

# Critical Thinking in Masses & Social Justice

Need for New Perspective (With special  
reference to Tamil Nadu)



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## **Abstract:**

Critical Thinking and Social Justice are the two main pillars of Social progress. Social Justice is not merely meting out justice to those who have been denied in the contemporary times or through history, but it is a system that has to be always inherent in a society or community, ensuring Equality for All. Tamil Nadu is a pioneering state towards the establishment of Social Justice, as a central pillar towards social progress. Along with it, Critical Thinking among the masses also needs to be inculcated and developed. Part of development of Critical Thinking is Logic. This application of logic has to be nurtured in the Society.

Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy and Arignar Dr. C.N. Annadurai were enablers of Social Justice & Critical Thinking in Tamil Nadu. Anna's literature has borrowed ideas from Plato, Rousseau, Locke, Mill, Marx and brilliantly altered them to suit the local cultural milieu so that they don't remain some abstract philosophies but rather tangible and workable theories. Arignar Anna's works need to be critically evaluated for debates, criticism & counter-criticism and the process

of Socratic method and much more. Only out of Critical Evaluation will emerge newer ways to develop social welfare models in the ever-changing society.

## **Essay:**

Social Progress, Critical Thinking, Social Justice, Tamil Culture, Dravidian Model, Dravidian Social Welfare, C. Annadurai, Periyar, Ambedkar The progress of societies varies and the variations are both of degree and kind. There cannot be one universal or fit-for-all scale by which the progress of the societies can be measured and replicated to others who are perceived to be lagging behind in that scale. There can be endless arguments on the perception of this relativism of progress but certain definitive markers can be agreed upon and applied at all circumstances to judge on this progress. But there are already claims of various kinds of progress of societies and they, on surface, are quite contrasting and yet on deeper analysis would reveal striking similarity of those contrasting claims.

There are certain societies that have advanced quite steadily in terms of material growth, but if there is a lesson that the past

five decades have given us, it is that material advancement gaining from the fundamental premises of greed, selfishness, exploitation etc. will lead to an extremely fragmented and unhappy society.

On the other hand, there are some societies which have trumpeted that their core strength is spirituality and material advancement is negligible in front of spiritual growth. The closer scrutiny of these claims reveal that such a state relies predominantly on renunciation of material gains rather than the advancement solely of spiritual society.

So, we have **materialist's affirmation and the spiritualist's denial** and both have been and are being propelled as the mark of social progress. Human beings are quirky and this level of quirkiness is probably too much for their own taste. The above two positions need no citations and references and they are very much a part and parcel of every day experience. Humans, maybe due to fluctuations of emotions and situations in their lives, love to and rather tend to swing from the shoulders of one to another.

And then there is another perception that is acutely understated, hardly amenable for perception, as if it were a shy lily flower refusing to blossom and therefore can only be found in traces in interactions, stories and songs. The most popular expression of this can be found in சமூகம் மாறிவிட்டது [samookam maari vittadhu] or సమాజం మరీపోయింది [samaajam maari poyindi] or समाज बदल गया है [samaj badal gayaa hai].

This is very subtle and unnoticeable. What it implies as a philosophical undertone is that, society changes itself. One has to go through these utterances and thoughts many a time to perceive this. No human intervention is needed and the society changes itself. Or to put it in a slightly refined way, every now and then societies reshape

themselves and their paradigms. Lying at the bottom of this nuanced assumption is the **philosophy of fatalism** on surface and deeper is the **philosophy of causality** – societies ignite and power both material and spiritual advancement.

So, this all-pervading thought in all the societies leads to a belief that (which people are unaware of at all) all the social institutions such as family, caste, class, marriage, government, family etc., are intelligently designed by Nature and all human interventions are waste of time and rather unintelligent on the part of human beings. If anyone has any doubt, one can go through what we call blind beliefs (not only religious but also other socio institutional thoughts) and one can find this lying at the bottom of the pile and snoring like a sleeping giant.

