



Thandhai Periyar E. V. R'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: Periyar, Enslavement, Women, Sati, Chastity, Child marriage, Dowry, Liberation, Widow-Remarriage

Introduction:

Thandhai Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (September 17, 1879 – December 24, 1973), also known as Ramaswamy, EVR, Vaikkam veerar, Thandhai Periyar, or Periyar, was a Dravidian social reformer, Economist, Sociologist, Philosopher, Social Researcher, Educator and Politician from India, who founded the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. He advocated for the rights of women and was considered ahead of his time as well as controversial. Throughout the Indian sub-continent today, women continue to be marginalized in various ethnic and religious groups. During the early part of the twentieth century there have been many agitations against British rule (external) and injustices committed amongst the people of the sub-continent (internal). With all this, women's rights have been left in the dark. Periyar stated that, "political reformers are agitating that the privilege of administering "India" should go to "Indians". Social reformers are agitating that communal divisions and differences should be done away with. But nobody takes notice of the great hardship suffered by one section of women. Intelligent people will agree that the creator has not endowed men and women with different faculties. There are, in men and women, intellectuals, courageous people, as well as stupid and cowardly people. While this is the case, it is unfair and wicked on the part of the haughty male population to continue to denigrate and enslave the female population. Periyar has explained that it is extremely cruel on the part of the Hindu brethren to witness the gradual destruction suffered by one half of their society, without taking any action. This apart, men and women are both human beings. The difference in physical features will not change the human quality. The difference in intellect and physical strength which we find among men can be found among women also. Practice improves the position equally in both men and women.

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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.

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 Thandhai Periyar E VR.

Objectives of the study:

- 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 Thandhai Periyar EVR as a crusader of women's issues and its relevance today.
- To sort out programmes for the betterment and liberation of women.

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

Methodology:

The narrative and analytical method has been used to the present study. It critically examines the works and contributions made by Thandhai 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 Thandhai 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 Movement. Thandhai 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 Thandhai 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 circumstances. 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 slave. Thandhai 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".

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 Thandhai 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 society. 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. Thandhai 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). Thandhai 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".

According to Thandhai 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 Thandhai 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 them. 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 Thandhai Periyar had been arrested, Nagammai took the lead in organising the women of Kerala to protest against the aggressive attitude of the upper classes.

Thandhai 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 wifhood, 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 disappear. Thandhai 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 Thandhai 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 Thandhai 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 Thandhai Periyar EVR's role as a Crusader of women's issues and his relevance today.

Thandhai Periyar and Women rights:

Women rights and women empowerment occupies first and prominent place among all other social reform activities of Thandhai Periyar E.V.R. There are so many writers on Periyar, who wrote many books especially on the issue of Thandhai Periyar E.V.R's views and services for the upliftment, empowerment and emancipation of women. K.Veeramani one of his prominent disciples of Periyar, collected and published a separate volume in Tamil with regard to Periyar E.V.R's speeches and writings on women empowerment and women rights. A studying Thandhai Periyar E.V.R's speeches and writings on various journals and periodicals published by Thandhai Periyar E.V.R. himself and by studying various compiled books by various scholars on the subject matter of Thandhai Periyar E.V.R's views on women rights, the present study identifies about ten

important issues on women rights by which Thandhai Periyar E. V. R. continuously talk, write and worked for the upliftment of women. They are as follows,

