

The Story of a Marriage: Being a Tale of Self-Respect Unions and What Happened to Them

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The body of woman has been made to bear witness to the integrity of community, nation and race. The notion of the woman's body as frontier, a mark on a map that is constantly fudged and re-drawn as larger identities are announced and instituted is a rather familiar one; and one which underwrites the assertions and practice of those engaged in what has come to be regarded as a politics of identity¹. I wish to address a related but somewhat different concern in this paper: I intend to narrate the story of a different sort of female body, produced, circulated and proudly owned up by the ideas and practice of Tamil Non Brahminism and its passage from wifhood to citizenship. Here I intend to tell the story of what happened to expressive political and social energies when they came to be mediated in and through the language of the law. It seems to me that this history will enable us re- pose the question of the gradual disappearance of the female body from political and social movements which are committed to a politics of identity and whose ideological power derives from their iterative obsession with female sexuality².

¹Classic studies of self-constitution under colonialism, such as Frantz Fanon's *Algeria Unveiled* have argued the centrality of the woman's body to identity. Partha Chatterjee's study of the woman's question in the context of Indian nationalism, Tanika Sarkar's work on women in the Hindu Right, and the more recent work on Partition by Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin have examined this theme in detail. The marking of the female body in caste society and the deployment of this marked body in the uneven struggle between so-called high and low castes has been the subject of several articles - by, among others, Uma Chakravathy, Susie Tharu and Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran - written during this past decade.

²I have in mind movements that address race, ethnicity or even caste, in short, movements which have emerged out of a historical situation that discriminates and punishes peoples on the basis of complex ideologies of difference. In all such movements, the female body figures as a leitmotif, signalling, marking, retaining the trace of identity, whether one that has been suppressed and denied or being articulated and celebrated. It seems to me as if Tamil Non Brahminism attempted to disarticulate the terms which went to make up such a leitmotif but did not quite succeed. Yet this seems an instructive failure and one that speaks to our contemporary moment in interesting ways.

By Tamil Non Brahminism, I mean that complex of ideas and practices which informed the politics of anti-caste, social and political movements in the Tamil country from at least the last decades of the previous century. The thought of E V Ramasamy Periyar and the young ideologues of his Self - Respect Movement are central to my argument here. The Self-Respect movement was founded by Periyar in 1925 to initiate radical anti-brahmin and anti-caste practices. At the time of its founding, Periyar was still a member of the Indian National Congress, but he was already disillusioned with its vague and ineffective stance on matters of social justice. He was initially attracted to Gandhian Non Cooperation and Constructive work, but he broke faith with Gandhi when he realised that the latter was quite unequivocal in his defence of varnadharma and Hinduism. The Self-Respect movement was passionately concerned with the destruction of caste and wished to annunciate into historical existence a new sort of subjectivity, one premised on self-respect, mutuality and equality. For Periyar and others in his movement, this required, among other things, the abolition of religion, the destruction of the brahmin's sacral and secular power and the devaluing of those ideological systems which valorised religion. As Periyar wrote of his work, two years before his death:

Though I have endeavored all my life to abolish caste, as far as this country is concerned this has meant that I carry out propaganda for the abolition of God, religion, the Shastras and brahmins. For caste will disappear only when these four disappear. Even if one of these were to remain caste will not be abolished... (Ninety-third Birthday Souvenir, quoted in Anaimuthu (ed), Periyar E.Ve.Ra.SinthanaikaL, 1974).

The anti-caste propaganda and practice of the Self-Respect movement was neither reactive nor negative. Its anti-Brahminism attempted define the good society in terms of a life, work, love, faith, in short, of the individual in relationship to the commonweal, that would be un-informed by the brahmin and all that he seemed to mediate, represent and embody. This implied the

practice of a radically different ethics of the self, the body, intelligence and labour.

The Self-Respecters held that Hindu religious lore and the brahmin's interpretation of it had deformed both the body and spirit of the Hindu person, mutilated either into postures of either arrogance or servility, into assertions of the will or, alternately, complete and willed self-abnegation³. In one of his earliest pronouncements on the nature of caste society, Periyar observed how, "in our country no one is spared the horrors of untouchability, unseeability, unspeakability and unapproachability. It is customary for a caste to consider the one below it [in the hierarchy] to be untouchable and unseeable, whereas the same caste is viewed as untouchable and unseeable by the caste above it" (Kudi Arasu, 21.6.25). In such a society, there could be no mutuality, only an eternal warring of interests: "while one class is constantly looking to advance its claims through any means whatsoever, other classes are anxious to avoid being victims of deception" (Kudi Arasu, 6.12.25). For Periyar and his Self-Respecters, what seemed most distressing was that self-loathing which seemed to hold captive the hearts and minds of those consigned to the lowest levels of the caste system. Addressing adi dravidas at an untouchability abolition meeting, Periyar upbraided them thus:

Why must you address other castemen as Swami? The sense of being a low caste person seems to have mingled completely with your blood. But you must endeavour to change this. Whenever you see a person - of another caste- you must ask yourselves if in reality there exists any difference between him and you. ...If your clothes are dirty and you appear unwashed, who is responsible for this state of affairs? When you do not even have access to drinking water, how can you bathe? It is not as if you were born smelly and dirty ... If mahants and

³ This is of course broadly similar to the passionate arguments Dr Ambedkar advances in *The Annihilation of Caste*, where he relentlessly interrogates the absence of compassion and reciprocity in the Hindu character.

shankaracharyas were denied access to water to bathe, wash their clothes and brush their teeth and were to be locked up in a house for days, would their clothes remain spotless? Would their bodies smell fragrant? (Kudi Arasu, 25.4.26)

The Self-Respecters pointed out that the doctrine of exclusivity, of purity and pollution, served the material interests of brahmins and other upper castes, and had acquired a consensual value due to the religious aura and philosophical sophistry which informed defences of caste privilege and power. This was not to be wondered at, argued Kaivalyam Swamikal, a man of immense learning and a theist associated with the Self-Respect movement from its earliest days, since in caste society, brahmins had been granted (and granted themselves) sole custody over knowledge. Not only did they use this knowledge ill, but, over the centuries, had become masters of an ingenious hermeneutical art which they deployed to confound and mystify others. Further, they had come to disengage their intellect from purposive ethical action but yet managed to arrogate to themselves both spiritual privileges and authority, such that their word was revered and their persons pampered (Kaivalyam 1931: 27-44; 108-117; 129). Periyar argued that not only had brahmins come to define the terms of good and evil in caste society but they also instituted laws and rules which held that such and such men ought to labour at such and such tasks and not at any other (Kudi Arasu, 15.8.26). As the Self-Respecters time and again contended, this insidious division of labour separated mental from manual labour, valorised the former, held the latter to be demeaning and thus led to an accumulation of intellectual and spiritual surplus amongst the "twice-born" few, which in turn underwrote the latter's authority and enabled them, through an alternate use of force and guile, to organise consent for caste-ordained practices.

