

Periyar: A Crusader of Women's Rights

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Abstract: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, also known as Periyar, had a progressive and forward-thinking perspective on women's rights. He was a staunch advocate for gender equality and believed that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. There are many key aspects of Periyar's perspective on women's rights. Education was something Periyar believed that women should have equal access to. He argued that education was essential for women to be economically independent and intellectually empowered. One of Periyar's core beliefs was that women should be able to be independent of men in all ways including financially, socially and intellectually. His legacy continues to inspire movements for women's rights and empowerment in the region. While Periyar made significant strides in promoting women's rights and gender equality, it's important to acknowledge that societal change takes time. His efforts laid the foundation for future generations to continue working towards a more equitable society for women in India.

Keywords: Women, Periyar, Rights

I. Introduction:

The prophet of new age, Socrates of South East Asia - The honours UNESCO conferred upon E.V. Ramasamy Naidu, fondly known as Periyar (the great one), in the year 1970 for his efforts towards reforming the Tamil society for over fifty years. His self-respect movement, which he started in the early twenties, is no less significant than the Indian independence movement. In essence, both opposed suppression and dominance. While one took great leaders over two hundred years of struggle, the other was achieved in a very short time by a common man who had less than six years of formal education. Such was the influence of Periyar and his self-respect movement. He opposed casteism. He opposed untouchability and slavery. He opposed women suppression. He fought vigorously against these evils till the end of his life.

He was born as Erode Venkata Ramasamy Naidu to Venkatappa Naidu and Chinna Thayammal in 1879 in Erode. He spent his early childhood with his widowed grandmother before his father decided to admit him to a school near Erode at the age of six. During those times, children from upper castes were prohibited from befriending children from the lower castes. In 1919, Periyar joined Indian National Congress(INC). In 1924, he led a protest in Vaikom (then a small town in Kerala) where lower caste people were prohibited from entering the street leading up to the temple. This was his first major agitation against untouchability. The same year he started a weekly called Kudiyarasu (The Republic). In 1925, he left Indian National Congress. The same year he joined the Justice party and started the self-respect movement. In 1930, he supported the bill to abolish Devadasi system. In 1944, he became the president of justice party and renamed it as Dravidar Kazhagam(DK). Periyar advocated that all men and women should live with self-respect and dignity. Further he argued that equal opportunities should be given to humanity irrespective of sex should definitely develop their physical, mental, and moral strength. He established self-respect movement to establish casteless and classless society and to end the prevalent social evils in all aspects. Periyar was dedicated very much to break out superstition beliefs which was created by the upper caste.

As a rationalist and ardent social reforms, he advocated that women should be given their legitimate equal position as men in the society. Good education is indispensable for women folk customs and convenience should not be the barrier in marriage of women. Further he advised women to realize their legitimate rights as worthy citizens of their country.

Periyar condemned child marriages and emphasized the need for educating girl children and giving rights to young widows to get marriage again. He vehemently said that child marriage, reflects the cruelty to which innocent girls were solicited by their well-meaning parents. Periyar asked that if their parents can be considered civilized in any sense of the term. There was no other leader than Periyar who reacted against the practice of child marriage.

Property Rights of Women as Per Hindu Law:

The patriarchal society thought that women were economically, physically, emotionally, educationally weakest species. But the major and real reason for the state of women in the society was rejection of economical security from their parents, husband and children. The denial of property right to women leads to social evils like female infanticide, child marriage, sati, refusal for widow remarriage and prostitution. Many social reformers tried to change that state of women, but eventually Periyar E.V.R the prominent social reformer strongly raised his voice to protect the girl children and women against the social injustice.

There existed an Act called Married Women's Property Act which was initiated in 1874. But the purpose of this Act was not fulfilled. In India, women's rights were a crucial issue that was the reason for ignorance of this Act. Later the Hindu Succession Act 1956 specifies the property rights of women. According to this Act, the women got absolute right in property. They can hold the property, maintain the property and dispose too.

Child Marriage Prohibition Act 1929:

As a result of the contribution of social thinkers and reformers the following Act were passed.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) 1929 popularly known as the Sharada Act prohibited child marriage of girls below the age of 15 years and boys below the 18.

In 1978, the law was amended the age limit was increased from 15 to 18 years in case of girls and from 18 to 21 years in case of boys.

Widow Remarriage:

On the remarriage of widows, Periyar condemned the atrocities committed by Hindu male population against women. Hence he said that severe treatment should be given to male population who indulged in child marriage. In this society, Periyar said that 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. Parents of widowed children treating them as untouchables. This was the reason why Periyar hated Hinduism and the orthodoxy practiced in the name of the Hinduism.

