

What If Periyar Had Drafted the National Education Policy 2020?

A celebration of Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy's vision

Social and Gender Equity in Education

A Webinar Series* Revisiting India's National Education Policy 2020 from different ideological perspectives

Volume 1

Webinar minutes, September 17, 2020

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**Disclaimer: All views are personal views of panelists and do not reflect the view of any organisation unless otherwise stated*

Context Setting

A year back, Subramanian Swamy was elected to Rajya Sabha on a reserved quota, against the category of “persons having special knowledge or practical experience in respect of literature, science, art and social service”. But have we ever heard of Subramanian Swamy being referred to as Quota MP? No. As I tried to find out the caste of other MPs nominated in the Rajya Sabha. Since independence, the Government has nominated 136 members to the Rajya Sabha. Of these, 50 are Brahmins. There are 43 others from dominant castes. There are only 4 from SC, 4 OBC and 1 ST. And 22 were women. Just a caste category of “Brahmin” caste alone formed 42% of that nomination. Who influences these nominations? Generally those at the helms of institutions such as Lalit Kala Academy, UGC, ICSSR, control the so-called academic, art and literary domains. When we looked at the caste composition of these agencies, it was seen that UGC has had 17 chairpersons so far and other than Sukhdev Thorat, there has never been a person, other than from upper caste. There have been two women chairpersons. There has never been a tribal chairperson. Similarly in ICSSR there have been 15 chairpersons and again, Sukhdev Thorat remains the only non-dominant caste person and there has never been a woman.

If we look at the universities that nominates these experts for these institutions, based on an RTI information available in public domain, on January 1, 2018, there were 496 Vice Chancellors across state and central. Of them, there were only 6 Dalits, 6 Adivasis, 36 from OBC, together not even 10%. Less than 3% were women. It was later found that this dominant category awards them with Bharat Ratna. So far, 48 persons have been awarded. , Of them, 38 were ‘upper’ caste. 31 were Brahmins alone. There were just five women. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar is the sole Dalit recipient who had received Bharat Ratna after three decades of his death by VP Singh Government and allegedly under the pressure of Kanshi Ram. Kanshi Ram, Thandhai Periyar, Maheshwata Devi, KR Narayanan have never been even in part of the consideration zone. *So, there is a socio-political category that is masculine, Savarna, Hetero sexual, upper-class male that rules this education system.*

The Government on 29 July 2020 adopted the National Education Policy 2020. NEP which itself was supposed to be based on T.S.R. Subramanian committee and K. Kasturirangan Committee claimed in their report that they had met many stakeholders but they have not met two categories: school children and the children who are not in schools. Where do these children who are not in school or dropped out come from? They are generally from the families of the Bahujan communities. These were neither consulted, even for tokenistic reasons, which means they are nowhere near the zone of influence, at least as far as education is concerned. So, the NEP 2020 clearly does not reflect the children's agenda; nor does it reflect the agenda of marginalised. It rather reflects the agenda of the dominant elites. An Expert committee, formed in September 2020, for conducting a “holistic study of origin and evolution of Indian culture since 12,000 years before present and its interface

with other cultures of the world”, is an exclusive male committee, which includes 5 from Sanskrit based universities and departments; 2 members associated with World Brahmin Federation. There are no women, no Adivasi, no Dalits and no representation from religious and linguistic minorities. Adivasis are referred to as indigenous population but they are not part of this committee. This expert committee is probably going to engrave the edifice for the new education system of this country in no time, and thus their continued hegemony of “masculine, able-bodied, Savarna, heterosexual upper-class male”.

The NEP 2020 itself prescribes that education curriculum and pedagogy should be rooted in India's history culture and tradition. But the question is what is the culture that is going to be defined by this 14-member committee? And the ability of this class to use secular terms such as preservation of rich languages, flexibility in curriculum or engaging pedagogy, as these terms appeal the progressive among dominant castes is well-known. Therefore one needs to have Periyar’s vision to see through the vested agenda, apparently as a good intended policy.

And this event serves as a platform to understand Periyar’s vision in drafting the National Education Policy. Let us hear from the panelists.

Pradeep Narayanan

Pradeep is the Honorary Fellow, Durham University associated with civil society organisations and campaigns in India.

Panelist 1

Viduthalai Rajenthiran, Keynote Address on Periyar and NEP 2020

Popularly known as 'Viduthalai' Rajendran, our first panelist is a Periyarist, currently the General Secretary of Dravida Viduthalai Kazhagam, formerly Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam. He is well known for propagating the principles of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy through his literary works. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the weekly Puratchi Periyar Muzhakkam.

On the birthday of Thanthai Periyar, I will discuss the importance of the New Education Policy in this country.

Is the National Education Policy (NEP) visible in India? India is a subcontinent, which consists of a multilingual and multi-rational population. Every state has unique requirements and a unique education programme and for a country diversified like India, NEP is not feasible. How did Thandhai Periyar view education? He sees education as neither a development project nor as a poverty elimination project. But he enforces education as a vital factor to transform the caste-based society into an equitable society with self-respect. From the time Periyar was in Congress, he was a leader that fought till the end for all sections of the society to be given the equal right to education, employment, and political participation.

Earlier how was the education system in India? It was a Gurukulam based education system and the only way to get educated in this country was to study the Vedas. The brahmins stayed at the teacher's homes until they completed their education, which in simple terms is known as the Gurukulam system. The education for others was denied based on Manu Veda. It was only after McCauley's arrival during the British rule that the current school system was first introduced where a schoolteacher could educate students in all categories, as the syllabus and book were also a part of the educational program introduced. Despite the criticism, McCauley introduced a system of education that was accessible by all, at a time when education was referred to as the study of the Scriptures due to which a majority of them were denied the right. In this situation, Periyar viewed the caste system as an illiterate section of the society, a section that confined people only to pursue hereditary caste work whereas what was required was a system that could develop self-esteem and self-confidence in the society with education for all. He liberated himself from the hereditary profession when education wasn't available to the oppressed. Education created a belief or a basis that a person had self-esteem. According to Periyar education is a powerful tool for social transformation and social justice.

