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A Study on Atheism and Periyar with Special Reference to Tamilnadu

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ABSTRACT

Atheism, an ideological stance rooted in philosophy, is defined by the absence or denial of belief in deities or gods. In contrast to theism, which affirms the existence of divine beings, atheists adopt a sceptical viewpoint, prioritising reason, empirical evidence, and critical thinking as the fundamental basis for comprehending the world. Emerging from a rich tapestry of ancient philosophical traditions and influenced by both historical and contemporary factors, atheism coexists harmoniously with various religious beliefs in India. Periyar's philosophy, centred around his atheistic beliefs, sought to confront social inequalities, caste-based discrimination, and religious orthodoxy. Periyar contended that superstitions stemming from religious beliefs hindered societal progress and functioned as tools of oppression. The ascent of the internet and social media has enabled the interchange of ideas, enabling atheists to connect, exchange information, and form communities beyond geographical limitations. This paper focuses mainly on the public perception of atheism and the relevance of Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu. The data was collected from 207 respondents in and around Chennai. The findings suggest that there is a need for awareness about atheism in rural areas while respondents in the rural areas are much aware about Periyar's ideologies. Irrespective of residential status, awareness about atheism, the respondents are of the opinion that atheism and religion can coexist in the society. The results underscore the significance of recognizing the widespread prevalence of inclusivity and mutual respect for diverse worldviews within distinct residential communities.

Keywords*: Atheism, Periyar, Scepticism, Public Perception, Inclusivity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Atheism in India constitutes a diverse and ever-evolving facet of the nation's sociocultural fabric. Emerging from a rich tapestry of ancient philosophical traditions and influenced by both historical and contemporary factors, atheism coexists harmoniously with various religious beliefs in this heterogeneous country. During the mediaeval period, atheistic or agnostic ideas found expression in various philosophical traditions.

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The Bhakti movement, while predominantly devotional, occasionally featured voices critical of ritualism and questioned established religious norms. For example, Basava, the revered founder of the Lingayat sect in South India, stressed the importance of devotion to Lord Shiva. Although the Lingayat movement maintained a theistic orientation, it explicitly rejected conventional Hindu caste distinctions and rituals. Basava's emphasis on establishing an egalitarian and immediate connection with the divine could be perceived as a departure from certain traditional theistic norms. His prioritisation of inner spirituality, critique of ritualistic practices, and promotion of direct communion with the divine showcase a nuanced approach rather than a clear departure into outright atheism.

Periyar's philosophy, centred around his atheistic beliefs, sought to confront social inequalities, caste-based discrimination, and religious orthodoxy. By eschewing conventional religious practices, he championed rationalism and atheism as means to advance social justice. Periyar contended that superstitions stemming from religious beliefs hindered societal progress and functioned as tools of oppression. He placed faith in the potency of reason and scientific thought to free individuals from the constraints of caste hierarchy and religious doctrines. Atheism, for Periyar, was intertwined with the fight for women's rights, challenging patriarchal norms perpetuated by religious traditions. He championed a secular worldview, striving for a society devoid of religious biases, where individuals were treated equally regardless of their caste or religious affiliations. Atheism served as a driving force behind Periyar's political activism, influencing the formation of the Dravidar Kazhagam and shaping its agenda for social and political change.

Notable individuals such as Periyar in the southern regions and social reformers like Gora in the northern parts have actively endorsed atheism as a tool for social reform, confronting caste-based discrimination and promoting rationalism. The rise of urbanisation and improved educational access has played a role in amplifying the presence of atheistic ideas, particularly among the younger and more educated demographic.

The ascent of the internet and social media has enabled the interchange of ideas, enabling atheists to connect, exchange information, and form communities beyond geographical limitations. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, atheism in India may encounter societal hurdles and stigma, given the profound intertwining of the cultural fabric with religious practices.

(A) Objective:

- To understand the familiarity of the public with the concept of atheism.

- To understand the public agreeability on Periyar's statement that religious practices and beliefs were used to control the oppressed classes.

- To know whether atheism and religion can peacefully coexist in society.

- To analyse the extent to which atheism, as influenced by Periyar, challenged traditional religious norms and practices in South India.

- To know the prevalence of Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu.

- To understand the perception of atheism in a locality.

(B) Review of literature:

Ryan T Cragun (2016) explores the concept of non religion and atheism from a social perspective. This was a descriptive study conducted through surveys and interviews. The findings suggest that the atheists are more liberal and/or progressive in their political views.

T. J. Coleman et al. (2014) in their research aims to explore how the non-believers self identify. The methodology for this research was both qualitative and quantitative. From this research, six types of non-belief were observed.

V. Geetha (1998) seeks to explore the enduring ethical dimensions of Periyar's life work, moving beyond the often politically charged perspectives through which his vision is typically examined. The goal is to scrutinize this ethical foundation and derive potential insights for contemporary feminist discourse and activism. The methodology involves a nuanced analysis of Periyar's life work, concentrating on facets that transcend mere political interpretations. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that draws from history, philosophy, and social sciences, the examination aims to reveal the lasting ethical dimensions that resist complete assimilation into political contexts. The findings illuminate the abiding ethical framework within Periyar's life work, challenging a simplistic alignment with everyday politics. These results underscore the enduring nature of Periyar's ethical perspective, providing valuable insights beyond the confines of political interpretations.

Karthick Ram Manohar (2019) aims to scrutinise the stance of Periyar EV Ramasamy, a South Indian rationalist and anti-caste leader, toward religion. This includes a focus on his view of Hinduism as a fundamental source of degradation for the non-Brahmin community, with particular attention to the Dalits. The objective is to establish parallels between Periyar and the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, delving into their radical interpretations of religion and its impact on social power dynamics. The methodology employed centers around a comparative

analysis of the viewpoints of Periyar and Bakunin, specifically exploring their radical readings of religion and its intricate connection to social power. The paper concludes by suggesting that interpreting Periyar within the anarchist tradition could provide novel insights for comprehending his political ideology.