Still not convinced? Talk to a cross section of society in various countries and you will be appalled to find morphic resonance among all, and one can find those who have cared to go deep into this resembling ek tara [single stringed instrument popular predominantly in Maharashtra and Karnataka]. Doubting Thomases may think this is a superficial understanding of the sayings of the masses, but it is not. I mentioned fatalism & there is nothing which goes beyond this belief of the masses. One will be amazed to see the number of people who believe that human nature keeps changing, societies keep redefining themselves & their paradigms, no need for any other factors, no need for any other movements etc. This is true of democracies and theocracies, autocracies and kingships driven by the divine right to the throne, and the theists and atheists alike.

This representation is not only to drive home the point that these ideas are widely

prevalent, but also to showcase the unique absurdity of these ideas as a single entity in different forms that display contrasting and contradictory ideas, depending on the direction of the perceiver. If one may say so – these perceptions and beliefs form one mammoth shapeless entity, which is at once (to borrow the thoughts from six systems of Indian philosophy) self-effulgent but incapable of higher purpose Mimamsaka's fire, soulless karmic wheel of Buddhists and world-less supreme reality of Advaitins). If there is one thing that is clear from the above, it is that the **ideal conditions or utopian ideas or dystopian projections cannot be the hallmarks of the actual social progress.**

Increasingly informed, but widely ignorant urban population may wonder about this stressed weightage on social progress. Knowledge deficient society will be filled with people who are not capable of questioning and finding out, but will have all the beliefs mentioned above. This is not a harsh assessment but a pragmatic and benign understanding of such communities. **Social progress springs out of the solid platform held together mainly by two pillars** [of course, there will be more than two pillars in something as complex as human society] – **Critical Thinking and Social Justice.**

Social justice is not merely meting out justice to those have been denied in the contemporary times or through history, but it is a system that has to be always inherent in a society or community ensuring **Equality for All** in all the endeavours of the given community. Equal opportunities to education and employment have become by and large political sloganeering in all the countries and unless accompanied by the equal opportunities to all, to generate wealth by legal means and the right to lead,

they will remain slogans for the foreseeable future. That may sound naïve and contrary to accepted political thought. On paper theoretical models of social governance have not yielded much. Pragmatic and level headed approach in understanding social dynamics is a must if there has to be a shift at ground zero in all the nations.

Otherwise, what we have witnessed thus far, few becoming richer and richer, and select few continuing to lead all others on the one hand, and the failure of mobilization of masses on the back of machines on the other, will continue. Ironically, the very same schools that have been supporting and propagating such models have also come out, from time to time, with perplexing and blockheaded arguments based on gross eugenics and similar ill-founded pseudo-scientific rationale.

If that has been the situation in social and political governance thus far, the citadels of religious practices paint more dismal pictures leading to the unavoidable feeling of upcoming apocalyptic darkness and nescience. Even the religions that project themselves as founded on firm footed equality of all, have nothing to show except disastrous manipulation and greed of groups that have successfully led to ostracizing of majority of the people within those citadels. This has led to a larger and problematic situation of many educated people in many nations resorting to either support the political / social / religious oppressors or join the gangs in the name of religion or wealth creation for majority.

So, it is clear there is a wide chasm between theoretical models and philosophies of projecting one's ideas on the society [incidentally, mathematical models such as algebra were found on such practices and probably arm-chair philosophers of later centuries were emboldened to replicate such hare-brained practices in all other spheres].

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was not only India's top sociologist but also the most underrated [no doubt, he was the thinker of the top order but often got distracted, and the problem with that was many of his perceptions could have become earth shattering volumes, but did not become and remained as bubbles for that reason]. What Dr. Ambedkar mentioned in the Constituent Assembly of India on 15 November 1949 about degradation in social movements (politics) is very apt for what was just described as a problematic situation across the world: "Bhakti in religion may be a road to the salvation of the soul. But in politics, bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship." [Constituent Assembly of India Debates (Proceedings) – Volume XI].