Thandhai Periyar E.V.R'S Views on Property rights to Women

Thandhai Periyar E.V.R. considered the grant of property rights to women, is a very significant and urgent matter to be implemented first. Thandhai Periyar E.V.R. when he published his book in 1942 entitled "Pen Yen Adimaiyaanaal ?"(Why Women Became Slaves?), he wrote a separate chapter under the title, "Penkalukkaana Sothurimai" (Property Rights to Women). This fact itself reveals that how Thandhai Periyar E.V.R. showed evinced interest in granting property rights to women. Thandhai Periyar strongly believed that if women are to be liberated and if they have to enjoy all rights in par with men, if they have to be respected as a fellow human being, if they have to be enjoy all the worldly available happy affairs, they (Women) should be given property rights of parents in par with the male heirs of the family. In this book itself Thandhai Periyar happily appreciated the proposals of the then Mysore samasthan, (a separate independent state of the then period) which published detailed provisions of giving property rights to women. Further Thandhai Periyar appreciated an another provision of the proposal of Mysore Kingdom (samasthan), which says that 'if a husband is supposed to be affected of some dangerous and contagious diseases or if a husband is having some concubines and having some illegal and extra marital affairs, the wife of that disease affected or illegal extra marital sexual relation affair husband, should be given the right of divorcing or that wife should be given the right of compensation from that husband. He criticized the Hindu activists of the then period that they opposed and made stumbling block against the Child Marriages Prevention Act of the British rulers. Thandhai Periyar requested and appealed the women that they should immediately involve and start an agitation to acquire their property rights.

- Marriage System
- Chastity
- Gender Equality
- Women Education and Employment
- Property Rights to Women
- Widow Remarriage
- Pregnancy, Childbirth and Family
- Planning Injustice against Women done by
- Epics, Puranas, Manudharma and other Religious
- Literatures
- Need for Change in Life Style of Women
- Other Important Measures needed] for the Upliftment of Women.

Widow - Remariage:

On the remarriage of widows, Thandhai Periyar states that among the atrocities perpetrated by the Hindu male population against women, here we have to consider the treatment meted out to widows alone. If a girl loses her husband, even before knowing anything of worldly pleasures, she is compelled to close her eyes to everything in the world and die broken-hearted. Even in Thandhai Periyar's community at the time, there were widowed girls below the age of 13 years. Thandhai Periyar stated how it is a touching

sight to see the parents of those widowed children treating them like untouchables.³ He goes on to say that whatever may be the reason for the present state of the Hindu society, my firm belief that the low position given permanently to widows may prove to be the reason for the utter ruin of the Hindu religion and the Hindu society. If we try to find the reason for such conduct, we will have to conclude that they instinctively feel that women are slaves, subservient to men and that they must be kept under control. That is why these people treat women like animals. They seem to feel that giving freedom to women is equivalent to committing a very serious crime. The result of this attitude is that there is no independence or freedom to one half of the human race. This wicked enslavement of half of the human race is due to the fact that men are physically a little stronger than women. This principle applies to all spheres of life and the weaker are enslaved by the stronger. If slavery has to be abolished in society, the male arrogance and wickedness which lead to the enslavement of women must be abolished first. Only when this is achieved, the tender sprouts of freedom and equality will register growth. One of the reasons why Thandhai Periyar hated Hinduism and the orthodoxy practiced in the name of Hinduism was the practice of child marriage. Many of the girl children who were married before they were ten or twelve years old became widows before they knew the meaning of the word.

Thandhai Periyar E. V. R 'S Views on Women Education and Employment:

Thandhai Periyar E.V.R. always viewed that for the emancipation women there is a need for creating equal opportunities for women to get their education. According to Thandhai Periyar, women themselves should come out of the bond of slavery, without the support of any men, provided that if they were given the opportunity of getting their education. He strongly viewed that as there is a reservation system existing for the socially backward sections of the people, there must be fifty percent of reservation should be provided for women in education and employment.⁶ He further insisted that in the entire government ministry, women were to be included equally as ministers. Periyar gave more importance to women child for education than the education for the male child. According to Periyar, if a man was given the opportunity He used to say that if there are two children in a family, i.e., one male child and another female child, if that family is able to provide education for only one child, that opportunity for getting education should be given only to the female child. Thandhai Periyar E.V.R further opined that if a male person is supposed to get education, that education will be helped him to develop his personality and also will be helped him to increase his financial position, but at the same time if a female child is given the opportunity of getting education, that educational knowledge will definitely helped her not only to develop her economic position but also will be helpful for the society, to solve many of the existing social evils.

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

worlds' 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 Thandhai 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. Thandhai Periyar advocated that Women have to step in and involve themselves for their liberation and not solely depend on males.

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