our civilization, yet have been marginalized in terms of the power and knowledge-sharing-arrangement in the Brahminical order" (Ilaiah 2021:n.p.)—, however, were limited in their conceptual understanding as their political action was restricted to securing representation and they did not have adequate self-consciousness of the caste system and the need for Dalitbahujan unity.

Ilaiah frequently cites Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar as being crucial to the development of his Sudra critique. He also refers to Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (hereafter, Periyar) as an important Dalitbahujan thinker. Indeed, as far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, it is Periyar who made a "Sudra critique" of Brahminism popular and acceptable in the public sphere—though, in Tamil Nadu, such a critique is more commonly known as non-Brahmin or Dravidian politics. This paper

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looks at the interrelations between these concepts as used by Periyar and his approach to the intermediate castes, who form the bulk of the population in Tamil Nadu and who are understood to be Sudras. It will explore Periyar's positioning of the Sudra identity as being imposed upon the majority of the Tamils, for which he holds Brahminism responsible. However, Periyar reviled the attempts by intermediate castes to position themselves above and superior the Dalits and he also used the Sudra label to chastise them, claiming that being a *panchamar*—that is, one outside the caste system—was more honorable than being a Sudra. The paper concludes with a consideration of the limitations of a Sudra critique.

It is worth considering some empirical realities before we proceed further. It is now commonly understood in academia that it is *jati* and not *varna* that is operating in practice in Indian society at large. This however does not make the *varna* model irrelevant. While there are thousands of *jati* groups and it is at this level that “caste injunctions on marriage, occupation and social relations are conducted” these castes nevertheless “draw their ideological rationale of purity-pollution, endogamy, commensality, and so forth, from the *varna* model” (Gupta 2000:199). Many *jatis* claim affiliation to a particular *varna*. Also, *jatis* that are placed lower in the *varna* order lay claim to a higher *varna* status. For instance, Jats in Punjab and Reddys in Andhra Pradesh are supposed to be Sudras but they lay claim to be the Kshatriya *varna*—Ilaiah calls them neo-Kshatriyas. The idea of Sudras as fallen warrior communities was proposed much earlier by Phule and Ambedkar. In Ambedkar's hypothesis, the Sudras were an Aryan community who were fallen Kshatriyas owing to a long conflict with the Brahmins (Ambedkar 1990:11–12). His predecessor, Phule saw the Sudras as persecuted Kshatriyas. According to him, the Brahmins sustained their domination by dividing the oppressed castes and deepening the antagonisms between them; and further, Phule argued that “All the shudras belonged to the same fraternity” (Phule 2008:19–20).

But as a sociological category (and a political category, which I will address in the course of the paper) the term “Sudra” can be extremely confusing. M. N. Srinivas notes that the Sudra category overlooks the lack of commonalities among the “non-Brahminical castes” and that it “spans such a wide structural and cultural gulf that its sociological utility is very limited” (1962:65). Srinivas does not consider that categories that do not have sociological utility might have political utility. However, he does make the prescient observation that that lack of clarity in hierarchy for such castes enables them to make claims of

higher status in that “Each caste tries to prove that it is equal to a ‘superior’ caste and superior to its ‘equals’” (Srinivas 1962:66). There are hierarchies within as well. Likewise, the confusing claims of *jatis* identified as Sudras makes one question whether greater attention in analysis should be given to what they are identified as or what they identify themselves as.

In the commonsensical understanding, Sudras are equated with the administrative category of Other Backward Classes (or OBCs, which also includes categories like Most Backward Castes, or MBCs). This is still misleading, as communities like the Saiva Vellalar Pillais of Tamil Nadu, who are technically Sudras, come under the so-called general category (which includes, for example, Brahmins). However, the OBCs form the bulk of the Sudras and “represent about half of the Indian population, but they have occupied a subaltern position so far” (Jaffrelot 2000:86). It is worth remembering that the administrative category of OBC was created after the consideration of several socio-economic factors of backwardness. Note that they are called a “class” while the “Scheduled Caste” (or SC) category has a clear mention of caste and covers castes that historically suffered and continue to suffer different forms of Untouchability. The concreteness around the SC category facilitated the emergence of a pan-Indian Dalit identity and intellectual conversations, even if Dalit politics has actually been localized in practice and also hosts various internal tensions. I have addressed some of the tensions within Dalit politics in Tamil Nadu in my earlier work (Manoharan 2019:85).