S. Sridevi (2020) aims to investigate the roles played by religion in society during the nineteenth century in Europe and the early twentieth century in Tamil Nadu. The methodology employed includes a comparative analysis of the ideologies and perspectives of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Periyar. The paper aims to present the results of this comparative analysis, emphasising the similarities between Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Periyar in their approaches to examining the roles of religion in society.

Sithardhanan et al., (2018) aims to explore Periyar E.V.R's viewpoints and contributions to the advancement of women throughout his extensive political career, spanning from its inception to his passing at the age of ninety-four. The focus is on illuminating how socio-religious reform movements, including those led by Periyar, aimed to disrupt societal norms, address legal inequalities, and confront customs that suppressed women. The methodology employed includes a historical analysis of Periyar E.V.R's political trajectory, with a specific emphasis on his involvement in socio-religious reform movements and advocacy for women's empowerment. The findings underscore Periyar E.V.R's notable role in advancing women's empowerment in India. By delving into his political career and association with socio-religious reform movements, the study showcases how he took a leading stance in challenging oppressive laws, customs, and social norms that marginalised women.

Manoharan et al., (2020) This article seeks to counter criticisms directed at Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, specifically those asserting his purported negligence of the Dalit question or his preference for intermediate castes over Dalits. The study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of Periyar's perspective on Dalit empowerment within the broader context of the Dravidian project. Employing a systematic approach, the methodology involves scrutinizing Periyar's works to analyze his stance on the Dalit question, with a particular focus on his interactions with B.R. Ambedkar and the influence of Ambedkar's ideas on Periyar. Contrary to claims of indifference, the findings underscore that Periyar considered Dalit empowerment and liberation as integral components of the Dravidian project. Through an examination of Periyar's primary works and engagement with Ambedkar, the study illustrates his unwavering commitment to challenging the caste hierarchy and advocating for the empowerment of Dalits.

Kalidas et al., (2018) aims to delve into the diverse social ideologies adopted by Thanthai

Periyar throughout his life, spanning from his early years to his passing. The research seeks to unravel Periyar's perspectives on religion, rationalism, opposition to the class system, untouchability, women's rights, and liberation. Additionally, the study explores his stances on various socio-religious restructuring movements that emerged in 19th-century India. The methodology involves a comprehensive examination of Thanthai Periyar's life and the evolution of his social ideologies. The findings highlight Thanthai Periyar's multifaceted contributions to societal transformation, emphasising his pivotal role in challenging the segregation of suppressed communities within temples, promoting rationalism, opposing the class system, and advocating for women's rights and liberation.

G. Pennycook et al., (2016) This research seeks to explore the relationship between analytic thinking and religious belief while accounting for potential order effects. The methodology involves the implementation of four studies explicitly measuring religious belief independently from analytic thinking. Additionally, a meta-analysis integrates the outcomes of these new studies with previously published research on the topic. The findings of this research indicate a negative correlation between religious belief and performance on analytic thinking measures, even when religious belief is assessed independently. These results suggest that the association between analytic thinking and religious disbelief is not solely attributed to a simple order effect and provide evidence supporting the reflective nature of atheists and agnostics compared to religious believers.

Zahra Mousavi et al., (2021) aims to examine how religion influences charitable donations among atheists. Employing an experimental design with both a post-test and a control group, the findings indicated that emphasising religion had no impact on the donation behaviour of atheists. This experiment suggests the need for additional research to enhance our understanding of the mechanisms that influence prosocial behaviour.

Ryan S. Ritter et al., (2011) In this study, hypothesised that exposure to outgroup religious beliefs might evoke feelings of disgust, given that these beliefs could be perceived as a threat to spiritual purity. The findings offer support for the idea that encountering rejected religious beliefs triggers disgust by symbolically violating spiritual purity.

Moon, J. W., et al., (2021) seeks to investigate if individuals in the United States may harbour positive stereotypes about atheists (and correspondingly negative stereotypes about the religious) through an experiment. The findings indicate that people may concurrently hold both positive and negative stereotypes about atheists, though the negative stereotypes associated with the religion may be even more pronounced.

Wright. J., et al., (2014) in this descriptive study, aims to enhance our comprehension of atheism as a social stereotype. The findings make a valuable contribution to research that intersects moral theory, moral psychology, and the psychology of religion.

Will. M. Gervais et al., (2012) in their descriptive study study seeks to explore whether prompts of secular authority, such as highlighting police effectiveness, can alleviate the prevalent distrust linked to atheists. The results indicate that reminders of secular authority possess the capacity to reduce the distrust commonly held by believers toward atheists.

Catherine L. Caldwell-Harris (2012) in their study seeks to investigate the presence of atheists within the framework of evolutionary psychology and the prevailing theories suggesting the inherent nature of religious and spiritual beliefs in human societies. The methodology entails a thorough review and synthesis of existing scholarship and literature on irreligion. The results indicate that atheists and non-believers display unique cognitive and personality traits, characterised by lower sociability, reduced conformity, and heightened individualism when compared to their religious counterparts.

Gerhard Andersson (2016) in a study aims to investigate the cognitive underpinnings of religion, specifically employing experimental methods, with a particular emphasis on non-believers (atheists). The methodology encompasses a thorough review across three distinct domains of study. The results of the review provide noteworthy insights into the cognitive foundations of religion, particularly concerning non-believers. Within the first domain, studies demonstrate that analytical thinking has the potential to diminish religious belief. The conclusion of the paper proposes that the investigation of bias against atheists deserves attention in Scandinavian countries, underscoring the necessity for additional research within this particular cultural context.