In Chennai since the 1920s, the representation of Class had begun; in the 1950s brahmins filed a case against communal representation to not give equal education to all communities, which later was declared invalid, by the court. After a long struggle of Periyar

along with Dravida kazhagam the Constitution of India had been amended. Unique policies for equal education were planned and implemented that resulted in an improved education system in Tamil Nadu. Through which several programs were channeled in schools including implementing schools in all villages, Free mid-day meals, free education, uniform, books, cycles, laptops etc., Reservation and affirmative action was introduced to mainstream marginalized children and enabled access to education for the wider population. Periyar has affirmatively expressed that parties working on transforming education for all are agents upholding social justice. The usual conversations revolving around reservation and quality of education are mostly made only by the upper castes; which are basically arguments for merit and not reservation. In Tamil Nadu, most doctors who had not written the NEET exams are the ones treating COVID Cases. This is the case in other states too. In Tamil Nadu, most of these doctors are renowned specialists who have excelled without NEET.

We are not against standardising the quality of education, but the question to be addressed is, who decides merit and competency in education and exams? The focus on merit, instead of on the background and resources of each student, is a means to keep lower caste people out of the education system. Education for all and equity for all was the basis of any previous Education Policy, but the NEP 2020 is totally against these cherished principles. Most of the policies followed in India are only based on education for all, but how does one increase the quality of education? The NEP excludes people who are on the margins and this shift from “Right to Education for all” by this policy is a systematic means to weed out the lower castes in society.

Introducing a common test for Classes 3, 5 and 8 is a means to filtering children and pushing them out of the education system, after which they will opt for traditional or caste-based occupations. When Kula Kalvi (caste-based education) was introduced during the period of the Rajaji (C. Rajagopalachari), it was vehemently opposed by Periyar. In NEP, there are more examinations added at each stage and in Class 8, students are allowed to pursue vocational training. This is a one-way show that only leads to children being influenced into traditional forms of employment, which also paves way for oppression in the society. The NEP is referred to as uplifting the quality of the education system or the Indian civilization but for the existing party, it is just transforming education to Sanskrit-based. In India, Sanskrit is considered as India's pride, and its woven into the NEP as a language implying that it highlights or showcases Indian culture but that is just a mere force of culture rather than acceptance of all cultures equally. The new policy tries to bring a three-language system into education but the underlying factor is the imposition of Hindi and Sanskrit. The NEP says any language can be learned as a part of education as mentioned in the NEP, but the fact is, it does not address how it works for a state that follows regional languages. Here, they indirectly impose Hindi and Sanskrit, which Periyar had opposed strictly between 1928 and 1929.

The Right to Education Act 2009 emphasises on education for all and compulsory education till 14 years of age, and other stellar qualities. But the current NEP 2020 policy has set aside the act and focuses on Sustainable development and equitable education for all based on the SDGs 2030. But the RTE Act, which was in place for more than two decades, has been set aside paving way for an inexperienced system.

Considering the rural population and clubbing schools or colleges might only be a source for reducing costs but it's not the means to access education or justice for all. The education curriculum framework should be a state subject and should take into account the state's culture and ethos and should not become a national homogenous bone of contentment for society. The newly added filters in each stage of education in the NEP are included to shut off the education of children rather than making it accessible. I insist that NEP should be framed, based on each state's unique educational needs. Tamil Nadu, being a pioneer state where 49% of the students go for higher education. Bringing the NEP at a stage like this would be a huge drawback for the state-level education system.

Panelist 2:

Kalpana Satish, Caste Inequities in Education

Kalpana Sathish is a social activist based in Chennai. She has been engaged in rights-based development interventions for more than 25 years. Her experience and expertise revolve around the theme: intersection of caste and gender over marginalisation.

In the beginning, Pradeep (Narayanan) had shared data showing the representation of upper caste Brahmins in educational and other key institutions. The caste system paved the way for the mental formation of the dominant castes. In Indian context, Brahmins are the inventors of the Varna system and caste groups that are ordered hierarchically and maintained through the various customs maintained by state and society. There is more academic and non-academic research available to prove this fact. This system creates inhuman conditions for several working classes and communities and defines the order of service based on the birth right of an individual. It classifies people based on their birth and class division imposed by the caste system. It is unjust and highly inhumane.

The constitution only talks about the abolition of untouchability but it doesn't abolish the caste system in which Ambedkar had exposed the politics behind it. Periyar vehemently addressed the unjust acts of the constitution and as to which the independence day in TN is considered as a black day. There are various kinds of manifestations of the caste system in innumerable ways that allows Brahmanism to subjugate people for centuries. Ambedkar in the north and Periyar in the south couldn't tolerate this injustice as they fought against it. So Brahmanism imposed a Varna system through their cultural education and made it a pan Indian phenomenon. Periyar saw education as a tool for social transformation because the Indian social structure is unequally constructed based on the beliefs of the upper caste. Even today the government has announced smart cities but if seen across the state most villages or cities are still organized based on caste lines. From the conception till death there are some communities marginalized in terms of these structures. NEP talks about rich heritage and ancient eternal Indian knowledge and thought and although we received modern education by the British and the relentless struggles of Ambedkar and Periyar, Brahmanism tries to recapture the status through a formal education system. So are the higher positions in the system that have been captured by the Brahmanical caste and upper caste who fall into the Sanskritization process. Hence its time to revisit our vision and rebuild NEP on the fundamental basis of equality, liberty, and fraternity. As the current NEP has mentioned equality and liberty but not fraternity. The fraternal nature of human society is a key to bringing in transformation as propagated by Periyar and adopted by the constitution. NEP 2020, adopted by the government of India has all-encompassing provisions to maintain the status quo. Views based on Periyar's vision and reading in forefronts:

1. The basic foundational principles – the Periyar’s vision and principle are based on a casteless and selfless society, self-respect and respect for other people’s dignity and integrity, and citizenship were the values propagated by Periyar. So, fraternity and selfless serving humanity is the highest human goal set out by Periyar through his speeches and writings. Anything, which is refusing to respect yourself and others, should not abide by that. He also said wisdom lies in thinking which means the spear of wisdom is rationalism and human intelligence is the utmost power to be utilized to build an equal society even the marginalized women experience freedom. When we see NEP it is exactly the opposite, which is centered around the ancient knowledge system, which is nothing but caste and selfishness.

