

Nietzsche and Periyar: Tryst with the Concept of God

Dr. S. Sridevi

Professor of English

CTTE College

Chennai 600011

Tamilnadu, India

sridevisaral@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims at examining similar thought processes regarding the concept of God of the German philosopher Nietzsche and the Tamil social reformer and thinker Periyar. Both these thinkers critiqued the religion with which they were associated, for different reasons. Nietzsche demanded an energetic religion that would reflect the power of real life and believed bringing back Greek myths would achieve this end. Periyar demanded a religion that accepted all people as equal, and hence rejected all myths that had a hidden politics of hegemony and hierarchy. The philosopher Nietzsche has thought like a social reformer, and the social reformer Periyar has thought like a philosopher. Philosophy and social ideologies intertwine these two great thinkers.

Keywords: God, Periyar, Nietzsche, myth.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a German philosopher who is associated with the concept of hermeneutics of suspicion against established social values. Nietzsche used his critical analyses to theorize about the nature of the self, and proposals suggesting new values that he thought would promote cultural renewal in Christianized Europe. (Anderson)

Nietzsche demanded a new symbol that will signify the zest of life in religion. He wanted religion to symbolize the dance of life and represent its fundamental energy. The Greek Gods symbolized this energy and he attempted to invoke them. “Now the essence of nature must express itself symbolically” in the society; “a new world of symbols is necessary” for people to be inspired - “the entire symbolism of the body, not just the symbolism of mouth, face, and words, but the full gestures of the dance—all the limbs moving to the rhythm,” Nietzsche says in *Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 11). Human life is like a rhythmic dance, and religion has to provide a suitable symbol so that people will live with complete enthusiasm and spirit. Once such a symbol is established then “the other symbolic powers grow, those of music, rhythm, dynamics, and harmony—all with

sudden spontaneity,” he argues (Nietzsche 11). If the main symbol represents dynamism, then the other related symbols would also begin to represent the energy of life.

We have to understand the power of this symbol which will liberate man and make him aware of his powers: “To grasp this total unleashing of all symbolic powers, man must already have attained that high level of freedom from the self which seeks to express itself symbolically in those forces” (Nietzsche 11). Man has to liberate himself from the “self” to attain this liberation. Social, cultural and religious identities create a self and in that man is caught. T.S. Eliot talks about similar ideas in *The Wasteland*:

DA

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison (T.S. Eliot)

We create a prison of our self; our identities and ideas about ourselves create this prison; we lock the doors of the prison; we often think about opening it with the key; when we think of the key, we confirm that we are indeed in a prison. Nietzsche says the powers of the universe will reach the human soul only if we learn to liberate ourselves from the self - the “self which seeks to express itself symbolically.”

There is energy in the human self which has to be liberated. Religions have to help people to live with energy. How do we understand this source of energy? Why have the earlier religions unleashed the power of life in their Gods? Nietzsche says in *Birth of Tragedy*: “in order to grasp this point, we must dismantle that artistic structure of Apollonian culture, as it were, stone by stone, until we see the foundations on which it is built (Nietzsche 12). Deconstructing the structure of Apollonian culture would teach us how it was built, says Nietzsche. He asks in the *Birth of Tragedy*: “What was the immense need out of which such an illuminating group of Olympic beings arose?” (Nietzsche 12) People create Gods and systems of religions to fulfil their needs. If the illuminating Olympic Gods are born in Greece, then there would have been a need for them. He compares the Christian religion with the Greek religion in *Birth of Tragedy*:

...there is no reminder of asceticism, spirituality, and duty. Here speaks to us only a full, indeed triumphant, existence, in which everything present is worshipped, no matter whether it is good or evil. ...The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence... In order to be able to live, the Greeks must have created these gods out of the deepest necessity. (Nietzsche 12)

Nietzsche comments on the mainstream religion and prefers the energetic ancient regions of the past. Magrini comments on Nietzsche's approach to Christianity:

Nietzsche claims that it was Christianity that initially gave ... a truly diseased world, for it "first brought sin into the world" ... Christianity has its origins in the festering resentment that passes "sentence on this whole world of becoming as a deception and [seeks] to invent a world beyond it, a true world" ... It perpetuates the harmful belief that our terrestrial existence is of little or no value, and worse, it serves as the terrestrial "training ground" or mere dress rehearsal in preparation for the next life, which will be better. This view "devalues" the only world we have and does so by measuring it against "categories that refer to a purely fictitious world." (Magrini)

Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (1879 – 1973), revered as Periyar or the great man changed the dynamics of South India with his deconstructions of millennia old myths and codes, ushering in a new movement of social justice and self-respect for all communities that demolished the sense of self-assurance in elite communities. Periyar brought in new thinking processes of equality and egalitarianism, and democracy gave him the space to found new political parties based on ideas of social justice. He encountered colonialism in the most appropriate manner, and it is through him that post colonialism in Tamilnadu and other southern states acquired a special meaning of a society that began to perceive all people as equal. It affected the people's views and English came to symbolise the neutrality of social ideology and still is viewed as the language of democracy, and now as the language of globalized equality.