Monica K. Miller et al., (2020) in a paper, seeks to explore bias against religious minorities within the criminal justice system, specifically delving into the limits of normative bias expression. The research employs four mock-juror studies designed to assess the boundaries of normative bias expression, with a focus on religious minorities, particularly Muslims. The results of these studies offer insights into the normative expression of bias within the criminal justice system, revealing that participants exhibited bias against Muslim defendants who committed violence motivated by religion. Conversely, they also demonstrated bias in favour of Muslim defendants who responded to attacks on their religion. These findings imply that motive, especially the motive behind violence, may play a role in determining the acceptability of bias expression.

Wallace, M., et al., (2014) aims to investigate religious discrimination in the hiring process through a field experiment that entails sending fictitious résumés to advertised job openings in the American South. The methodology involves submitting résumés with alterations indicating affiliation with one of seven religious groups or a control group. The findings from the experiment reveal that applicants expressing a religious identity are 26 percent less likely to receive a response from employers. Specifically, Muslims, pagans, and atheists encountered the highest levels of discriminatory treatment, while a fictitious religious group and Catholics experienced moderate levels of discrimination.

Brewster. M. E.,et al., (2016) with an primary objective of these two studies is to introduce and conduct an initial psychometric evaluation of a newly developed instrument, known as the Measure of Atheist Discrimination Experiences (MADE). The methodology encompasses the creation of items for the MADE based on existing literature, followed by revision by a panel of expert researchers, and subsequent psychometric assessment. In Study 1, an exploratory factor analysis indicates the potential existence of five related dimensions of perceived discrimination. However, confirmatory factor analysis in the same study provides strong support for a prominent "general" factor of discrimination, with varying degrees of support for subdimensions. Study 2 further validates the bifactor model established in Study 1, highlighting the robust presence of a "general" discrimination factor and limited support for subdimensions.

Grove. R. C., et al., (2020) aims to explore antiatheist prejudice by identifying prevalent stereotypes about atheists, examining the intuitiveness of these stereotypes, and assessing whether distrust towards atheists is primarily influenced by the label "atheist" or by the attributed characteristics associated with atheists. The methodology comprises a series of studies. The outcomes of these investigations reveal explicit and implicit associations of different attributes with atheists and Christians. Notably, even when atheists exhibit attributes stereotypically linked to Christians, Christians exhibit significantly less trust in atheists compared to their trust in other Christians. These findings suggest that anti atheist prejudice remains relatively insensitive to individual differences in the target's attributes.

(C) Methodology:

This is a Descriptive study using Convenient sampling with total responses of 203 collected in and around Chennai. The independent variables are Age, Gender, Educational qualification, Occupation and marital status. The dependent variables are familiarity with the concept of atheism, agreeability on Periyar's statement that religious practices and beliefs were used to control the oppressed classes, whether atheism and religion can peacefully coexist in society,

extent to which atheism, as influenced by Periyar, challenged traditional religious norms and practices in South India, the prevalence of Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu, the perception of atheism in a locality.
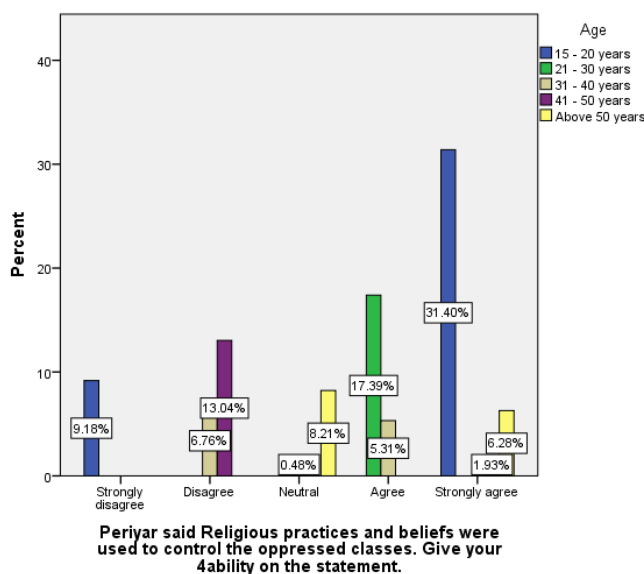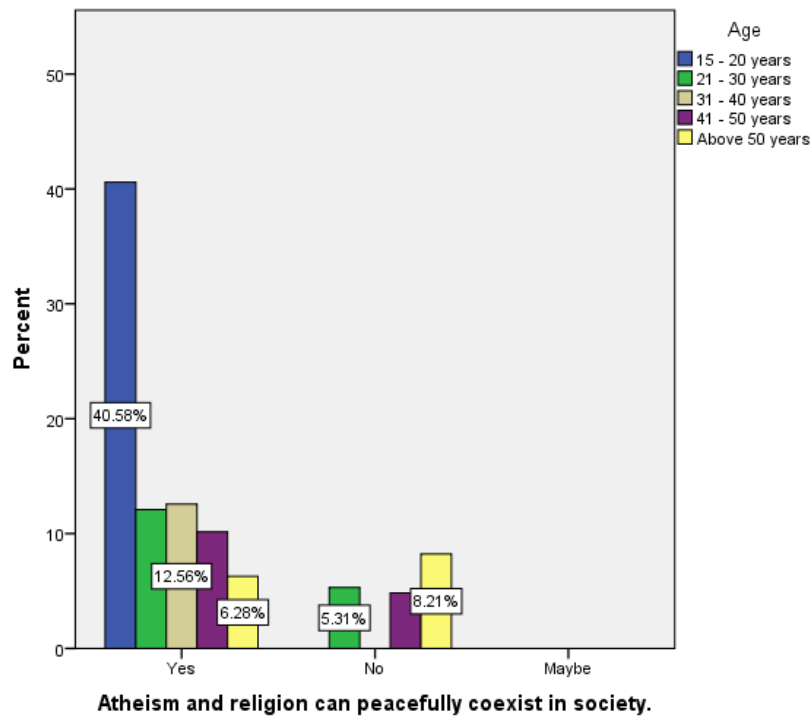
II. ANALYSIS