2. Roles and responsibility of the duty bearers that are parents, teachers, officials - the government policy says the teachers have to be made a respected citizen as they shape the future citizens this is the quote given in the policy. Periyar says the teacher should be free-thinking and make students think rationally. A teacher should have discipline, honesty, fairness, and integrity. Even parents have the teacher’s role in the preschool education stage, that’s how parents play the important role of teacher till the age of 5.

3. Addressing the historical marginalization from Periyar’s perspective – there are two aspects, one – only through critical thinking and representation the marginalization could be addressed. Critical thinking is you make the children think critically about the situation, provide them with all information and knowledge to understand the nature of the society and how to bring transformation in the lives of people. So this exposes the student the fact about society and brings in reservation and representation in all spheres, to make sure the marginalized get their rights. Universal education is the main agenda of Periyar, equity, and quality in education is the goal but the government policy talks about the targeted opportunity for historical representation.

4. Language and the medium of communication – Language is the most popular aspect in the context of TN. According to Periyar, language is the life of the people, learning the native language will build self-respect and other languages are only the mode of communication. So English is chosen because of its global coverage and intense literature and modern science and civilization. Sanskrit and Hindi have been experienced as dominant because their literature has the essence of the Varna system.

Panelist 3

Karuppusamy, Child Labour and Education

Karuppusamy is a social activist who has done his post-graduation in Economics Gobi Arts and science. Karrupusami is the State Convener of Campaign Against Child labour (CACL) Working with Dalit children, women and Textile workers

Periyar is a person who was born in a fairly privileged caste and fought against female slavery, liberation of Dalits and eradication of caste system. He was and is still a leader not just in Tamil Nadu but throughout the nation because he fought for justice and equality for all. We are aghast at the way NEP has been shut down through our throats as there was no discussion nor a debate or consultations with the states or other stakeholders on the new system. The newly added divisions to the NEP are only exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities of children such as child labour and making it difficult to access schools.

Child labour system exists even today and if children are posed with a multiple examination system starting at Class 3 to 12 it will only lead to creating a society of child labourers. And during the lockdown there were many cases where child labourers were rescued and one instance was a textile factory in Tiruppur where 8 children were rescued.

NEP proposes a 3-language system, which will burden and add more pressure affecting children mentally. Indian culture is mostly about caste, patriarchy, and other regressive aspects and with this new system it will only lead to caste influence as experienced by most students with NEET examination. The new system proposes a system that was favoured by the leader Rajaji's who dreamed of a caste-segregated Tamil Nadu (caste-based education system) which was something that Periyar opposed. Tribal children have to walk 2 to 3 kms to go to schools and with clubbing schools under this new system it is only going to deprive them of education. If schools are closed due to low-attendance and based on costs incurred it will only result in the marginalised becoming more marginalised.

The children of scavengers are first generation learners and if this system opens up for vocational training it could lead them to take up unskilled or semi-skilled jobs - instead of going to colleges. These children would be faced against their traditional form of employment deprived of the opportunity for an equal education. NEP - is against social justice and equality; it is against the rights of children for which Periyar stood up.

Panelist 4

Shanthi, Sexuality and masculinity and their relevance to NEP

Harmony in her name, Revolution in her thoughts! She accepted 'Dignity and Knowledge as mankind's beauty' and is an ardent believer of humanity. She exceedingly works on transferring Virtues of Periyar to the young community.

Though he was not born among the most oppressed, He fought for the rights of the oppressed. Even though he was born into a capitalistic family he voiced out for the affected labour.

Though Periyar was a leader, he addressed the society to rationally think and act upon his words and not to blindly abide by his words. (Tamil Poetry)

Periyar was the person who fought for injustice and fought for the oppressed and those not heard in the society. Many of them have spoken about all the necessary things that need to be addressed on sex education but Periyar was among those who spoke about Sexuality and Masculinity.

Chastity in English refers to the sanctity of human society, not male or female in particular. However, in the Indian society, the word chastity is associated with the sanctity of women and the essence of the chastity - 'slavery'. In common language chastity should have been associated with both male and female. But in the Indian context chastity/virginity is a word associated only with women, which objectifies and treats her to be someone's slave. Periyar was irritated and he wished - that morals and ethics should apply equally to be both genders. He did not believe that love/lust had to be differentiated and used to club people's individuality down. He wanted - social norms on sexuality equally applied to both sex. When the topic of Love and Sex come into play, the discussion delves around both male and female but on the contrary a woman's chastity is deemed to be her responsibility. Chastity is not a physical context but rather a mental subject. It is in the purity of love. Further Periyar stated that chastity is defined as a form of self-discipline common for both male and female. In the journal 'Viduthalai' dated on May 4, 1972 Periyar says that 'Pathinni (wife)', 'Padhiviradhai (loyal to one's husband)' are terms that originated from irrationality and stupidity. These words are meaningless in aspects of nature, justice, equality and freedom.

What would have been Periyar's vision on sex education for students? What was Periyar's view on chastity and masculinity? His ideology makes a great impact against patriarchy, which also reflects in Education policies. Among the rationalists who fought for Sati abolition, widow remarriage and child marriage, Periyar did a courageous act when he passed a resolution for oppressing women on the grounds of chastity, at the first (Self-Respect) conference held in Chengalpattu in 1929. Chastity in English refers to the sanctity of human society, not to male or female in particular. However, in Indian society, the word chastity belongs to the sanctity of women and the essence of chastity becomes 'slavery'. In reality, chastity is equal to both men and women despite the difference in

physical features. This will not change the human quality; in fact, it improves the equal position for both men and women to be treated on a par.

The role of chastity in the New education policy 2020?

According to the statistics of National Crime Records Bureau, the cases of rape increased in society every year. In sexual offences, the men committing the rape are not demeaned by the society whereas the girl, even though she is the victim, is prone to judgments and is blamed for the crime. What do you think is the reason behind this act? In general girl children are considered to be off of the ribs of a man (Reference - Story of Eve's creation). In a society like this, a woman would be definitely subjected to various judgments. If we want a generation that embraces social justice to emerge, then school is the right place to start weeding out patriarchy and establishing gender equality.

