

Negotiating Modernity and Caste: A Comparative analysis of Savarkar and Periyar

Aditya Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Govt. Degree College, Chenani, Jammu & Kashmir

1. Introduction

The dialectic of tradition and modernity shaped the intellectual and political history of modern India. The interaction with modernity in India led to challenging the various institutions including caste. As India grappled with the socio-political transformations brought about by colonialism, a number of reformers and thinkers made a concerted effort to redefine Indian society through diverse and often conflicting visions of progress and justice. Taking this idea in backdrop the paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and E.V Ramasamy Periyar to examine two influential but ideologically divergent figures in modern Indian political and social thought. Savarkar is considered as the champion of Hindutva politics the ideology of political right wing in India. On the other hand, Periyar is considered as bastion and torch bearer of the Dravidian politics in the southern part of India. The paper employs sociology of knowledge perspective to look understands how the social position of both these towering historical figures influenced and shaped their intellectual standpoints. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Karl Mannheim the paper situates both figures within the broader discourse on modernity, caste and the production of social knowledge. The paper argues that while Savarkar's modernity was integrative and reformist, aiming to consolidate Hindu national identity, Periyar's was revolutionary and annihilative, seeking to dismantle the very structures that underpinned caste. This comparison sheds light on broader debates around tradition, reform, identity and emancipation in South Asian intellectual history and underscores the enduring influence of both thinkers in contemporary India.

The aim of the paper is not only to trace their intellectual trajectories but also examine the philosophical and socio-political implications of their respective visions. A comparative analysis of these two thinkers is crucial not just for historical analysis but for engaging contemporary debates around caste, secularism and nationalism in India. As India continues to confront questions of social justice and cultural identity, the legacies of Savarkar and Periyar remain deeply embedded in political discourse, influencing both state politics and grassroots movements.

Epistemological comparison of Savarkar and Periyar

Both thinkers were product of colonial modernity and were deeply engaged with questions of caste, religion nationalism and social reform. However their responses to these issues reveal fundamentally divergent visions of modernity and social transformation. VD Savarkar's epistemology stems from the influence of positivist thinkers like Herbert Spencer, Jeremy Bentham and J.S Mill. His writings and speeches reflect a consistent advocacy of critical inquiry based on rationalism and empiricism. He

argues that religious texts are man-made and should be subject to rational scrutiny. Savarkar was neither a religious man nor an atheist; he did not abandon religion but accepted nothing that was irrational. Metaphysical statements and theological debates concerning religious beliefs were of no interest to him (S. Sharma, 1996). In this context, Lederle identified Savarkar, as agnostic and referred to G.V. Ketkar who aptly named Savarkar's agnosticism as 'believing agnosticism' (Lederle, 1976). Savarkar considered the scriptures to be not divine, but written by unknown thinkers. Savarkar's stay in the cellular (1911-1924) jail can be seen as epistemic rupture—a period where inherited knowledge about caste was destabilized and new rationalist and nationalistic framework was developed. In his view caste had to be rethought not to fulfill ancient religious laws but to fulfill the political destiny of Hindu unity and Indian Independence. The people had to be told that they were divine revelation for otherwise they would not have accepted the scriptures as holy. Savarkar observed that many of the ancient scriptures like the Manusmriti (Law of Manu) contained various teachings that had been proven false over the course of time. Applying principles of necessity and utility as the only criteria of acceptability, Savarkar stated, 'Whatever we find in Manusmriti to be harmful or ridiculous today should not be followed, but that does not make Manusmriti harmful or ridiculous'. If we accept that the religious texts, though claimed to be of divine origin, have failings like that of any human creation, they become the inheritance of all mankind and the social evils presented and defended in the name of religion would come to an end (Godbole, 2004). Born in Chitpavan Brahmin family Savarkar social position—that is upper caste shaped his social standing on the issue of caste. His social position shaped a form of knowledge that was modernist and Brahminical which in turn resulted into an engagement with ultimate project that is unification of Hindus into a single national community. In *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923), Savarkar articulates a vision of Hindu identity based on a shared territory (pitrabhumi)—land of forefathers and holy land (punyabhumi) signifying culture. He distinguishes between Hindu and non-Hindu based not on religion per se, but on cultural allegiance. However this formulation homogenizes the vast internal diversity of Hindu society particularly cast.

