



THANTHAI PERIYAR ON WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Periyar advocated the development of women asserting 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 and injustices committed amongst the people of the sub-continent. 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.¹ 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. Just as there are foolish people, weaklings and people with bad qualities among men, among women also there are likely to be people belonging to these categories.² With regards to marriage, Periyar has stated that it is one of the worst customs in India. He claimed that the marriage principle, briefly, involves the enslavement of a woman by her husband and nothing else. This enslavement is concealed under the cover of marriage rites to deceive the women concerned by giving the wedding the false name of a divine function.³ There have been numerous papers in South India reporting how husbands have killed their wives, suspecting immoral behavior. The husband's suspicion of his wife's character has often led to murders. Those who believe in the divine dispensation, according to Periyar, do not have the knowledge to ask themselves why marriages conducted according to religious rites and the approval of God end in this fashion.⁴ Periyar further states that the very idea that the only proper thing for women to do is to be slaves of domesticity, bear children and bring them up, is a faulty one. As long as these restrictions are imposed on women, we can be sure that women have to be subservient to men and depend on men for help. 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.⁵ In this paper an attempt has been made to enlighten the views of Thanthai Periyar on women and

¹Dr. K. Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.55.

²Ibid., pp.17-18.

³Ibid., p.19.

⁴Ibid.,

⁵Ibid., p.21.



development under the headings arranged marriages, love marriages, self-respect marriages, widow-remarriage, education, property rights and divorce and resolutions passed.

Introduction

Periyar advocated the development of women asserting 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 and injustices committed amongst the people of the sub-continent. 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 both 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.⁶ 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. Just as there are foolish people, weaklings and people with bad qualities among men, among women also there are likely to be people belonging to these categories.⁷ With regards to marriage, Periyar has stated that it is one of the worst customs in India. He claimed that the marriage principle, briefly, involves the enslavement of a woman by her husband and nothing else. This enslavement is concealed under the cover of marriage rites to deceive the women concerned by giving the wedding the false name of a divine function.⁸ There have been numerous papers in South India reporting how husbands have killed their wives, suspecting immoral behavior. The husband's suspicion of his wife's character has often led to murders. Those who believe in the divine dispensation, according to Periyar, do not have the knowledge to ask themselves why marriages conducted according to religious rites and the approval of God end in this fashion.⁹ Periyar further states that the very idea that the only proper thing for women to do is to be slaves of domesticity, bear children and bring them up, is a faulty one. As long as these restrictions are imposed on women, we can be sure that women have to be subservient to men and depend on men for help. 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.¹⁰ In this paper an attempt has been made to enlighten the views of Thanthai Periyar on women and development under the headings arranged marriages, love marriages, self-respect marriages, widow-remarriage, education, property rights and divorce and resolutions passed.

Arranged Marriages

In South Asia we mostly hear of arranged marriages as part of custom, heritage, and religions. Periyar thought that the Aryan wedding methods were barbarous because of the Aryan religion and art: Vedas, Sastras, Puranas, and Epics belong to the barbaric age. He further stated that is the reason why their

⁶Dr. K. Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.55.

⁷Ibid., pp.17-18.

⁸Ibid., p.19.

⁹Ibid.,

¹⁰Ibid., p.21.



wedding methods involve the parents giving the girl, prostituting the girl children and some stranger carrying the girl away by force or stealth.¹¹ Arranged marriages in general were meant to enable the couple to live together throughout life and derive happiness, satisfaction and a good reputation, even years after the sexual urge and sexual pleasure are forgotten.¹² But, with the selfish manipulation of this pact, Periyar claimed that women find 'pleasure' in slavish marriage because they have been brought up by their parents without education, independence and self-respect and because they have been made to believe that marriage means subordination to males. The inclusion of such slavish women in the group of 'chaste' women is another lure to them, leading them to find pleasure in such marriages. Because a man is also married before he has understood the nature of life, its problems and its pleasures, he is satisfied with the slavish nature of the wife and the sexual pleasure she gives. If he finds any incompatibility, he adapts himself to his partner and the circumstances and puts up with his lot.¹³