What one means as a deep chasm, is the distance between the philosophical discourses / works of Mill, Bentham and Marx, and what one has been witnessing in the past century in almost all the countries. Theoretical frameworks unless calibrated and re-calibrated on ground are nothing more than gaseous dreams. Wonderful to experience, but will not benefit anyone including the dreamers except for a few orgasmic trepidations. To be fair, even Mill cautioned common folks not to lay their liberties, at the feet of even a great person or to trust that person with power which enable him / her to subvert the institutions of the society.

So, we have the undesired situation of people all over the world enjoying reveries in their deep dreams, or hoisting the flag for the oppressors on the one hand, and people languishing at the bottom of the pile with no possibility of seeing light at any time during their lifetimes, on the other. Before moving on to another central pillar of social progress, **Critical Thinking**, one must

clearly understand what is **Social Justice** or rather, what does not constitute the core of social justice.

Righting the historical wrong, providing material conditions for people to pursue basic education and find employment etc., are without any doubt, part of Social Justice. But, they in themselves do not and cannot be the summum bonum of Social Justice. Further, there is an inherent misperception among the people of Tamil Nadu (please refer the title & here it begins) that social justice is a kind of justice delivery system alone. Justice delivery through jurisprudence for civil and criminal procedures is a well-laid one, but that will also fail if social justice is falsely understood.

**Social Justice is practical and beneficial only when opportunities and freedom to every individual becomes inherent in the social institutions**, every penny of public finance reaches the last citizen, those who are in charge of running the governments and institutions should ensure the delivery of goods and services for the public do not sag at any point of time, and the mechanism of jurisprudence, apart from dealing the civil and criminal procedures, should not impede - directly or indirectly - the delivery of public goods and services in any way. Well, all these things are happening, i.e., the obstacles leading to the absence of inherent social justice. I am touching upon Tamil Nadu as an example, primarily because, it is in this state in India that many preliminary steps leading to social progress, such as noon-meal scheme for children across towns and villages, equal public distribution system, attempts to bring uniform syllabus in schools, etc. were laid, much before in any other state of India. Some ancillary steps such as removal of caste in the street names, higher reservation for the backward classes

including scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in education system were also taken up. These are, without doubt, essential steps towards the establishment of Social Justice as a central pillar towards social progress, but these are not end in themselves.

They are the preliminary steps and what we are witnessing in the past six to seven years in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar - that had fallen down in the ladder of progress, so much through five decades, is nothing but replication of these preliminary steps in a more sophisticated manner with last mile delivery [for more on this, please see Mehta, Nalin. *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party: The Remaking of the World's Largest Political Party*, New Delhi: Westland Publishers, 2022]. So, in the light of the above, it is clear that vast majority are forming impressions, without any touch with the reality and only out of their own imaginations on the one hand and the educated people joining forces with the oppressors. Why is it so? Is the entire humanity very fond of walking backwards and getting attracted to hidebound thinking, like iron to magnet?

One of the two pillars, Critical Thinking is rare, not only in Tamil Nadu but all over the world. Without Critical Thinking among the masses, Social Justice loses relevance and true social progress is not possible. Instead, the society will bind itself in chains of formalities, and cannot think beyond the established norms and practices. Worse, there will be no reflection on its own traditions, and hence there will be no chance of breakthroughs in the philosophies. It is not enough to have one or two thinkers per community, and what is needed is a critical thinking among the masses. Without critical thinking among the majority, equally or even more pernicious cultural hegemony will be

established in the very same society, that started to question and counter the cultural hegemony in the first place.

People are fond of Gramsci when it comes to hegemony, but seldom do people realize or even find out through reading him, that he was wary of such an outcome where the societies will start more pernicious hegemonic traditions after crystallizing him or Marx, for that matter. It is no surprise that is what is exactly happening. [For more on Gramsci's Cultural hegemony and ancillary views on traditions, see, Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2015]. People may not be aware of the hegemonic traditions they themselves are starting, but worrying part is that they are following the very same pattern of behaviour and thinking which both Dr. Ambedkar and J.S. Mill warned about.