Like Nietzsche, Periyar too expects a change in social life, Periyar too expects challenges in social life and approaches to myths and religion. If the existing social values and traditions can continue to harm the mental makeup of people, then we have to be ready for a paradigm shift, Periyar argues vehemently. Social and cultural systems have to be inclusive, and not segregate sections of people as inferior and do not facilitate their entry into the mainstream system, he consistently pleads, in an aggressive manner. The aggression is calculated to shake off centuries of practices and the words in Tamil are violent enough to bring forth a revolution. Periyar said on February 02, 1961, in a speech in Thambi Nayakkan Patti:

The self-respect movement and Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu have served our society in an unprecedented manner in the history of India for the past 2000 or 3000 years. These movements strive to bring people out of the savage habits and lowly habits. Except the Buddha, who appeared 2000 years back to remove caste from society, no other person took efforts to cleanse the society of its non-inclusive practices and ignorance. History says that the political elites made sure that

Buddhism was sent out of the land. After that, no other reformers were around to change the system. The subcontinent has created Azhwars, Nayanmars, saints, Mahatmas, godly people. All these great people did not talk about social welfare. They were more interested in self-evolution and identified themselves with the elite philosophy instead of catering to the needs of the populace. It is only in this half a century the self-respect movement and Dravidian movement have begun to bring in ideas of egalitarianism in society. The only way to bring forth the idea of equality in society is to uproot the established concepts of religion, God and the written codes that all insist on social exclusivity. (Periyar 131)

Periyar and Nietzsche critiqued the established religion of their continents. According to Periyar, a religion has to cater to the needs of all the people - economically and culturally - high and low. This was the leading ideology of twentieth century India, as the intellectuals had become familiar with the ideas of Marx. Social exclusivity became the by-product of the concept of God and religion, Periyar felt very strongly. The elite and sophisticated thinkers from India spent their time wondering how to self-evolve further and failed to worry about poverty and other social problems. Social welfare was not part of mainstream culture and philosophy that created a weak society. The uneducated poor man was ignored and left to fend for himself. Periyar felt that it was the moral responsibility of the intelligentsia to take care of the intellectually inferior people and guide them into better living. He tried to redefine the role of religion and was in favour of an organized religion that gave opportunities to all in an equal manner. There has been a growing sensitivity to the role of the man with gifted intelligence, who is expected to guide the rest of the world:

Fichte in his work *Science of Knowledge* identifies the intelligentsia with a free-thinking person who, with the help of intelligence and constructive thinking, “creates” the material world... Fichte proceeded from the fact that the philosopher, abstracting in the process of thinking from the experience of perception of objects, forms his consciousness as the intelligentsia... the intelligentsia is that layer of society that makes itself an object of both knowledge/self-knowledge and the subject of transforming life in accordance with the essential dimensions that make up the content of their individual tribal vocation. Indeed, man is a social being, always belonging to a certain type of popular community ... To be involved in the people, one should have the intelligentsia as an internal state of the soul, as the spirit of vital activity. (Tabeikyna, et al.)

Periyar’s engagement with the elite philosophy can be interpreted from this perspective of the social role of the intelligentsia. If myths have been written down by the intelligentsia, then they should have been given a check for the hidden political veins of thought as well; if there had been

hegemony found, then those aspects must have been cleansed, demands Periyar. Indian philosophy of the North aimed at getting a high sense of self-awareness and evolution. Periyar argued that it ignored the welfare of the people, in general, as the common man may not actually have the intellectual ability to reach the higher level of consciousness and self-awareness that demands high cognitive skills and talent.

Religions and social codes institutionalized by religions recommend a certain model of thinking and social behaviour. Thinkers rise against the existing systems and recommend new forms of thought. As Magrini argues, Nietzsche's comment on European society is that he claimed that it was Christianity that brought the concept of man as a sinner which created guilt in man's mind and subdued his energy. It made the world a diseased world. Christianity did not accept the violent and energetic reality and taught people to think of a world of the future. Every religion begins with an ideal and it accumulates layers of meanings slowly and after a point people begin to study its impact on society. Thinkers deconstruct these layers and approach these religions from another perspective, expecting social changes. If Christianity has brought in a guilty conscience in society, Indian mainstream thought has brought in untouchability in a method of palimpsest. Indian myths have layers of added nuances and meanings that have frozen the concept of untouchability.