Love Marriages

Love marriages, claims Periyar, on the other hand will suit only those who have no ideals in life. Such a wedding gives primacy to sexual union along and it is doubtful if it indicates an agreement between the couple for good life. Sexual compatibility alone does not ensure happy married life; the couple should be able to live together cheerfully. Suitability for life or living together can be determined only if the man and woman get used to the company of each other, and are satisfied with each other. Only then, they can enter into an agreement to live together.¹⁴

Periyar further states that love marriages can give pleasure only as long as there is lust and the ability to satisfy that lust. If there is no compatibility between the partners in other respects, such marriages end only in the enslavement of women. The lives of such women resemble the lives of bullocks which are tied to a cart, beaten up and made to labor endlessly until they die.¹⁵ Therefore, there is a proverb stating, "A deeply loving girl is unfit for family life; a suitable life partner is unfit for love." Periyar believed that the agreement between partners to live together will constitute a better marriage than a love marriage.¹⁶

Self-Respect Marriages

In a leading article of Viduthalai, Periyar states that a self-respect wedding is based on rationalism. Rationalism is based on the individual's courage. Some may have the courage to conduct it during the time which almanacs indicate as the time of the planet Rahu and that, particularly in the evening. Some others may have just enough daring to avoid the Brahmin priest and his mother tongue - the Sanskrit language.¹⁷ Some may feel nervous about not keeping the traditional lamp burning in broad daylight. Some others may have the rotten thought that conducting a wedding without 'mangala sutra' is disgraceful. Still, the self-respect weddings conducted during the past thirty years have some basic limits. They are: Brahmins and their mantras should be utterly avoided; meaningless rituals, piling mud pots, one on another, having the traditional lamp during day time, ritual smoke - all these should be avoided. Rationalism does not approve of these. Periyar then asks why can't the government pass an Act that legalizes weddings which avoid the above-mentioned superstitious practices. If all these details

¹¹Ibid., pp.32-33.

¹²Dr. K. Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.30.

¹³Ibid.,

¹⁴Diehl Anita, E.V.Ramaswami - Periyar: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India, Scandinavian University Books, Sweden, 1977, pp.32-33.

¹⁵Dr. K. Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.30.

¹⁶Ibid.,

¹⁷Ibid., pp.30-31.



cannot be accommodated in the Act, the latter can legalize weddings which don't have Brahmin priests, the Sanskrit language and the so called holy fire.¹⁸ Thus, marriages styled as Self-Respect marriages carried a threefold significance: a) replacing the Purohit, b) inter-caste equality, c) man-woman equality. Periyar claimed to have performed Self-Respect marriages unofficially since 1925 and officially since 1928.¹⁹ Self-Respect marriages were legalized in 1967 by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) Government.²⁰

Widow-Remarriage

On the remarriage of widows, 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 Periyar's community at the time, there were widowed girls below the age of 13 years. Periyar stated how it is a touching sight to see the parents of those widowed children treating them like untouchables.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ One of the reasons why 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. Periyar was deeply disturbed when he realized that among the widows in India, 11,892 were little children below 5 years and that young widow below 15 years numbering 232,147 were denied the pleasures of life.²⁴

With regards to the re-marriage of widows, Periyar stated that it is the practice of our people to refer to such a wedding as "a widow's marriage". Such an expression is used only with reference to women and in connection with men. Just as this lady is marrying another husband after the death of the first husband, many men marry again after the death of the first wife. But the second marriage of a man is not referred to as "a widower's marriage", though that is the proper thing to do. Periyar himself was a widower. After becoming one, he took a second wife. He claimed that in the ancient days, both men and women in the country had this practice. There were numerous instances in sastras and puranas of women getting married again after the death of their first husband. Periyar further stated that this is not an unusual practice in the rest of the world though it might appear strange for us at the present time.

¹⁸Ibid., p.31.

¹⁹G.P.Gopalakrishnan, Periyar: Father of the Tamil Race, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 1991, p.31.

²⁰Dr.K.Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.31.

²¹Ibid., pp.33-34.

²²Ibid., p.39.

²³Ibid., p.77.

²⁴Ibid., p.41.