What was most original about the self-respecters understanding of caste society and its effects was their very clear sense of the articulation of gender and caste divisions. S.Ramanathan, an erudite Self-Respecter who was

Periyar's colleague and comrade from the founding of the Self Respect movement, wrote incisively on the terms of this articulation: "To control their women Aryans [read Brahmins] devised a system which would characterise their enemies as untouchable and which ensured that [these women] do not even touch these other men". Untouchability, as precept and practice, argued Ramanathan, was closely bound up with notions of ideological and actual control over women: "...because our forbears held women as property they had to create the phenomenon of untouchability to safeguard this property..." (*Kudi Arasu*, 12.4.31). Periyar explicated at length on this theme. He observed that only after man sought to secure property did he bring woman into his household as his wife. Not only did this enable him to enlist her services to protect his property and supply him with progeny, but it also allowed him to lay exclusive claims to her person. Woman was valorised as wife and mother and in her turn she learnt to value herself thus, securing thereby her insubordination and the unequal social system which allowed some to hoard wealth and forced others to work at producing this wealth. Periyar uncovered yet another dimension to motherhood in caste society as well. He noted that the desire to have children for the inheritance of one's name and wealth would not have assumed such significance in Hindu society if it had not been for the religious reasons that were advanced to justify this desire for progeny: "After it had become the norm for people to want children to safeguard property, brahmins who had invented fictions of heaven and hell to keep the poor from robbing the rich and to amass some of this wealth for themselves now argued that ... man must have a [male] child who would keep alive his name after death and perform his yearly obsequies" (*Viduthalai*, 11.10.48). Thus even as the real reason for wanting children faded into the recesses of communal memory, the fictitious reasons invented by brahmins came to take hold of the Hindu male imagination. Motherhood came under increasing pressure for now it was deemed significant for the reproduction of an unequal social order in this world, as well as the next!

The inscription of female sexuality within the terms of private property and caste, argued Periyar was reified by the institution of marriage⁴. Once again we find him linking up the servitude of castes low in the social hierarchy and the subordination of women: "... just as how Brahminism condemns a very large portion of the working population to shudrahood, so it has condemned women to the servitude of marriage. ...To the extent that a woman lives up to the norms of a chaste and ideal wife, to that extent she accepts and revels in her slavery" (Viduthalai 28.6.73). Marriage, for Periyar, regulated and disciplined women's familial and reproductive labour, even as it actively denied their desires and rights to a self-respecting life of their choice. Of whatever caste or class, the bond of marriage, he argued, invariably rendered woman a property and slave of her husband.

Periyar illustrated his thesis by pointing at the extant form of marriage in Hindu society: most marriages were contrived events, with families, kin and others deciding on who should marry whom. Yet marriages were considered sacred, and produced as such by rituals enunciated by a selfish priesthood and forced on a servile and ignorant laity. In this merging of the profane and sacred, no account was taken of individual desire, or love. On the other hand, such unions once made were deemed irrevocable for all time. Time and again and at many a self-respect marriage gathering Periyar would reason thus, attempting earnestly to divest marriage of its seemingly invincible sacred

⁴Periyar's powerful critique of the sacrality of marriage ought to be read in the context of another critique: of the devadasi system. Periyar and the self-respecters objected to the devadasi system for several interlinked reasons. For one, it seemed a deplorable instance of debauchery sanctified by the priest and the temple and rendered hoary by convention. Besides, the fact that devadasis were all inevitably from non brahmin castes and that they were consecrated as temple dancers, in service, not merely to the deity, but to the deity's patrons, be they brahmin priests or men of wealth irked women (as well as men) self-respecters. Then, again, the system presented itself as a desirable vocation, so much so that women who felt "dedicated" into it did not really seem to understand the vicious logic which held them captive. For Periyar, religion, caste and the claims of masculine sexuality seemed to exist in a complex and unholy articulation in the figure of the devadasi (Anaimuthu, 170 - 173). In this sense, the devadasi system seemed a telling alter to marriage. The one was a system of sexual slavery legitimised by religion, whereas the other was considered a divine union which, in practice, was accountable only to male desire and authority. The devadasi and the married wife not only mirrored each other but also the worlds in which they lived and moved about in complex ways.

aura. Periyar held that the sacrality and irrevocability of marriage in Hindu caste society affected women more adversely than men. After all, men's sexual happiness and notions of intimacy need not be and often are not fulfilled within the terms of marriage. Periyar understood this very well and wrote movingly of women trapped in loveless marriages and of widows who were forced to suppress and deny their desire and longing for love and companionship⁵. He held that to desire was human and to deny it was cruel, and against the grain of the natural world, of nature. Speaking at a self-respect marriage in the 1930's he noted that the problem with the existing practice of marriage was the sacrality it was meant to embody, and which sought to set itself up against mortal humanity. Thus, marriage, considered a spiritual union between man and woman, served to alienate, dislocate and finally elide love and sexual desire from their natural matrix and to restrict and control those pleasures and freedoms which belong to and become us as mortals living in a natural universe. Periyar observed:

The term divinity is commonly used to refer to our state of ignorance about many things. As for spirituality, it is used to describe the nothingness that may not be known through sensual apprehension. It is clear that these useless words have been imposed onto an existence whose importance and philosophical meaning inhere in the natural experience of pleasure. The only purpose of such an imposition is to render men lifeless and to enslave them thereafter.... (Quoted in Viramani, *Suyamariyadhai Thirumanam, Tthatthuvamum Varalarum* 1997, p. 32)

For Periyar, then, desire and freedom were inalienable aspects of a natural order of things, and he held sacrality and divinity to be subversive of and opposed to the very substance of mortal, human existence. As he wrote on

⁵Recalling Periyar's role in enabling her leave behind an abusive and loveless marriage, one Veeramma, who is now in her late seventies remembers how he greeted her warmly on the news of her divorce and suggested to her that, perhaps, she ought to make her former husband responsible for their children and look to lead her life, as she wished: maybe even fall in love and marry one of her own choice (Reminiscences by Veeramma in Sinthanaiyalan Pongal Malar, January 1998). .

another occasion, criticising the non-availability of divorce provisions for those who wished to separate honourably:

To discipline love and desire and direct it along particular channels and orient them towards particular persons does not seem to us to have any justification. To desire is human. To control it is to practice a kind of slavery (Anaimuthu: 153).

The denial of desire through marriage too affected men and women differently. For one, the containment of desire was achieved in and through strategies that enabled men and the institution of marriage contains women, their bodies, labour and sexuality. Secondly, women had come to accept and wear this self-denial as if it were a proud badge of honour. Periyar pointed to the practice of tying the mangalsutra or thali, as it is known in Tamil, around the woman's neck to announce the consecration of marriage and argued that this piece of thread was not very different from that hardened rope that was routinely passed through the noses of cows and buffaloes purchased at a cattle fair to drag them to their new residence. He refused to accept as valid the conventional argument that the thali was meant to keep desiring and lustful men away from the married woman and wondered why no such rule was deemed necessary for men. Why were not women to be warned against falling in love with a married man? The thali, he held, bore witness to men's bestiality, for did it not brand a woman as an object on one hand and rendered her the sole possession of her "owner" on the other? Yet, lamented Periyar, women seemed to actively desire this piece of thread, this reminder of their enslaved status, just as how shudras seemed to revel in their status as Hindus, unmindful of the fact that it was the Hindu religion which had consigned them to eternal lowness. In either instance, human persons stood to lose their self-worth and dignity and were often condemned, and condemned themselves, to a beast-like existence (*Kudi Arasu*, 13.7.30; quoted in Viramani, 1977).

