

Periyar's Contribution to Women's Liberation

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Abstract:

Scholars from various countries have focused on women's liberation. Periyar's perception of Periyar on the issue of women's liberation and their rights is different from that of others. He smashed the very base of the bondage that devastated the calm and happy state of women's lives by means of his philosophical thoughts and ideals. Periyar Ee.Ve.Ramasmy strongly expounded that the adaptation of life's principles by men only would yield nothing for social prosperity. The true freedom of the country can't be achieved without the rise of women's status both on the home front and outside. Periyar dedicated his whole life to elevating the position of women. He firmly believed that social progress was possible by eradicating societal inequalities and atrocities. Periyar created an awareness among women by prompting them to realise their current position in society and their state of bondage, and propagandised for the well-being of women through his writings that conveyed his message. Periyar roused rationalistic thinking in the minds of Tamils and toiled to abolish women's servitude constantly. Hence, this research paper is presented under the title, "Periyar's Contribution to Women's Liberation". The untiring efforts of Periyar liberated women from their captivity. He recognised the issues that plagued women and suggested solutions to overcome them. Before the 19th century in India, women faced various issues, so Periyar was a prominent figure among those who spoke for the rights and welfare of women from these issues. The main objective of this study is to convey Periyar's thoughts related to the welfare of women to society. Thus, this research paper is mainly intended to discuss the impediments women encounter in their path of progress and how Periyar proposed ways and means to promote women's education and forbid the procedures of child marriage, polygamy, widow marriage, etc., Devadasi tradition should be abolished, and the divorce act should be implemented.

Keywords: Widow, Women, Marriage, Education, Rights

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1. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

"Those who want women's freedom in the world of individual rights should make women educated. You have to learn a profession for life. If a country wants to get rid of superstitions completely, if high reforms are to grow in the world and to stop cheating in the name of God, then female education should take root in that country. The veil of darkness should be torn, & the women should come out. The wealth of knowledge should be consumed. If this happens enough, reform plans will take shape. New revolutions are blossoming in a country where female education excels. New history is being made in new fields, all due to female education. Periyar paid special attention to women's education, as rationality was also a must for women.

Society is divided into two major categories, i.e., males and females. While men seem to enjoy all rights, women are deprived of many rights, and this sad state of affairs for women remains forever. Being conscious of this deplorable status of women, Periyar agitated for women's rights such as

property rights, the right of remarriage, the right of denying child marriage, the right of expression, the right of writing, and running the family with rights on par with those of one's husband (Arasu Manimehalai, 1981).

He aired his voice to eliminate social crimes like prostitution, illicit abortionists and fought to win the rights of receiving education, marriage, remarriage, property, child rearing, etc. for women through self-respect campaign. He created an awareness among people, stressing the uplift of women through newspapers such as Kudiyarasu, Viduthalai, and Unmai, which started circulation on the 2nd of May, 1925. Periyar extended his propaganda to the neighbouring countries as well.

Periyar, having observed the status of women in other countries of the world, aspired to lead the Tamilnad women to achieve the same status in education. He went ahead. Emphasizing that Tamilnad women should reach a high literacy level in order to enjoy the anticipated rights such as property rights and divorce rights, etc., through legal means (Anaimuththu, V. 1914). He stressed that it is the moral

obligation of parents to educate their daughters and find them employment until they are 22 years old, and only then may they think of engaging their daughters in marriage. "If we are really independent citizens, we are obliged to make arrangements to provide equal rights and privileges to women, as men, and liberate them from unjust social restrictions." (Thanthai Periyar, 1926)

From the perspective of Periyar, women's servitude is more of a social problem than a literary problem. When commenting on the attitude of those who proclaimed that they were working for women's liberation, he remarked, "The act of those supposed to show respect to women and devote themselves to winning their rights is nothing but a form of plot intended to deceive women."

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This has been done using Periyar's literature and thoughts as sources. Historical and descriptive research methodologies were used in this study.

3. RESULTS

As a result of this study, Periyar's ideas establish that recognition should be given to women in society.

