

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's Role as a Crusader of Women's Issues and its Relevance Today

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Abstract

Women in Tamil Nadu constitute half of the total population and played a vital role in shaping the economy of our nation. Over the ages Indian women have been culturally and negatively conditioned to consider themselves inferior to men. Women are expected to sacrifice, to be like candle or camphor, all sweetness and light losing or melting themselves in the service of the family. Her identity is fixed as a man's daughter and after marriage as a man's wife or child's mother.

Keywords: Child marriage, Dowry, Liberation, Widow-Remarriage

1. Introduction

Women in Tamil Nadu constitute half of the total population and played a vital role in shaping the economy of our nation. Over the ages Indian women have been culturally and negatively conditioned to consider themselves inferior to men. Women are expected to sacrifice, to be like candle or camphor, all sweetness and light losing or melting themselves in the service of the family. Her identity is fixed as a man's daughter and after marriage as a man's wife or child's mother. It is this perceived gender inequality and the urge to remove it made social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswara Chandra Vidhyasagar, Periyar EVR and host of others including the British administrators to take bold steps in uplifting the status of women. The status of women in the world is a far-reaching topic that covers issues such as girl's education, their role within the family, community and politics, maternal health, economic empowerment and more.

2. Importance and Scope of the study

Women in general have been treated as sub-humans in society. Periyar EVR was emphatic about giving equal

preference to women in all the fields like education, equal rights education, women empowerment etc. Today women have attained a remarkable position in probably all fields and they are in no way inferior to men. India has a remarkable history of women who were successful as President, Prime minister and Governors of India. They shine as able doctors, lawyers and many more professional skills. Even in business they are occupying high positions. Yet women have to cross many obstacles on their way of progress in a male dominated society. The progressive ideas of EVR on the upliftment of women have a lot of relevance today. Both the Government and institutions have to take up the challenges against women and solve them on the revolutionary path suggested by EVR.

3. Objectives

- To promote a society without any discrimination against women.
- To bring out the women's issues such as dowry, child marriage, widow remarriage, property rights.
- To identify and explore the concept of Periyar EVR as a crusader of women's issues and its relevance today.
- To sort out programmes for the betterment and liberation of women.

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- To discuss how EVR's ideas are more relevant to the contemporary society.

4. Methodology

The narrative and analytical method has been used to the present study. It critically examines the works and contributions made by Periyar EVR for the attainment of social equality, based on rationalistic ideals among the people of Tamil Nadu.

The uplift of women was one of the programmes of Periyar from the beginning of his public service. He succeeded in creating awareness in the minds of Non-Brahmins of the low position to which they had been pushed by the Brahmins. He named the movement, the Self Respect Movement only in order to make every Non-Brahmin realise that he has his own self-respect to maintain in all his dealings with his fellow-beings. If a man realises that he is equal to all other men and that he has the right of equality with all other men, then he becomes a self-respecting person. He wanted women also to develop that kind of self respect. This was one of the reasons, why he named this as Self Respect Movement¹.

Periyar fought against the orthodox traditions of marriage as suppression of women in Tamil Nadu and throughout the Indian sub-continent. Though arranged marriages were meant to enable a couple to live together throughout life, it was manipulated to enslave women. Much worse was the practice of child marriages practiced throughout India at the time. It was believed that it would be a sin to marry after puberty. The Self respect philosophy of Periyar refers to the assertion of one's individuality against exploitation, discrimination and injustice. According to him, if the women do not have the right to property that would be against their self-respect. Also Periyar fought fiercely for this and also advocated for the women to have the right to separate or divorce their husbands under reasonable circumstances².

Periyar kindled the thoughts of everybody by ridiculing the use of the word chastity only with reference to women degraded not merely women but men also. He extended this thought and said that in any sphere of activity, civilised society cannot think of one law for men and another for women. He also said that the way most men treated their women was worse than the way the upper class people treated the lower class, the way in which rich men treated the poor and the way in which a master treated his slave³.

Periyar EVR advocated such an enlightened ideas as early as 1929, long before even the developed countries enabled women to attain their legitimate rights in society.

During the early part of 20th Century in the Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalpattu he adopted new policy guidelines to empower women in our country. The resolution reads as follows:

"This Conference resolves that women should be given equal rights

With men for property and for the privilege of succession and the rights

And facilities to be employed in any profession or job, and that necessary

Steps should be taken (by the government) to employ a greater number of

*Women teachers in schools including primary schools"*⁴

Another resolution stated that the age for a girl's marriage should be above 16 and that if the husband or the wife disliked the alliance and wanted the marriage to be cancelled, he or she should be given the right to get it cancelled; that widows should be helped to get married again and that men and women should be given the right to choose their partners without attaching any importance to religion or caste. The highlights of this 1929 statement of Periyar were accepted only much later. According to Periyar, the concept of women's status is different from the notion of several educated women even today. Urging women to respect themselves as individuals in their own right he wrote, "wearing silk saris, putting on gold and diamond jewels, riding in motor cars and declaring that she is such and such officer's wife will not bring honour to any woman. If a woman thinks like this, she will be only demeaning herself. He believed in the development of women through education and employment which would help them to attain status and employment in society⁵. During his tour of Malaysia he was impressed by the fact that some women dressed themselves like men. Afterwards, he started advocating that women in Tamil Nadu should have their cut bobbed and as well wear dress like men and do away with sarees, so that they would command equal respect with men in the society.

