

Thanthai Periyar: His Resolutions and Rights for the Emancipation of Women in Tamil Society

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Abstract

Thanthai Periyar pushed for women's emancipation, expressing resolutions and rights for women and was regarded as both ahead of his time and controversial. From the outset of his public career, Thanthai Periyar prioritized women's empowerment. With the exception of Tamilnadu, he was the only Indian reformer who, through his journals, challenged the conceptual basis of society's "enslavement of women" for the first time. He saw his diaries as effective vehicles for spreading his message to the Tamil community. From the beginning of his political career till his death at the age of seventy-four, his resolutions and rights were dedicated to the advancement of women. Women's oppression has long been a chronic and deep-rooted ailment throughout the world, regardless of whether a country is classified as developed, developing, or undeveloped. In India, too, the situation of women has remained dissatisfactory. In India, many socio-religious reform movements arose in the early nineteenth century. There were campaigns for caste reform or abolition, equal rights for women, and a battle against social and legal disparities in the social domain. In this paper, an attempt is made to enlighten Thanthai Periyar's resolutions and rights on women's emancipation struggled for the emancipation of women movements, widow remarriages, love marriages, self-respect marriages, education and employment, women rights, rights of women in house and society and property rights of women.

Keywords: Periyar, Self Respect Movement, Widow Remarriage, Education, Property Women Rights, Tamil Society.

Introduction

Thanthai Periyar fought for women's development and asserted their rights, and was both ahead of his time and controversial. Throughout his seven decades of public service, he advocated for women's rights with a well-organized group of friends and followers. He bravely confronted the forces of orthodoxy and reactionaries through propaganda tours and platform speeches, as well as through social groups such as the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. Among Thanthai Periyar's other social reform endeavours, women's rights and empowerment are first and foremost. There have been numerous writers on Thanthai Periyar, many of whom have written works specifically about Thanthai Periyar's thoughts and services for women's upliftment, empowerment, and independence. K. Veeramani, a notable Thanthai Periyar follower who compiled and released a distinct volume



in Tamil on Periyar E.V.R's lectures and writings on women empowerment and rights in Tamil society. Under the headings Periyar and His Women's Movement, Self-Respect Movement's Resolutions and Women's Rights, Women's rights, arranged marriages, love marriages, self-respect marriages, widow remarriage, education and Employment, Rights of Women in House and Society, Property Rights to Women, Periyar and His Other Important Measures Needed for the Upliftment of Women, Periyar and His Other Important Measures Needed for the Upliftment of Women.

Periyar and his Women's Movement

Given Periyar's near-visionary impact, it's impossible to distinguish between his political and social legacies. However, despite the fact that his vision has been politicised and misattributed to anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu emotions, much of the substance of his work has been lost in the political discourse. If a boundary between E.V.R's political and social lives had to be established, it would be when he left the Congress party in 1925 to launch his now-iconic Self Respect Movement. The Self-Respect movement's main goal was to promote social equality and equity in a culture plagued by caste and patriarchy, preaching that man must cultivate self-respect in order to achieve individuality. Periyar said "Self-Respect Movement alone could be the actual liberation movement" at a time when the Indian Independence movement was gaining steam and was viewed as the ultimate social position to be a part of individual self-respect is required for political freedom to be fruitful.¹

A little-known truth is that E.V.Ramasamy was given the title of 'Periyar', which means "learned one" in Tamil, at a first-of-its-kind Tamil Nadu Women's Conference on November 13, 1938, by Dr.Tharambal, Ramamirthammal. Neelambigaiyar, the daughter of Maramali Adigalar, who was a staunch critic as well as a friend of Periyar, presided over the convention. It is a frequent misunderstanding to regard Periyar's Self-Respect Movement and his feminist principles as two distinct societal philosophies. In fact, the Self-Respect movement codified the values of individual liberty and upliftment for not only the oppressed castes, but also women. "We are only fit to think of self-respect when the concepts of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' are gone from our land", he said. This includes not just differences in caste and creed, but also differences in men and women's attitudes of superiority and inferiority. He a strong opponent of the chaturvarna system so were women treated inside the house by being treated as untouchables at certain times and were looked upon as lower than men in social standing by being confined to the kitchen and made to serve men of the household.

