

## Who is the Third that Walks Behind You? A Response to Aditya Nigam

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I read Aditya Nigam's observations on an epistemology of the dalit critique of modernity with great interest. His formulations are both fascinating and suggestive, therefore, I would like to complicate them.

Firstly, while I accept that dalit politics and ideologies represent the "problematic 'third term' that continuously challenges the common sense of the secular modern", I am not sure that these exist as an "absent presence"; or that they advance a notion of citizenship that is premised on the notion of the community as a rights-bearing subject. It seems to me that the non-brahmin, lower caste engagement with the "secular modern" does two things: it contends with the contradictions of modernity, as Nigam so ably demonstrates, but it also dips beyond and across the wide arc of the secular-modern to articulate an expressive ideology and world view that is still recognisably modern. I would like to illustrate this with reference to the thought of Periyar Ramasamy.

Secondly, I am not sure if the dalit and non-brahmin engagement with the modern can be directly linked to a lived and felt experience of abjection and suffering on the part of dalits and other lower castes. Experiential angst, of course, is central to dalit politics, but it is always mediated, recognised and named, defied and challenged in specific ways and through particular means. In this context, it might be useful to investigate how experiences of pain responded to the promises of modernity, how they re-cast the latter's constituents, granting them a different weight and resonance, as it were.

Thirdly, the fraught relationship between caste and class and the suspicion with which non brahmins and dalits received communist ideas and hopes are not all that overdetermined by the logic of the modern. In this context, I would like to suggest that Periyar's responses to socialism represent a critique that is enormously suggestive.

I

Periyar responded to modernity with relish: he welcomed its sciences, applauded its commitment to infinite progress, yet he was conscious that modern gifts seldom arrived as such. He realised that they suffered mediations, distortions, transformations and achieved their distinctive forms in specific contexts. He retained the notion of an incorruptible modernity against which he measured its mediated effects, yet his understanding of these mediations enabled him to outline a different modernity, one that was not merely adulatory of the gift, but which re-possessed it in extremely specific ways.

He was critical and scornful of the pretensions of Indian nationalism, especially of what he identified as its gandhian ethical core, which for him comprised a peculiar inflexion of both politics and religion, community and ethics. In a marvellous essay, he called attention to the moral sophistry and political acumen that marked Gandhi's

political leitmotif - the notion of satyagraha. Arguing that what may appear as truth to the Gandhians may not necessarily be true for the self respecters, he observed that in the gandhian universe, the efficacy of truth depended on its success, its ability to command action. This of course meant that "there need be no truth in a particular cause (for which one conducts satyagraha) nor need a winning cause be a particularly truthful one." Yet satyagraha remained a valid principle of both politics and ethics, a spiritual expression of Gandhi's political intelligence. Periyar pointed out that satyagraha remained opaque to criticism and interpretation, because it could only be measured and judged by its own forms of expression. A critique of its truth claims could not but be ignorant and false.

Periyar also argued that satyagraha represented the essence of a politics that attempted to subsume its partisan concerns in a universal rhetoric of truth, patriotism and sacrifice. In this sense, it embodied both the moral ambiguity that marked nationalism as well as the political desire that suffused a revived Hinduism (Kudi Aasu, 6-9-1931).

Periyar's rejection of nationalism then was essentially on these grounds, that it retained the old within the new, or rather that it sought to compromise the new with the substances of an older tyrannical religious ideology. If nationalism were to regain its original liberative content, then one had to resolutely challenge and dislodge the old - not only in terms of its manifest practices, but its moral ardour.

Periyar's strategies for fighting the old were two fold: wage an unrelenting war of position against religion, caste, brahmins and the nationalism they espoused; create the conditions for another nationalism, one that was not merely oppositional, either in a civilisational or in an ethical sense, but which possessed its own correlates and meaning. He would of course characterise this nationalism as "dravidian" and "Tamil", but the objective correlates of this political and discursive shorthand were neither an oppositional history nor a subaltern agent. Instead, the new nation he anticipated was an ideal republic, a common weal whose needs and rights had to be consciously struggled for and established.

He noted that the idea of nationalism makes sense only "if a nation's citizens could realise their ideal, without having to forgo or compromise on their dignity ..." Further, for a nation to exist in this fashion, there would have to be "an all-round growth of knowledge, spread of education, the cultivation of rational thought, work, industry, equality, unity, initiative and honesty, and the abolition of poverty, injustice and untouchability" (Kudi Arasu, 19-5-1929).

Periyar's sense of the nation was thus complex: it firmly set itself against a pious nationalism, while accepting that the Indian variant was a distortion of an originally sound idea. Yet, this original core was not granted normative value, Periyar reinscribed it within the terms of a philosophy that answered the needs of his histories and epistemologies.

Periyar's agent of history was neither the shudra, nor an adi dravida; nor was it a Tamil or a dravida. Instead, it was the non brahmin historic bloc, in its entirety that was to undertake the tasks of creating a new social, economic and ethical order. This bloc was not a sociological given, it had to constantly renewed, forged in response to changed historical conjunctures and situations. It was to reinvent itself, heeding only

these principles: socialism, atheism, anti-brahminism, each of which, singly or in articulation with one another, defined the commonweal.

Periyar's notions of nationalism and historical agency may be better understood if placed in the context of political traditions that belong to the moment of historical modernity but which also exceeded its discursive limits - radical utopianism, for one, and the anarchist traditions of political voluntarism. Periyar, of course, did not acknowledge or admit to such a genealogy, but it is productive, in a critical and heuristic sense, to thus elicit one, rather than characterise his engagements in terms of an elusive, Derridean trace or absence. .