The vagueness and ambiguities around the Sudra–OBC–intermediate caste question results in not only their politics being localized, but also in the absence of pan-Indian intellectual debates on this identity/identities. One of the reasons for the paucity of such debates is the minimal representation of OBC academics in central universities in India, which is worse than the representation of academics from SC communities (Kumar 2018). Likewise, the social scientist Yogendra Yadav (2021) claims that there is a reluctance to conduct a caste census as it may reveal that “the very large numbers of the OBCs” and also that their plight is “worse off than the top layer of the SC communities.” Further explorations in this line might be very insightful to both empirical and theoretical studies on how caste as a system is exclusionary and oppressive not just to the Dalits but the OBCs as well.

In Tamil Nadu however, the situation for the OBCs has been better, to which the Dravidian parties can take considerable credit. A recent work on Tamil Nadu’s political economy—aptly titled *The Dravidian*

*Model* (Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021)—explains that the populist policies pursued by the Dravidian parties that have been in power in the state for over the last half-century brought about an inclusive model of development that led to significant socio-economic mobilities of the OBCs and SCs. The authors also argue that Periyar's politics of Self-Respect played a crucial role in shaping the unique politics of the state. What I intend to convey in the course of my paper is that Periyar's substantial understanding of casteism enabled him to develop a nuanced perspective that was well aware of local realities and the several internal contradictions between castes, while not losing sight of the critique of the Brahminical system. A mechanistic understanding of casteism looks at Dalits as the only victims of casteism, oppressed by all those above them, where physical violence and explicit acts of discrimination are the only criteria to categorize victim identities. On the other hand, a substantial understanding of casteism looks at Dalits as the *most* oppressed by casteism, but not the *only* oppressed of casteism, and understands the degraded social, political, and economic status of both Dalits and the intermediate castes to be an interlinked problem. In an earlier paper, I have addressed Periyar's approach to the Dalit question (Manoharan 2020). Here, I will focus on his approach to the intermediate castes.

In this paper, I use the term *intermediate castes* to refer to the OBCs, in that they technically occupy a middle position between the general category and the SC category. But this is also not a fully accurate categorization. We must remember that while in Tamil Nadu those said to be belonging to the Sudra castes largely come under the OBCs, there are also minority castes like the Saiva Pillais, Saiva Mudaliars, and Nattukottai Chettiyars who are in the general category. Such elite communities initially spearheaded the Non-Brahmin Movement and comprised the core leadership of the Justice Party. However, Periyar's arrival accelerated the plebianization of that movement (and party), much to the consternation of the non-Brahmin elites, and led to the eventual dissolution of the Justice Party. Barnett identifies Periyar as being chiefly responsible for "the radicalization of Dravidian ideology" (Barnett 1976:32). Periyar identified the non-Brahmin (and non-Dalit) castes as Sudras and tended to take the side of the intermediate castes over the elite non-Brahmin castes. Contrary to allegations by critics that Periyar saw the non-Brahmin category as an unproblematic whole, Periyar was acutely sensitive to the deep fault lines within this category.

