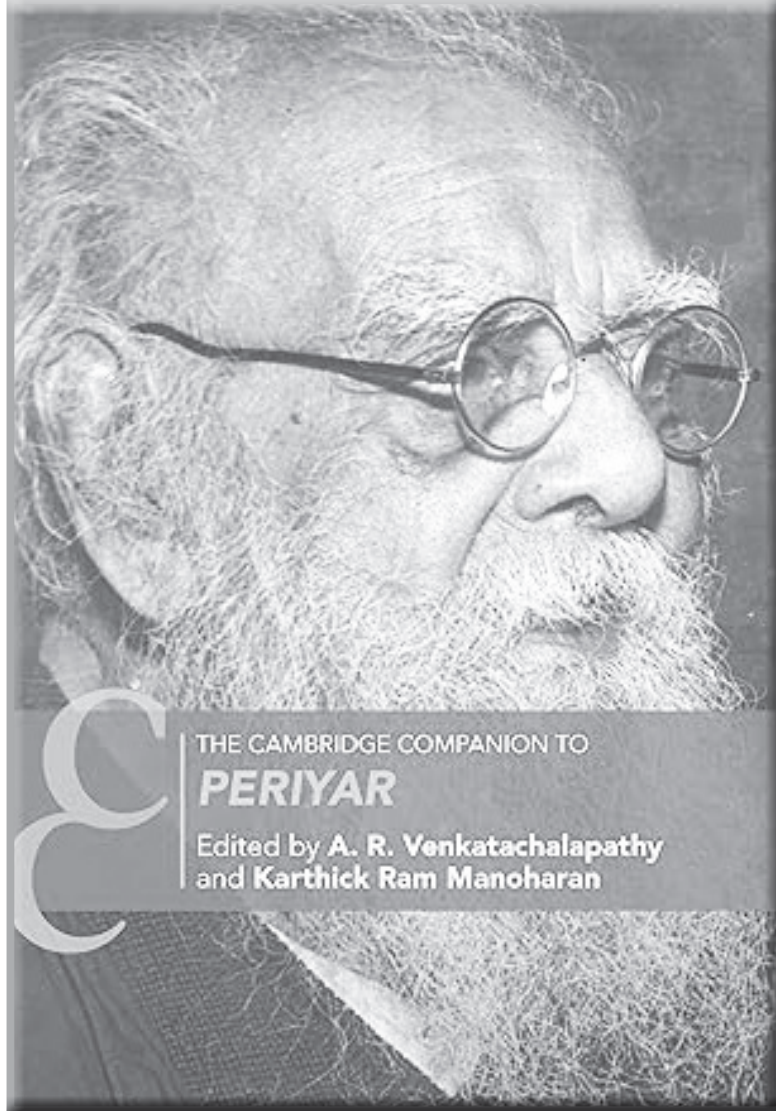


Book Review

The Cambridge Companion to Periyar

Edited by A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan



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Abstract :

The Cambridge Companion to Periyar, edited by A.R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan, marks a significant milestone in the scholarly recognition of E. V. Ramasamy “Periyar” as a major intellectual figure of global importance. This review examines how the volume situates Periyar’s ideas within wider debates on social justice, political philosophy, feminism, secularism, and postcolonial thought. By bringing together interdisciplinary contributions, the Companion highlights the enduring relevance of Periyar’s critique of caste hierarchy, Brahminical dominance, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy. The review argues that the inclusion of Periyar in the Cambridge Companion series represents an important step in expanding the global intellectual canon beyond Eurocentric frameworks. It further evaluates the editors’ success in presenting Periyar not only as a regional social reformer but also as a thinker whose ideas engage with universal questions of equality, rationalism, and human emancipation. Serving both as an accessible introduction for students and a valuable resource for scholars, the volume offers fresh perspectives on Periyar’s intellectual legacy and its contemporary significance.

Introduction

The Cambridge Companion to Periyar, edited by A. R. Venkatachalapathy and Karthick Ram Manoharan, represents a landmark in the global recognition of E. V. Ramasamy “Periyar” (1879–1973). Periyar, the radical social reformer and founder of the Self-Respect Movement, remains one of the most influential figures in modern Indian intellectual history. His critique of caste hierarchy, Brahminical orthodoxy, patriarchy, and

religious dogma shaped the Dravidian movement and continues to resonate in contemporary debates on social justice, secularism, and feminism.