Let us look at Tamil Nadu in the past five decades (100 years maybe too long given that new traditions and trends emerge every two decades and social paradigms are reshaped subsequently and hence 50 years will give a good slice of reality to assess along with the trends and thoughts which emerged in that period) and one can clearly see the same confusion that one can see elsewhere too, happening very much in Tamil Nadu.

Criticism and Critical Thinking are the most underrated activities of the human societies. Criticism need not be confined to, but includes critical evaluation of the activity already happened, something that is happening at present, evaluation of a published book or movie or art. Critical thinking enables people to evaluate the social norms, customs, mores, practices, laws and traditions of the given society. In the absence of such reflective thinking even atheism will become a religion and governance will become the performance of acting.

**Criticism is a process of reflection on the society as a whole, and all the parts which make up that whole.** Critical thinking and evaluation of thoughts & practices, philosophies of the thinkers, reformers and leaders of that society, as well as various social institutions leads to a healthy society that will progress. No one can underestimate the critical thinking in masses, as it is the primary driver of social progress and social justice.

**In the twentieth century, two personalities charged the Dravidian school of social progress and social justice, Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy and Arignar Dr. C.N. Annadurai.** While Periyar focused primarily on anti-religious, anti-caste and self-respect movement, Anna threw his net wide and charged the political movement in the post-independent India. There were others, but these two were primarily responsible for major social and political changes that happened in Tamil Nadu during the twentieth century.

These two personalities are adored by millions of followers of Dravidian philosophy on the one hand and are vilified by few others who brush aside their contributions. Alas there is no critical evaluation of Periyar and Annadurai and their works. Some people just put photos, carry some quotes derived from someone else on their shoulders and charge anyone who says anything in contrary as committing blasphemy, whereas some people target these two personalities and their followers, and charge them as carriers of irrationality in the name of rationalism. This is the behaviour pattern of warring religious societies, what started in the name of rationalism has become more of a religious system, not applying the rational principles of self-reflection and critical analysis and the opposing side blindly throwing sacrileges

disregarding the rationalist movement and the subsequent governmental institutions' welfare schemes for public. Only very few analyse their contributions and works.

**Arignar Anna's philosophy offers a vast landscape for debates, criticism & counter-criticism and the process of Socratic method and much more.** It is sad that neither supporters nor opposers have read Anna's speeches and writings deeply and reflected on them. Anna's speeches and writings offer a rare critical view of the making of independent India (see <http://www.annavinpadaippugal.info/> the site of Anna Centenary Trust / Parimalam) and actually offer a panoramic view of Indian and World politics, social institutions, movements and also on the world of arts and cinema. There is a constant effort among some sections to undermine Anna, the writer. While what constitutes good literature has always been debatable and will continue to be so, Anna's short stories, more than his other writings bring out critical acumen especially in relation to social institutions. [see Bose, Subash Chandra, Comp., Selected Stories of C. Annadurai, Chennai: Sahitya Akademi, 2020].

Anna may not have had the field experience of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, or the full exposure to European Thought like M. N. Roy, but he was original in his assessments. Through translations he might have read the modern classics of European languages and his knowledge of them is very much visible in his English writings and speeches. ([http://www.annavinpadaippugal.info/annavin\\_english\\_katturaigal\\_part1.htm](http://www.annavinpadaippugal.info/annavin_english_katturaigal_part1.htm)). Through three decades of writings and speeches that are available in the public domain, one can easily trace the development of Political Philosophy of Annadurai.

**Anna's focus and the issues might have been local, but his philosophy**

**contained enough universal elements, so that they can be applied elsewhere too.** Also, one can see the influences on his philosophy - even by the thinkers and leaders with whom he differed completely. In the last three decades of his life, one can see Anna's concerted and conscious attempts to deploy writing and literature as a political tool, almost on the lines of Gandhi with whom and the Congress party he disagreed a lot. He went one step further, and ensured that writing as a political weapon was followed in his party even after his passing away.