It is common to see OBCs referred to as "caste Hindus" in Tamil Nadu, especially in relation to Dalits. Ilaiah (1996:viii) claims that this

is a trap for the OBCs as it denies the oppression they face while including them within the Hindu fold. For one, the terminology of “caste Hindus” homogenizes an extremely diverse conglomeration—Tamil Nadu has 252 castes in the OBC category, inclusive of MBCs and denotified communities. Secondly, it assumes a commonality of social and/or political interests when nothing as such has existed historically. To give a few examples, in his remarkable study of the Nadars, Robert Hardgrave Jr. captures the intense conflict in south Tamil Nadu between the Nadars and the Maravars, who considered the Nadars as a lower caste and sought to thwart their attempts at social mobility. In the Sivakasi riots of 1899, several Nadars were killed by a Maravar mob. But the Nadars also fought back and defended their locality and their right to assert themselves (Hardgrave Jr. 1969[2018]:109–20). In Erode in western Tamil Nadu, the powerful landowning Kongu Vellalars looked down on the “warrior merchant” caste Kaikkolars and this led to conflicts in the early parts of the twentieth century especially when the latter laid claims to temples (Mines 1984:39–40). The Vanniyars, who fashioned themselves as Kshatriyas from the 1870s, claimed that they had been historically subjugated by the Vellalars (Gough 1981:301). Periyar’s critique identified all of these communities as Sudras and, urging them to abandon “Sanskritization,” encouraged them to build common cause with one another and with the Dalits to dismantle the caste system.

## We, the Sudras

From the start of the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar uses the term “non-Brahmin” to refer to not just those who were not Brahmins, but more specifically to those who, according to him, were oppressed and/or degraded by the Brahmins. To him, this included several communities divided by caste—in particular, the untouchable and unseeable castes—as well as Christians, Muslims, and Anglo-Indians (Ramasamy 2011a:22). Used loosely, “non-Brahmin” might make no political sense, as a Brazilian, Ugandan, Japanese, or German are all technically non-Brahmins. But the specific usage in Tamil Nadu that was popularized after the publication of the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto* in 1917 made this term have concrete political value in that it signaled an opposition to Brahmin hegemony.

But while the Justice Party was usually reluctant to address divisions within the non-Brahmin community, Periyar openly acknowledged the divisions within and did not try to use the non-Brahmin

identity as an easy suturing of conflicts. Likewise, while considering the Dalit castes as a crucial part of the non-Brahmin identity, he was alert to their specific interests and also argued that they needed proportional representation much more than other non-Brahmin castes (Ramasamy 2011a:25).

But while from the 1920s to the 1940s Periyar liberally used the term non-Brahmin (*paarpanarallathor*), he would turn a critical eye towards the term in 1950. At a speech at Chengalpet in March 1950 (Ramasamy 2011c:180–86), he recounts that the Dravidian Movement was earlier active through the Justice Party which also known as the Non-Brahmin Party, and whose aim was to secure proportional representation for non-Brahmins in jobs and administrative posts. But the name “non-Brahmin” did not give dignity to the people, he argued, as it was still a derivative of the Brahmin label. Periyar’s perspective is that as a people who are the natives of the land, who were once its rulers, who were now reduced to Sudrahood and Untouchability, he prefers the usage of the term “Dravidian” to describe the lot as it conveys opposition to Aryanism.

In an article on the abolition of Untouchability, Periyar argues that while the Sudras may be ritually above the Paraiyars, they are nevertheless in much more degraded position. To Periyar, while the Paraiyars were of proper parentage, he claims that according to the Hindu *shastras* the Sudras are bastards and sons of prostitutes (Ramasamy 2011a: 37). Brahminical deceit, he suggested, created the four varnas and the several divisions of castes. Claiming that the Brahmins destroyed the egalitarian thought of the Siddhars, the Buddha, and the Jains, he subversively reads the creationist myth of the four varnas to implicate the ancient Brahmins (Ramasamy 2011a:44–46). The Brahmins encountered a group of warriors who questioned their superiority and so were bestowed the title of Kshatriyas with the promise that there were others lower to them. When the wealthy section questioned their superiority, the Brahmins bestowed them the title of Vaishyas, again with the promise that they were superior to those lower to them. These three groups were also given the privilege of wearing the sacred thread. With knowledge, political power and wealth on their sides, they categorized the majority of the country as Sudras and Untouchables.