The decision of Cambridge University Press to include Periyar in its prestigious Companion series signals his entry into the canon of global intellectual figures, placing him alongside thinkers such as Marx, Foucault, and Fanon.

This volume is not merely a collection of essays but a scholarly intervention that

seeks to situate Periyar within broader discourses of political philosophy, postcolonial studies, and feminist theory. The editors, both distinguished scholars of South Asian intellectual history, have curated contributions that reflect the interdisciplinary richness of Periyar's thought. The Companion thus serves both as an introduction for students and as a critical resource for advanced researchers.

Structure and Content

The Companion is organized into thematic sections that collectively map the intellectual terrain of Periyar's life and legacy. The editors provide a lucid introduction that frames Periyar as a radical rationalist whose ideas challenged not only the structures of caste and religion but also the epistemological foundations of Indian nationalism.

The then dominant Cambridge school, led by David Washbrook and Christopher Baker, characterised the Dravidian Movement not as a genuine ideological or social revolution, but as a product of elite – this reading was endorsed by rationalists both from congress and the Indian Left. (The Hindu, Sunday Magazine P 3)

E. V. Ramasamy "Periyar" remains one of the most uncompromising voices in modern Indian intellectual and political history. His radical critique of caste, religion, patriarchy, and economic

inequality continues to reverberate across South Asia and beyond. This Companion brings together leading scholars to examine his life, thought, and legacy in a comprehensive manner. Organized into five thematic parts, the volume offers a multidimensional portrait of Periyar as a social reformer, political strategist, cultural critic, and global thinker.

Most Anglo- American scholarship on the subject relied on anti- colonial narratives produced by nationalists. Both bodies of writing were conspicuously silent on larger questions, such as self-respect and the quest for dignity, and validated the entrenched, vertical social hierarchy that refused to imagine a horizontal social impact. (Sunday Magazine, March 1 2026)

Structure and Scope

The book's architecture is both deliberate and effective.

Part I, "Events That Made Periyar," situates him within formative struggles such as the Vaikom Satyagraha and the Poona Pact, highlighting his solidarity with Ambedkar and his uncompromising stance against Brahminical dominance.

One of the first things that Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leader M.K. Stalin did on assuming office as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 2021 was to declare Periyar's birth anniversary (17 September) as 'Social Justice Day' – underscoring his reputation as a

crusader for social justice. (P 1)

Part II, “The Politics of Periyar,” explores his ideological strategies and organizational challenges. Essays on non-Brahmin cosmopolitanism, Tamil solidarity, and the split with C. N. Annadurai reveal the dynamism and tensions within the Dravidian movement, underscoring Periyar’s ability to combine radical critique with pragmatic politics.

He had an unusual relationship with electoral politics, where he wanted to stay away from it but appreciated its role in cementing and furthering ideas of self-respect and social justice in the public sphere. (Geetha, 2019) “p 82

Part III, “Religion, Caste, and Identity,” highlights his philosophical interventions. His advocacy of rationalism, critique of Aryan hegemony, and transnational resonance—particularly in places such as Singapore—demonstrate how his ideas transcended local contexts and connected with global currents of decolonization and liberation.

Periyar’s views on religion were rooted in his personal experience of growing up in a religious household. Born into a rich merchant family, he was exposed to religion at a very early age. Sanyasis, Bhagavatas, Puranics, and scholars of religion thronged his home. (p 114)

Part IV, “Women and Culture,” is particularly significant. Essays on Periyar’s engagement with the “women’s

question” and his relationship with Maniammai foreground his feminist commitments. Contributions on literature, art, and cinema expand the scope of his influence, showing how his rationalist critique permeated cultural production and reshaped Tamil cultural identity.

Periyar saw the Aryan and non-Aryan conflict as stretching over two millennia. The Aryans came from outside and imposed the caste system on the native Tamils or Dravidians and thus rules over them. (P 136)

Part V, “Labour and Dignity,” explores Periyar’s understanding of economic power within caste society and his insistence on dignity as a radical cultural psychology. These essays remind us that Periyar’s critique was holistic, targeting not only religion and caste but also the economic structures that sustained inequality.

Strengths of the Volume

The greatest strength of *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar* lies in its plurality of voices and themes. By including essays on politics, religion, culture, and labour, the editors ensure that Periyar is presented as a thinker whose interventions were wide-ranging and interconnected. The inclusion of feminist and cultural perspectives in Part IV, and economic analyses in Part V, enriches the narrative and prevents the reduction of Periyar to a single dimension.