Figure 1
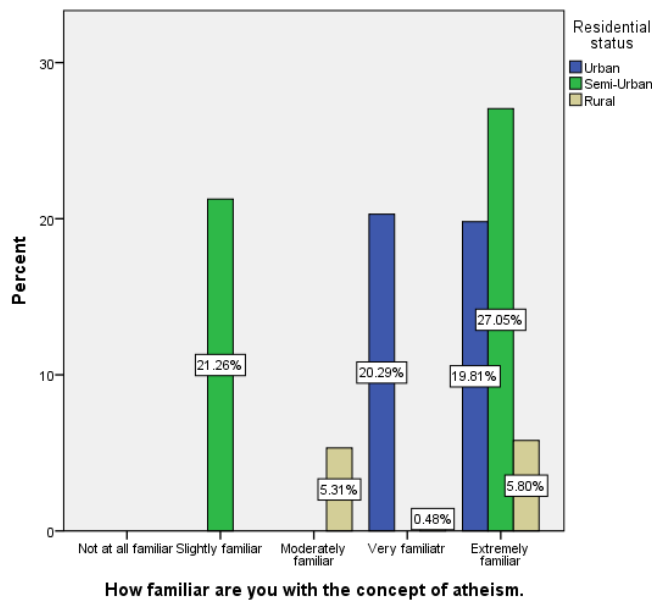
Legend: Figure 1 represents the familiarity of the respondents with the concept of atheism with respect to their residential status.
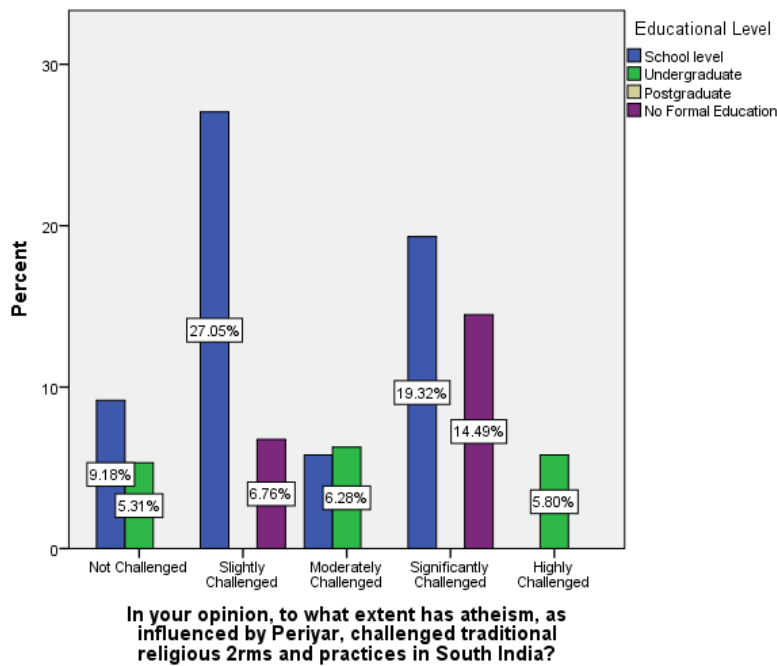
Figure 2

Legend: Figure 2 represents the respondents' agreeability to Periyar's statement that religious practices and beliefs were used to control the oppressed classes with respect to their age.
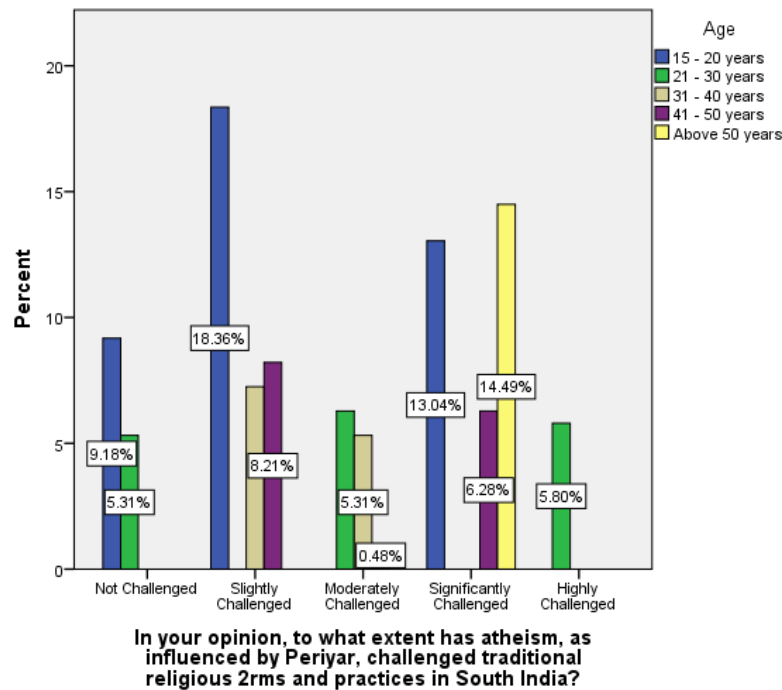
Figure 3