3.1 Impediments

Women have to overcome several impediments to attain a state of glory. In societal view, chastity is not regarded as common for both men and women, but it is generally attached to women only. The immorality of men is not subject to being condemned. Women are always prone to being labelled as prostitutes when they are found to have deviated from moral norms. The general societal tendency is to ignore the immoral practices of men.

Bearing children imposes a heavy burden upon women. Women's progress in life is crippled as women grow weak and languish physically as well as mentally, subsequent to their confinement. Social injustice and cruelties inflicted upon women should be eradicated so as to allow them to lead a stress-free life.

Periyar considered women's servitude as a political issue rather than a social issue. He expected women to possess all the rights that men have (Thanthai Periyar, 1946).

Periyar's claim of equal rights for women is purely based on his proposition that women are equal to men in all respects. He has defined women's rights as, "Men ought to admit that women are endowed with emotions like valour, vigour, resentment, and wrath, as men" (Thanthai Periyar, 1928).

3.2 Education for Women

Periyar was firm in his opinion throughout his life that women should be granted all rights, and he fought for it. He believed that it is only through literacy that knowledge of how such rights could be realized and of the benefits of rights can be gained. He longed for Tamil Nadu women to attain a high

literacy level on par with women in the other parts of the world.

He suggested, "You, like the Western women, have to secure all your rights and lead a pleasurable life. Several rights, including the property right, the right to divorce, etc., are due to your access through legal means. Inevitably, you ought to be knowledgeable in order to enjoy such rights" (Periyar, 1991).

If women have to live on terms of equality with men, they must have the liberty, like men, to have the kind of education they like and also to do unhampered any work suitable to their knowledge, ability, and taste. Periyar, until his death, urged women to leave the kitchen and pursue education. Denial of education and property hampers women's freedom and mobility.

Bharathidasan mentions that if a woman gets an education, society will change; it is very appropriate. A man gets an education only to develop his family and earn money. If a girl is educated, then the family will prosper. When a family grows, the society grows. If society develops, the country will develop, so the root is in female education. Women should be educated. Instead of giving jewellery to a girl, the money should be spent on education, and parents should make her study. Education should be practical education. It should be an education with quality of life and self-reliance.

Every woman should have a vocational education so that she can earn something. No husband will treat her as a slave if she has the ability to earn at least enough for her stomach. If a woman earns, she will no longer need to depend on someone. Confidence comes automatically. The thought of living as a slave will leave the mind. Education is essential for self-reliance. Periyar made girls' education his policy. In this way, they have progressed to the extent that all women hold a separate conference for themselves. Periyar's activities are the basis for this. In the Chengalpattu convention, only primary compulsory education for school-going girls should be provided from public funds. Periyar brought a resolution that education should not stop at the age of 11 and that girls should continue their education till the age of 30.

3.3 Marriage

Marriage is a kind of contract. It is the society that created the system of marriage. We have been adopting this same system since its inception. It was proposed that when a man is away from home, he needs a mate to protect the property earned by him. Such companionship or bond is known as marriage.

3.4 Child Marriage

Periyar commented thus on the marriage of women before puberty. "The marriage of immature persons before they attain due knowledge and sensitivities becomes detrimental to society. He highlights this issue and takes measures to resist it. From the perspective of Periyar, it could be understood how child marriage undermined social prosperity. (Thanthai Periyar, 1928)

Periyar fought to abolish child marriage. Through his self-respect campaign. When the child husbands were no more, absurdities like forcing the child wives to remain as widows forever occurred. Periyar and his supporters propagandised against these evil practices. Also, they stressed that an act should be brought in to raise the marriage age. (Eramakrishnan, 1977)

In the year 1929, an act to ban child marriage was formulated. According to this Act, males under 18 years of age and females under 15 years of age were prevented from getting married. Even after the implementation of this Act, child marriage was practised to a large extent in India. However, compared to other parts of India, in South India, the number of females engaged in child marriage seemed lower.