Self-Respect Movement's Resolutions and Women's Rights

"A man becomes a self-respecting individual if he knows that he is equal to all other men and that he has the right to equality with all other men", Periyar believed. Periyar also encouraged women to achieve self-respect in the same way. One of the reasons he called his movement the Self-Respect Movement was because of this. The following resolutions were passed at the first Self-Respect Conference in Chengalpat, Tamil Nadu, in 1929;



“This conference decides that women should be given equal rights to property and succession as men, as well as the rights and opportunities to work in any profession or job, and that the government should take the necessary steps to employ a greater number of female teachers in schools, including primary schools. Another resolution said that a girl's marriage should be around the age of 16. If either the husband or the wife disliked the relationship and desired to end it, he or she should be given the option to do so. Widows should be assisted in remarrying, and men and women should be allowed to pick their mates without regard for religion or caste”.²

Women's Rights

Thanthai Periyar was a strong advocate for women's rights. He stated that each woman should learn a suitable career for herself in order to make money. No spouse will treat her as a slave if she is able to make a life for herself. He believed that women in India are currently subjected to far greater hardship and humiliation, and that such a slavish system should be abolished. He was adamant that as long as women are subjected to constraints, they must be obedient to males and rely on them for assistance. He stated that if women are to live on an equal footing with men, they must have the freedom, education, and work that are appropriate for their knowledge, ability, and taste. He went on to say that women should not follow religious instructions that preach against them. He emphasised that religion is to blame for slavish attitudes, timidity, superstitious beliefs, and a reluctance to adopt conventional norms. Penadimai (women's enslavement) and Pen Izhivu (women's enslavement) were two of his most severe condemnations (degradation of woman).³ He called for women to build their physical strength in the same way that males do, by exercising and learning how to handle weapons. They need to be able to defend themselves against sexual assault. They should also receive military training so that they can assist the country in times of disaster. He blamed men for the shambles of women's relations. He stated that it was men's responsibility to keep women as decorative animals.⁴ He proposed that lavishing women with expensive gowns and diamonds is inferior to providing them with education, knowledge, and self-respect. He believed that women's obsession with decorations in whatever form would not improve their social standing; rather, it would put them in peril. Self-pride, vanity, spousal quarrels, and insecurity were among the outcomes, he said. He exhorted ladies to cast off their golden flatters and become free.⁵

Thanthai Periyar and Arranged Marriages

Arranged marriages are common in South Asia as a result of custom, heritage, and religion. Because of Aryan religion and art, Thanthai Periyar considered Aryan wedding methods were barbaric: Vedas, Sastras, Puranas, and Epics belong to the barbaric age. He went on to say that this is why their wedding techniques include the parents giving the girl, prostituting the girl's children, and a stranger forcing or stealthily dragging the girl away. In general, arranged marriages were intended to allow the pair to live together for the rest of their lives and enjoy contentment, fulfilment, and a good reputation, even after the sexual need and sexual pleasure had faded.⁶ However, Periyar said that women found 'joy' in slavish



marriage because they have been raised by their parents without knowledge, independence, or self-respect, and because they have been led to believe that marriage means submission to males. The fact that such subservient women are included in the group of 'chaste' women is another attraction for them, encouraging them to seek pleasure in such relationships. Because a man is married before he has fully grasped the nature of life, its troubles, and its joys, he is content with his wife's subservient nature and the sexual pleasure she provides. If he discovers any incompatibility, he adjusts to his partner and the circumstances and makes the best of his situation.⁷