Periyar argues that the religious climate in India created the structure of caste that refused equality and inclusion. The concept of God and the ideology of religion supported social discrimination that was further strengthened by governmental assistance. Caste discrimination merged itself into religious values and the perception of God, that people have accepted it as inevitable. Periyar refers to caste as a lowly practice that has been institutionalized using a religious framework. He said in a speech on March 20, 1961 in Panagudi::

Casteism has continued to exist with the support systems of the idea of God, the institution of religion, the power of the elites and the dominance of the government. One cannot remove from Indian culture without destroying the established religious ideas and its traditional approaches, as all these have become a part of Indian thinking - it is in the blood of people. In fact, it is in the life breath of people. (Periyar 179)

Periyar wanted to remove the idea of casteism that is embedded in the Indian psyche as it was institutionalized merging with religion and traditions. The ideology of caste was effectively intertwined with religious practices. It mingled with people's belief systems, and they had begun to have faith in its functioning. To remove its power, one is pushed to remove the position of religion too. In retrospect, we realise that a shake to the caste system happened as it merged with an effort to uproot religion too. The concept of God was questioned along with the concept of caste.

Periyar rebelled against the ideology of Indian religions and stories that emphasized on the practice of caste. Tagore in his play *Chandalika* expressed the same idea:

Mother: Have you no respect for religion?

Prakriti: How can I say? I respect him who respects me. A religion that insults is a false religion. Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags. But since that day something forbids me to conform any longer. I'm afraid of nothing now. (Tagore)

The play was written in 1938 and it reflects the perspective of Indian intelligentsia. The intellectuals viewed religion as the responsible factor for nurturing untouchability in society. Tagore's *Chandalika* speaks from the viewpoint of the marginalized. Fraser argues that Nietzsche attacked the mainstream religion as it kept the energy of people down. The will of man was not celebrated by Christianity, Nietzsche felt vigorously. Passive behaviour only weakened mankind, he believed. Fraser wrote in 2012 in *The Guardian*:

Nietzsche's case against Christianity was that it kept people down; that it smothered them with morality and self-loathing. His ideal human is one who is free to express himself (yes, he's sexist), like a great artist or a Viking warrior. Morality is for the little people. It's the way the weak manipulate the strong. The people Nietzsche most admired and aspired to be like were those who were able to reinvent themselves through some tremendous act of will. (Fraser)

Nietzsche compared Greek religions with the new European religion of Christianity. He thought like a social reformer who wanted to change the patterns of human thought. Fraser's interpretation of Nietzsche's search for an energetic human being against the mode of the self-loathing as a sinner enables viewing Nietzsche as a reformer, bent on recreating social values. It is at this point that one can connect the ideology of Periyar with Nietzsche, as thinkers who demanded a change in society.

Nietzsche argues in his essay "Apollonian and Dionysian Art" that the Greeks encouraged both the Apollonian and Dionysian art and "these two different tendencies run parallel to each other" and operate "openly at variance" and also "continually incite each other to new and more powerful births" perpetuating "an antagonism" and, these terms are "superficially reconciled by the common term 'art'" (Nietzsche 91). The "aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence," Nietzsche says further (Nietzsche 92).

Dreams represent an irrational system of operation in the mental sphere of humanity, we can surmise, and hence they play a significant role in shaping society. Nietzsche is talking about this aspect of our lives. It is this area of human experiences that brought forth religions, myths and rituals and these have sustained humanity for millennia. To continue the sustenance of human lives, society needs these myths and stories of multiple varieties and types.

In India, these stories and myths of the past also have brought a social hierarchy and political hegemony. Hence, Periyar wants to deconstruct the myths and remove the hierarchic principles in them. He moves in the direction of rationalism as his land had myths that taught society to conceive certain sections of people as untouchables. Myths in Greece according to Nietzsche spoke of vitality, and myths in India according to Periyar spoke of hegemony. Nietzsche wants the Greek myths back and Periyar does not want Indian myths. Behind this appearance of contradictions, there is a single line of similarity in thought - both thinkers reject the existing social ideologies and recommend either old or new ways of thinking.

In *Athma, Motcham-Naragam* (The Soul, Heaven-Hell) Periyar says that man is proud of himself and hence he will not acknowledge his ignorance. He cannot confess his ignorance easily and when he cannot understand certain things, he creates a space which in turn creates God and religion. That is, Periyar says, when man does not have the capacity to understand life and its implications, he hides behind the concept of God (Periyar 9). Tamil Poet Kannadasan expresses similar thoughts in the poem “Deivam thandha Veedu”: “Thelivaga therinthaalae siddantham; athu theriyamal ponalaie vedantham - when we understand concepts well, we call it as philosophy; when we are not sure of the functionings we call it as mysticism” (Kannadasan).

Heaven and hell are created by mankind when it is not sure of happenings and are not able to formulate clear concepts about the future, as life cannot be understood with the help of a formula. There are experiences that go beyond a defined structure and man allocates them to various theories like *karma* or destiny or God’s will. As humanity evolves, we have to reckon with human imaginations, myths and related ideologies that constantly intervene with the functioning of the universe. Thinkers and intellectuals are seen reviewing the existing systems of thought and comment on social behavior. Periyar and Nietzsche are part of these reviewing systems of thought rising against existing intellectual ideologies.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 22:9 September 2022

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **22:9 September 2022**

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