**If one is unbiased and goes through the Anna literature, one cannot but wonder, how he borrowed the ideas from Plato, Rousseau, Locke, Mill through Marx and brilliantly altered them to suit the local cultural milieu, so that they don't remain some abstract philosophies, but rather tangible and workable theories.**

Such reading of Anna literature is not a series of goosebump moments alone, there are places where one is bound to differ. One can find questionable assertions interspersed with brilliant notions and oratory. Without much knowledge of what historicism and presentism are, majority of the contemporary society, masses and scholars alike, are heavily engaging in the very same act. Popper's philosophy may have many lacunae, but historicism is where he got everything correct. While today's masses indulge, without any restraint whatsoever, in presentism of many ideas and events of the past which they dislike, there is no similar attempt to hold Anna for that. As it is, uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes, especially the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts, is not a healthy one. In democracy, alternative arguments are important, which Anna himself stresses.

What Anna provided was, an alternative paradigm on the powers that be vested with states and the centre, on the rules for panchayat, reorganization of regions and importantly held up the mirror to the politics of Nehruvian era. In fact, in one of the articles, Anna fearlessly tore into the Nehru's rule and contradictions galore in the government and the party. Incidentally that also props up the question of corruption in the country [[http://www.annavinpadaippugal.info/katturaigal/picture\\_of\\_nehrus\\_india.htm](http://www.annavinpadaippugal.info/katturaigal/picture_of_nehrus_india.htm)].

There are very few discussions in the Tamil milieu on all these aspects of Anna's Thought and Literature, and all that one may encounter frequently is the Self-Rule and such allied subjects, mostly in the form of slogans. Supporters of the political party which Anna founded, if they want to respect and pay tribute to Anna's legacy, should do so by reading Anna literature and emulate & evaluate him critically. Such critical thought alone will bring the best out of the existing pattern of social thoughts and also show the path to new vistas and paradigm. This is the way to constantly improve.

Critically evaluating popular culture including cinema, political behaviour, ways of governance, available literary and cultural traditions, individual's place in the society and so on, is the only way to do that. Part of that effort should be to **constantly evaluate and improve on the Dravidian Model of Social Welfare.** Otherwise, the entire thing will stop with the preliminary steps as described above, and there is a danger that the very same society which initiated all these measures will slide as a whole.

Why should it happen among the masses? Nothing remains permanent. Everything changes including Moral codes, religions, cultural components, laws, ways of governance etc. What was acceptable to the

society few years ago may not be acceptable today, what was wrong yesterday might be correct today, what was the culture of the region few decades ago need not be the culture of the very same region today. The public should reflect on all the philosophies available to them, remove what is not applicable today and move on with what is applicable at present. Unless critical thinking becomes part of everyday life and part of social institutions, society will end up holding on to that which is in the past, that which is dead, or at best antique with no clear role in the life of the present. Society is an ephemeral river. Anna's literature is not a Critique of Pure Reason which people can take up at leisure and engage in mental gymnastics. Why alone Anna literature, even the sayings that are venerated today in different sections of the society like the Tirukkural of Tiruvalluvar or the Mahabharata of Vyasa, have to be critically evaluated and people take what is applicable to their lives and move on.

**Part of development of Critical Thinking is Logic.** The Tamil Nadu government can take initiatives to introduce Logic [Aristotelean & Nyaya], Rhetoric etc. from the Class of 8, so that when men & women come out of higher educational institutions, they will be trained in logic and reasoning, and the methods to identify fallacies & avoid them. Talking of fallacies, masses are completely unaware of the logical fallacies in the arguments in everyday life, ignorant of the fallacies to which the lawyers resort to, or the fallacies in the rhetoric of the politicians and government officials. Logic can help in markets, offices and almost every other aspect of life. Having initiated Social Welfare schemes for the masses, Tamil Nadu can take the lead in this aspect also, to inculcate Logic & Reasoning in Society.