It is through education that we can bring progressive changes in the system and at the societal level. In India, the education system has never openly addressed Sexuality and Masculinity. Even with moral advice, girl children are asked to keep themselves away from evil. Girls are expected to act 'right', even when the society is wrong. But it is highly doubtful if male children are offered the same piece of advice.

Periyar thought that the implication behind the fact that women are gracious is nothing but the comfort of men. If Periyar's principle of generalizing chastity is incorporated into the education system, then morality will be taught to both the male and female students. Feminism is a conceptual ideology created for equality. As Periyar stated, chastity/virginity is an equal concept for both male and female and it has to be brought into the education system where it applies equally to both. We could consider Periyar's idea as radical feminism as it identifies the root cause for gender differentiation at various levels and seeks to eradicate it. Women need to understand this and promote actions to overcome patriarchy. Although feminism is promoted by many, Periyar's revolutionary feminism is that "patriarchy cannot be eradicated unless the women realize and find the roots of the various forms of gender discrimination that exist in society and eradicate them". In Periyar's vision, masculinity (*'aanmai'* in Tamil) is used in a derogatory manner towards women. He harshly criticised the eminence of masculinity. He says, without destroying the notion of masculinity, women cannot achieve their liberty.

Why do you think men rape women? Because they consider women as suppressed; and as dominant, they feel they can extract any desire of theirs. A male individual feels intimidated by a socially and financially independent woman as his male chauvinistic ego is hurt. The male chauvinism he believes is shattered. Periyar stated that the term "I am a man" itself was used to degrade a woman. Only when chastity/virginity is treated as equal for both then the superiority will not exist and when there is no male chauvinism there is no need for feminism too. This is Periyar's vision and it can be only achieved by a change in the mindset

of students in our society. So, I repeat, if we want a generation that embraces social justice to emerge, then school is the right place to start weeding out patriarchy and establishing gender equality.

Periyar believed that this can be changed through 13 principles. When chastity becomes common morality, there is no need of masculinity and Feminism. Once gender equality is achieved, humanity blooms. He moved from 'common notion of chastity' to challenging the very notion of chastity to govern the lives of human beings.

Policies that can be implemented in Periyar's ideology follows:

1. Co-education should be implemented in schools.
2. Understanding adolescence and effective counseling methods should be implemented.
3. Girls must take up defence training in order to protect themselves when they are alone.
4. Carrying out exercises that cultivate a balanced view that morality is common to both men and women.
5. Social justice principles should be ingrained in both genders to weed out inequality.
6. Ideologically and practically creating awareness that physical strength is not based on gender but on environment and training practice.
7. Emphasise the psychology that women and men are equal except for minor changes in physique and body on cultural platforms.
8. Making all aspects of life common to both genders. Eg. Dress, Work, Morality
9. Making efforts that the girls need to understand that when they have to beautify to look good, could also be a product of patriarchy.
10. Incorporating compulsory engagement in co-curricular activities as a feature of gender education to focus on unbridled energy.
11. Emphasise to girls that rights and freedom are not given by men to women rather it is their own and they have to fight for their own freedom.
12. To have counseling centres in schools to deal with teenage psychological problems.
13. Education, which incorporates the principles of Dignity and Knowledge and the equality principle in treating another human, will lead to abolishment of slavery.

If Periyar's ideologies are introduced in the education system, future generations will transcend gender equality, caste, religion, race, language and nation to become Global citizens. Educational inequalities have held a strong ground in India for many years. While the Right to Education Act provides a solution towards an inclusive educational system in India, effective implementation of the same still remains to be a challenge. Girls need to learn martial arts; and mentally learn the art of defending themselves and their behaviours.

Panelist 5

Dushyant, Combating Superstitions through Scientific Temperament

Dushyant is a frequent contributor at various publications and a staunch Periyarite, who also happens to be his birthday twin.

I would like to retell Thanthai Periyar's legacy in the context of recently revised National Education Policy 2020. I read the NEP draft and had an interesting thought if NEP was a person it was most likely to be a Brahmin. Why? Because it engages in a lot of sweet talk. Hidden beneath that sweet talk are live wires to kill our dreams, our aspirations and us. It seduces us with a lot of words like 'holistic development', 'creative pedagogy' and even 'scientific temperament'. I must confess for a quarter of a second I fell for the frame, fell for the seduction and thought it might be good for us. Then when I read it under the Social Justice test and searched for a word reservation I got the result - zero. I realised Sanskrit has been explained in the draft very extensively whereas subaltern languages like Tamil, Kannada, my native language Bundelkhandi or any other language for that matter is not mentioned - only touched for tokenism. And finally, they mentioned Brahmin characters like Chanakya but did not mention social activists like Savitri Phule, Mahatma Gandhi or Thanthai Periyar. It became crystal clear that this NEP was not for us. The policy has nothing for us except for what Brahmin wants us to have, which is nothing. If Thanthai Periyar had a chance to read it, he would have thrown the draft into the trash.

Periyar's politics and ideas are panoramic and extensively wide. Scientific temperament is very core and fundamental to all of his ideas. As the previous panelist mentioned, Periyar's vision for education was meant to transform a caste-based society into a rationalist one. I believe Scientific temper and rationalism are interchangeable. By rationalism, I mean freethinking. In layman's term, it is common sense. Superstitions have their roots in religion and religion doesn't stand the test of common sense. I further boil down my topic to rationalization versus religion. Religion finds its roots in the past. It pushes human beings and humanity backwards while rationalism strives for a better future beginning and a new world order. Rationalism and religion are antagonists and they cannot gel together. Rationalism makes humans realise their full potential and what they can do. This brings us to the stage of intellectual supremacy, where religion has no relevance because humans no longer rely on heaven and hell where the whole idea of heaven, hell afterlife and promised land are completely demolished.