Legend: Figure 3 represents the respondents' answers to the question whether atheism and religion can coexist in society with respect to age.
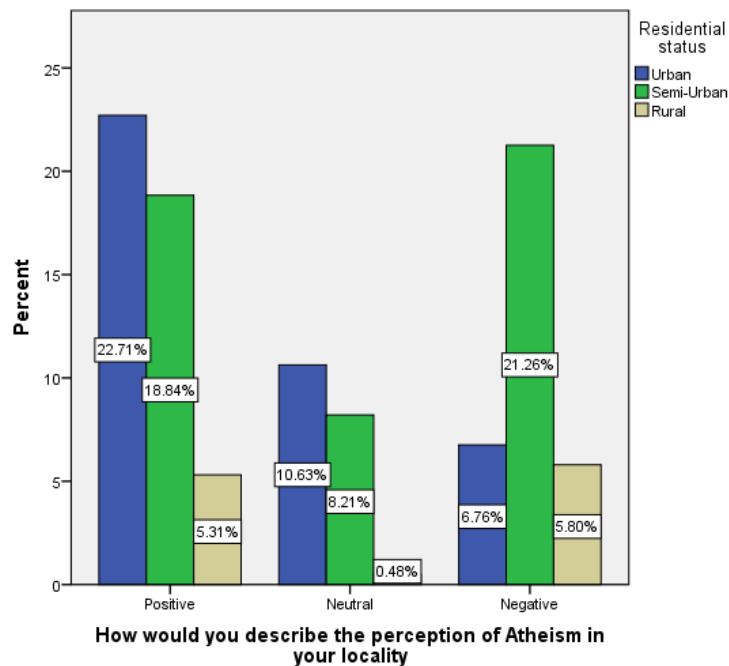
Figure 4

Legend: Figure 4 represents the respondents' opinion to what extent has atheism, as influenced by Periyar, challenged traditional religious norms and practices in South India with respect to their educational qualification.
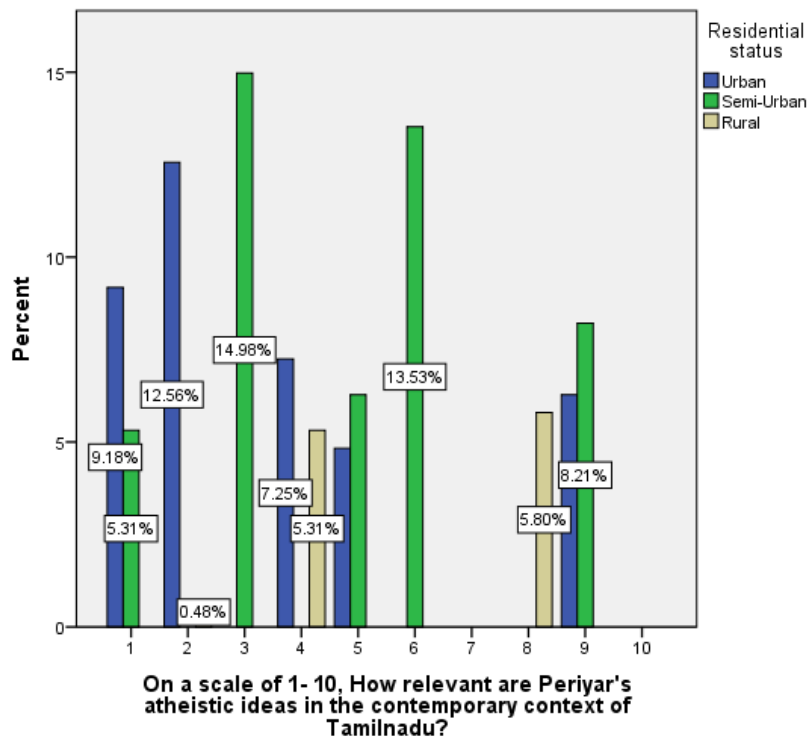
Figure 5

Legend: Figure 5 represents the respondents' opinion to what extent has atheism, as influenced by Periyar, challenged traditional religious norms and practices in South India with respect to their age.

Figure 6

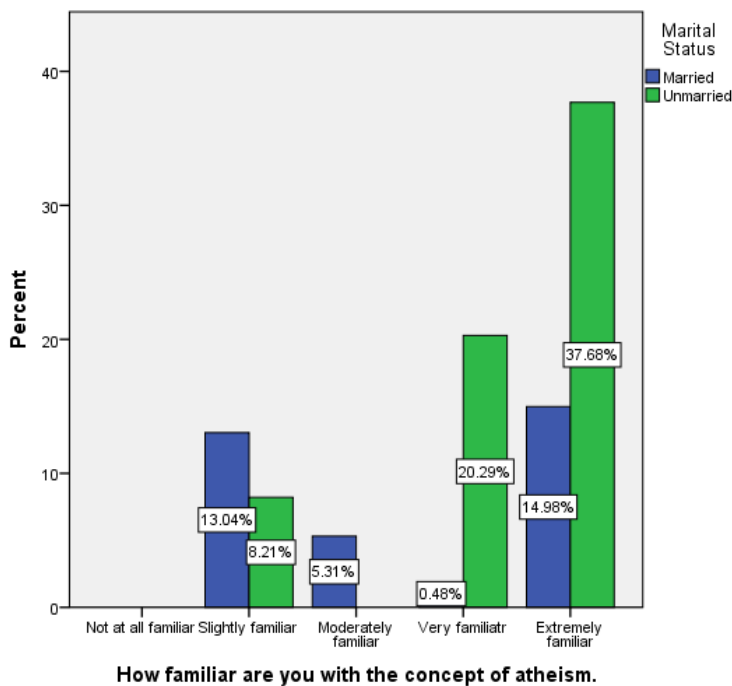Legend: Figure 6 represents the perception of atheism in their locality with respect to their residential status.
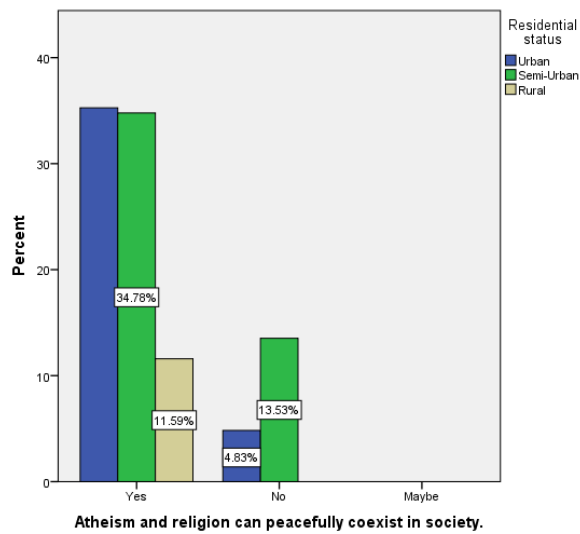
Figure 7

Legend: Figure 7 represents the respondents' opinion on how relevant are Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu.