Anyone who agrees with their dogmas are accepted as brothers and sisters, and those with some other dogmas are branded as traitors and trolled in public platforms. It doesn't matter which end of the spectrum they belong to. Jean Paul Sartre once remarked that "Principles are easily forgotten but Habits seldom die." The initial habits have all become bad habits in the absence of critical thinking in masses. One cannot stress enough, how much population without critical thinking, will become blind believers in attractive sensations, become addicted to titillations, and the society as a whole will degenerate subsequently. This situation starkly reminds me of Sita Ram Goel's impression of RSS people in the early 1980s. The period of 1970's & 1980's was the Golden Period of both the Left-Wing & Right-Wing writing in India. If the likes of Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, Gupta and Karat led the communist ideology, eminent scholars like Sita Ram Goel, Arun Shourie and Ram Swarup primarily led the Right-Wing ideological writings. The exchange of ideas led to newer ways to understand social institutions and processes.

*"What was most revealing to me about the RSS people was that, by and large, they did not react to expression of any opinion on any subject except that about their organization (sangha) and their leaders (adhikaris). One could say anything one chose about Hinduism, or Hindu culture, or Hindu society, or Hindu history, without drawing any reaction from an average RSS man. He became warm or cold only when something favourable or unfavourable was said about his organization, or his leaders, or both. I wondered what sort of a Hindu organization it was. I*

*expected the RSS to be alive to Hindu causes rather than to the reputation of its organization or its leaders.”[Sita Ram Goel, How I Became A Hindu, New Delhi: Voice of India, 1993, Page 80]*

Tamil Nadu is now portrayed as a rationalist society based on the principles of rationalism as propounded by Periyar. His rationalism revolved around Equality of the Peoples, rejection of Caste, rejection of God and Religion, denial of myths and superstitions, and acceptance of all that which is based on science. To begin with, much of the existing criticism of Periyar misses the core point, and do not assess whether his philosophy is universal and for all times.

For a balanced society to exist and progress, both theism and atheism are very much in play. Age-old arguments such as light and darkness etc. already exist in support of this understanding and need not be repeated here. All societies and civilizations have developed and will develop religions, invent gods, produce myths and will appeal to all - that which is not possible within the fold of matter, and in conscious field of human experience. This is universal and it doesn't matter whether one believes in a specific or all of institutionalized religions. A person may be an out and out atheist and yet that person can have religious experience too. The vagaries of the mind cannot prevent a person to undergo a truly religious experience, and conviction is something that leads to emotion, and further play by the ego, and hence it has very little to do with actual experiences. [For more see, James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, London & New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1902]. The biggest pre-supposition is that religion is driven by mythology which is nothing but a bundle

of superstitions and fantastic stories. But, actually, myth is a synthesis of values which mean many things to many people, and is one of the many expressions of human aspirations to get out of limitations of material nature. Eric Gould summed it very beautifully when he wrote “It is allegory and tautology, reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, waking thought and dream, atavism and perennial archetype and metaphor, origin and end” [Gould, Eric. Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 28]

Today, the word myth is used in a variety of ways, but people predominantly use it to mean old ways, old story etc. and in the sense propagated by the 20th century European materialism school, and believe that myths have no use and relevance in front of science. Marx is one person they all quote in this context. So, to counter, let me bring in a leading Marxist writer-thinker, K. Satchidanandan: “Marx was wrong in supposing in Grundrisse that myths would not survive science: they still charm us, involve us, move us, encourage us to intervene in history, positively and negatively, leading us backward or forward, speaking often as they do of Utopias in future or golden ages in the past.” [Satchidanandan, K. (ed.) Myths in contemporary Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2003, P. X]

Further, the word ‘myth’ is used in the contemporary Society interchangeably with the word puranam (புராணம்) to mean all things old. But, as the late renowned Tamil Scholar & Sociologist Tho. Pa says, Myth/ Lore (வழக்காறு) is not always old, they are created in every generation and every region, both with and without religion. There are many distinguished scientists who resorted to myths when they reached a dead end, to recover, what French philosopher Henri