Thanthai Periyar puts religion to the philosophical test. He asks basic questions like "Why god? Which God? What does religion do? If God doesn't harm anyone why don't humans disrespect God or ask questions to god?" He states that while religion is a very egoistic project, rationalism is a very altruistic project. Religion and God are the basis for discrimination. I would like to quote Periyar he says "I have broken the idol of Vinayaga and

burned pictures of Ram. If my act doesn't hurt thousands of people who gathered for the meeting it is implied the idea of self-respect and wisdom has dawned upon them".

The world is moving towards the rationalism that Thanthai Periyar propagated. In the book 'World to Come', a compilation of Periyar's speech in which he predicted mobile network, video conferencing and IVR, which we are utilising now, it is evident how rationalism opens our mind and creates space for vision, making humans powerful beings. The currently revised NEP has nothing to challenge religion or God. So I think it is a failure. It doesn't stand up for the standards set by Thanthai Periyar. NEP is a big NO for me; No for us and it is fit to be trashed.

Panelist 6

Rachel Chitra, Gender Roles and Education

Rachel Chitra, a journalist and Periyarist, who has always found his work and lifestyle inspirational. Periyar has also been a household name as Rachel's great grandfather N Devadasan was an independent Dalit MLA, belonging to the Justice Party, who worked with both Periyar and Karunanidhi. Periyar's core fight with then Tamil Nadu CM Rajaji was on his caste-based education system. As someone who has studied in Tamil Nadu Rachel is among the beneficiaries of Dravidian politics and its focus on education.

My great grandfather was N. Devadasan from Paraiyar (Dalit) community who was a member of the Dravida Kazhagam, with Periyar's Justice Party. Periyar was not a respecter of age, community, and religion so anybody could come up in the organization if they had passion. My great grandfather contested the election and won, he became an MLA. He also contested in Tirunelveli bar elections when 70% of the bar association members were brahmins. Today we are hearing about a Dalit MLA who is refused entry in the temple, we should have progressed instead of which we seem to be regressing backward.

I had largely benefited from an education system drafted by Periyar's vision for Tamil Nadu. When I studied in school, I learned about Bharathiyar's "Pudhumai Penn" on what Bharathiyar felt how women should be; Avaiyar, Manimegalai – one of the big five epics in Tamil literature. In Manimegalai, she (the protagonist) goes to Sri Lanka on her own and there she propagates Jainism. These are the models of powerful women I learned about when I studied in Tamil Nadu. But in the national education policy, I have a feeling that the other children may not have the benefit of knowing how powerful women can be and how they are equal to men in every way. If we look at the NEP, one of the mainstays is that they want to centralize education and do not want it to be a state subject anymore. I am quoting some examples of passages from some textbooks from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Bihar. "Donkey is like a housewife, because a donkey does not require frequent food or water, and in some ways, a donkey is better than a housewife as it can't walk away to its parents' house. It will always be loyal to its owner." This chapter ends by saying "a woman must follow her man." This is what the kids are studying in Rajasthan but as a kid from Tamil Nadu what I was learning from Periyar is for men to not treat women as their property and not as beings capable of feelings as acute as himself.

The way men treat women is worse than the zamindari and caste systems. At least in those systems, human beings are demeaned only in a situation when two of them are together, but men treat women as slaves till death. The other things these textbooks are propagating about how sati is a glorious form of Indian womanhood, staying true to Indian culture. Sati was banned during the Rajaram Mohan Roy's time and the British were completely horrified by the concept of Sati. Periyar himself noted that the origin of sati lies in misogyny, an idea

that women are always inferior to men. Their whole existence depends on men, which is a patriarchal idea and reinforced by these recent editions of textbooks. The way to oppose patriarchy is to get educated, to have a job and to have an ability to remarry if you're a widow or a divorcee is important. A marriage constituted on the basis of self-respect, where the bride and the groom exchange garlands and take vows and are deemed married, this is a perfectly legal way to get married in Tamil Nadu. Here, at one go, Periyar is breaking so many stereotypes - the idea of marrying within the religion, caste, community etc., He firmly believed that women should choose their spouses. Today's society again seems regressive because we talk about love jihad, say women should not wear jeans or have phones, should not talk to men from other communities, etc. In TN, Periyar vehemently opposed caste and felt that people should fall in love with whomever they wanted. We have many parties that want to divide us based on caste and religion, and their biggest fear is women's liberty. The idea of women who are open, educated, sexually liberal, and able to choose their partner is so frightening to the patriarchal parties.

Periyar also believed in contraception, and that women have the right to decide whether they want to have a child or not. It is so relevant at present, as in US we have so many misogynist people who probably paid for the abortion of their mistress saying that women should not have an abortion as it is illegal and immoral. In India abortion is legal but still, there are so many difficulties. Even today our laws do not enable reproductive freedom for women and the ability to have sexual partners of their choice. Because our concept of womanhood is chastity, virginity, and we base our ideas of a perfect woman on controlling her and the gender stereotypes we live with.

Even concerning swear words in Tamil, Periyar was all for gender equality! There is a word called "Thevidiya", "Vibachari" which means prostitute, and "Vidhavai (widow)" Thanthai Periyar said these are words that should not be reserved only for women but also for men.

In NEP, nationalising the education system in Tamil Nadu has beautiful aspects to it, one is the mid-day meal scheme. The mid-day meal scheme was initiated in Tamil Nadu and has been taken up at the national level and implemented across India. In states like Uttar Pradesh, the children are fed rice with turmeric and salt and fed roti with salt. There is also the whole conversation of vegetarian or nonvegetarian diet and this Brahminical imposition is not good for children. We can see the kids are malnourished, especially those from oppressed castes. Children coming to school and having the mid day meal are having one proper meal in a day. This scheme had originated in TN as Kamaraj's vision of education for all and in 1982 MGR improved this scheme. The Dravidian concept of what Periyar had instituted has been further developed by other Dravidian leaders like late leaders *Kalaigunar* M. Karunanidhi, J. Jayalalitha who focused on education by providing free cycle, laptops, and made sure the children in TN are educated. All this will get affected if NEP is implemented and education will no longer be a state domain.