It is interesting to note that Periyar aligns desire and pleasure with freedom and ignorance and an enslaved and repressed existence with, alternately, death or a primitive, bestial and low sort of existence. In this complex of ideas, death is associated with a denial of the body and a concomitant devotion to matters of the spirit and soul. For him, bestial existence is less a natural state than an unevolved one, where the play of reason is absent and freedom and dignity is as yet unavailable to the human person⁶. Nature, in this scheme of things, is a humanised Nature, and therefore not essentially antithetical to reason. Paradoxically, bestiality and spirituality are brought into a homologous relationship to each other. It is in the name of such a mortality, alive to life, freedom, desire and pleasure and naturally inclined to a life of reason and dignity that Periyar spoke to women and entreated them to abjure their enslaved lives and walk out into a free, autonomous existence. If marriage seemed to embody thwarted, deferred and elided desire and love, especially for women, ideals such as chastity and beauty on one hand and ideologies of motherhood on the other worked to persuade women to accept this legacy of a patriarchal history. Chastity represented for Periyar a perversion of the love ethic. He was scornful of the claims of beauty, on love, art and female subjectivity and argued that it further reified women's objectified familial and social status. However Periyar's most passionate critique was reserved for the social phenomenon of motherhood, which seemed to him a cunning and insidious institution that forced women into an existence of forgetfulness and anomie. Motherhood in this sense was the very obverse of female selfhood and had to be consciously rejected if women were to grow into reason, autonomy and dignity.

⁶The term 'reason' possesses a rich ambiguity in Periyar's semantic universe. Periyar sometimes used it to refer to a quintessentially human power of analysis. At other times he interpreted reason as an adjunct of an existential selfhood, along with freedom and self-respect. Reason was also advanced as a counter to faith and superstition, and considered the very obverse of folly. Reason figured as a mode of analysis as well, one which sought to laugh angrily at the play of power, cupidity and avarice which obtained in practices of authority. Periyar's was a ludic reason, at once carnivalesque in its imaginings and relentless in its quest for a truth which it was ever willing to abandon, should it be marked, by historical circumstance or superior argument, as inconsistent and relative.

Periyar's views on female chastity sought to answer those who feared that the self-respecters' support for marriages based on love would encourage sexual promiscuity amongst the young. Tracing the etymology for the Tamil word for chastity, Periyar suggested that in the early centuries of human history the word was in all probability used to refer to a universal human quality resident in the human body, unmarked by sexual coitus. Later on, as woman's status in society became subordinate, chastity was deemed a valued feminine attribute. Periyar angrily observed that chastity was a norm devised by men for women and observed that even the great Tamil poet, Tiruvalluvar, who was otherwise compassionate and fair-minded, had praised this norm. For, had he not said, "if a chaste woman who worships not God but her Husband wills the Heavens to rain, it will?" (Anaimuthu: 115-117). Periyar's denunciation of chastity represented in effect an implicit critique of masculinity, for just as he refused to accept chastity as an exclusive feminine norm, so did he reject the notion that there was something that could be considered essentially 'masculine' as different from 'feminine':

Though women get pregnant and carry children in their wombs for ten months this does not make them different from men. With respect to qualities such as courage, anger, the power to command and the will to violence, women are like men...just because men do not bear children it cannot be said that they differ from women with respect to love, peace and the ability to nurture..." (*Kudi Arasu*, 12.2.28).

Periyar's argument was clear and relentless: if women were to free themselves from the burden of chastity, masculinity as a norm ought to also be rejected and even destroyed, for masculinity, by marking certain socially valued attributes such as fearlessness and strength as masculine implicitly relegated qualities antonymic to these latter to the realm of femininity, that was dependent on masculinity for its semantic power. Thus, masculinity as concept and practice degraded women, refused their humanity and worse, enslaved them.

If chastity represented one sort of enslavement, the idea of beauty represented another, more insidious form of control which women nevertheless internalised. Periyar was particularly scornful of those literary and cultural descriptions of beauty that were given to a hyperbolic celebration of women's bodies, while almost nothing was said of their minds. He exclaimed that women were viewed as mere "pegs" on which one exhibits jewellery and men took great pride in showing off their adorned wives, as if these women were on display for the entire world to view and applaud or criticise, as the case may be (Kudi Arasu, 21.9.46; Anaimuthu: 127-130). Jewellery not only rendered the woman's body an object of material (as well as sexual) desire, but actively restricted her movements and restrained her spirit. Commenting on the practice of women piercing their ears and noses, Periyar remarked sardonically that heavy ear-rings, necklaces and nose-rings were deemed necessary wear for women, for otherwise how could women bear with patience men's anger, how else would they shrink and bear in silence the burden of men's violence? Their bejeweled bodies kept them contained, made it difficult for them to move and act and thereby robbed them of the power to resist another's authority, made them weak and ineffective and therefore stoic, tolerant of abuse and passive (Viramani: 69). Beauty was burdensome for women from another point of view as well. Women's beauty was often inscribed within notions of vulnerability that women feared to lose it, and so actively desired to pamper their bodies and cultivate them. Periyar pointed out how from childhood girls are thought to feel simultaneously proud and vulnerable about their bodies and how this led to the transformation of the latter in adult life into icons of pride:

We allow girl children to play and prance about from infancy to childhood, shower them with kisses, and nurture them without the least hint of discrimination on our part. But when such creatures attain maturity and intelligence, we worry about them in an unnatural fashion and ...constitute them as veritable dolls that are but a burden to their parents. Women thus become a matter of concern to

themselves and others and thus, having made them objects of worry, we strive to protect them, satisfy their every whim, decorate them, so that they become inert, lifeless ... wanting to be pampered and praised (*Kudi Arasu, Anaimuthu*: 127).

Periyar contended that conventional notions of female chastity and beauty fostered a pattern of expectations and needs in the woman which she assumed may be fulfilled only by the attainment of motherhood. Having been told to look beautiful and chaste, women naturally expected to use their bodies honourably and the ideology of motherhood appeared extremely attractive to them, since it allowed for a play of female desire within safe bounds, even as it enabled the woman to experience a measure of power. To Periyar, motherhood was the crucial link which secured women's sexual and social subordination and he was determined to denaturalise this complex and overdetermined experience which seemed an inalienable and essential aspect of a so-called feminine nature. On one hand:

Men's responsibilities end with getting women pregnant but all other responsibilities, beginning with the moment of pregnancy to the time a woman experiences labour (including the dangers which accrue to her health) are thereafter hers alone. Even after a child is born it is the mother who nourishes it with her blood ... If the child falls sick it is the mother who observes the necessary diet..." (*Kudi Arasu*, 1.3.31, *Anaimuthu*, 159).

On the other hand, men cannot be exempted from the responsibilities of parenthood:

...though men do not possess the (biological) means to get pregnant, it cannot be said that they possess qualities different from men, with respect to love, calm and the power of nature. If we value true equality - if there exists true love between man and woman - it is certain that all responsibilities, except that of bearing a child should be considered common to both" (*Anaimuthu*, 121).

