



PERIYAR'S JOURNALS'S STRUGGLE FOR EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

K.VELMANGAI AND L.SELVAMUTHU KUMARASAMI

Ph.D., Research Scholar in History
Presidency College (Autonomous) Chennai Tamil Nadu..
Associate Professor in History
Presidency College (Autonomous) Chennai Tamil Nadu.

Abstract:

A galaxy of social reformers and a few reform minded elites emerged in the Nineteenth Century to remove societal obstacles that stood in the way of women's emancipation and development. Of all the reformers, Periyar E.V.Ramasamy (E.V.R.) alone attacked for the first time, the ideological basis of the "enslavement of women" in society through his Journals Periyar considered his journals are powerful vehicles to spread his message to the Tamil Society. In 1925, he started a journal, Kudi Arasu, (People's Rule), which was followed in 1928 by Revolt. Then he started a Tamil journal Puratchi. It was then replaced by Pagtharivu, (Rationalism) on 26 August 1934.. He made constant and quick substitutions of each banned journal. It illustrated his importance to printed media because the journals regularly carried his social and political reform ideas to the nook and corner of Tamil Nadu. As a matter of fact, till the end of his active public life, E.V.R. continued the floating of new propaganda journals. He started Unmai (Truth) in 1970 and Modern Rationalist in 1971, both when he was extremely old. In all his journals, Periyar paid much attention to the emancipation of women and elevation of the Depressed Classes.

KEYWORD-

Emancipation, Self-Respect, Women Rights, Widowhood, Remarriage.

INTRODUCTION

Periyar E.V.R. worked for the cause of women during his seven decades of public service with a well disciplined supporters and followers. His journals and organisations came to his defence against vituperative attacks and brickbats. It is a well known fact that to retrieve the "marginalized section" (women) of the society from the "dominant culture" E.V.R took up the cause of women as his life mission right from the day when he entered the public service. Through propaganda tour and platform speeches, and through the social organizations like Self - Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam E.V.R. courageously met the forces of orthodoxy and reactionaries.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

At a Tirunelveli District Self-Respect Conference held on November 28, 1927, E.V.R as President, pleaded with the Government" to give equal rights to women like men to inherit or possess property as that would make them economically independent. On that occasion, among other resolutions,

Title : PERIYAR'S JOURNALS'S STRUGGLE FOR EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN Source:Golden Research Thoughts [2231-5063] K.VELMANGAI AND L.SELVAMUTHU KUMARASAMI yr:2013 vol:2 iss:7.

the following two resolutions were passed to that effect.

1. "In Hindu families where the widows refused to remarry, they should be given right to property of their deceased husbands".
- 2 "Properties in Hindu families should be equally distributed between men and women without any sex discrimination"

E.V.R. emphasized the need once again in his editorial in Kudi Arasu in December, 1929 thus; "Like men", the women should have property rights and like women, the men should have all virtues and good character and laws enforcing these should be made without any delay.¹

The Self-Respect philosophy of E.V.R. 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. Hence, while speaking on the occasion of a marriage in July 1930, at Virudunagar, which was covered by Kudi Arasu, E.V.R. thundered, "The parents of this bride should give a share of their property to her. Like men the women too have right to property and right to work. If not, how will the women live with self respect in the society?".² Then Kudi Arasu wrote that E.V.R.'s followers set an example to others by adhering to the ideology of the Self- Respect Movement. E.V.R. praised highly a bridegroom who in his marriage held in September 1939 at Nagercoil registered a property worth of Rs. 5000/- in the bride's name.³ Following this, Kudi Arasu wrote that Even, E.V.R. appealed to the Central Government to pass social legislations aiming at establishment of social equality in the society. Among other reforms, he added, the Government could introduce a legislation giving equal property rights to women like men.⁴