Panelist 7

Semmalar, Teaching feminism to students: Perspectives needed in NEP

Semmalar is currently working as Lecturer in Department of Social work, Loyola College Chennai and also pursuing PhD on 'Dalit Students' access to higher education' at Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology- Madras. Semmalar has been associated with NCDHR - a coalition of human rights organizations all across the country and it is engaged in internationalizing the caste-based discrimination as South Regional Coordinator and also with People's Watch-Tamil Nadu, (Dalit Human Rights Monitoring)

Good evening everyone, Thanks to Rachel who spoke in a similar dimension. The topic given to me is Teaching Feminism to students: Perspective needed in NEP 2020. It's a heavy theme, I have divided the topic into three dimensions: Periyar's perspective on feminism, what are the missing gender inclusive aspects of NEP 2020 and third is teaching feminist perspective to students, how will you take it forward.

Coming from Tamil Nadu Periyar is still seen as a threat by Hindutva forces in Tamil Nadu. These rightwing forces are struggling hard to find a way to step into Tamil Nadu's politics. They tried to plant religious clashes but that didn't work, they also schemed to divide people along caste lines. Of course, it is working to an extent in Tamil Nadu and their present programme is to replace the Dravidian ideology, propagated strongly by Periyar, with the Tamil identity. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is also providing support to programmes taking pride in Tamil identity rather than the Dravidian identity. Of course, they will be defeated by one icon - Periyar, they are finding it hard to find a base in Tamil Nadu. The reason is that Periyar's writings are exposing the exploitation of the Brahmanical system on Tamil soil. He played a crucial role in establishing the Dravidian ideology. Even before Periyar, of course Tamil Nadu has the history of dalit intellectual Pandit Iyodhee Thass, who started a magazine called Dravida Pandian in 1885.

Coming to Periyar's perspective on feminism, Periyar is the reason for terming Indian patriarchy as Brahmanical patriarchy. He is the icon who worked hard to connect both these dimensions. Universal definition of patriarchy defines men oppressing women. But Periyar gets deeper and exposes that Indian patriarchy is rooted in the Hindu religion. Hindu religion is grounded on the Varna system. Manusmriti and the Vedic texts dictate how a woman should behave. Manusmriti says women cannot be independent, menstruating women are polluting and unclean, women should worship their husbands, women should die after her husband dies, it promoted child marriage, dowry and all sorts of nonsense that oppress women. In this whole system, Brahmin women are also treated as slaves within their families. Rightwing fundamentalist women oppose Periyar, without understanding that Periyar also fought for Brahmin women who are slaves of the brahmanical ideology also.

Periyar also exposed the nexus between patriarchy, caste, religion and culture. This is because we are having discussion on this particular topic, one of the significant things done by Periyar.

Coming to the second dimension, NEP and gender inclusion, I just wanted to highlight that NEP 2020 has mentioned the word women and girls only 12 times, twice it is referenced to the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It is self-explanatory how sensitive and gender-inclusive the people who have designed the NEP would have been.

Third aspect, teaching feminism from a Periyarist perspective. The ideas that have been discussed, the first is teachers should undergo intense training for gender sensitive approach as part of teacher training curriculum or their orientation or refresher programmes that they are attending. So, this should be mandatory. Only if teachers are sensitive, they can mold students in a similar way. Second is college and university students should mandatorily undergo feminist training programme on their campuses, like how they are being trained in NSS (National Social Service), NCC (National Cadet Corps). We have been inculcated with the idea of being a nationalist, right from school. So, school curriculum should also include gender education. Children should be made to think along inclusive lines not only gender but also other dimensions like caste, religion. So, when we teach nationalist ideas in school, we can teach feminism from childhood itself. Like we celebrate birthdays of popular icons such as Nehru, Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, we need to celebrate birthday for Savitribai Phule- being a Periyarist feminist point of view, who started the first girls' school and played a key role in teaching Dalits and OBCs even in colonial India. Women leaders from Tamil Nadu could also be introduced to school children and their birthdays also be significantly celebrated.

Last point, girls' students' clubs can be formed within educational campuses, wherein, feminist thoughts of popular leaders can be encouraged. Girls can take initiatives in sensitising their own peers within campuses. These points could be included in the NEP, in the dimension of Periyarist strategy teaching feminism to students.

Panelist 8

N. Sai Balaji, Student's Freedom of Expression of Students and Dissent

N Sai Balaji is a second year PhD Student at Jawaharlal Nehru University. He was the former Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union President and is currently the National President, All India Students' Association (AISA).

Being the last speaker, I have the privilege of avoiding repetitive parts because most of the speakers have brought points in a nuanced way. (I will be talking about) the campuses, the University space and the NEP.

Before going into how NEP would impact the structure of campuses and how Periyar would have reacted, I would like to discuss a small thing - the past six years (show us) where NEP would take us and what the situation would be. In 2015, when the government of India scrapped the fellowship programme for M Phil. PhD students, we were protesting against this through the Occupy UGC (University Grants Commission) Movement, subsequently Rohith Vemula's targeting and institutional murder happened, immediately after that students in JNU were charged with sedition, many were jailed. Among the six students were charged with sedition, two were OBC students, two Dalits, one Muslim, and another from other backgrounds. And later on, there was the witch-hunt of students.

If we look at the profile, where they come from, their social background and class they belong to, there is a general sense that the majority comes from marginalised backgrounds - Dalits, BC's, women. This is the section that will be impacted by most of the National Education Policy. How? I think one of the fundamental ideas that Periyar fought for was the idea of self-respect. When we say self-respect, it's not just language, but the culture that we have. Lowest strata of the society are taken to be born impure and they don't deserve education. The idea of self-respect Periyar supported was-no, whatever you are, it is something that you have to carry and you have to fight for.

Social justice has been a very broad and very resonating aspect of Periyar. It had resonance in Tamil Nadu, which was one of the states on the forefront for affirmative action for the OBCs. It also became one of the basis for agitation for affirmative action across the country. The subsequent Mandal commission's Report, arguing for OBC reservation in 1990s and the BJP targeting Mandal Commission's progressive legislations, tried to consolidate the caste Hindus and othered the Muslims. The lower caste and marginalised came together as one identity and how the BJP tried to play Mandal versus Kamandal politics and how they tried to divide the society was seen in 1990.