By making parenthood rather than motherhood the decisive factor in the nurture and care of human life, Periyar sought to liberate the female body from the oppressive and suffocating realm of eternal fertility. He and his self-respecters encouraged the widespread practice of contraception and entreated women to assume sovereign control over their wombs. Articles appeared regularly in Kudi Arasu, Puratchi and other Self-Respect journals which examined the implications of the practice of birth control for women's freedom. In several women's conferences convened by Self-Respecters, resolutions urging women to secure their reproductive freedom were passed. While speaking at Self-Respect marriage gatherings, Periyar would counsel women not to make a vocation out of motherhood.

.Periyar also linked women's reproductive freedom with the question of their sexual and personal autonomy. In an article on the pioneering work of Marie Stopes and her birth control clinic, he argued forcefully that when pregnancy ceases to be a matter of choice but a condition to be endured at all costs, it not only trapped women in loveless marriages, but also prevented them from seeking out other male friendships or leaving a despised husband for one they loved (*Kudi Arasu*, 1.3.31, *Anaimuthu*, 159).

The Self-Respecters' propaganda against all those practices which demeaned women and deprived them of their full humanity proved proactive and daring in those instances where they encouraged and themselves entered into Self-Respect unions. Self-Respect marriages refused the services of brahmin priests but did not insist that these should be replaced by either non-brahmin or Tamil priests. The thali was consciously abjured by many, as was the practice of uniting in wedlock before a holy fire. The Self-Respect marriage form was premised on the idea of revocability and with the freedom to part being inscribed into the marriage ideal, no guarantees could possibly be given or taken, except of course those which were voluntarily agreed upon by the

couple in question⁷. Often these guarantees had to do with love, companionship and want and, in insisting on these as the founding premises of marriage; the Self-Respecters transformed not only the form, content and meaning of marriage in Hindu society, but also its function. Marriage ceased to be a sacral event that helped reify female sexuality and thereby secured the division of persons into high and low, even as it ceased to affect this inequality in and through the bodies of women⁸.

Self-Respect marriages then rescued women's bodies from that permeable, frontier zone which they were enjoined to inhabit through the force of custom and returned them to a space that they could inhabit and experience as their own, over which they could exert their rights - to love, desire, companionship, to work, reason, and politics. Perhaps nothing captures the spirit of Self-Respect unions as much as does the vow that man and woman undertook to announce the fact of their coming together voluntarily. When Sami Sitambaram, a Self-Respecter and future biographer of Periyar decided to wed Sivagami, a widow, the couple undertook the following vow:

⁷In fact self-respect marriages were not rendered valid in law until 1968. We will return to this at a later point in our argument. For our purposes here, what seems important is the amazing recklessness which directed Self-respecters' activities during these decades, that is, the twenties and the thirties. They did not actively seek legal guarantees and were willing to risk the ire of family, community and even fortunes in the cause of either making a Self-Respect union or encouraging others to enter into one. Self-Respect marriages which did not heed caste differences were jeered and scorned by an array of interests, including Brahmins, nationalists, non-Brahmin Saivites, believing Catholics....

⁸ Most Self-Respect marriages were public events, declarations of defiance, in a sense, since they not only dispensed with the services of a Brahmin priest, but announced the fact with great fanfare. The Self-Respect movement in fact produced a calendar with photographs of couples who had united in marriages where no priest presided over the desired rituals. The Self-respecters did not insist on the performance of rituals, except those desired by the couple themselves. Of course, Periyar and others prominent in the movement, when called to address such marriage gatherings never failed to gently and ironically upbraid couples who had displayed a measure of timidity with regard to tradition and community. But as long as the marriage was premised on clearly expressed choice and did not require a Brahmin priest to consecrate it, the Self-respecters were not overly critical. For their part, the Self-respecters transformed the space of the marriage hall or house into a public platform and would often declaim on matters close to their hearts on such occasions: from the evils of the caste system to contraception, from the desirability of atheism to the problematic piety of Gandhian nationalism!

Today our conjugal life that is based on love begins. From today I accept you, my dear and beloved comrade, as my spouse, so that I may consecrate my love and cooperation to the cause of social progress in such a manner as would not contradict your desires. (*Kudi Arasu*, 11.5.29)

The Self-Respect marriage vow bound man and woman in a relationship of equivalence as well as equality, such that neither could hope to enjoy or practice rights denied to the other. The marriage granted equal rights to the wife in respect of property as well and such rights were sometimes pronounced in the marriage vows themselves, as was the right to separation and divorce. Periyar was at all times insistent that women understand and take advantage of the promises of liberation inherent in Self-Respect unions and establish their equality with men. The right to leave an abusive marriage, the right to divorce, the right to fall in love, yet again, the right to have or not have children: women were exhorted to avail of all these rights and claim the dignity and pride due to them.

II

The Self-Respect marriage or union proved to be of catalytic significance in the Tamil country⁹. Periyar was clearly aware of the implications of this sort of a marriage and on several occasions made it clear as to why he considered it central to Self-Respect propaganda. First and foremost, Self-Respect marriages were marriages of love. They celebrated love and what Periyar often referred to as natural pleasure and further helped to delink love and desire from their association with childbirth, family and community. Desire

⁹Self-respecters were attacked in extremely scurrilous terms in magazines such as *Desabandhu*, for their seeming encouragement of sexual anarchy. Various sorts of objections were put forth to the Self-Respect mode of marriage, and it is clear that the objectors feared that such marriages would bring about the imminent destruction of caste and the concomitant emancipation of women. One *Desabandhu* correspondent accused Self-respecters of disregarding female honour and argued that if women were educated and allowed to work for their living, this would shatter the peace of the household. Besides, he went on to argue, how could women, or for those matter men, choose their spouses wisely? Could love be an honest emotion if it discarded modesty and restraint? (*Desabandhu*, 20.7.29; 17.8.29).

thus ceased to be a socially useful energy and was now re-centred in the individual. But by that same token, desire was now free to explore its own momentum, essay its own trajectories and was not expected to abide by boundaries of caste, kinship or community. In fact, love and desire were not expected to be bound by any rules whatsoever, and when two people entered into a Self-Respect union, what was deemed most important, from their point of view, as well as from the point of view of others who were supportive of them, was that the two bore a measure of responsibility for each other. The freeing of desire, then, was to signify a social value in itself and one which, over a period of time, would discover its appropriate social forms.

Secondly, Self-Respect marriages were daring in their flouting of custom and caste and openly and deliberately challenged the power of brahmins to consecrate marriages. Thirdly, Self-Respect marriages could be dissolved and re-marriage was advocated for spouses, should they wish to separate or should one of them die. Fourthly, these marriages were meant to free women from the tyranny of the household and the burden of unwanted and multiple pregnancies (*Viramani*, p. 32-43).

Periyar was sensitive to the radical implications of Self-Respect marriages, but was not, on that account, willing to surrender its ruptural impact to the exigencies of the moment at hand. While at times, he attempted to strike a conciliatory tone and entreated the public to see the Self-Respect marriage as roughly equivalent to older forms of marriage and as being different only in how it chose to characterise its meaning and purpose, at other times, he declared and quite vehemently that the Self-Respect marriage had no precedents in history and cannot be anchored in older practices. Speaking at a wedding in the 1943, he carefully but quite clearly distanced himself from those who spoke before him and who had sought to create an atavistic glow, rather an aura, around Self-Respect marriages (*Viramani*, 60-61). At such times when he wished to preserve for his Self-Respect unions their radical dimension, he located the institution of marriage in evolutionary time and

argued that forms of marriage will and must change with time. Thus, he observed that, perhaps, there may come a time when a man and woman will actually live together as friends, lovers and comrades without really attracting adverse or even curious attention. However, he was quick to add, such transformations would be effected only if women gave themselves up entirely to a self-respecting, rational and truly liberated existence (Viramani, 58). For Periyar, the lacerative aspects of human relationships acquired worth and resonance only if they enabled women lead dignified, free lives of their choice. It is not surprising then that often times he exclaimed that if two women could be claimed for the cause of Self-Respect, this was equivalent to persuading ten men to propagandise the virtues of the self-same cause.