According to Hinduism, the girl children should get married before the puberty. The girl child's parent thought that if a girl is married after the puberty, it is considered as a great sin and child's parent would not go to heaven. Due to this the number of widows was rapidly increased. According to the 1921 All India Census the details of the child widows reported living in the country that time were as follows:

Table 1: 1921 Census Reports and Note the Numbers of Widow

Baby widows	1 year	597
Child widows	1 to 2 years	494
Child widows	2 to 3 years	1,257
Child widows	3 to 4 years	2,837
Child widows	4 to 5 years	6,707
Total No of widows Below 5 years		11,342

Women Education:

The development and growth of any nation determined by two main sources, namely natural resource and human resource as for as our nation is concerned, regarding women are not equally treated by the scale of society. Women education in the society plays an important role in the development of the nation. It not just helps in the development of half of the human resources, however in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Educated women not just tend to promote education of their girl children, yet in addition can give better guidance to every one of their children. Moreover educated women can also help in the reduction of infant mortality rate and growth of the populace.

Periyar advocated that women strived to overcome from their meaningless restrictions and superstitious beliefs. He empathized that women education is the best investment, any society can make for the health and well-being of its children, as well as its economic and social progress. If women were well educated, none of these social injustices would have happened to them. The society took advantage to suppress and exploit women by their ignorance.

In a verse of Eladhi it states, "Beauty does not lie in the style of wailing or in the charm of a blush but only in the combination of numbers and letters. Hence, women education was considered as an important aspect during ancient times itself. Later uppercaste of Hinduism declined women education and all their basic rights. At this state, Periyar analyzed the psychology of the socially affected women, especially young women and their physical and psychological needs. So Periyar insisted women education must be mandatory for women's self-respect

The women education which was recommended by Periyar was widely recognized as the gateway to economic security and social status of women and Young widows

Dowry:

On the Dowry system practiced widely throughout the Indian sub-continent not only by Hindus but Christians too, Periyar calls it a "series disease that was spreading fast amongst Tamilians". He went on to state that the disease was also found in its virulent form among the Andharas and Brahmins of Tamil Nadu. This practice was sometimes accepted as a necessary evil in the system of marriage. This practice was originated from Smritis, it is mentioned that the bride is to be well-dressed and wearing costly ornaments, this is called as "Kanya dhan". It was not considered as dowry, because the parents used to offer them out of love and

affection. Later the bridegroom's parents started to demand for dowry. The reflection of this practice was increased number of unmarried girls, domestic violence, suicide, loss of self-respect. SAA

Periyar calls the dowry an evil and explorative practice depriving tens of thousands of talented and beautiful young women with sound character remaining spinsters without any chance of getting married.

Dowry prohibition Act, Indian law, enacted on May 1, 1961, intended to prevent the giving or receiving of a dowry. Under this Act, dowry includes property, goods, or money given by either party to the marriage, by the parents of either party, or by any other person in connection with the marriage. This Dowry Prohibition Act applies to people of all religions in India.

Devadasi System:

Before 1930 Devadasi practice was an important functionary in the Hindu society. Devadasi is a girl who is married to god and worships the god by singing, dancing and other rituals. Hence she was refused to the marriage system and die as a devadasi without any moral support. Later they started dancing before kings, landlords and other higher officials. Eventually they entered into the prostitution. Devadasi is prostitution in the name of lord. Due to this practice they were abandoned by the society and suffered from many difficulties.

In later 1930, Periyar stood against the devadasi practice, he also insisted that this practice should be entirely abolished in south India. He recommended Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy to articulate against the devadasi system. When she was the member of legislative, she insisted the elimination of devadasi system. She had so many consequences Sathyamurthy, a member of the legislative stated that devadasi women are sacred and they would live there after life in heaven. Dr. Muthulakshmi replied as, then why don't you send your own family girls to this practice.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy were instrumental in passing the Devadasi Abolition Bill but, after a great opposition the Madras Presidency devadasi Act (prevention of dedication) it is known as the Tamilnadu Devadasi Act was passed in 9October 1947 just after India became independent from British rule. It was passed in the Madras Presidency; the legal right to marriage was given to Devadasis. After this Act, Devadasi practice became punishable offence.

II. Conclusion

When Periyar was suppressed, oppressed and depressed lit 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, logically and forcefully of the need to eliminate the outmoded, traditional, inhuman practices against women and to promote the values and ways that would help them too become equal, free and dignified partners of men.