And unfortunately, the NEP down the line is Mandalisation of our education system, De-Mandalisation of our society. How? We have, in the past three years, seen the way

centralization of examinations has been happening. The best case is NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) , because of which students from Tamil Nadu have been dying by suicides, a large scale of students being excluded from social justice, especially given the OBC reservation issue. 10,000 seats unfilled from state quota were converted into general seats. When protests started, neither the Central government nor the Bharatiya Janata Party tried to clarify and in every university space, we see reservation being attacked, as our first speaker said that reservation itself doesn't have any mention in the NEP and social justice mentioned only twice, online and digital education is mentioned so much, more than 80 times as if everything is there in the online sphere. We know around 60% students do not have digital access, and hence, they will not have the ability to get educated. Why this NEP wants to bring de-mandalisation of education, it is what Periyar stood for and what Periyar taught. His ideas have not been understood by the majority of the country. The Hindi speaking population, still do not see Periyar as an icon for self-respect and dignity, the rights of the marginalized especially women. The problem in the country where Periyar is still not seen as an icon, the Hindutva fear of him is so strong that his statues are vandalized and ideas are ridiculed, he is called names and people who believe in his ideas are targeted. The ideas of rationality that are propagated militantly fought for, which are not there in India unfortunately bigotry and fake news are prevalent. It is in this context that we will have to see the NEP, that is not going to promote scientific temper and rationality because when you exclude the majority from education and to prosper, you cannot expect the irrational hegemony of Brahmanical ideology to be defeated. And it is in this context when I said de-mandalisation of education is happening right now, NEP with no reservation guaranteed and public colleges and universities closed down, will impact women most.

If no public school and colleges have reservations (imagine the plight, when) even if reservation is there, it is not guaranteed. The way the scuttling of OBC reservation is happening across the country, it is unfortunate that we are not able to use social justice as a propellant and make people believe. In every university, people are challenging in courts the implementation of OBC reservation. If the majority of oppressed are not there in universities there will be no dissent at all. Because only those who concur with existing ideas will access education, the idea of university would not be social justice but one of hegemony that exists in society. The reason that dissent is there in universities is because people from marginalized backgrounds come to universities. Through their education, they question. Dalits question, Adivasi question, sedition is being imposed on students where they are minorities, women, dalit and adivasis. Majority of students targeted are from marginalized backgrounds and NEP seeks to exclude this section from the education system itself so that rationality, social and gender justice does not survive.

Grant model to loan model of education being pursued, the engagement on dissent, criticality, is killed because NEP excludes the majority from access to education. Ambedkar was right, our society has institutionalized graded inequality. NEP promotes this graded

inequality. If Periyar would have been there today he would have stood and questioned if you want to bring Varna ashram and gurukul system, why to have universities, colleges. Just replicate the hegemony and epistemology of knowledge, don't build institutes, if the battle has to be from the streets. NEP will push the marginalized on to the streets. It is not education but exclusion policy. He would have been the first person to go to jail for protesting against it.

Question & Answer Sessions (Moderated by Stanley Joseph moderated the webinar)

Anil Sadagopal: Does it not follow from Periyar's ideology that we also ask for Samachir Kalvi Thittam (Common School System)? I did not hear any of the panelists talk about it. I belong to the All India Forum for Right to Education (AIFRTE), a federal platform of 80 plus organisations from 22 states/UTs including Tamil Nadu, which started a 'RejectNEP2020' on social media on 11th August. Each Tuesday and Friday since 11th August, AIFRTE has held Webinar talks by different people who oppose NEP2020 on several grounds, including those issues raised in today's webinar inspired by Periyar. AIFRTE is uncompromisingly anti-caste and anti-Patriarchy, apart from being anti-imperialist too. We are fighting for a state-funded Free Common Education System based on mother tongue to provide education of equitable quality from kindergarten to post graduation. Our education movement is inspired by Savitribai-Jotiba Phule, Iyothee Thass & Periyar and Dr. Ambedkar read along with Marx.'

Kalpana's response: Thanks to Anil Sadagopal for raising the issue of the Common School System which we have been fighting for so many years. Periyar's aim of universal education can be operationalised by the Common School System, that is the ideal system. But unfortunately, in Tamil Nadu, the Samachir Kalvi Thittam introduced by Kalaignar has been reduced to a Common Syllabus system. It does not talk about state-funding and strengthening the public school system because of the pressures of the private lobby. The private lobby here was so strong that education has to be privatised and there was no popular people's support for this, so we failed. There were some political parties who raised this issue, but during the AIADMK government, the demand collapsed completely. The discussion has to be revived.

Abishek Ebenezer: What's your view on the below? Noticed a name change in Thiruvanniyur Government schools from Adi Dravida Welfare Program Middle School to ADWP School

Rachel's response: I just feel it is a way of erasing people's discomfort while discussing caste and they want to pretend caste doesn't exist. So people will have names like Nair, Ninan, Iyer, but at the same time, they will say, non, no we are all for equality of castes. This Adi Dravidar is very important in the context of Periyar. There was the Paraiyar community, ie. Dalits. He felt the name was very derogatory, calling a community Paraiyar. It was the Dravida Kazhagam and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam which came up with calling them Adi Dravidar, celebrating their Dravidian identity with pride. It is also with regard to what Periyar said about Asuras and Devas, because Asuras were the dark-skinned. The Aryan supremacy theory, the Brahmin supremacy theory that dark skinned people are inferior and probably demons, and fair-skinned people are good people with virtues. The whole thing about changing the name from Adi Dravida Welfare Program Middle School to ADWP School is a way of whitewashing inherent inequality and caste injustice in India. ADWP, people would not even know what it is. It is an acronym. If I said MCC, you would wonder what it is. I would have to expand it to Madras Christian College. I am not cool with the change and I don't think Periyar would have been cool with the change. Because if you are creating an institution to benefit a community, the name of the community should be right there, and I think the term Adi Dravidar in any way doesn't have the same negative connotation that the earlier term Paraiyar had.

