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## Periyar on the Effects of Science

R. Mahendran, Ph.D.



Periyar EVR

### Abstract

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Periyar on the Effects of Science

Periyar EVR was a great leader of the Indian National Congress in Madras Presidency. For various social and political reasons he left the Indian National Congress and took up the cause of all downtrodden people from various social rungs. He led a powerful movement to eradicate superstition. He declared himself to be an atheist. In those days with little or no literacy and education, masses of people knew little about the development of science. Periyar felt that, with the knowledge of science, people would give up their superstitions. He dreamt and hoped that the forthcoming world would be based on science. Some of his dreams included cellular phones, test tube babies, etc.

**Keywords:** Periyar, Science, The world to come.

## **Introduction**

The objective of this paper is to discuss some of the contributions of Periyar, a great Dravidian leader from former Madras Presidency, for the development of science and the spread of scientific knowledge and temper and to highlight his prophetic vision relating to developments in science.

Erode Venkata Ramasamy, a social scientist and prolific writer, is popularly known as Thanthai (Father, originator) and Periyar (Great Person) in South India. He was born on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1879 in Erode, a town in Tamilnadu and died on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1973. He was a free thinker from his tender age and worked hard to eradicate caste discrimination, untouchability and superstitions from the society. He widely travelled in India as well as Russia, Middle East and South East Asian countries. He spent a lot of time in his life to write articles and essays besides addressing public meetings, espousing causes dear to him, such as anti-brahmanism, atheism, uplift of all the lower castes, fight against superstitions, etc. His writing has greatly revolutionized the Tamil society to think scientifically. The citation awarded by the UNESCO described Periyar as "the prophet of the new age, the Socrates of South East Asia, father of social reform movement and arch enemy of ignorance, superstitions, meaningless customs and base manners." A very fitting description, indeed!

Periyar sowed the seeds of science-oriented/rationalist wisdom in the minds of hundreds of thousands of people. Rationalists would declare that Periyar cleared the cloud of darkness from the minds of countless thousands and tore the veils of the demoralizing dogmas and creeds of ignorance. From a rationalistic perspective, pseudo-science encroached on the hearts of people and made them superstitious. Rationalism is the seed of the actual science. All the inventions and discoveries are carried out only because of rational thinking. Periyar worked round the clock to eliminate pseudo-science.

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## Periyar and Science

Periyar was always a staunch supporter of science and believed that science only can eliminate superstitions. In his journal *KUDI ARASU* (People's Rule) and *VIDUTHALAI* (Liberation/Freedom), he wrote a number of essays frequently about the necessity of science and its uses.

The contribution of science is predominant in the world. *The New Encyclopaedia* says, "Science is any of various intellectual activities concerned with the physical world and its phenomena and entailing unbiased observations and systematic experimentations. In general, science involves a pursuit of knowledge covering general truths or the operations of fundamental laws" (page number). Rationalists claim that science alone can express the truth. The great thinker Periyar wrote on 11-06-1949 in his journal *Kudi Arasu* in detail about the importance of scientific outlook among the students and the public. He pointed out, "the imaginary belief of god, salvation, heaven and hell, spirit, discipline, the cycle of the impact of good deeds and bad deeds in birth and rebirth are demolished because of the development of science" (citation).

## Scientific Outlook

Scientific outlook means how a man accepts and follows his rationality, research and its results. It must stimulate the efforts and actions of learners and should help to express the energy within us. Religions, priests, saints, preachers, foretellers and monks are against science and they mesmerize the people in the name of god/God, Periyar declared. In olden days it was claimed that the fire, water, air, waning moon and waxing moon were formed only by god/God. Now this position is rejected because of emerging science. The former prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, pointed out (citation), "our people should have scientific outlook and should follow it in their own life and the public life. Now the world depends upon science. It is incumbent on the scientists and atheists to root out the nihilisms immediately." The pioneer scientist Galileo discovered and informed the world that the earth is not flat but spherical. People threw stones at him because they believed that he was spreading rumors against God and nature.

Periyar believed that the origin of human beings is also the symbol of rationalism. He supported Evolution, not creation by god or God. Charles Darwin explains in *The Origin of Species*, "man is not created by God but created himself". The Nobel Laureate Venkatraman Ramakrishnan also spoke in Chennai on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2011, "we should give up the superstitious beliefs and believe the proved science".

## In Support of Atheism

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Periyar is not a soothsayer but a balanced optimist to envisage the future of the world. He felt that the people are cheated and betrayed in the name of god/God because they know nothing about scientific inventions. He dreamt about the future of the world. The outcome of such dreams of Periyar is found in a booklet: *'The World to Come'*. He asked many questions in the public meetings to attract people to his rationalistic thought and to turn people away from religious beliefs. What was the world yesterday? What is the world today? What is going to be the world of tomorrow? What changes will take place as centuries go on? Only the rationalists could have an idea of all these things. Once he asked, "Thousands of eclectic lamps burn here while the switch is located somewhere else. Does the religion make it?" His writings and lectures created among the public awareness about science and its inventions.

### **Periyar and Scientific Inventions**

Periyar foresees in *The World to Come* (1934)

**"Means of transport would mostly be in the air and at a great speed. Wireless would be provided for all. Radio might be in the hats of everyone. T.V. will be available with greater technique for everyone to see and talk freely. One be the knitting of the hearts, there can be lovely life. One will be able to contact instantly anyone anywhere. Education could be imparted easily far and wide. The nutritive food needed for a full week might be made available in a small capsule. Man will be able to live 200 years or even more".**

**"There may not be any necessity for a potent male and female to perform intercourse, for getting a child. Even as strong and study bulls are specially brought up to improve the cattle, men with sound and healthy body may be specially induced to part with their semen scientifically and by injection method the extracted male semen might be let into the womb of the female".**

**There will be many changes in the articles we now use. For example the weight of the present day automobile would be reduced considerably. Petrol consumption would be reduced. Nay, cars may run out of electricity:**

*(Thoughts of Periyar, pp. 296-297)*

Periyar's prediction was validated in the form of test tube babies and surrogate mothers. Dr. Robert Geoffrey Edwards of United Kingdom made the first test tube baby in the world on

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25<sup>th</sup> July 1978. He had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology in 2010. His wonderful invention was Ms. Louis Brown. Now she got married and gave a natural birth to a child. It is not a miracle but science.

As Periyar envisaged, the first hand-held mobile phone was demonstrated by Dr. Martin Cooper of Motorola on April 3, 1973 using a handset weighing around 1 kg. Now the video conference methods and webinars and 3G mobiles are utilized for face to face conversation.

Periyar hoped that machines would be used for agricultural work to enrich the life of farmers and to reduce the physical burden. At present, the harvesting machine, tractor, planting machine, etc., are working in the arable land.

Changing the script of Tamil is his prophetic vision which is now better for computer use. Further he educated the people about the importance of scientific family planning to reduce the population.

Periyar wrote an editorial column in *Kudi Arasu* on 13-8-1933 under the title 'Pride of Machine'. He says, "The machines were considered as ghosts then. Those days were creating barbaric feeling among the mass. The innocence and false ideas may be vanished after using their knowledge towards research mind".

Further he pointed out that the machines might be used for cleaning the toilets and sweeping the streets. Instead of man and women doing such jobs, the machines like robot are doing these works now.

## Conclusion

What Periyar foresaw in 1920s and 1930s have come true now. It is evident that Periyar had clearly envisaged the futuristic world. He was, indeed, a great thinker. He propagated the scientific temper and made it popular because he knew that science can only replace the irrational thoughts. Hence he expected the forthcoming world with full of scientific inventions.

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