Periyar's engagement with Western rationalism, particularly ideas from the European Enlightenment, was a cornerstone of his epistemology. Through his travels (notably his visit to Europe in 1932), Periyar encountered and absorbed the ideas of thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau, and Thomas Paine. He admired their commitment to reason, skepticism of religion, and belief in human equality. For Periyar, knowledge could not be based on divine revelation or tradition but had to be derived from reason, experience, and critical inquiry. Periyar was deeply influenced by India's indigenous rationalist traditions, particularly Buddhism and the teachings of the Charvaka (materialist) school. The life and philosophy of Buddha, whom Periyar regarded as a social reformer rather than a religious figure, offered a model for a knowledge system grounded in empirical reality and ethical conduct without reliance on the divine. Charvaka Materialism Periyar's emphasis on material reality over metaphysical speculation echoes the ancient Charvaka rejection of supernatural explanations and insistence on direct perception (pratyaksha) as the only valid means of knowledge. He famously declared that "there is no god; there is no religion; there is only humanity." Like the Enlightenment thinkers who challenged the Church, Periyar challenged the hegemony of Hindu religious structures, seeing them as instruments of social oppression. **Periyar** argued that caste is not natural but artificially created and maintained by Brahminical scriptures like the Vedas, Manusmriti, and Puranas. These religious texts were seen by him as the epistemic foundation legitimizing caste hierarchy. Knowledge, for Periyar, is not neutral it serves

to reinforce oppressive social orders. Religion as Epistemic Violence-According to Periyar, religion (specifically Hinduism) is not a spiritual pursuit but an instrument of caste dominance. In his view, religious knowledge violently miseducates the masses, making them accept their subordination as "divinely ordained." Rationalism as a Tool for Epistemic Liberation- Periyar insisted that the only way to challenge caste is through rationalism, critical questioning, logic, and scientific thinking. He encouraged people to reject traditional knowledge unless it could stand up to reason. Periyar also pointed out that myths, rituals, and Sanskrit language were key in spreading caste ideas. He promoted Tamil language and Dravidian identity as alternative epistemologies against Aryan/Brahminical domination. He believed that lived experience, especially the suffering of the oppressed, was a more reliable source of knowledge than ancient texts. In this way, Periyar can be seen as an early proponent of a kind of standpoint epistemology. Central to Periyar's thought is rationalism (*kutarka vadam*) — the principle that reason is the ultimate tool for attaining true knowledge. He consistently emphasized that knowledge must arise from: Skepticism of traditional beliefs Critical inquiry into the origins of social practices Empirical validation of claims. In *Why Religion?* (1933), he declared "Reason is the only method by which we can discern right from wrong, true from false."

Ontological Understanding of Caste

In the first war of Independence (1909), Savarkar reinterprets the 1857 revolt as unified Hindu-Muslim uprising against British rule. He omits internal divisions and caste-based inequalities, presenting a romanticized, nationalist historiography. Savarkar uses instrumental rationality to understand and delve on the issue of caste, nationalism and politics. Savarkar argued that caste was a social phenomenon not a divine or ontological necessity. For him, caste is an evolution from an ancient system of division of labour. He quotes "The caste system grew up as a political and social necessity to preserve the integrity and efficiency of society. In fact, he praises the original Varna system of occupational division but condemns the later degeneration into birth-based caste. He quotes Caste had nothing to do with the real worth of man. It was his work, his personal qualities, which should determine his status"(Sharma, 2011). Savarkar believed that caste fragmentation led to social weakness and political subjugation. He argues that "If Hindu society has been broken to pieces by caste system; it must be consolidated by ending this system"(Jaffrelot, 1996).

EV Ramasamy popularly known as Periyar developed a radical critique of caste that was rooted in a materialist and rationalist ontology. For Periyar caste was not merely a social arrangement or a division of labour, it was an ontological structure- a mode of being-that fixed human worth according to birth and ritual status. He challenged the metaphysical foundations of caste and demanded its complete annihilation. Periyar viewed caste as an ontological imposition that defined and confined individual's existence from birth to death. According to him, caste identity was not simply a label, it was a totalizing condition that denied the humanity of the lower castes (Iyer, 1991). He maintained that ontology itself must be transformed –that is human beings must be understood not in terms of divine origin, karma or past birth but as equals by nature. Therefore, the destruction of caste required not merely economic or political reform, but a complete ontological rupture with Hindu religious thought (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). Periyar opposed rationalism and materialism as the new basis of being. He insisted that the human being is born without any inherent hierarchy and society's task is to recognize this essential

equality. Thus he replaced the theological ontology of caste with a materialist ontology based on reason and human equality and social justice (Aloysius, 1998).