To Periyar, the Untouchable castes were closer to the idea of Self-Respect since they were outside of the varna order. He saw them as naturally inclined to Self-Respect thinking. On the other hand, the Sudras, who sought pride in their superior position to the Untouchable castes, *consented* to be sons of the concubines of the Brahmins (Rama-

samy 2011a:111). Periyar writes: “Though the majority of the non-Brahmins tend to be submissive to the Brahmins and think foolishly that it is fine that we are the sons of prostitutes of the Brahmins as long as we are superior to the Paraiyars, we are trying our best to change things” (Ramasamy 2011a:119). Periyar was clear that the Sudras had to fight alongside with the Paraiyars and the other Untouchable castes if at all they could free themselves from the caste ignominy (Ramasamy 2011a:231). To counter caste, preaching alone would not be enough—a social revolution and progressive laws were also necessary (Ramasamy 2011a:261).

Periyar laments that “We do not bear the identity of Dravidians. We do not bear the identity of Tamils. We only have the identities of Sudras, untouchables, fourth caste, fifth caste” (Ramasamy 2011b:95). He accuses the Brahmins of sloganeering “down with imperialism,” while continuing to discriminate against the Sudras and maintaining caste distinctions (Ramasamy 2011b:96–97). Yet, he also says that as long as Untouchability exists against the Adidraavidars, the Dravidians will continue to face discrimination from the Aryans (Ramasamy 2011b:97). In an article entitled “Dravidians are not Hindus” in *Viduthalai* in 1941, Periyar says that the Dravidians were the natives of India, those who built great civilizations and cultures, before they were defeated by the Aryans and reduced culturally to the state of being Sudras and Untouchables and economically impoverished simultaneously (Ramasamy 2011b:32–133). The Dravidians were all Sudras, which in Aryan law, according to Periyar’s reading, meant they were either the children of the prostitutes and concubines of the Brahmins or they were Untouchables (Ramasamy 2011c:132). He claimed that this degradation would continue as long as the Dravidians called themselves Hindus: “As long as we are Hindus, our birth-based inferior status will not go. To be a Hindu means to subscribe to caste hierarchy. Hinduism means the Brahmin is superior and the rest are his slaves” (Ramasamy 2011b:133).

In a short article dated 1 May 1941, Periyar distinguishes the Dravidians from the Aryans and claims that the differences between them are irreconcilable (Ramasamy 2011b:141–43). The Dravidians were the natives of India. The Aryans were invaders. Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam were Dravidian languages. Hindi and Sanskrit were Aryan languages. The Dravidians were without caste differences and worshipped one god. The Aryans brought in the caste system and many gods. The cultures and social practices between them were different. But these two entities could remain together only if the Dravidians

accepted the superiority of the Aryan-Brahmins and contended to remain as inferior Sudras. In another article written on the same day, Periyar makes similar arguments, except here he replaces “Dravidian” with “Tamil” (Ramasamy 2011b:145–48). The Tamils, the natives of Tamil Nadu, were an ancient people who lived in harmony, without caste differences. But with the arrival and the hegemony of the Aryans, the Tamils were reduced as Sudras and Untouchables. Religion, gods, and the caste system prevented the Tamils from attaining self-respect, he argued. A person with self-respect would not consent to live as a slave, to be ill-treated or exploited by others. Therefore, Periyar declares that his key aim is to bring self-respect to the Tamils:

The struggle for social rights is the revolution that we are making. We have decided to accomplish this revolution neither through an armed struggle nor the cowardly tactics of non-violence. We desire to kindle a consciousness among the Tamils, to unite them by making them aware of their current state that is devoid of self-respect. We aim to bring a revolution by uniting the people against social degradations. (Ramasamy 2011b:148)