3.5 Polygamy

When monogamy was not licensed by law, there was the custom of having more than one wife at the same time. But it was the norm of society that a woman could be a wife only to a man. While society allowed a man to remarry a woman when his wife died, it restricted the remarriage of a woman when her husband died. Periyar pinpointed this discrimination, which led to the division between men and women in society. Having observed such inequalities, he demanded equal rights for women as men. He was sternly conscious of abolishing the custom of a man marrying many women at the same time.

3.6 Widow Marriage

Due to the social restrictions prevalent in those days, young widows had to suffer without gratifying their feminine sensitivities. But the society allowed even an old widower to remarry. Periyar pointed out this discrimination that resulted in social cruelty (Thanthai Periyar, 1926).

Periyar did not stress that all widows should remarry. He opined there shouldn't be compulsion on the remarriage of widows. Remarriage should be their own option.

"When a woman becomes a widow, will her natural, delightful emotions faint? How can women suppress their natural feelings? Therefore, despite restrictions imposed upon them, they are unable to overcome the natural sensations, and ultimately they conceive stealthily and resort to abort the fetus or commit infanticide; the members of the society to which she is attached should be responsible for this sin," remarked Periyar (Thanthai Periyar, 1926).

3.7 Divorce Right

Periyar suggested that the right to divorce should be legalised for women. It would pave the way for the removal of discrimination with regard to the notion that chastity is associated only with women and other forms of cruelty. It was a superstition that if divorce rights were legalised, the state of chastity would vanish totally. Periyar repeatedly reiterated the necessity of the adoption of legal means to the practice of divorce for women. As a result, in the year 1955, a law was passed to provide women with the right of

divorcing their husbands under justifiable grounds (Veeramani, 1991).

3.8 Property Rights

The only property given to a girl by her parents is the jewellery vessel that she carries modestly from the house where she was born. Bharathiyar saw the social cruelty that even those things are not hers, and they are all the property of her husband. If a woman gets wealth, she will automatically gain self-confidence; her value will rise in the society, and the inferiority complex will disappear from her.

When we look at Periyar's opinion that if the women of the family have the right to property, it will be clear how much better they will lead a life, then we can realise how big handcuffs this society has placed on women. Periyar's opinion is that if there is a separate property for women, there will be no compulsion to live till the end depending on a man. If women lose their right to property, all kinds of discomforts will disappear for them. Periyar has made it clear that an economy is necessary for a woman to stand tall for progress, just as the root of a large banyan tree is supported in the soil without being visible to the eye.

Periyar stated that there was no difference between men and women. He went on to say that like men, women should have the right to own property and enjoy its benefits. If a widow gets remarried, she must be given the right to claim a share of the first husband's property.

3.9 Abolition of the Thevathasi Cult

Periyar played a prominent role in the abolition of the Thevathasi cult. With regard to the Thevathasai cult, he stated, "The existence of the Thevathasai cult itself is a disgrace to Hinduism. A blemish to a single woman is a blemish to the entire female population. It undermines the reputation and prestige of women (Thanthai Periyar, 1930).

Veeramani stated, "Periyar contributed tremendously to abolishing this cult at every nook and corner constantly"

A law was passed in Tamil Nadu in the name of Periyar. For the first time, to abolish this cult, soon after India became an independent state.

Periyar, in his statement, pointed out that the Devadasi system was a disgrace to the Hindu religion.

3.10 Chastity

Chastity is the best tool to lower a woman's social value and reduce her to a position of servitude in a private society. Periyar did not accept the idea that even if a man commits all the mistakes, only a moment should live for the man and can be considered true chastity only if he lives like that.

Bharathi's view that chastity is common to both sexes is consistent with the fact that morality or chastity does not belong to both sexes but only to women. Just as education, wealth, and emotions are equal for both men and women, chastity is also equal.

Chastity was used to enslave a woman into a man's personality. We call those who are absorbed in this way as *karparasi*; *Patipathini* is real. According to Periyar, the words *paththini* and *pathiviratai* are derived from stupidity and ferocity and were created to prevent women from acting freely. In this way, the strength of chastity is measured by scholars and scholars in each period according to their own criteria, but Periyar's criteria of chastity are different.