It is clear that for Periyar the singular importance of Self-Respect marriages lay in the promises of freedom they held out for women. For a woman who made a Self-Respect marriage, the world suddenly seemed large and full of possibilities. She could take part in meetings that did not leave her out, in conferences where women like her spoke and debated on a range of matters which concerned them as women and as members of a social order they obviously wished to stand on its head. Such encounters with the outside world brought her in contact with people who did not abide so much by ascriptive rules of conduct and interaction as they did by those norms of civil behaviour which required men and women to mingle freely, across castes and creeds and in a spirit of equality and mutuality. Most importantly, for women in Self-Respect unions, love and companionship translated in real life into a disregard for convention, whether this had to do with domesticity, sexuality or work. Many Self-Respect couples worked as full-time propagandists and movement-builders, did not mind constant travel, dislocations of home and careers and endured a fair measure of privation and penury. For women, this meant that distinctions between home and the world could be easily fudged and even erased and many women in fact did attempt such an erasure: in their thought, in their work in the movement and in the political choices they made. For instance, Neelavathi, a prominent speaker and writer in the Self-

Respect Movement, attempted an analysis of women's work at home, using the socialist category of labour, thus translocating a set of concepts conventionally used to examine social production to a new context¹⁰. Such a translation of concepts was facilitated of course by the fact that women were now visible in the public sphere and their domestic identity was not really central to their sense of the self. Neelavathi was a prominent speaker on Self-Respect platforms, an ardent feminist who wished to set up an autonomous centre for women and a thinker who could write as eloquently about women under fascism as she could about the Sarda Act. Thus even as she sought to render domestic labour a crucial component in the production of social goods, she came to embody, in her own life and work, a transformed role for women. Fighting for love and against forced marriages, upholding the claims of their intelligence and reason against caste and the faith which justified its existence, women self-respecters viewed themselves as the citizens of the future, as veritable harbingers of the millennium. This millennial urge informed the movement's perceptions of itself to a great degree and Periyar and others often proclaimed themselves as revolutionaries who not only wished to stand caste society on its head, but who were doing so, in the knowledge that no one or no movement, since the time of the Buddha had attempted such a thing. For women, it is clear; this millennial imagery translated itself as an invitation to citizenship, to a community of comrades. Now, the question arises, and one which we will attempt to address: did the Self-Respect movement manage to successfully negotiate women's passage from wifedom-motherhood into citizenship? It seems that two intertwined histories are relevant here: the history of those ideas and practices inaugurated by the Self-Respect movement and the history of events that re-organised these ideas and practices. For our purpose, we will limit ourselves

¹⁰ Neelavathi observed in this context, that if one were to leave aside the very rich and privileged amongst women, who lolled about all day long and idled their time away, the others worked - not merely at housework, but in "factories, hospitals, in the countryside... (in) tailoring, weaving, construction, vending..." Women were however denied the dignity of being workers, since society held that work was the mark of a man. Thus whatever women laboured at became theirs by destiny. For Neelavathi, it was important for women as well society to acknowledge their productive worth; that is women were to be considered workers and accorded respect - and due wages, even for housework. (Puratchi, 29-4-34).

to a consideration of the one seminal idea we have been discussing so far: the idea of the Self-Respect union between man and woman.

As we have remarked earlier the Self-Respecters sought to reclaim love and desire from within the matrix of the Hindu marriage sacrament and to invest these with a liberative significance. This reclaiming was complex and somewhat problematic, for though Self-Respecters succeeded in constituting love and desire as natural, self-validating emotions, they yet felt obliged to restore to either, social value, though of a radically different kind. In fact the institution of a Self-Respect marriage ritual was part of this attempt to grant a released and potentially anarchic emotion a coherent and viable embodiment. Periyar, for his part, was unwilling to define the content and substantive meaning of such a ritual - he preferred the term contract or agreement to ritual - and was content to remark that a Self-Respect marriage was one based on voluntary choice, executed by both man and woman on a rational basis. He often resorted to evolutionary logic to justify his essential ambivalence on this matter of defining a Self-Respect marriage and declared that since marriage forms would change with the season, it was impossible to produce a stable definition of such a form. (*Viramani*, 47). Yet, to underscore the socially radical aspects of the Self-Respect marriage, Periyar was at times obliged to lay down a few ground rules. Thus he conceded that a Self-Respect marriage was one conducted without a brahmin priest. He also re-defined the "rational" elements in such marriages to mean those aspects which were compatible with the power of one's reason. That is reason, being limitless, was also on that account elastic enough and could be accommodated even within a narrow perspective of ideas and emotions. Thus some could be rationally persuaded to abandon the tying of the thali, while others would not settle even for this (*Viramani*, 96). When pressed for a definition, Periyar suggested that a marriage that did not comprise rituals which were contrary to reason and Self-Respect would qualify as a Self-Respect marriage. Such a marriage would necessarily dispense with the services of a brahmin priest and his holy fire.

What is significant about these attempts (and failures) at defining the Self-Respect marriage form is the gradual re-figuration of its founding premises. Thus love and desire, rather than being constitutive elements to the definition are encrypted within a rational and practical text, while women's subjectivity, so central to the very institution of Self-Respect marriages is made subordinate to an ostensible larger social purpose, the legitimisation of a cultural practice that rejected the mediations of a brahmin priest. Such a re-figuring of key Self-Respect concepts so as to underscore their social relevance proved tendentious because of the very nature of the elements being re-figured. When love and desire are declared central to social relationships which had conventionally been grounded on other considerations, such as kinship, caste, community and class, they automatically acquire an overdetermined social value, in that they come to mark the limits of social daring and transgression. One can understand better the threat implicit in this daring and transgression to the social order they obviously wish to challenge, if we compare Periyar's doctrine of love to Gandhi's.

In the semantic and cultural world of Gandhi, love was a deeply individual emotion. It was often viewed as a sort of moral force that could transform and render empathetic human consciousness and behaviour. While Gandhi claimed love was an ancient and universal emotion, his valuing of it in terms of its effect on individual will rendered it an emotion that coaxed the individual into communion with himself? It was believed that such a communion would yield a moment of knowledge, even of remorse, and enable the individual to act on it. What was considered crucial to an ethically grounded act was not the individual's engagement with the stubborn Otherness of a world he confronted in all its differences, but his ineffable, inner voice, the whispers of conscience that directed him to act in the world but in fidelity to a felt and known truth. This meant that the person seized of love was not expected to be particularly mindful of the context in which he had to act and could, and many times did, seek to embody his love for his

fellow creatures in acts of piety and altruism. Often these latter expressed his sense of what the suffusing emotion demanded, rather than what was required by the conjuncture and context at hand. It was thus several hundred well-meaning and sincere caste Hindus took up untouchability abolition work, without really having come to terms with the essential cruelty and inhumanity of the caste system and without having to give up caste in matters of marriage or in their own homes. Periyar's invocation of love conceptualised it as a right, as something that ought to be expressed, struggled with and fought for. In a society that so clearly and systematically denied peoples their humanity, love could not be assumed as a universal human quality that only needed to be awakened. Love had to be claimed, engaged with, as one would with a natural force and aligned not so much with empathy and altruism as with reason and Self-Respect. Unless that self-loathing endemic to caste society was replaced by self-worth, the love that it ought to claim as a right would be a vapid and ultimately meaningless emotion.