Caste prevented the progress of the Tamils. Without abolishing caste, thus, Tamils could not become human beings. To Periyar, it was because of the caste system that the Tamils were deprived of proper education, social rights, wealth, representation in politics, and political power (Ramasamy 2011b:153–54). “They who do not seek to annihilate caste are not Tamils. They are merely Tamils in body” (Ramasamy 2011b:154). Periyar argues that after several efforts to secure rights and reforms, his movement is compelled to raise the slogan of “Tamil Nadu for Tamils” since such a state might lead to the erasure of the caste system (Ramasamy 2011b:155). To Periyar, the ruling class was inspired by the *varna* order based on the *Manu Smriti* and thus, the Dravidians had to fight against the imposition of this order in their land (Ramasamy 2011b:167–68).

Periyar was not averse to criticizing the intermediate castes for internalizing the *varna* order. He calls out the Acharis for naming themselves as Vishwabrahmins; Komutti Chettiyars for naming themselves as Aryavaishyas; the Nagarathu, Vellan, and Vaaniya Chettiyars for considering themselves Vaishyas; and the Vanniyars, Nadars, Sengunthars and Naickers for fashioning themselves as Kshatriyas. He asks, “all of this will only hold the Aryan-Brahmin as a high caste and accept that the rest are all low castes, other than that, will there be any

benefit for your communities?" (Ramasamy 2011b:176). He says that these communities have no problem in considering the Brahmin to be above them but would like to establish their superiority over other Tamil communities. As a result, it had become impossible for the Tamils to consider themselves as a nation (Ramasamy 2011b:177). Periyar wanted the caste associations of Brahmins and intermediate castes to be banned (while he defended Dalit associations). He lamented that the numerous caste associations of the intermediate castes prevented Dravidian unity (Ramasamy 2011c:189). For Tamils to be a nation, therefore, they had to reject such ritual hierarchies and be united. The goal is for the Dravidians to remove the indignities that had been heaped upon them from the time of birth.

Taking a page from Aristotle's book, Periyar says that man is a social animal, but the Hindu religion divides society and legitimizes social hierarchies (Ramasamy 2011b:191). While the divisions in North India were on religious lines, Hindu-Muslim, in South India, the divisions between Brahmin and Sudra were crucial. Responding to Savarkar's claim that Muslims were to be opposed because of their aggression, Periyar says that if that were the case, then there was more reason to oppose the Hindus because of their aggression towards and the inferiorization of the Dravidians (Ramasamy 2011b:194). Periyar calls for a unity of the Non-Brahmins and Muslims to oppose Hindu aggression. He further claims that the only reason why the Tamils were categorized as Hindus was to differentiate them from and pitch them against the Muslims; but within Hinduism, they were marked as Sudras and Panchamas (Ramasamy 2011b:227–28).

However, Periyar did not believe that mere representation of non-Brahmins in places of power would end their social degradation. Referring to the powerful positions held by P. T. Rajan, Kumarasamy Reddy, A. P. Patro, Ramasamy Mudaliar, and Muthiah Chettiyar, he remarks that despite their positions, they could do little for the improvement of the majority of the society, nor could they remove the ignominy of Sudrahood in society (Ramasamy 2011b:197). He accuses these "Sudras" in power of being unable to confront Brahminism and for their subscription of Brahminical culture and practices. He criticizes the Tamils who attain a position of power for looking down on those below them as "lower castes," for imitating the Brahmins, and for treating the poor as Sudras (Ramasamy 2011b:236). More specifically he says, "The Dravidian Movement will fight against whoever oppresses the untouchable castes" (Ramasamy 2011c:72). While arguing that the Untouchable castes are part of the Dravidian community, he acknow-

ledges that among the Dravidians themselves there are those with caste arrogance. Hence, he says:

The Dravidian Movement's main aim is to make into reality the idea that in this country the differences of Paraiyar, Brahmin, upper caste, lower caste, Sudra, Panchama, are all totally destroyed, and all belong to the same nation and the same society. (Ramasamy 2011c:73)