E.V.R. showed keen interest to focus the meetings in which thoughts related to women welfare were touched. In October 1930 in Madras under the Presidentship of T.R. Venkatarama Sastri and in the presence of former Advocate - General -and Law Member of the Madras Government, Narayana Kurup, a great gentleman addressed large gatherings in which the problems and rights to women had been focused. In the meeting a consensus was arrived at regarding the need to give women the right to own and inherit property, the right for alimony and the widows' right to the property of their deceased husbands even after remarriage. E.V.R. gave wide coverage to this meeting in his journal, Kudi Arasu thus: "It is the duty of those who work for the liberation of women to see women shedding fear and servile attitude that stand in the way of their securing their right to property."⁵

E.V.R. did not fail to criticize the government if the latter hesitated to support any legislation regarding social nature. Harbilas Sarda introduced in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1932 a bill for securing right to Hindu widows over the property belonging to their husbands. It was opposed even by the Government on the ground that the three Hindu members who took part in the debate were against it. E. V. R. enraged over the stand taken by the Government. He expressed his views in Dravidan thus; "The objection of the Government to this bill has no doubt caused much dissatisfaction to all persons. It is indeed regrettable that, while the Government should help the progress of the country by accepting at least bills introduced in the Legislative Assembly for effecting social reforms. Though they do not grant all facilities for such reforms, at least, they should not have opposed the bill while sympathizing with its object in words".⁶ In fact, E.V.R. had an unflinching faith in the British Government in India that they alone could introduce reforms, and did not expect anything from the sanatanists and orthodox reactionaries.

E.V.R realized that the denial of some rights to women such as right to own or to inherit property, right to widow remarriage, and the right to divorce would lead to other social evils like prostitution. Hence, to eradicate these ills from society, he stressed the need to attend those ills by passing social legislations.⁷ While detailing some of the rules and regulations for the conduct of SelfRespect marriages, E.V.R wrote in Puratchi in June 1934 thus: "As per the old marriage system the women did not have the right to property. They did not have equal rights with men in the family, whereas the Self- Respect marriages are based on the recognition of equal rights of women in owning or inheriting property and also in sharing rights equally with men in running the family".⁸

In 1937, the Government of India passed the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act in the Central Legislative Assembly. E.V.R commended this act in the editorial of Kudi Arasu thus: "The Bill that forwarded by Bhagawan Das was at last put into an Act against strict orthodox opposition and at least it has established the necessity of Hindu women's right to property on a firm ground".⁹

At a marriage held at Kanchipuram in June 1940, E.V.R. as a common man urged the need to give women an equal share in the family property like their male counterparts. It was given wide coverage in Kudi Arasu thus : He said that "If we give a share of our property to our daughters, the daughter- in -laws will also bring in their share of property to our family. In such a case, there will not be any profit or loss in the

family.¹⁰ Thus, through Kudi Arasu, E.V.R. drawn the attention of the masses to the point that the people should recognise the rights of women to property.¹¹

E.V.R did not accept the notion that women in society have been the real stumbling block to progress. On the other hand, he strongly viewed that if the right, to education, property owning and inheriting rights are given to the women, they would not wish to confine their lives to the kitchens, bedeck themselves with jewels and end up with innumerable problems of marriage.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

E.V.R did a lot for the women's rights. He said that each woman should learn an appropriate profession for herself, so that she is also to earn. If she is able to eke-out a living at least for herself, no husband will treat her as a slave. He strongly viewed that at present women in India experience much worse suffering and humiliation and wanted such slavish situation should go.

E. V. R strongly 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. E.V.R. 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 woman) and Pen Izhivu (degradation of woman).¹²

E.V.R advocated that women should develop their physical strength like men, take exercise and get trained in the use of weapons. They should be able to protect themselves from sexual assault. They should be also militarily trained so that they could serve the nation in times of crisis. He condemned men for the low state of women affairs. He pointed out that men were responsible for keeping women as decorated animals. He floated the idea that adorning women with costly dress and jewels is not better than giving them education, knowledge and self-respect.

E.V.R. considered the women's craze for ornaments in any way could not elevate their condition in the society; instead it would bring them in danger. Its results, E.V.R. listed, were self-pride, vanity, domestic quarrels and insecurity. He called upon women to throwaway their golden flatters and be emancipated.¹³

MARRIAGE

E.V.R 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 per cent of the prevailing prostitution will disappear.