Christian and Muslim women marry again after the death of the first husband. 90 percent of women in Muslim countries get married again soon after the death of the first husband. This may be unusual in certain sections of Indian societies. But it is a common practice in certain other sections of our society which are called very backward communities.²⁵ Further, inter-caste marriages and remarriage of widows are on the increase in India. Brahmins oppose these because they are afraid that they cannot exploit the people any more in the name of sastras. For the same reason they oppose the Sharada Act which is necessary for social well-being.²⁶

Education

On education, Periyar stated that some foolish parents believe that if girls get educated, they will correspond with their secret lovers. That it is a very foolish and mischievous notion. No parent need be anxious about it. If a girl writes a letter, it will only be to a male. We can even now caution men not to read any love letter addressed to them by a woman and, even if they read it, not to reply to it. If men do not listen to this advice, they, as well as the girls who write them must be punished. It will be a hopelessly bad thing, if parents keep their girl children uneducated for this reason.²⁷

At a speech delivered by Periyar at the Prize Distribution function in the Municipal School for Girls at Karungal Palayam, Erode, he stated that girl children should be taught active and energetic exercises like running, high jump, long jump, and wrestling so that they may acquire the strength and courage of men. Their time and energy should not be wasted in light pastimes like Kummi and in Kolatam. In ancient Tamil literature, poets have stressed the value of education for women.

In a famous verse, a poet by the name of Naladiar stated that, "What gives beauty to a woman is not the hair style or the patten of her dress or the saffron on her face but only education".²⁸ 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 (education)."²⁹ In a 1960 issue if Viduthalai Periyar stated that "There should be a drastic revolution in the desires and ideals of Indian women. They should equip themselves to do all types of work that men are doing. They should have good domestic life without allowing nature's obstacles in their own lives. Therefore, there should be a welcome change in the minds of our women. The administrators also most pay special attention to the advancement of women".³⁰

Property Rights and Divorce

With regards to property rights for women, 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. With regards to divorce or separations, he advocated that a woman can lie away from her husband if he is an undesirable person and if he has nay virulent disease. When a woman has to live apart from her husband in these circumstances, she is entitled to maintenance allowance and a claim on the husband's property. Even if a widow gets remarried, she must be given the right to claim a share of the first husband's property.³¹

²⁵G.P. Gopalakrishnan, Periyar: Father of the Tamil Race, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 1991, p.32.

²⁶Dr. K. Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.63.

²⁷Ibid., p.44.

²⁸Dr.K. Veeramani, Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R., Third Edition, The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, Chennai, 2005, p.470.

²⁹Dr. K. Veeramani, Periyar on Women's Rights, Emerald Publishers, Madras, 1992, p.47.

³⁰Ibid., p.48.

³¹Ibid., p.35.



On February 4, 1946, the Central Legislature passed an Act giving the right the Hindu married woman to get from her husband in certain circumstances a separate place to live in and a maintenance allowance. Periyar explained how that it was a useless Act. Since it seems that the members of the Hindu Mahasabha and Sanadahnis agitated against the grant of even this right.³²

Conclusion

Thanthai Periyar in order to give effect to the development of women, he passed a number of resolutions at the various Conferences. At the Self-Respect Conference held in Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu in 1929, the many resolutions passed with regards for women's rights were women should be given equal right along with men for the family property; there should be no objection to employing women to any job for which they are qualified; and schools, particularly schools, should try to employ only women teachers. At the Conference held in Erode in 1930, the same resolutions were passed again reminding the delegates and others that the interest of women was still uppermost in Periyar's mind. M.R. Jayakar who presided over the Erode Conference was greatly impressed by the progressive views of Periyar and other members. He was particularly happy that the movement included not merely non-Brahmin Hindus but Christians and Muslims too. He pointed out that the Self-Respect movement was more progressive than Congress. Furthermore, at the Virudhnagar Conference the women members held a separate Conference and passed some resolutions demanding that women should have the right to select their life partners without any consideration of religion or community and that wedding should not involve wasteful expenditure and elaborate ceremonies.³³ The efforts taken by Thanthai Periyar on women's rights are a milestone on the development of women.

³²G.P. Gopalakrishnan, Periyar: Father of the Tamil Race, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 1991, p.31.

³³G.P. Gopalakrishnan, Periyar: Father of the Tamil Race, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 1991, p.31.