Periyar adds that irrespective of whether the Untouchable castes join the Dravidar Kazhagam (his political party) or not, they have the right to claim the benefits of the party's efforts (Ramasamy 2011c:75). Such explicit overtures by Periyar towards the Dalits contradicts the claims by academics like Narendra Subramaniam that Periyar's conception of the Dravidian "contains at its centre the Tamil speaking Shudra of Tamil Nadu" (Subramaniam 1999:105) while the Dalits found themselves in an outer layer. As I have argued in an earlier paper (Manoharan 2020), while fighting for the political rights of the non-Brahmin bloc as a whole, Periyar was attentive to and vocally stood by the particular struggles of the Dalits, even if it offended the intermediate castes who comprised the overwhelming majority in Tamil Nadu.

Neither a theoretician nor a systematic thinker like Ambedkar, Periyar recognized certain basic political and socio-economic safeguards for the Dalits and advocated for them. In conflicts between Dalits and the intermediate castes, he stood firmly on the side of the former, whom he saw as those most oppressed by Brahminism. He was of the opinion that those from the Untouchable castes were in greater need of communal representation than the non-Brahmin Sudra castes (*Kudi Arasu*, 8 November 1925). He believed that not only the Brahmins, but intermediate castes also behaved in a foul manner towards the Dalits and were complicit in their oppression; addressing the "non-Brahmin people who think of themselves as upper castes," he said that they wouldn't be able to get rid of the caste ignominy they faced unless and until they worked with the Untouchable castes to help the latter get rid of theirs (Ramasamy 2006:44–45).

Throughout his political career, Periyar criticized the intermediate castes for their notions of superiority over the Dalits—he argued that this was more unjust than the casteism of the Brahmins, even as he held the latter to be responsible for the caste ideology (*Kudi Arasu*, 9 December 1928). While he said that the Dravidar Kazhagam fought for all non-Brahmins, he knew that the non-Brahmin upper castes, even though

they were seen as Sudras by the Brahmins, ill-treated those lower to them (Ramasamy 2011c:124). He claims that compared to other castes it was the Adidraavidars who attended his meeting in large numbers: “The Adidraavidars mostly know that Draavidar Kazhagam works for the welfare of the working people, and not for the plump and lazy Brahmins or the landlords who are their stooges” (Ramasamy 2011c:124). In several of his speeches addressing the Sudras, he repeatedly stressed that Dalit emancipation was central to the emancipation of the entire non-Brahmin community. To Periyar, the Draavidian project was fundamentally incomplete without freedom and equality for the lowest of the castes.

To Periyar, even the elite non-Brahmin castes like the Mudaliars, Chettiyars, and Nayakkars (the Telugu Nayakkars, not to be confused with the Vanniya Nayakkars who were predominantly a labouring caste) were Sudras. The identity of “Draavidian” was meant to be an identity of dignity and self-respect to the indigenous people of South India, those derogatorily referred to as Sudras and Panchamas (Ramasamy 2011c:94). In another occasion, he says that some castes adopted names like Mudaliar, Gounder, Nayakkar, et cetera so as to hide their Sudra status (Ramasamy 2011c:243). This might appear as a blind spot in Periyar’s perspective in that he was mapping elite non-Brahmin castes (like the Mudaliars and Chettiyars), who occupied powerful positions in the government and the bureaucracy, along with subaltern intermediate castes (like the Vanniyars, Vannars, Nadars, and Thevars) as Sudras. His point however was that despite their powerful positions, these elite communities were ritually Sudras and worse, they did nothing to challenge their ritual status or to ameliorate the conditions of the other communities that were lower to them (Ramasamy 2011c:95–97). In another article, he criticizes the elite Vellalar communities such as the Mudaliars for considering themselves as *sat-Sudras* (‘clean Sudras’) and for placing themselves above intermediate castes such as the Maravars, Kallars, Kammavars, and Idaiyars, noting that this only strengthens the superior position of the Brahmins (Ramasamy 2011c:224–26). He criticizes these communities for *consenting* to be Sudras and for not adopting egalitarian politics. He says, “Instead of getting in power, or betraying our ideals and falling at the feet of our enemies for the sake of power, we should stand on the side of the common people and apply pressure on those in power” (Ramasamy 2011c:97). Power, to Periyar, not only corrupted the Sudra, but also Brahminized them.