Savarkar and Periyar's crusade against caste: A comparison

Savarkar explicitly states that "all Hindus are of common blood" a claim that flattens the historical oppression experienced by lower castes. In attempting to construct a unified Hindu identity, Savarkar reframes caste as a matter of social practice that could be reformed without challenging the hierarchical structure. For instance, he advocates for the abolition of untouchability but insisted on preserving "Varna" distinctions as essential to Hindu society's historical fabric. Savarkar proposed a reorganization of Hindu society through internal reforms like inter-caste dining and temple entry for 'untouchables', but these reforms were meant to strengthen Hindu unity against external enemies rather than dismantling caste hierarchy itself. Savarkar rejected the idea that some castes were inherently superior to others. His efforts for temple entry for Dalits, inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriages were all based on the ontological view that all Hindus are fundamentally equal. He declared the touchable and untouchable, the Brahmin and the Mahar, the Maratha and the Chambhar must all be treated as equals. Hindu society must be built anew on the basis of social equality (Sharma, 2011).

Colonial modernity introduced new dynamics into Indian society, including notions of equality, rights, and citizenship. However, caste adapted to these changes rather than disappearing. Particularly in the Tamil-speaking regions, Brahminical dominance persisted in administration, education, and religion. **Periyar** emerged in this milieu, initially through his association with the Indian National Congress, and later through his break from it when he realized its reluctance to confront caste hierarchies meaningfully (Pandian, 2007). Periyar's analysis was influenced by Enlightenment values — rationality, equality, and skepticism toward tradition. He rejected the Hindu religious canon, particularly the Manusmriti, as a theological justification for caste oppression. He quoted that "If religion and God can uphold caste, then we must destroy religion and God themselves." (Periyar, Collected Works). Periyar's Self-Respect Movement (founded in 1925) aimed to cultivate dignity among the oppressed castes, encouraging them to reject Brahminical rituals and practices. Marriage without Brahmin priests, communal dining, and temple entry movements were some practical expressions of this ideology. Anti-Brahminism was central to Periyar's project but must be distinguished from hatred toward individual Brahmins. His critique was systemic: it was aimed at dismantling a system where Brahmins monopolized knowledge, religion, and governance. Periyar conceptualized the term "Dravidian" as a counter-identity to the "Aryan" Brahminical order. He posited that the Tamil people, as Dravidians, had a distinct, pre-Aryan civilization that was egalitarian and rationalist. Periyar also understood caste as intertwined with patriarchy. In *Why Were Women Enslaved?* (1942), he argued that caste perpetuated women's subjugation by enforcing norms of purity and endogamy. True social liberation, he insisted, required the simultaneous dismantling of caste and gender hierarchies. By the early twentieth century, resistance to Brahmin dominance began to emerge in various forms, notably in South India. The Justice Party, formed in 1916, was one of the first organized efforts to articulate the grievances of non-Brahmin communities. Periyar's early political career was shaped by this milieu; though he would soon develop a far more radical approach that sought to demolish caste hierarchies altogether rather than merely redistribute power within them.

Contemporary relevance and legacy of Periyar and Savarkar

Savarkar's influence is most prominently visible in the ideological frameworks of organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The emphasis on cultural nationalism, temple-building movements, debates over historical narratives, and issues of citizenship and migration resonate with Savarkarian thought (Jaffrelot, 2021). In recent years, there has been a systematic re-evaluation of historical figures. Efforts to rehabilitate and valorize Savarkar include initiatives to commemorate his contributions, incorporate his works into educational curricula, and honor him through public memorials and official awards. This trend reflects a broader shift towards reclaiming a nationalist historiography. From a **Sociology of Knowledge** perspective, Savarkar's caste views must be situated within the broader project of constructing a Hindu identity compatible with modernity and political mobilization. Savarkar saw caste as an impediment to modern nation-building. Unlike Gandhi, who approached untouchability from a moral-religious lens, Savarkar treated it primarily as a political obstacle.

Periyar's social reform agenda was comprehensive, addressing not only caste-based inequalities but also gender and cultural issues. Advocacy for Gender Equality - He believed that women should not be confined to traditional roles as child-bearers and insisted on equal rights in education and employment. The Self Respect Movement promoted marriages without rituals, divorce rights, and equal property rights for women—radical ideas for that time. Social Equality He appealed to people to abandon caste suffixes in their names, and to not mention caste. He instituted inter-dining with food cooked by Dalits in public conferences in the 1930s. These efforts were revolutionary, as they directly challenged deeply ingrained social norms and his vision and praxis remains relevant to challenge the hitherto existing caste barriers and inequality in society.

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