E.V.R and Love Marriages

Love marriages, on the other hand, will suit only individuals who have no life goals, according to Thanthai Periyar. Such a wedding prioritizes sexual union, and it's debatable whether it represents a long-term commitment between the couple. Sexual compatibility isn't enough to ensure a good marriage; the pair must be able to live happily together. Suitability for life or living together can only be evaluated if the man and woman have become accustomed to each other's company and are content with each other. Only then will they be able to agree to live together.⁸ He goes on to say that love marriages can only provide pleasure if there is lust and the ability to satisfy it. If the couples are incompatible in other ways, such marriages merely result in the servitude of women. Such women's lives mimic the lives of bullocks chained to a cart, beaten, and forced to work interminably until they die. "A genuinely loving girl is inappropriate for family life; a suitable life partner is unfit for love", according to a proverb. He believed that a living-together pact between couples would be a better marriage than a love marriage.⁹

Widow Re-Marriage

The cruel practise of child marriage was one of the reasons Thanthai Periyar despised Hinduism and the rigidity performed in the name of Hinduism. Many of the girl children who were married at the age of ten or twelve became widows before they ever knew what the word 'widow' meant. It's strange that no one else, except from him, has spoken out against the practise of child marriage. Child marriages would not appear as barbaric as they do now if Indian society was open enough to allow innocent young widows to marry again. The orthodox folks who performed these child marriages, on the other hand, regarded it as in for a widow to marry. Ponnuthai, Periyar's sister, had a daughter. She married a twelve-year-old guy when she was nine years old. The boy-bridegroom died of cholera on the thirty-first day after the wedding, leaving the innocent nine-year-old girl child a widow. The child came to Periyar and bemoaned the fact that he and others had put her in such a bad situation. Periyar was extremely moved by this experience, and he resolved to do something revolutionary to make life more meaningful for widows. Young girls marrying wedding grooms significantly older than themselves, according to the 1931 census data, increased the number of widows in the Madras Presidency. The Self-Respect Movement was outspoken in its condemnation of marriages between women and elderly widows. The Self-Respect Movement bemoaned the condition of young widows who were denied the right to remarry and live a happy life with



other women. It went on to say that instead of resorting to such inhumane behaviour, everyone should treat the disappointed young widows with understanding and concern. The Self-Respect Movement promoted literature that highlighted the condition of young widows, with the goal of educating the uneducated and orthodox.¹⁰ As a result, the Self-Respect Movement saw all of these issues as not only societal issues and potential threats, but also utter servitude and moral degradation.

Women Education and Employment

Periyar E.V.R has always believed that equal educational opportunities for women should be created for emancipated women. According to Periyar, women should be able to free themselves from slavery without the assistance of men if they are given the opportunity to obtain an education. He was certain that, because there is a reservation system in place for the socially backward parts of the population, fifty percent reserve for women in school and work be provided. He also requested that women be included equally as ministers in the whole federal ministry. He placed a greater emphasis on the education of female children than on the education of male children. According to Thanthai Periyar, if a man is given the opportunity He used to say that if a household has two children, one male child and another female child, and the family is only able to offer schooling for one child, the female child should be given the opportunity. He went on to say that if a male person is required to receive education, that education will assist him in developing his personality as well as increasing his financial position; however, if a female child is given the opportunity to receive education, that educational knowledge will undoubtedly assist her not only in developing her economic position but also in assisting society in resolving many of the existing social ills.¹¹

Divorce and Property Rights

Thanthai Periyar asserted that there was no distinction between men and women when it came to property rights. He went on to add that women, like men, should be able to own property and benefit from it. In the case of divorce or separation, he advised for a woman to lie away from her spouse if he is an unpleasant person or suffers from any virulent sickness. In certain circumstances, a woman is entitled to support and a claim on her husband's property. Even if a widow remarries, she must be allowed to claim a piece of her former husband's estate.¹²

The Central Legislature passed an Act on February 4, 1946, granting Hindu married women the right to a separate place to dwell and a maintenance allowance from their husbands in certain circumstances. Periyar outlined why the Act was ineffective. Since it seems that the members of the Hindu Mahasabha and Sanadahnis agitated against the grant of even this right.¹³