In a satirical dialogue between a teacher and student penned by Periyar (Ramasamy 2011c:213–16), the teacher asks how to identify a Sudra. The student replies that the Sudra is one who is content with his Sudra status and seeks to serve the Brahmin without caring for his own degraded status, without self-respect. The Sudra has fully internalized Brahminism and believes in his own inferiority. Forget confronting the Brahmin, the Sudra celebrates him. The Sudra does not help those of his own class, but goes out of his way to promote the welfare of the Brahmins. No matter how wealthy or influential a Sudra is, he considers the Brahmin to be superior to him.

Periyar believed that Aryanism was intent on attacking him and his party not so much because of his attacks on Hinduism, but because of his questioning “Why should we be Sudras?” (Ramasamy 2011c:109). In a speech in December 1947, he says that the varna order and the Hindu religion consigned the working people as Sudras (Ramasamy 2011c:113). He saw the caste order as unchanging for two thousand years, in that those who were Brahmins, Sudras and Untouchables two thousand years ago continued to be so now (Ramasamy 2011c:150). This is an ahistorical reading, of course, but its tone is rhetorical—his point was to question “For how long will we remain Sudras in this world?” He asks the people to reject or change the religion and state that made them Sudras (Ramasamy 2011c:153–54). Responding to communists who foregrounded class over caste, he questions why the rich Annamalai Chettiyar was still a Sudra and the highly educated Ambedkar still an Untouchable (Ramasamy 2011c:156). He argues that before the rich are overthrown, we need to overthrow the priestly class, the gods, the mutts, and the religions (Ramasamy 2011c:179). All of these worked together to prevent the advancement of the Sudras. But then, most Sudras were unaware of this. The task of the Dravidar Kazhagam, thus, was to make the Sudras conscious of their own oppression and their position within the hierarchy of oppression.

## The Critique and Its Limitations

Periyar often uses the terms Sudra, Tamil, non-Brahmin, and Dravidian interchangeably. This might look confusing and inconsistent. But each of these terms are used by him for specific purposes.

*Sudra*, to Periyar, included all the non-Brahmin, non-Dalit castes of Tamil Nadu. This is “technically” correct, insofar as mainstream readings of Hinduism is concerned. The Sudras and the Untouchable castes taken together were the native Tamils.

They were also Dravidians, but *Dravidian* meant more than a term signifying nativity, ethnicity, or nationality. Rather, the term indicated an oppositional position to Aryan–Brahminical values. He acknowledged that elite non-Brahmin castes such as the Chettiyars and Mudaliars did not share his zeal for egalitarian thought and were content to remain *sat Sudras*. The Sudras were divided into several castes, and each fought for a place within Brahminism and was content to be above the Dalits. Periyar, however, felt that the Dalit castes were closer to the ideals of the Self-Respect Movement because they were out of the varna order, because they had not bought into Brahminical values, and because they did not accommodate themselves within the Brahminical system. The Sudra, on the other hand, was devoid of Self-Respect.

*Tamil*, to Periyar, indicated a nation, a civilization, and a language, but this included the Brahmins too. To him, the Sudra Tamils needed to “rise above a state of barbarism” and for that “it is not enough that one hates god, religion, the Vedas, the traditional puranas, temples, festivals and religious processions. One also must detest the Tamil language which upholds the puranas and religious epics. This is so because the Tamil language is structured so as to degrade the Tamil” (Ramasamy 2011d:138–39). The Sudra Tamil needed to give up not just the Brahminical religious texts and scriptures but also an attachment to a native Tamil culture to be an individual of self-respect.