WOMEN'S FREEDOM

E.V.R found out the reason behind the statement that "Man can live without woman, but a woman cannot live without man". According to him because of the problems of child bearing, women are unable to demonstrate that they can live without men. As men have no such burden, they are so placed as to declare that they can live without women. Besides, the problems of maternity make women seek the help of others and this gives rise to male domination. Therefore, for true emancipation of women, they should be completely freed from the bothersome obligation of child bearing.¹⁴

WIDOWS REMARRIAGE

E.V.R. also reformed and modernized several aspects of marriage. The reforms of E. V.R. have helped to improve the quality of life of women in general. He took his place alongside other great Indian reformers who liberated widows from a life of perpetual misery and drudgery. In this regard Kudi Arasu, illustrated an incident in his life. E.V.R. opposed the widowhood ever since his niece Ammayi aged ten lost her thirteen year old husband due to cholera. It was a rude shock for him and thenceforth he took a vow to eradicate child marriage and popularize widow marriage.¹⁵

E.V.R. gathered statistics from the 1921 Census Report of India and highlighted the plight of 26,37,788 widows in the country. He viewed that widow non-marriage was perpetuated by men "to make

women subservient to them like slaves and to keep them under control". He further argued that "this wicked enslavement of half of the human race is due to the fact that men are physically a little stronger than women. True to his vow, he championed the cause of widows by arranging several widow marriages, popularizing them and helping the widows in the society to attain a new lease of life.

E.V.R emphatically supported the rights of women to divorce when they could not get along with their husbands. Divorce was not allowed in the past according to the laws of the land. He argued: "At present women have no right to seek divorce; when the husband is alive, no woman has the right to marry another man. While this is the case with woman, the law allows a man to marry another woman while the first wife is alive."

E.V.R. wished the people to think about widow's remarriage. For instance he put a question before the people thus: "If a man can marry again at the instance of the death of his previous wife, why can not a woman remarry at the death of her husband?"

E.V.R also strongly condemned polygamy. In this regard, Kudi Araasu revealed that E.V.R. cited the practice of the Namboodiris, among whom the eldest son alone can marry any number of Namboodiri girls while all the other younger brothers can keep the Nair girls as concubines. The children born to the concubines have no right over to the father's property. This practice keeps the Namboodri old man with six or seven wives.¹⁶ Thus Periyar in his life Mission utilized the journals of him to ventilate his assertive views on the Women Emancipation even though many of his journal were banned by the British Government for his extreme political views.¹⁷

END NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1.Kudi Arasu, 29 December 1929.
- 2.Ibid., 28 July 1930.
- 3.Ibid., 28 September 1930.
- 4.Ibid., 5 October 1930.
5. Ibid., 26 October 1930.
- 6.Chandrababu, B.S., Battered Women of Madras, Chennai, 1998, p.47.
- 7.Kudi Arasu, 29 May 1932 and 16 June 1935.
- 8.Puratchi, 17 June 1934.
- 9.Kudi Arasu, 7 February 1937.
10. Ibid., 30 June 1940,
11. Ibid., 29 September 1940 and 18 March 1947.
12. Anaimuthu, V., (ed.),Periyar E.V. R.Chintanaigal , (Tamil) (Periyar E.V.R. Thoughts) Part.A, Tiruchi, 1974, pp.21-22.
- 13.Nagoorkani, P., 'Periyar E.V.R. The Pioneer of Women Liberation Struggle in Tamil Nadu', Paper presented in the Thirty- Eight Annual Conference of Institute of Historical Studies, Kodaikanal, 8-10 November 2001, pp.6-7.
- 14.Gopalakrishnan, M.D.,(comp.), A Garland to Periyar, Channai, 1999, pp. 80-83.
- 15.Kudi Arasu, 22 August 1926.
- 16.Ibid., 26 October 1930.
- 17.Pandian, M.S.S., Brahmin & Non-Brahmin, Permanent, Black, New Delhi, 2007, p.211.