Yet this posed other problems for Periyar and the Self-Respecters, since emotions, such as love and desire are constitutively anarchic, they could not be rendered socially coherent unless re-defined and re-cast in institutional terms. As we have argued earlier, the institution of a Self-Respect marriage ritual was in itself an acknowledgement of both the impossibility and the need for endowing these transgressive emotions with a suitably social form. What however proved viable and allowed for such an institutional translation was the notion of love as a right. Now, in Periyar's lexicon, love was both an expression of freedom and pleasure as well as a right. However, when love had to be embodied in socially relevant forms, its "rights" aspect acquired prominence. Love-as-a-right could demand and obtain a guarantee of its eventual realisation, especially since a series of other rights flowed from this primary one. Thus one could seek to uphold one's right to a marriage beyond caste lines and through rituals of one's choice, and thereby a measure of

social and political space was opened up which enabled the self-respecters to attempt a resolution of their original problem.

The issue of re-figuring and institutionalisation is however not one that can be understood in terms of the internal history of an idea and must be mapped onto and rendered homologous with historical events, which in a direct as well as tangential fashion altered the history of ideas in the Self-Respect movement, as well as the latter's fortunes. Thus we need to ask: what were the social and political events and pressures which called for and perhaps hastened the process of institutionalisation and how did this latter alter and re-cast the content of what it set out to capture within its own terms.

III

The historical moment that catapulted the Self-Respect movement onto the political arena, a space it had shunned since its days of origin, was the moment of the anti-Hindi agitations of 1937-39. These agitations begun as a series of protests against Madras ' Congress government (elected to office after elections were held under the Government of India Act of 1935) which sought to make the learning of Hindi compulsory in schools in the Presidency area. Periyar and the Self-Respecters were in the forefront of these agitations since they viewed the imposition of Hindi as a strategic expression of a Brahminical will to control the minds of non brahmin castes. The premier of Madras, Rajagopalachari had suggested that Hindi would enable the Hindus know their scriptural lore better, and earned the ire of the self-respecters who were left with no doubt as to his intentions. They argued in response that if one needed to learn another language, one may as well learn English that was after all the language of science and commerce than read Hindi that would only encourage the spread of Brahminical superstition and reinforce the brahmin's sacral as well as secular power (*Kudi Arasu*, 15.5.38)¹¹.

¹¹The self-respecters considered Hindi a mere stand-in for Sanskrit. In the general discourse of self-respect, Sanskrit embodied an entire system of values through which the non-brahmin peoples of the Tamil country had been enslaved in times past. In fact Tamil had long been the carrier of a spirit of resistance to Sanskrit (Se Krishnan, 1984) and the imposition of Hindi

The anti-Hindi agitations involved others besides the Self-Respecters. These included Tamil scholars and enthusiasts, poets and songsters, Congressmen, Saivite pietists who viewed with alarm this veiled attack on their mother tongue which to them was the very form of Lord Shiva himself, adi dravidas, workers, students, socialists, women and a host of others, all of whom, schooled in nearly two decades of Self-Respect propaganda saw in this attempt to make their children study Hindi a veritable threat to their identity as self-respecting Tamils. The agitations proved to be national-popular in their appeal and rendered increasingly attractive an evolving Dravidian-Tamil nationalism. Though, Periyar and the Self-Respecters were wary of plunging the agitations into a bout of atavism and nostalgia, they found themselves with the historic responsibility of defining and rendering coherent their vision of the good society within those terms outlined by a history, which, to be sure, they had helped to make, but which now loomed over them, compelling them to bend to its imperatives. The non-brahmin millennium which Periyar and his self-respecters had worked so hard to bring into being seemed imminent and they lost no time in calling into existence this anticipated community, now aptly characterised as Dravida Nadu. Of course the Self-Respecters were insistent that Dravida Nadu was but another name for a caste-free utopia¹². But history began to work its effects out in curious and contradictory ways. Flushed with the pride of having resisted an alien language and looking to a past they wished to welcome in as the future, several Tamils began to delineate the cultural and social contours of the Tamil nation. It is not surprising that one of the many monographs to do with a characteristic Tamil way of life that were published during this period had to do with the quintessential Tamil form of marriage.

proved to be one more conjunctural event in the history of the Tamil language; but it proved to be one that galvanised an entire society into identifying itself with its language and the history embodied in it. The self-respecters were less enamoured of the past glories of Tamil, either as language or as history and were more concerned with this most recent expression of caste power that sought to rationalise itself through an appeal to learning and knowledge.

¹²Dr Ambedkhar visited Madras in 1940 and in the course of a conversation with Periyar exclaimed that he was so impressed with the achievements of the Self-Respect movement that he would love see the whole of India transformed into Dravidasthan! It is clear that he understood the semantic as well as symbolic significance of the appellation 'Dravida' and did not consider it a marker of a distinctive culture, as it was of a distinctive social order.

Titled 'Tamizhar Tirumanna Nool' (The Tamil Marriage Book) and written by a Tamil scholar, Rajamanickam Pillay, this amazing piece of text attempted to recover for the Tamils their own marriage forms. Basing his evidence on his reading of Sangam literature, Rajamanickam Pillay argued that the old world Tamils neither sought out a brahmin priest, nor kindled a holy fire at the time of the marriage ceremony. Their rituals were simple, unostentatious and merely involved the giving away of the bride and the bridegroom tying the thali around the neck of the bride. The various elements involved in the simple rituals that accompanied the bedecking of the bride and the entrusting of her to her husband were of the earth: grain, flowers and water. The bride and groom shared a marriage bed the very night of the wedding and thereby consummated as well as consecrated their union. Rajamanickam Pillay pointed out that the ancient Tamil marriage ceremony was brief, inexpensive and functional. Besides, it did not require either bride or groom to reveal their lineage and neither was the former entreated to remain steadfast to her husband, as if her chastity could be in any doubt! On the other hand, the chastity of the marriage bed was written into the ceremony itself that no special entreaties were required of the bride to honour this important norm. Rajamanickam Pillay outlined a marriage ritual for contemporary Tamil society as well, thereby skillfully adapting the aesthetics of marriage to be found in hoary classics to the needs of the political present of the Tamils, a present marked by their emergence, rather re-emergence as a sovereign national people. Significantly, the model ritual which he suggested, while incorporating details found in the old texts, comprised new elements as well, such as the marriage vow, which was however different for man and woman. While the groom was enjoined to entreat his bride to lead with him a life in the glorious tradition of the Tamils, she was entrusted with the responsibility of accepting and expressing her desire to abide by his wish (paraphrased from original text, quoted in *Viramani*, 122-131).