But whatever he or she might do, the Sudra would remain a Sudra as long as a Brahmin remained a Brahmin. That is, the symbolic presence of the Brahmin rendered the intermediate Tamil castes as Sudras. The non-Brahmin and the Sudra were ontologically related to the Brahmin and these identities were limiting, both as far as politics was concerned *and* as far as the individual was concerned.

Frantz Fanon (2008) rejected the identity politics of Negritude that was based only on the lived experiences of Blacks and their histories of suffering in favor of a broader African politics. His endorsement of the Algerian identity is based on its affirmative potential to have an existence independent of the French. The past does not validate the politics of the present. The present has to create an affirmative politics of the future. “I have not the right to become mired by the determinations of the past,” wrote Fanon (2008:179). Periyar’s Sudra, however, was determined purely by the past. The Sudra of the present was in his inferior social state owing to a straight succession of events from two thousand years back when the Sanskrit scriptures were composed and the Brahmins, generation after generation, prevented any move to achieve social equality. In a sense, the history of the Sudra is the history

of defeat by deceit. A key reason why several intermediate castes in Tamil Nadu *refuse* to associate with the Sudra identity is because of its strong negative connotations.

Periyar did not valorize the Sudra identity. He used it as a double critique. One, to incriminate Brahmins for consigning the majority of the population to a lower status for generations. Two, to remind the intermediate castes of their lower status and to rubbish their claims of superiority over the Dalits. Being a Sudra was something to be ashamed of and any Self-Respecter ought to struggle against the same. He called on the intermediate castes to leave their attachments to their caste identities and join hands with the Dalits in a common struggle against the caste system as such. But even in his own time, his message was not easily digested by the intermediate castes. Even as the elite Vellalar castes contended to remain *sat Sudras*, the subaltern intermediate castes like the Vanniyars, Nadars, and Thevars claimed Kshatriya status. The obvious reading is that of Sanskritization, but it can also be seen as attempts by these communities to defy the status ascribed to them and their aspirations for a prominent social role. The ill-effect, as presciently noted by Periyar, was not only that this strengthened Brahminism; it also wedged a divide between such castes and the rest. The repercussions of such ritual claims can be seen in contemporary Tamil Nadu, where over two dozen castes lay claim to be descendants of Tamil monarchs while simultaneously claiming superiority over other subaltern castes. And this is a trend among some among the Scheduled Castes as well. Prominent leaders among the Devendra Kula Vellalars, for example, reject both the Dalit and Dravidian identities and see themselves as a land-owning agriculturalist caste and descendants of the Pandian kings.

To Periyar, the term *Dravidian* was a sort of a palliative. Though he claims its roots are in Tamil history and signifies a conflict with Aryanism, it is very much a modern political term. But in Periyar's own thoughts, the ancientness of a thing does not justify its presence—it had to be validated by the egalitarian politics of the future. Within the framework of a national democracy, which Carl Schmitt (1985:9) calls an actual democracy, there are two requirements: homogeneity and the eradication of heterogeneity. One could say that the desire for *actual* homogeneity in a caste hierarchical society is desirable given that it would erase the differences of caste. As Aloysius (1997) notes in his remarkable work on Indian nationalism, the political nationalism that sought to annihilate caste differences and bring a nation into being was sidelined in favor of a cultural nationalism that retained caste differ-

ences and privileges. But what Aloysius terms political nationalism is not the same as Schmitt's conception of homogeneity. It is closer to Mouffe's idea of "commonality," the concern being "how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a 'demos' but nevertheless compatible with certain forms of pluralism" (1999:50). Periyar's Dravidian gives such an option for a "commonality" to emerge for the intermediate castes *and* between the intermediate castes and Dalits. As "Dravidian," the Sudras and Panchamas can remove their stigmas and fight for greater common rights, without necessarily being asked to sacrifice their interests for immediate political gains. In principle, "Dravidian" was also open to others willing to join the cause of Self-Respect and social justice.

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