Bergson called Élan vital. They all have had intuition moments described by the famous French mathematician Jules Henri Poincaré. Myths are always present, generated in the rural as well as urban settings. In today's world, most of the myths have nothing to do with religion. Even in the past, myths for example Ramayana and Mahabharata, served the purpose of providing some continuity to cultures. Progressive People should leverage on the power of the same myth & lore, to touch upon the common folk sentiment, and usher them into the progressive fold. Nehru, wondering about their continued influence says, "Dating back to a remote antiquity, they are still a living force in the life of the Indian People." [Nehru, Jawaharlal. Discovery of India, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 99]. Secret behind their relevance even after thousands of years is that they were adapted by hundreds of communities, and retold by diverse people to suit the sensibilities of local cultural milieu. So, to use the principle of Redundancy used in Communication studies, these myths (going by the connotation of the contemporary society to prove the point, instead of resorting to itihasa) never lost the core - which can be applied to any civilization and at any point of time.

This is not new, and even the educated people have not heard of the rationalistic assessment of myths, as put out by Existentialist, Structuralist and Post-Structuralist thinkers such as Durkheim, Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes, Propp and Derrida. (the list is long and hence limiting myself to mentioning few names). Probably contemporary Tamil society has read them, but due to absence of critical thinking, no one has bothered to evaluate their own paradigms. (I will be failing if I do not mention the names

of three doyens who enabled people across the world to understand myths rationally – Mircea Eliade [Eliade, Mircea. The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, San Diego: Harcourt, 1959, p. 84], Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski [Malinowski, Bronislaw Kasper. Myth in Primitive Psychology, London: Norton, 1926, p. 137] and C.G. Jung [Jung, C.G. & Jaffé Aniela, Memories, Dreams, Reflections, New York: Random House, 1965]).

Seriously, knowledge of many languages, subjects and cultures, provide advantage to people of critical thinking. Those who question the need for such knowledge acquisition are obviously oblivious to the fact that the breakthroughs / platform for paradigm shift happens outside the field of discourse as Thomas Kuhn demonstrated [Kuhn, Thomas S. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962].

Experience is universal among human beings and everybody undergoes religious and social experience of some sort at several points in their lives. When many men and women started having these experiences, misunderstanding and hatred started coming in. To prevent further chasms and differences, the communities collected and put them as codes for those societies. This process itself takes hundreds of years. When larger communities took over the smaller ones, codes of these smaller communities generally disappeared, and of course, in countries like Nigeria, good and practical codes from smaller religions got absorbed in the major religions. However, to prevent people from getting mixed up, religious codes were institutionalized, codes were made as canons, pontification took place, priestly class emerged, divine right theory was born,

and all these were forced on everyone in that society including Kings & Queens.

Another misconception regarding religion is about rituals. Make no mistake, religion is designed to be practical and performative. Abstract philosophies are for mental gymnasiums and after some time people will feel fatigued and it is the ritual which ensures the alignment of mind and body. What is true about the contemporary assessment of religion and myth is regarding accretions. Accretions are inevitable to all human processes including institutions, and religions are not exceptions. All the social institutions, whether family or marriage or government – they all might have had different origins and purpose, but today they all are inflated with accretions. There is nothing wrong in people hating accretions in religions, but merely hating will not do. They have to move past accretions, and take all that is good for them and relevant, and move on with life.

Then there are groups in the contemporary society who have massive problems with religion. There is nothing wrong in that. It is possible that millions may not be comfortable with specific religion, which they may feel constrict them from marching towards the goal driven by the aspirations to go beyond mundane and material. [For more on this universal aspiration please read, Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Puducherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001]. It is also quite possible that individuals may not be satisfied with any of the existing institutionalized religions. Yet to serve their own aspirations, they can chalk up their own paths, create their own myths and religions. In this respect, twentieth century people are less courageous than modern and pre-modern scholars. For example, William Blake was extremely dissatisfied with the Church and lack of diversity in the

myths. So, he decided “I must create my own system or be enslaved by another’s” [Blake, William. *Poetical Sketches*, London: Tate, 2008, p.22]. Blake was not alone in this. Some great minds like William Butler Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke and Bengt Gunnar Ekelöf of Sweden created their own myths or systems.