Rajamanickam Pillay's little book won the unstinted and enthusiastic approbation of Tamil scholars and language zealots, all of whom expressed in

euphoric terms their joy at his re-discovery of their shared traditions for them. The Tamil mode of marriage was hailed for its simplicity, sparseness and because it did not require a brahmin priest. In fact the entire ritual was obviously pre-Aryan, as some of the scholars were quick to point out, and therefore worthy of importing into the present, when contemporary Aryans were attempting to cheat the Tamil people of their birthright of language and the culture and history embodied in it (*Viramani*, 122-149).

While it is difficult to ascertain whether the enthusiasm over the book translated itself into marriages on the model suggested in it, it certainly announced a vision of community that was quite distinctive. Self-Respecters were uneasy members of this Tamil sodality, unused as they were to a language and practice suffused with nostalgia and so obviously dependent for its rhetorical and symbolic flourishes on a sentimental and romantic vision of female sexuality. Yet, this re-marking of the female body along conventional lines was already in place as the anti-Hindi agitations proceeded apace, and clearly the Self-Respecters could do very little about it. For instance, Tamil was hailed as a sad and abused mother, even imaged, in one instance, as Draupadi whose honour was being ravished by pro-Hindi zealots (*Kudi Arasu*, 26.10.37; 19.12.37). Tamil men were exhorted to remember and act heroically on their Mother's plight and prepare for prolonged War against Hindi (*Kudi Arasu*, 29.5.38).

What we have in these instances of land and woman being made to signify on and for each other is a language of the nation, replete with both maternal and military rhetoric. Women's power was thus invoked in ways that interpellated them as guardians of home and hearth and as purveyors of a sacrifice of "sons" whose heroism was expected to evoke in them pride as well as sorrow. Women now were citizens of a particular sort, for whom the idea of a freed nation proved more enabling than the idea of a freed womanhood, as several hundreds of them courted arrest during the agitations with babes in their arms. What was of course subsumed in the feverish anomie of the times was

that certain anarchism, that reckless disdain for the orthodoxies of past and present almost routinely exhibited by the Self-Respecters, in short, the language of desire and love was drowned out in the language of patriotic zeal. Of course, Periyar and the Self-Respecters continued to speak out against all those social disabilities suffered by women, but clearly the moment of women was already in the past. This becomes amply clear when we examine the terms that structured debates on Self-marriages in the 1950's and 1960's.

The 1950's witnessed the emergence of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) into political visibility. The DMK was the brain-child of C.N. Annadurai who broke away from the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK). The DK comprised members of the erstwhile Justice party, the first non brahmin political formation in the Madras Presidency as well as Self-Respecters and was formed in 1944. The DMK was founded in 1949, when Annadurai and a few others left the DK due to differences that had emerged in that party on the eve of August 15, 1947, over the question of India's independence. The DMK viewed itself as a party committed to keeping alive the memory of a hoary Tamil past, even as it distanced itself politically from Periyar's insistence that only a free and sovereign Dravida Nadu would allow the Tamil people lead a life of Self-Respect and enable their progress in diverse fields. However DMK leaders were sensitive to the rhetorical power of nationalist discourse and deployed a language of Dravidian-Tamil pride and national honour skillfully, both to signify their loyalty to a heritage that had borne them into history and to challenge the rule of Congress in Madras. The DK under the leadership of Periyar functioned pretty much as the Self-Respect movement had and was given to defiance, only now that defiance was directed against the fictions of all-Indian nationalism and the nation-state which embodied this nationalism. However, when K. Kamaraj, a Congressman became Chief Minister of Madras in 1954, the DK decided to support him, without giving up its Tamil Nationalist stance, since it discovered in this sensible and astute non brahmin leader a man with an admirable commitment to the non brahmin

commonweal. In the 1950's, then, Dravidian-Tamil aspirations acquired new structural constituents: in the form of government that existed in Tamil Nadu as well as in the populist nationalist rhetoric of the DMK.

Given these conditions, questions of social and gender justice were bound to be discussed either in terms of law and governance or in a language that made much of their symbolic, rather than substantive significance. It must also be kept in mind that the legacy of the Self-Respect movement was a sort of non brahmin commonsense that was wary and even openly contemptuous of brahmins and brahmin pretensions to exclusivity and this, instead of provoking Tamil brahmins to re-examine the lives they lead and the values they upheld, served to freeze them in their hidebound history. Whenever matters of social import were debated, Tamil brahmins contributed their own into forcing the argument along lines which foregrounded the brahmin-non-brahmin contradiction over and above everything else. This meant that all those non brahmins in office and out of it, active in the public sphere and not of it were pushed to constantly re-pose questions of caste, authority and power. Nothing illustrates these matters as well as the fate that befell Self-Respect marriages in Tamil Nadu.

IV

In 1953, while passing strictures in a Partition suit, two (brahmin) judges of the Madras High Court ruled that the Self-Respect marriage referred to in the suit was solemnised in a manner contrary to both custom and law and was therefore invalid¹³. The judges also ruled that the children born out of such an ad hoc union, as they referred to it, cannot be considered legitimate heirs and could only be accorded the status of children borne by the concerned person's mistress. Writing on this judgment seven years later, Periyar noted that the judges of the Madras High Court had in effect confirmed the parties to the suit in their pre-given status as shudras, for had they not drawn inferences from Yagnavalkya and the Brahma Sutra to proclaim what was due

¹³The information in this section of the paper is drawn from Viramani (1997). Obviously its arguments are tentative and require further research and refinement.

to shudras and what was not, by way of social rights, and applied it to the individuals in question? (This, in spite of the fact that one of the parties to the suit had claimed vaishya status, being of the Nattukottai Chetti caste!) In 1954, in the wake of this notorious judgment, The Hindu Non-Confirming Marriage (Registration) Bill was sought to be passed in the Madras Legislature. The Bill was meant to validate those Self-Respect marriages that were already in place but contained nothing whatsoever about the legal status of future marriages. Eventually the Bill was given up on the argument that the 1872 Special Marriage Act had been updated and passed and this could be taken advantage of by those who wished to legalise Self-Respect marriages.

Periyar and others debated the question of self-marriages and the Law at length during this period and after. In 1957 the DMK contested polls for the first time and 15 of its members were elected to the Legislature. The DMK's election manifesto had promised to enact a law that would define and validate Self-Respect marriages and elected DMK members were vociferous in their demand for such a law. However, the Congress ministry in power refused to countenance these demands and fended them off with the argument that since there existed no clear-cut definitions of what Self-Respect marriages were all about and how they ought to be performed, it was difficult to frame a law. Periyar sought to answer this query, and in doing so unpacked some of those legal and ethical quandaries that lay at the heart of the practice of Self-Respect marriages.