Another strength is the balance between historical detail and theoretical reflection. While some essays are firmly rooted in archival and historical analysis, others engage with contemporary theoretical frameworks such as cosmopolitanism, cultural psychology, and decolonization. This dual approach makes the volume relevant both to historians and to scholars of political theory, cultural studies, and gender studies.

1. Interdisciplinary Reach

The essays collectively demonstrate the breadth of Periyar's intellectual interventions. By drawing on history, philosophy, and cultural studies, the volume avoids reducing Periyar to a regional political leader and instead presents him as a thinker of global relevance.

2. Accessibility for International Readers

One of the challenges in Periyar studies has been the linguistic barrier, as much of his writing is in Tamil. The Companion succeeds in making his thought accessible to non-Tamil audiences through translations, contextual explanations, and comparative frameworks.

3. Critical Engagement with Feminism

The essays on gender are particularly noteworthy. They highlight Periyar's radical critique of patriarchy, his

advocacy for women's education, and his rejection of oppressive institutions such as arranged marriage and dowry. These contributions situate Periyar within global feminist discourse.

4. Editorial Vision

Venkatachalapathy and Manoharan's editorial framing is both rigorous and imaginative. They resist hagiography and instead encourage critical engagement with Periyar's contradictions and limitations, making the Companion a scholarly rather than celebratory volume.

Scholarly Contributions

The Companion makes several significant contributions:

1. Canonization of Periyar

By including Periyar in the Cambridge Companion series, the editors and contributors effectively position him as a global intellectual figure, moving Periyar studies beyond regional confines.

2. Pedagogical Utility

The volume is well suited for classroom use. Its accessible essays, bibliographic resources, and thematic organization make it valuable for courses in South Asian studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist philosophy.

3. Advancing Feminist and Subaltern Studies

The Companion situates Periyar within feminist and subaltern frameworks,

expanding the scope of these fields. His critique of caste and patriarchy anticipates contemporary intersectional approaches.

4. Global Relevance

By drawing parallels between Periyar and other radical thinkers, the volume demonstrates his relevance to global struggles against oppression and situates him within broader debates on justice and equality.

Historiographical Context

The limitations of earlier interpretations—particularly those associated with the Cambridge School, which often reduced the Dravidian movement to elite politics—were challenged by M. S. S. Pandian in his pioneering essay, “*Beyond Colonial Crumbs: Cambridge School, Identity Politics and Dravidian Movement(s)*” (1995).

Over the last three decades, the historiography of Tamil Nadu has undergone a significant shift, with rhetoric giving way to evidence-based analysis. *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar* is part of this broader academic course correction. The editors are to be commended for presenting a rich repository of contemporary Tamil history while making it accessible to a wider, non-Tamil readership.

The opening essay, “Introducing an Iconoclast,” is particularly

noteworthy. Rather than offering a simple biographical sketch, it traces Periyar’s political and social journey across multiple strands, highlighting both convergence and divergence with other ideological traditions. The concise treatment of key concepts such as *suyamariyadhai* (self-respect) and *samadharmam* (equality) signals that the Companion is intended as a reader rather than an encyclopaedia.

Limitations

Despite its many strengths, the volume has certain limitations. The density of the academic style may restrict accessibility for general readers, as several essays assume prior knowledge of Tamil politics and the Dravidian movement.

Additionally, while the book covers a wide range of themes, certain areas—such as Periyar’s influence on contemporary feminist movements and his reception in present-day Dalit activism—could have been explored further. A concluding synthesis tying together the five parts would also have strengthened the overall coherence of the volume.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, *The Cambridge Companion to Periyar* is a landmark contribution to Periyar studies. It not only documents the historical trajectory of his activism but also situates his thought within broader intellectual

and cultural currents. For scholars, it offers a rich resource; for activists, it serves as a reminder of the radical possibilities Periyar envisioned—a society free from caste, patriarchy, superstition, and economic exploitation.

By extending the discussion to women, culture, and labour, the editors ensure that Periyar’s legacy is

understood in its full breadth. His critique was never partial but holistic, targeting every axis of hierarchy and domination. This volume succeeds in presenting that vision, establishing Periyar not merely as a figure of the past but as a thinker whose ideas remain vital for imagining egalitarian futures.