Rights of Women in House and Society

Thanthai Periyar has always seen women as having independent autonomy and being of equal social and household status to men. In his various humanitarian projects, he pushed women to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. He was a preacher who lived what he taught. In his early days as a member of Congress and Gandhi's battle to enforce prohibition,



he empowered his wife Nagammai and his sister to spearhead toddy picketing with such zeal that even Gandhi recognised their contributions to the movement's success.¹⁴

Property Rights to Women

Periyar Thanthai The extension of property rights to women, according to E.V.R, is a highly important and urgent topic that must be implemented first. When E.V.R published his book "*Pen Yen Adimaiyaanaal?*" (Why Women Became Slaves?) in 1942, he included a distinct chapter named "*Penkalukkaana Sothurimai*" (Property Rights to Women). This fact in of itself demonstrates Periyar's desire in granting women property rights. He was a firm believer that if women are to be liberated and enjoy all of the rights that men do, if they are to be respected as fellow human beings, and if they are to be able to partake in all of the world's available happy affairs, they (women) should be given property rights as parents on par with the family's male heirs. He chastised Hindu activists of the time for opposing and making a stumbling block against the British authorities' Child Marriages Prevention Act. He urged and urged the women to get involved and start agitating for their property rights as soon as possible.¹⁵

Periyar and his other Important Measures for the Emancipation of Women

Thanthai Periyar denounced the so-called women liberation campaigners as a malicious and clever action designed to fool the naïve illiterate women. 'Is there any possibility of the cats granting liberation to the rats?, is there any possibility of the foxes granting liberty to the goats and chickens?, is there any possibility of the capitalists granting liberty to the workers?, is there any possibility of the Britishers providing economic boost to the Indians?, and is there any possibility of the Brahmins granting equality to non-Brahmins?' he continued. Similarly, there is no way for men to grant women their freedom. For these reasons, he advocated and asked of the then-Government that fifty percent of all teaching positions be reserved for women in all primary school education appointments.¹⁶ Thanthai Periyar believes that the mother is the most important person in a family, and that the children should be given the first letter of the mother's name as their initial, and that the method of providing the father's name is useless and unnecessary. He was certain that instead of teaching cooking, music, tailoring, and other skills to girls, they should be taught life skills, as well as liberty, equality, and economic independence. He also counseled the women not to grow their hair because it would be a waste of time to manage it and, in some ways, would be a hindrance to their day-to-day activities. Through his propaganda and services on this issue, an increasing number of women were allowed to receive an education, numerous child marriages were stopped, numerous inter-caste marriages were conducted, resulting in the dismantling of the strong caste system, women were given more political positions, women were given property rights from their families through legislation, the dowry system was significantly reduced in society, and dowry deaths were also significantly reduced.

Conclusion

Thanthai Periyar has constantly shown a strong interest in the liberation, emancipation, and upliftment of women throughout his early political career. It's worth



noting that in the 1920s and 1930s, when no one else seemed to care about women's empowerment, it was he who waged a struggle against a male-dominated traditionalistic culture and achieved a lot in his goal of empowering women. He took a strong and outspoken position against female enslavement, speaking out and fighting strongly against it. He began to raise his resolute voice against all types of brutality and injustice to which the vulnerable and despairing ladies were exposed when he observed their oppressed, downtrodden, and dejected lot. He fought tenaciously and relentlessly for women's equal rights in all aspects of life, presenting his ideas honestly, fearlessly, and inhumane actions against women, and promoting principles and methods that would enable them become equal, free, and dignified partners of men. Women in Tamil society were awakened and began to demand their rights in all sectors of life as a result of Thanthai Periyar's hard, constant, and consistent efforts toward women's emancipation. Thanthai Periyar was dubbed the "Pioneer of Feminism" in India because of his multifaceted contribution in the emancipation of women's rights. The uniqueness of the leadership of Thanthai Periyar and his feminist ideology is to be understood from his innate sense of gender equality and social justice.

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