Figure 8

Legend: Figure 8 represents the familiarity of the respondents with the concept of atheism with respect to their marital status.

Figure 9

Legend: Figure 9 represents the opinion of the respondents on whether atheism and religion can peacefully coexist in society.

Figure 10
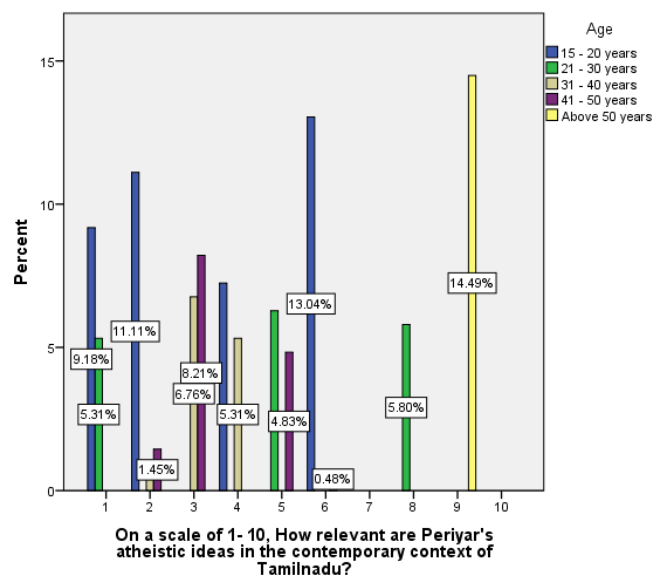
Legend: Figure 10 represents the respondents' opinion on how relevant are Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu with respect to their age.

III. HYPOTHESIS

(A) Anova

1) Null Hypothesis: There is a difference of opinion about the familiarity with the concept of atheism between different age groups.

Alternate Hypothesis: There is a difference of opinion about the familiarity with the concept of

atheism between different age groups.

Table 1

ANOVA

How familiar are you with the concept of atheism.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	124.967	4	31.242	37.003	.000
Within Groups	170.550	202	.844		
Total	295.517	206			

Interpretation: The calculated p-value is 0.000. Since, the p-value < 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at a significance level of 5%. So, There is a difference of opinion about the familiarity with the concept of atheism between different age groups.

Discussion: Media portrayal can shape awareness of atheism. Younger individuals, with access to a broader media spectrum, may encounter discussions on atheism. The familiarity with atheism can be influenced by an individual's religious background, potentially making those from more religious backgrounds less exposed to or interested in atheistic concepts.

2) Null Hypothesis: There is no difference of opinion on the extent to which atheism as influenced by periyar challenged the norms among different educational groups.

Alternate Hypothesis: There is a difference of opinion on the extent to which atheism as influenced by periyar challenged the norms among different educational groups.

Table 2

ANOVA

In your opinion, to what extent has atheism, as influenced by Periyar, challenged traditional r

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	22.629	2	11.315	8.270	.000
Within Groups	279.110	204	1.368		
Total	301.739	206			

Interpretation: The calculated p-value is 0.000. Since, the p-value < 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at a significance level of 5%. So, There is a difference of opinion on the extent to which atheism as influenced by periyar challenged the norms among different educational groups.

Discussion: Advanced education is frequently linked to a greater willingness to embrace diverse perspectives. Those with higher education may exhibit increased receptivity to alternative viewpoints, influencing their perspectives on the impact of atheism. Education empowers individuals to analyze societal structures and dynamics, allowing those with higher education

to evaluate the influence of Periyar's atheism on challenging norms within a broader societal framework.

3) Null Hypothesis: There is no difference of opinion among different age groups about their agreeability on Periyar's statement that religious practices and beliefs were used to control their age.

Alternate Hypothesis: There is a difference of opinion among different age groups about their agreeability on Periyar's statement that religious practices and beliefs were used to control their age.

Table 3

ANOVA

Periyar said Religious practices and beliefs were used to control the oppressed classes. Gi

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	87.113	4	21.778	13.717	.000
Within Groups	320.713	202	1.588		
Total	407.826	206			

Interpretation: The calculated p-value is 0.000. Since, the p-value < 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at a significance level of 5%. So, There is a difference of opinion among different age groups about their agreeability on Periyar's statement that religious practices and beliefs were used to control oppressed classes.

Discussion: Peer groups and social circles can shape individuals' perspectives. Younger individuals may belong to social networks that interpret Periyar's statements differently than older generations. Variances in cultural sensitivity and awareness can lead to differing opinions. Younger generations, exposed to a more globalized world, may interpret religious practices within a broader cultural and social justice context.

4) Null Hypothesis: There is no difference of opinion among different educational groups about the relevance of Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamil Nadu on the scale of 1 to 10 and their education.

Alternate Hypothesis: There is a difference of opinion among different educational groups about the relevance of Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamil Nadu on the scale of 1 to 10 and their education.

Table 4

ANOVA

On a scale of 1- 10, How relevant are Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	422.148	2	211.074	42.482	.000
Within Groups	1013.591	204	4.969		
Total	1435.739	206			

Interpretation: The calculated p-value is 0.000. Since, the p-value < 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at a significance level of 5%. So, There is a difference of opinion among different educational groups about the relevance of Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamil Nadu on the scale of 1 to 10 among different educational groups.