As for Hinduism, it must be recorded here that even those who follow the rituals are not aware, that it is not a single religion. There are multiple religions within it. Great scholar, P. V. Kane tried to trace the religious practices once including worship of natural phenomena from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. He found out that many practices or rituals that are essentially rural, get transformed and absorbed into multiple streams and gain different nomenclatures [Even if unrelated, one should go through all the pages in Kane, P. V. *History of Dharma Shastra*, Pune: Bhandarkar, 2006. One of the most amazing works a person can encounter. Patrick Olivelle called it as *Magnum Opus of India*]. As for taking what is good and leaving out the unacceptable elements in the canons, secular philosophers of India like Jiddu Krishnamurti [in Jayakar, Pupul. *J. Krishnamurti: A Biography*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1986] and Daya Krishna have shown that though they do not agree with the *Bhagavad Gita*. Good points which will serve humankind can be taken and many of their admirers have done that.

Religions and Myths have multiple roles in the lives of individuals and societies. Even though I personally do not practice any religion though, religious texts from all over the world, analysis of various religions, and interpretations of religions as carriers of cultures, fascinate me. Here is an example,

few lines from a Tamil poem and I have not seen such richness in any other linguistic or literary tradition in India.

ஆராதஅருளமுதம்பொதிந்தகோயில்  
அம்புயத்தோன்அடியாத்திமன்னற்களித்தகோயில்  
தோலாததனிவீரன்தொழுதகோயில்  
துணையானவீடணற்குத்துணையாங்கோயில்  
சேராதபயனெல்லாஞ்சேர்க்குங்கோயில்  
செழுமறையின்முதலெழுத்துசேர்ந்தகோயில்  
திருவரங்கமெனத்திகழுங்கோயில்தானே

In almost every meeting at Delhi or Kolkata or Patna or Mumbai or Bengaluru, I always point out how Tamil society has preserved their language, literature and culture spanning two millennia. This is the time Tamil society showed to the world that they can bring in, absorb critical thoughts and compelling rationale in other languages and cultures. Only such intermingling and interaction can produce new ideas.

Lack of critical thinking has prevented society from developing second traditions. It is possible that Tamil Siddha literature could possibly have absorbed socio critical thoughts from Mithila region which produced the Charyapadas, and from whatever manuscripts that people were able to extract that were in proto-Maithili script, some of the songs have strong resemblance to Siddha songs, both in structure and content. But some people were not ready to accept this comparative philosophy and their arguments were similar to the people rooted in Sanskrit hegemony which advocated that it need not take other ideas and sounds. Without resorting to such historicism or presentism, individuals in Tamil society should critically evaluate their current social

structures, negate all that which might lead to stagnation, absorb all that which will lead to growth, and essentially question the existing philosophies. So, let us read and critically evaluate great personalities like Anna and Periyar in their socio contexts and philosophies, instead of doing them a mere lip service. Such critical reading alone will bring new ideas and fresh thinking.

Out of this extreme negation and critical thinking will emerge newer ways to develop social welfare models in the ever-changing society. Tamil Nadu has a head start, as far as social welfare schemes are concerned. They have to be continued and so should other measures, to ensure equality of all the citizens. Stopping there would only mean negation of their own goals. Developing Logical Thinking and Critical Attitude are the signs of Rationality. To conclude, let us reemphasize that: **Social progress will only spring out of a solid platform held together by two pillars – Critical Thinking and Social Justice.**

### **Bibliography:**

*In this paper, I have opted to provide references and explanations in the text itself for easy reading and not as foot notes or references / notes after the article.*

### **About the Author:**

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