Dhipthi Dhona: Can any panelist speak about cultural of silence regarding caste, caste-based violence in the Smachir Kalvi textbooks

Kalpna: Here the education movement, as we see as a social transformation envisioned by Periyar. Anna carried out by building institutions, more schools, for universal education and so on. Karunanidhi also followed. In the later period, there were lots of issues of clash between AIADMK and DMK ideologies, for example, with regard to what is school system? what is samachir kalvi, what should be the content - there was no discussion. It was just announced that there should be a common syllabus. So there were lot of issues in introducing on reworking the content. There were some progressive Leftists on the committee that drafted the Samachir Kalvi, but unfortunately none of those were taken by bureaucrats. Bureaucracy is completely dominated by the dominant castes, dominant ideology. So it is very tough to introduce anything that Periyar visualised. Now, it is worse. With BJP ruling the centre it is becoming worse. You can see how the MPs were struggling in Parliament to present the position of Periyar. This is failure. We need to accept it. Social movements were not sensitive to these issues. As Sai Balaji said, anything rational, anything opposing dominant culture was outrightly rejected, has been treated as anti-national, or as terrorists. So it is very tough to introduce such content within the state. So there needs to be lot of debates and discussions across states and then caste and discrimination has to be brought into the syllabus.

From Abiraami: Let's say that education is changed and there is vaguely, the mention of caste. But What about the community groups? I mean caste welfare groups

Rachel: Caste welfare groups are the bane of Indian society I feel. If you go anywhere, like on Twitter, Facebook, they are the most toxic, virulent groups. They are called caste honour killings right? I think we should change the way we talk. Why call it honour killing? Why call it a caste welfare group? Just call it a caste group. You are only trying to make your caste better. I feel political parties like the PMK (Pattali Makkal Katchi) would have never come to power had it not been for the caste groups like the Nadars, Gounders. Politicians have a tendency to play up the particular castes whose areas they visit. For example, in Krishnagiri, or in Dharmapuri, or Salem, this is a trend that is extremely anti-Dravidian. When the DMK and AIADMK came to power, it was different. For example, when MGR came to power, it was all about movies. When Karunanidhi came to power, he was the one who wrote dialogues for his movies. All his dialogues were about exposing the idea of equality, equal society. Early tamil society was an equal society (like in the 3rd - 7th C AD) It was in the early 10th Century that with Raja Rajendra Chola when there was the formalisation of the caste system. Earliest epics show a fluid society, without the caste divides. I feel our education system should talk about caste, caste inequalities and we should stop talking about caste welfare groups. They should not exist. Imagine, in America, Ku Klux Klan is despised for what it is - because their basic idea is whites are supreme and the blacks are inferior creatures, dumb, stupid, unintelligent, monkeys, gorillas, apes - isn't that exact same way Dalits are called here? So instead of caste welfare groups, they should be called Ku Klux Klan so that we can best identify what they actually stand for.

From Rosamma: Why is Periyar not part of history textbooks?

Panelist Rachel's response: Periyar, like Gandhi, I think, is becoming persona non-grata. There has been a steady push to keep people like Gandhi, Nehru and icons like Periyar out of school books.

They would no doubt prefer Nathuram Godse's statues and books making him out to be a freedom fighter and patriot.

Suggestions from audience and panelists

- 1.1. To form a Periyar study group
- 1.2. To transcribe the speeches into a document that can be later translated into different languages
- 1.3. To have a recorded session to watch later ([What if Periyar had Drafted the National Education Policy 2020?](#))
- 1.4. To have two separate sessions: one on Periyar's relevance, impact of Dravidian politics and the idea of state autonomy. Education should come under state listing (Geetha Narayanan)
- 1.5. Links to written blog pages
- 1.6. Suggest list of books to read/ links (Rajeev Khanna)
 - 1.6.1. www.periyarbooks.in
 - 1.6.2. <https://www.facebook.com/rachel.chitra/posts/10158516157348072>
 - 1.6.3. <https://www.forwardpress.in/2017/06/ambedkar-and-periyars-intellectual-comradeship/>
 - 1.6.4. <http://www.periyarwritings.org/index.php/english>
 - 1.6.5. <https://leher.org/blog/this-educational-policy-is-a-casteist-educational-policy-periyar/>
 - 1.6.6. <https://countercurrents.org/2016/09/periyar-and-his-ideas/>
 - 1.6.7. [NUJS Diversity Report 2019](#)
 - 1.6.8. <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/hegemonic-category-of-quota-mp-an-upper-class-person-is-seen-as-talented-while-scst-are-stigmatised-2884643.html>
 - 1.6.9. <https://delhipostnews.com/building-social-democracy-do-we-not-need-more-periyars/>

Conclusion - Pradeep Narayanan

The Panelists have described the importance of Periyar lens to understand the gaps in the National Education Policy, 2020. The gaps that were described today are about absence of the willingness to take on casteism, patriarchy and masculinity. Further, the need for integrating scientific temper and rational thoughts in the education curriculum has been emphasized.

One needs Periyar's vision to see through the vested agenda in apparently good intentioned policies. A similar attempt was made in 1953 when the Rajaji Government in Madras introduced the *Kula Kalvi Thittam* (Hereditary education policy). The scheme was brought in for a secular objective of universalising primary education and providing opportunities for excluded children to participate in schooling. The enrollment was low and the dropout was high. Rajaji wanted to enhance the enrolment in schools by aiming to create a parallel system for children from depressed caste to be taught their hereditary occupation. But, within one year, the scheme was dropped after an open revolt by the Congress legislators and subsequent resignation of the Chief Minister. There were massive public protests against the policy led by Periyar. The learning is that if there were no assertions from the margins, the dominant elites would find solutions within the four walls of the caste system and patriarchy, which anyway favours them. The subsequent CM, Kamaraj from Bahujan caste, displayed that the progressive educational outcomes are possible without necessarily aligning with caste system and patriarchy.

The next Webinars scheduled are:

Kanshi Ram's Vision on Education for Social Justice: Potential Challenges from NEP. Date October 9, 2020; Observing 14th Death anniversary of Manyavar

Maheshwata Devi and Education for DNT communities: Challenges from NEP. Date October 12, 2020. Observing 150 years of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871