Discussion: Education empowers individuals to analyze the structures and dynamics of society. Those with advanced education can assess the pertinence of Periyar's atheistic ideas within a broader societal framework. Elevated levels of education may foster a more nuanced comprehension of philosophical principles, influencing how individuals evaluate the relevance of Periyar's atheistic ideas.

IV. RESULTS

In **Figure 1,** almost equal percentage of respondents of urban areas are very familiar and extremely familiar with the concept of atheism. Likewise, an equal percentage of rural respondents are moderately familiar and extremely familiar. Most of the respondents of semi urban areas are very familiar.

In **Figure 2,** most of the respondents of age 15-20 strongly agree to Periyar's statement that religious practices are used to control the oppressed classes. All of the respondents of age 21-30 agree to it while all of the respondents of age 41-50 disagree. Most of the respondents of age above 50 are neutral to Periyar's statement.

In **Figure 3,** Most of the respondents of every age are of the opinion that atheism and religion can co exist peacefully in the society.

In **Figure 4,** most of the respondents with an educational qualification of school level are of the opinion that atheism, as influenced by Periyar, has Slightly challenged traditional religious norms and practices in South India. While, most of respondents with no formal education are of the opinion that atheism has significantly challenged the norms in South India.

In **Figure 5,** most of the respondents of age 15-20 are of the opinion that atheism, as influenced

by Periyar, has Slightly challenged traditional religious norms and practices in South India. While most of the respondents of age above 50 years are of the opinion that atheism has significantly challenged the norms in South India.

In **Figure 6**, most of the respondents from the semi urban areas are of the opinion that atheism is perceived negatively in their locality and most of the urban respondents are of the opinion that atheism is perceived positively in their locality. While rural respondents are of the opinion that atheism is perceived both positively and negatively in their locality.

In **Figure 7,** most of the semi urban respondents are of the opinion that on a scale of 1-10, Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu are relevant on a level of 3 and most of the urban respondents are of the opinion that on a scale of 1-10, Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu are relevant on a level of 2. While, most of the rural respondents are of the opinion that on a scale of 1-10, Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu are relevant on a level of 8.

In **Figure 8,** most of the unmarried respondents are extremely familiar with the concept of atheism while an equal percentage of married respondents are extremely familiar and slightly familiar with the concept of atheism.

In **Figure 9**, Most of the respondents irrespective of their residential status are of the opinion that atheism and religion can co exist peacefully in the society.

In **Figure 10**, all the respondents of age above 50 years are of the opinion that on a scale of 1-10, Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu are relevant on a level of 9 and most of the respondents of age 15-20 are of the opinion that on a scale of 1-10, Periyar's atheistic ideas in the contemporary context of Tamilnadu are relevant on a level of 6.

V. DISCUSSION

In **Figure 1,** the results may be because of the variations in awareness and comprehension across diverse geographical settings. Urban areas showcase a well-balanced awareness, likely shaped by a variety of information sources and extensive exposure. In rural settings, a significant portion demonstrates a moderate level of familiarity, signalling a potential discrepancy in exposure or accessibility to information concerning atheism. Conversely, respondents from semi-urban areas exhibit a heightened awareness, potentially influenced by a combination of urban and rural characteristics. These results may lead tailored awareness campaigns and educational efforts to address the knowledge gap regarding atheism, particularly in regions where familiarity levels are moderate.

Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents in the 15-20 age group strongly agree with Periyar's assertion, likely reflecting youthful idealism and a critical perspective shaped by modern education and social media influences. Young individuals in this age bracket are often more open to questioning established norms and may have a heightened sensitivity to social justice issues. All respondents aged 21-30 agree with Periyar's statement, indicating a solid consensus within this demographic. This agreement may stem from their formative experiences in higher education and early professional life, where exposure to diverse viewpoints and social theories is common. The 21-30 age group, at the intersection of youthful idealism and emerging practical realities, might recognize the historical and contemporary implications of religion in structuring societal power dynamics. Conversely, respondents in the 41-50 age group uniformly disagree with Periyar's statement. This age cohort, having lived through significant cultural and economic changes, may have a more conservative outlook shaped by traditional beliefs and practices. Their disagreement might be rooted in a perception of religion as a source of cultural identity and moral guidance rather than an instrument of oppression.

Figure 3 shows that a majority of respondents across all age groups believe that atheism and religion can coexist peacefully in society. This perspective reflects a modern understanding of religious freedom and tolerance, influenced by advancements in education, globalization, and interfaith dialogue. Younger respondents, shaped by progressive education and global connectivity, are likely to endorse this view as they value diversity and secular values in a pluralistic society. Meanwhile, older respondents, drawing from their life experiences and evolving social norms, also contribute to this consensus, possibly driven by a desire for social harmony and respect for individual rights.

Figure 4 shows that respondents' educational qualifications significantly influence their perceptions of atheism's impact on traditional religious norms and practices in South India. Among those with a school-level education, most believe atheism, influenced by figures like Periyar, has moderately challenged these norms. This perspective likely stems from a basic grasp of social change and figures advocating rationalism. Conversely, respondents with no formal education overwhelmingly view atheism as having substantially challenged traditional norms, possibly due to direct experiences of religious practices being openly questioned. This contrast highlights education's role in shaping views on societal changes; formal education provides frameworks for nuanced understanding, while the lack thereof can amplify perceptions of radical societal transformation based on personal experiences and local influences.