This brings me to my second observation. Working vigorously against the grain of the secular-modern, Periyar re-possessed secular virtues in distinctive ways. He grasped the limitations of an abstract notion of rights and citizenship and submitted it to a sharp and penetrative critique. Responding to the Indian National Congress' Karachi resolutions, especially to those which guaranteed religious freedoms and the non-intervention of the State in religious matters he indignantly wondered if this was not a ruse to keep benighted orthodoxy and brahmanic values alive:

"Are these rights ... enjoined by the shastras? Or else, are they rights that have emerged from experience, custom and habit? Do they guarantee 'nationhood' or are they natural and universal rights? Besides, if there are to ensue a clash of rights, say between Hindus and Mohameddians, brahmins and adi-dravidas, who rights would be considered sacrosanct and on what basis?" (Kudi Arasu, 12-7-1931)

Yet Periyar endorsed the notion of rights as such and accepted the importance of citizenship - he counterposed the citizen, unmarked by caste and religion to the caste persona. This citizen however was no normative republican, neither was she a passive subject of the law. On one hand she carried her past history of subjection with her in her dealings with the law and state - she demanded positive discrimination in her favour, insisted on substantive, rather than formal equality under the law. On the other hand, she also worked actively to shed herself of this past - Periyar was convinced that in the realm of family and civil society, the citizen had to re-make herself, undergo nothing more or less than an ontological transformation. His revolutionary notion of self-respect must be seen in this context, as an exhortation to adi dravidas and non brahmins - self-respect with its attendant notions of mutuality and reciprocity was the very obverse of caste society, with its graded inequality, mutual hostility and self-alienation.

Clearly, Periyar's notion of the citizen was both political and phenomenological. He did not define his subject in her subalternity, rather he wished her to be present to herself, in a living, thinking sort of way..

## II

Nigam links the absent presence of dalit epistemology to the experience of oppression. In a descriptive sense, this is indeed so, but the relationship between dalit epistemology and experience is neither causal nor mimetic. Instead, it is mediated: felt notions of pain and injustice grapple with ideologies of protest and theories of oppression and liberation to constitute new knowledges. In turn, feeling is itself

structured by gender on one hand and class on the other. Feminist notions of the 'authentic' female experience are instructive in this regard. Several traditions within feminism resolutely challenge the concept of an experiential femaleness, arguing that 'the experience of womanhood' cannot be considered a universal critical category of understanding or action. Instead, these experiences must itself be viewed in the context of criss-crossing social and productive relationships - of caste, religion, ethnicity, kinship, religion and language.

To account for dalit epistemology through the invocation of an unmediated notion of experience is problematic in another sense. It produces a strange mirroring of the gandhian notion of the ineffable 'inner voice', whose truth claims are self-evident. Further, experience, when deployed in substitution of argument and analysis sometimes fudges the very field of one's critique - it causes Ilaiah to lump M.N. Roy - whom Periyar considered a friend of the non-brahmin movement - with P.C. Joshi and E M S Namboodripad. More important, it does not grant the dalit critic a credible theoretical foothold to critically engage with dalit politics. Even if dalit politics is to be viewed chiefly through the lens of a collective angst, the question needs to be posed: whose story is being told here, is the BSP's story an uncontested narrative of dalit experience? What stories does the politics of alliance leave out?

Periyar, as in other instances, did not grant epistemological privilege to experience. In this sense he was quite unlike Gandhi. He did not seek out the meditative space of an ashram to dwell into the inscrutable murkiness of the caste Hindu mind. Rather, like his favourite hero, Socrates, he courted the open and contested space of the agora - the truth of caste experiences, he was convinced must be made available to reason, dialogue and argument, even if this entailed that non brahmins confront one another over questions of untouchability, or women confront good self-respecting men over patriarchy.

### III

Finally, I am not at all sure that our experience of colonial modernity so overdetermined the content and form of communist politics that Periyar (and Dr Ambedkar) had to explicate their own notions of universal history. If official socialism did not prove attractive to Periyar, it was not because its constitutive modern moment disallowed the articulation of 'unmodern' categories such as caste.

For one, Periyar, Gurusamy and the young Jeevanandham, who later on became a respected and loved member of the Communist Party of India, did produce extremely original glosses on central socialist categories, such as surplus extraction, alienation and ideology. In all of these, caste and religion figured in fundamental ways. Like his other re-possession, Periyar's socialism too was of a part with what it inherited, only this inheritance was claimed in complex ways.

Secondly, the aryan-dravidian narrative was not advanced as a counter to the universal history of the class struggle. Its great expressive power was put to use in politically strategic ways, but the subject of this narrative was not the flattened, racial and cultural 'dravidian' of a latter-day dravidian ideology. It was the self-respecter, the bearer of samadharma, who was alternately a socialist, a dravidian, a Tamil and a non-brahmin. Even in his last public address, Periyar returned to these themes: in an impassioned speech he railed against the social ignominy suffered by non brahmins and

dalits, both in law and in practice. Using the terms adi dravida, Tamil, dravidian, shudra and non brahmin interchangeably, he observed that what was at stake for this vast community of peoples was their very selfhood - deemed low, dishonourable and untouchable by their religion, and which had to be redeemed, re-posessed in the name of a common and universal humanity.

The point is, the aryan-dravidian narrative was an open one, it was framed by and framed other modes of critique and practice, therefore, in no way was it conclusive and bounded.