Periyar granted that Self-Respect marriages were constitutively indefinable, since there existed any number of variations of such unions and each claimed to be different from a conventional marriage, and announced itself to have been guided by the play of reason alone. In a sense this reflected on the phenomenon of the rational itself which knew no boundaries, save those it set for itself. This surely ought to be clear, argued Periyar, to those who were familiar with practices of faith, which were equally resistant to simple

definitions, being infinitely different. Yet, since the question of definition had come up, he needed to address it. Periyar pointed out that Self-Respect marriages had been in vogue in the Tamil country for over thirty years and over this period of time, such marriages had come to be distinguished from other sorts of marriages by their excluding the brahmin priest, his holy fire and his sacred texts. Surely a law which recognised the validity of marriages which abjured these latter could be formulated? As for the Congress ministry's suggestion that the Self-Respecters could register their marriages under the Special Marriage Act and there by validate them, this was simply not acceptable. For one, there existed no provisions to register such marriages in most villages and towns. If it was deemed compulsory to register marriages, just as at present it is compulsory to register births and deaths, he could accept the logic of such a solution. For this would entail every sort of marriage to be registered. However government would not consider such a suggestion, since it obviously feared that such a mandatory provision would desacralise marriages!

After having responded to the specific points raised by those who did not wish to legalise or legislate on Self-Respect marriages, Periyar wryly pointed out that, such discussions notwithstanding, Self-Respect marriages continued to be performed. Even those who feared their heirs would stand to disinherit property entered into Self-Respect unions and then made out wills that bequeathed property at the discretion of the individual in question (Viduthalai, 2.9.59, quoted in Viramani, 98). For Periyar, the debate seemed, at one level, entirely gratuitous and somewhat absurd, since it could neither alter history nor forestall the future. At another level, he was deeply concerned that those who entered into Self-Respect unions would on that account be made to suffer civil and social disabilities. In the heyday of the movement, many endured such travails, and no one even raised the question of discrimination at the hands of the law and the state. But the Madras High Court judgment had set a legal precedent for the law to actively discriminate against those who had made Self-Respect marriages and Periyar had to

balance out his faith and knowledge that as long as human beings continued to fall in love and wished to marry on their own choice, Self-Respect marriages would happen with his felt responsibility to a project his movement had initiated. Besides as a realist he also probably took into account the fact that the movement was not what it was in the past and what it wished to defend at present was markedly different from what it desired to uphold then. This present, as was evident from the Madras high court judgment, was yet captive to the brahmin's discourse on caste and therefore it seemed important to challenge the persistence of brahminical hegemony.

Thus, in an article written a few months later, we find Periyar contemplating the possibility of legislation. A DMK member of the Legislature had moved yet another but more radical bill on the matter that sought to validate past as well as future marriages and insisted on their registration. Periyar was happy with the bill but sceptical as to the registration clause. He argued that either all marriages are registered or the Self-Respect marriage be granted validity on its own terms and not on the terms of the Special Marriage Act. Periyar viewed the Self-Respect marriage as an alternative to and therefore an equivalent of the existing and legally valid Hindu forms of marriage and if these latter could be considered well within the bounds of the law, even if they were not registered, then the Self-Respect marriage could also be granted the same legal courtesy. Once more we find Periyar being defiant for he observed yet again that whatever experts may say Self-Respect marriages would and did continue to take place. Periyar was however more keenly aware than before of the need for legislation, since this alone could fix a practice that had been in existence as a custom and thereby secures its continued availability and existence. But he was also aware of how much would be lost, therefore, for we find him concluding his article in this instance on the rather sad and ironic note, that unless new marriage laws that radically re-defined the very nature of marriage were formulated, such problems would persist (*Viduthalai*, 3.1.60).

Periyar was moved to think about a new law on Self-Respect marriages and marriage in general, because he felt that the Self-Respect marriage as it existed could no more serve as an alternative that only needed its appropriate socially sanctioned forms. For now it had become commonplace for many, especially those in the cinema world to enter into irresponsible relationships and proclaim, when questioned, that they had entered into Self-Respect unions. This meant that the Self-Respect marriage form was being casually detached from its original, liberative context, where love and desire had signified great and irrepressible human emotions and being called to serve the promiscuous games that those in the tinsel world liked to play (ibid.). Reading between the lines one is able to discern here a certain resignation of the spirit; as if Periyar had realised that the attractions and appeal of Self-Respect marriages required a concomitant practice of ethics, an ethics did not shirk the responsibility of working through the radical social implications of such marriages. In the absence of such a practice of ethics, the kind that had informed Self-Respect work in the 1920's, 30's and even the 1940's, and the displacement of the meaning of Self-Respect marriages onto the realm of sexual convenience, he was forced to re-examine the terms of the marriage itself. He could no longer envision it in terms of love and desire, for these emotions were themselves resonant with other meanings now, and besides, what was important was to preserve for posterity as much of the original content and impulse of the Self-Respect marriage as was possible. What had survived the past three decades was a profound non brahmin sensibility, a commonsense that wished to consolidate its ideological gains and if a marriage without a priest could be deemed as valid as one with a priest, then as far as Periyar was concerned this was no small victory, for it meant that the sacred element in Hindu society was being challenged and edged out¹⁴.

¹⁴An amendment to the Hindu Marriage Act was finally brought about in 1968, after the Madras Legislature had unanimously passed a bill that sought to render valid Self-Respect marriages. The DMK government sworn to power in the 1967 elections made much of this and pledged the amended Act as a gift to Periyar. The re-inscription of a radical practice as a consecrated gift was of course supremely ironical in that it underscored the transformation of a ruptural event into an institution guarded by the State itself.

What is of course surprising and disappointing is the complete absence of women from these debates, both as points of reference and as participants¹⁵. As we had pointed out the anti-Hindi agitations proved to be a turning point for gender politics in the Self-Respect movement and though Periyar and others continued to speak up for the cause of gender justice, the woman question was obviously valued for its symbolic rather than substantive worth. Besides, the politicisation of the Self-Respect movement's energies and the replacement of its lively, metaphoric imagination with one that was synecdochic domesticated its concerns. As far as the woman question was concerned, it meant that the rich, complex and resonant debates of those past decades were being substituted by the language of the law. This does not mean that there exists an obvious, inevitable and antagonistic relationship between movements in process and their legal and institutional embodiment. This relationship is actually more dialectical than it seems and the vigour and strength of the dialectic take their cue from the conjuncture in which the latter functions as well as from the actors who work to render it functional. The Self-Respecters had to abide by a history that proposed to them very limited choices and they sacrificed some of the more crucial elements of their ideology of Self-Respect. As long as the movement remained alive, even these choices did not prove limiting. But once, the movement lost its momentum and its ideologues and leaders lost their powers of persuasion, the former was deprived of its images and metaphors, its adventurous imaginings and most of all its millenarian edge. The marginalisation of the woman question now became complete as the

¹⁵ Women continued to be and to this day are active in the Dravidian Kazhagam, though their presence is modest and their voices, except for a few, are muted. During the period we are concerned with, women were as much a part of the party as before, but gender concerns had ceased to be central to the politics as well as the identity of the Non Brahminism and Dravidian nationalism that the Dravidian Kazhagam espoused. The anti-Hindi agitations had marked women as national citizens who bore the traces of the nation on their bodies, whether as mothers, or as comrades in the struggle to free Mother Tamil. Such a marking came to stay and entered the realm of commonsense through the DMK's re-figurations of the Tamil nation as youthful, virginal and pure. This imagery proved seductive and has all but replaced the earlier female images, of those whom Periyar entreated to take control of and exert sovereignty over their wombs.

movement gave itself up to the symbolic languages of nationalism, a nationalism that did not even attempt to speak to its female subject.