Figure 5 shows that age significantly influences respondents' perceptions of atheism's impact on traditional religious norms and practices in South India. Young individuals in this age group

are typically more inclined to question established norms and adopt progressive values, influenced by modern education and exposure to diverse viewpoints through media and the internet. In contrast, respondents aged above 50 overwhelmingly view atheism as having profoundly challenged traditional norms in South India. This perspective among older respondents likely stems from a lifetime of observing societal changes and historical events where atheistic ideologies, particularly influenced by figures like Periyar, actively critiqued or opposed traditional religious practices.

Figure 6 shows that respondents from different locality types perceive atheism within their communities with varying attitudes, revealing distinct viewpoints across semi-urban, urban, and rural areas. In semi-urban areas, a majority perceive atheism negatively, reflecting traditional values and cultural norms that prioritize religious beliefs and community identity. These environments, blending urbanization with rural influences, often maintain conservative attitudes towards atheism due to concerns about challenging established social and religious norms. Conversely, urban centers, characterized by cosmopolitanism and diversity, generally exhibit a more tolerant and accepting stance towards atheism. Urban residents, valuing secularism, intellectual freedom, and diversity of thought, tend to view atheism positively as a legitimate personal choice and philosophical position.

Figure 7 shows that respondents from different locality types perceive the relevance of Periyar's atheistic ideas in contemporary Tamil Nadu with varied perspectives across semi-urban, urban, and rural areas. In semi-urban environments, there appears to be a perceived disconnect or limited resonance with Periyar's ideologies. These areas, influenced by both urban and rural dynamics, may prioritize alternative societal issues or hold divergent views on religious and cultural reforms, resulting in a lower perceived relevance of Periyar's atheistic principles. Urban centers, characterized by their progressive outlook and intellectual discourse, recognize Periyar's contributions to social reform while potentially prioritizing contemporary challenges or advocating different approaches to societal issues. This moderate assessment reflects a nuanced understanding of how historical ideologies evolve in modern urban contexts. Conversely, rural areas, often rooted in traditional values yet receptive to socio-political changes, view Periyar's atheistic stance as crucial in challenging orthodox religious practices and promoting social equality and rationalism.

Figure 8 shows that there are significant differences in familiarity with atheism between unmarried and married respondents, revealing how marital status influences awareness and understanding of atheistic concepts. Unmarried individuals, often in stages of personal and educational development, tend to actively seek knowledge and engage in discussions to broaden

their understanding of atheism and its implications. On the other hand, married individuals exhibit varied levels of exposure and interest in atheistic concepts, reflecting diverse backgrounds shaped by personal beliefs, family dynamics, and community norms. This variation underscores that unmarried individuals, focused on personal growth and intellectual exploration, actively pursue information on atheism and critically engage with religious philosophies. In contrast, married individuals may prioritize familial responsibilities and social roles, potentially impacting their levels of interest and exposure to atheistic ideas.

Figure 9 shows that there is a strong consensus among respondents, regardless of their residential status, regarding the peaceful coexistence of atheism and religion in society. Across diverse residential backgrounds, a majority of respondents agree that atheism and religion can coexist harmoniously. This widespread agreement highlights a universal acknowledgment of religious diversity and the potential for mutual respect among individuals with differing beliefs. Whether residing in urban, semi-urban, or rural areas, respondents recognize the importance of tolerance and harmony in accommodating diverse religious and non-religious viewpoints within societal frameworks. Urban respondents, exposed to a variety of cultural and religious practices, often prioritize secularism and mutual respect as essential for societal cohesion. Similarly, semi-urban respondents, navigating the intersection of urbanization and rural traditions, advocate for peaceful coexistence amidst evolving societal dynamics. Rural respondents, rooted in traditional values while being receptive to modern influences, also support the coexistence of atheism and religion, reflecting a balanced approach to fostering community harmony and respecting individual belief systems.

Figure 10 shows that respondents aged above 50 unanimously consider Periyar's atheistic ideas highly relevant, giving them an average score of 9 on a scale of 1-10. This consensus highlights older individuals' strong belief in Periyar's enduring impact on Tamil Nadu's socio-cultural landscape, reflecting his pivotal role in challenging traditional religious norms and promoting progressive values through rationalism and social reform. In contrast, most respondents aged 15-20 perceive Periyar's atheistic ideas as moderately relevant, rating them around 6 on the scale. This younger demographic acknowledges Periyar's historical contributions while interpreting his ideologies within contemporary socio-political contexts and educational frameworks. Their rating suggests a nuanced understanding of Periyar's advocacy for social justice and secularism amidst evolving perspectives on cultural identity and modern challenges.

VI. LIMITATIONS

- The sample size was restricted to 200.

● Lack of quantitative studies for the review of Literature.

VII. CONCLUSION

Atheism, an ideological stance rooted in philosophy, is defined by the absence or denial of belief in deities or gods. In contrast to theism, which affirms the existence of divine beings, atheists adopt a sceptical viewpoint, prioritising reason, empirical evidence, and critical thinking as the fundamental basis for comprehending the world. Misunderstandings about atheism sometimes stem from stereotypes or misconceptions, highlighting the importance of education and open dialogue to foster a nuanced understanding. Atheism served as a driving force behind Periyar's political activism, influencing the formation of the Dravidar Kazhagam and shaping its agenda for social and political change. Centred on his atheistic convictions, Periyar's philosophy aimed to challenge social inequalities, caste-based discrimination, and religious orthodoxy. Rejecting traditional religious rituals, he advocated for rationalism and atheism as vehicles to promote social justice. This paper primarily explores public perceptions of atheism and the contemporary significance of Periyar's atheistic concepts within the context of Tamil Nadu. The findings suggest that there is a need for awareness about atheism in rural areas while respondents in the rural areas are much aware about Periyar's ideologies. Irrespective of residential status, awareness about atheism, the respondents are of the opinion that atheism and religion can coexist in the society. The results underscore the significance of recognizing the widespread prevalence of inclusivity and mutual respect for diverse worldviews within distinct residential communities.

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