Periyar opined that as long as restrictions are imposed on womenfolk, women have to subservient to men and depend on them for help. He remarked that if women have to live on terms of equality with men, they must have the liberty, kind of education, and work suitable to the knowledge, ability and taste. He added that women should not listen to religious instructions, which preaches against them. Periyar focused the fact that the slavish attitudes, timidity, superstitious beliefs, obstinacy in adopting traditional customs are all due to religion. He vehemently condemned Penadimai (slavery of women) and Pen Izhivu (degradation of women).

Periyar questioned each and every condition imposed on women. He criticized the life of “A Woman who was dependent on her husband for two square meal and a pair of clothes and shelter. In return the women should work at home from morning till night serving the husband with utmost obedience, bearing his tortures and still worshipping him as her god, giving birth to his children and remaining chaste and loyal to him”⁶.

According to Periyar “There are many obstacles to the advancement and independence of women. We have to attend to many things in order to raise the status of women. In economic and social spheres many changes have to take place. How can a woman without money, a woman without independence and woman without equal rights with men in social affairs become free and experience progress? These obstacles in the path of the advancement of women are solid ones”. Therefore, he gave certain practical suggestions to empower women. He advocated that all teaching jobs in schools must be given to girls and that job-oriented institution like nursing school, poly techniques and engineering colleges exclusively for training women should be started. He established such institutions in Trichy. The exclusive women’s engineering college in Asia was also established on his advice in Thanjavur. He not only preached the ideology of women’s development but also established suitable human resource development programmes for attaining this goal long before many others had thought about it.

When Periyar took up any problem for discussion, he explored all its possibilities most critically. On the question of uplift of women also, he examined all its aspects thoroughly. He said that parents should devote great attention to the education of their girl children and should give them liberty to choose not merely the profession best suited to them but also the life partner most suitable to them⁷. In his own life, though in his younger days he compelled Nagammai to come round to his views, later he gave her full liberty to express her views freely and act according to her convictions. She rose to be a fit partner for this revolutionary leader and took an active part in all his agitation. In the Vaikom agitation, after Periyar had been arrested, Nagammai took the lead in organising the women of Kerala to protest against the aggressive attitude of the upper classes. Periyar took her along with him in all his foreign tours and thus showed that she was his partner and not a submissive wife in the traditional sense.

The male domination, marriage system and wife-hood, child bearing, and motherhood, chastity, family life, circle of relations, caste are all linked together in the brahmanical, varnashrama dharmic Hindu society. Periyar was vehement while saying that I do not accept the words

‘wedding’ or ‘Marriage.’ I term it only as a contract for companionship in life. For such a contract, it is enough a proof of registration. The other marriage ceremonies meant that waste of mental effort, time money, enthusiasm and energy. According to him, a wedding should be contracted only on the principle of equality of the sex and equality of treatment. He added that if child marriages are abolished and provisions exist for divorce, widow’s remarriage, intercaste marriage and for the right to marry by one’s own choice, then ninety percent of the prevailing prostitution will disappear⁸.

Periyar clearly indicated that the practice of child marriages against overall development of women. He recommended the age of marriage for female as 22 years. These ideas of Periyar dating back to the 1920s were translated into reality in the 1980s in India. India has marginally raised the marriage age of consent from 16 to 18, which is not at all adequate eugenically for the health and survival of mothers and children. It is a pity that even after 50 years, our government has yet to implement Periyar’s advice on women empowerment. His disciples who have come to power in Tamilnadu have also been putting these ideas into practice. This research paper deals with the clear view about the Periyar EVR’s role as a Crusader of women’s issues and his relevance today.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the world, boys and girls do not have equal access to education. In many places, the cultural norm is to educate boys over girls if families do not have the resources to send all of their children to school. Two-thirds of the world’s illiterate population is female, and in 33 percent of countries parents disproportionately send more sons than daughters to school. Women in the political sphere occupied only 19 percent of parliamentary seats in the world. Gender equality in politics and government is essential because women bring a unique perspective and champion “female causes” that may otherwise be overlooked.

When Periyar saw suppressed, oppressed and depressed lot of the helpless and hopeless women, he began to raise his determined voice against all forms of cruelty and injustice to which they were subjected. He fought stoutly and tirelessly for their equal rights in all walks of life, presenting his arguments frankly, boldly, and inhuman practices against women and to promote the values and ways that would help them to become equal, free and dignified partners of men.

According to Indian Constitution, women are legal citizens of the country and have equal rights with men

(Indian Parliament). Because of lack of acceptance from the male dominant society, Indian women suffer immensely. Women are suffering mental and Physical tortures in their in laws houses. Their husbands demand more and more dowry. They consider their wives as good source of getting dowry. Bride-burning and bride killing occur every day in India. Another serious problem that women faced was that of child marriage. Small kids and in some cases even infants in the cradle were married off. Early marriage affected the growth and development of the children. Crime against women occurs every minute; every day and throughout the year, though several such crimes go unreported. This is how the status of Indian women is going down. The Women can get back their rightful place in society if law is properly enforced to check male superiority. Periyar advocated that Women have to step in and involve

themselves for their liberation and not solely depend on males.

6. References

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