Chastity should never be for the sake of control and coercion. Let the chain of chastity bind them as tight as they will for the contract of life and for the love of love. I don't care about that. But in enslaving only the bond of an innate justice, desire is not cruel, but it lacks wisdom and responsibility to the extent of mustard. Periyar's idea is that a woman who is a virgin out of fear of sin and chastity out of fear of her husband has the same virtue (Ramakirushnan, 2007).

3.11 Give Birth to a Child

Motherhood is said to be the main duty of a woman. Perhaps if that opportunity is not available, the society casts her aside as barren. It has also become a social norm for the husband to marry another woman in order to have an heir. At the same time, because the mental and physical health of the woman is affected by giving birth to more children, one should avoid giving birth to more children. It is also necessary to look at Periyar's opinion. Men can do it easily if they want to move from one place to another, even if they want to become a *sannyasin* or a *brahmachari*. But pregnancy is an obstacle for women to be able to do that (Ramakirushnan, 2007).

3.12 Birth of a Female Child

The time when the birth of a girl child was considered a great blessing has changed. And today the birth of a girl child is considered a great burden. Even though my mother is a girl, the attitude of considering it a huge burden when the child she bore is a girl is a fundamental thing if the Tamil society is to progress. Periyar started his movement based on this concept. Equal to man, woman lives in the life of man as a daughter, co-born, wife, and mother who carries the human society in her womb and nurtures it as her blood (Ramakirushnan, 2007).

Periyar has mentioned that there should not be a *pedam* in the dress and food habits of men and women. If there is no *pedam*, female slavery will go away from the mind. Periyar's view is that not only ideologically, but also psychologically, will change when looking at this. Mothers and fathers should not try to lock women in the house like cages; let them socialize freely. Even if a woman has all the facilities inside a big house, sharing her affections within the family without looking at the outside world is like a lamp in a jar. Expensive sandalwood saplings are safe to grow indoors. However, as the full use and growth of the tree shrinks, these women will also become useless (Ramakirushnan, 2007).

3.13 Benefit of Education

"One is that education should give people reason and a sense of self-respect. And the other should be used for doing business or looking for a better life".

It was not Periyar's intention that women should get educated and retire. As a result of that education, women should be transformed into people who have various rights.

It is not an end by itself, but
It is a means to an end.
The prevailing opinion was that.

While giving advice to women, you should have all the rights and live a happy life like upper-class women; for that, you have to study like men. Many rights are waiting for you through the law, such as property rights, divorce rights, and to enjoy those rights, you need education, and get rid of your love for jewellery or sarees. Education is not only for the welfare of women, but if we want to become a society of intelligent people, the mothers who take care of and raise them should be intelligent women. A scholarly quote by Louise Beaufort is also worth recalling here. (Periyar's thoughts, part 11)

3.14 Learner Duty

Educated women should give full value to Buddhism when they come back as teachers who teach education to others. Education should be used as a powerful tool for social change. It is an undeniable fact that only women's education can lead to social change. Thinamani, who admired Periyar's education, also said about this. It is noteworthy that Karaikudi Alagappa University Vice Chancellor Dr A. Iramasamy said that "Father Periyar once said that if I become the education minister, I will allocate all the funds for male education. (Dinamani, 2002)

4. CONCLUSION

Periyar is the only great leader who toiled for more than 60 years for social renaissance. Periyar elucidated his ambition as follows. "Man should perform useful deeds during his life period. His deeds are supposed to contribute to the well-being of others and to the social prosperity (Thanthai Periyar, 1928). He fulfilled his ambition by living a life dedicated to the comfort of others and social uplift.

Thus, the devotion of Periyar eliminated women's servitude. Child marriage was banned, and the *Saratha Act* has passed. Inter-marriage and widow marriage were approved and encouraged by state medal awards and appreciation. Self-respect marriage got approved, and the percentage of educated women rose dramatically, and they could achieve equal status as men. Periyar can be called the savior of the women population. He created a new society that honored knowledge and labor. He is a great hero who transformed the society corrupted by evil forces into a cultured and civilized society during his lifetime.

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