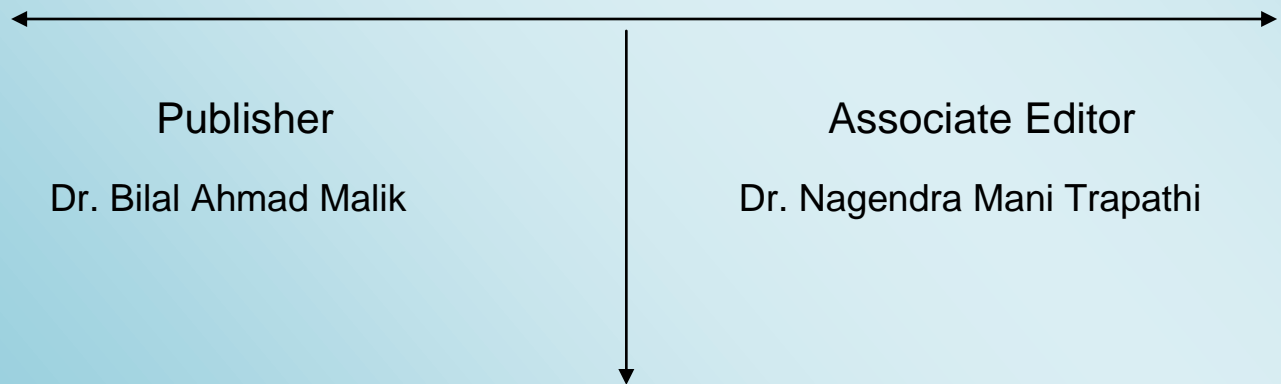


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PERIYAR E.V. RAMASAMY AS A FIGHTER OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION

A new and glorious era in the Socio-cultural history of India has begun with the historic struggles and services of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879-1973). His unique efforts and ideas have slowly but surely heralded a fundamental change in the outlook of the people and in the social set up. His influence in all spheres of life is so deep and his message is so powerful that human society can march successfully on the path of progress and modernity. The great leader Periyar E. V. Ramasamy was multi-faceted personality a social revolutionary, a rationalist, a prolific writer, a powerful speaker and above all an original thinker.

Nineteenth Century was a period of Social ferment in India. This period was the beginning of Indian Renaissance. E.V.Ramasamy was a born crusader against social inequality and injustice in Tamilnadu. He thundered and raises his voice against social evils in the society and he played a role of 'Father Figure' in Tamilnadu for half a century and was reverently addressed as "Thanthai Periyar". The title Periyar was formally conferred on E.V.R. by women when they gathered in a conference in Chennai in 1938 for his invaluable services in promoting their welfare by enabling them to have liberty, equality and justice.

Periyar Ramasamy (1879-1973) was the Voltaire 1694-1778 of South India particularlyⁱ Tamil Nadu. Both were rationalist who aroused their people to realize that all men are equal and it is the birthright of every individual to enjoy Liberty, equality and fraternity.ⁱⁱ

The 'revolution', which Periyar brought about, was a bloodless one and he had to spend more than fifty years of his life opening the eyes of people in the field of education and their ignorant belief in superstitions, the deception and exploitation to develop self-respect and self-confidence.ⁱⁱⁱ

Going through his life one finds, he was a born social revolutionary. Though born in an influential and orthodox family, he never accepted social evils, religious bigotry and superstition.

Ramasamy Naicker is better known as 'Periyar' meaning Great Man in Tamil. In Tamil, E.V.Ramasamy was a crusader against caste, champion of the rights, and fighter for social and communal justice and protector of human rights. C.N.Annadurai called him 'Voltaire and Rousseau of India'. UNESCO, in its citation hailed him as 'Socrates'. He is regarded as the Father of Tamils.^{iv} Nagammai, his relative was married by E.V.R.^v E.V.R. even made to remove the Holy thread as he considered it a symbol of slavery.^{vi}

E.V.R.'s concept of women's status was different from the notion of others. A galaxy of social reformers and a few reform minded elites emerged in the 19th century to weed out societal obstacles that stood in the way of women's emancipation and development. Of all the reformers, E.V.R. alone attacked for the first time, the ideological basis of the "Enslavement of women" in society.^{vii}

E.V.R. took up the cause of women as life mission right from the day when he entered the public service.^{viii}

SELF RESPECT MARRIAGES

Self respect marriages are the outcome of the philosophy of self respect which is an outstanding contribution of Periyar E.V.Ramasamy to social progress.^{ix} Thali to any Hindu women is a sanctified symbol of charity. To a self respecter Thali is a cruel symbol of feminine servitude to men. Thali is prohibited in self respect marriages in order to raise the status of women.^x Self-Respect marriage has basic strategy in advocating abolition of caste through Inter-caste marriage. At self-respect conference from 1929 onwards the institutions of 'Temple girls' was condemned. Sometimes with the outer free them and marry them.^{xi}

According to Hindu traditions, especially among high caste widows were not usually permitted to re-marry. In his early opposition to caste regulations, Periyar advocated the rights of women, when he defied his orthodox kinsmen by encouraging his young niece to re-marry after she had lost her husband early in marriage.^{xii}

According to Periyar ("Kudi Arasu", 1926 statics) there were 11,892 widows in India below the age of 5. At Self Respect Conferences in 1929-30, Women's right to divorce and property was emphasized. The booklet "The Benefit of a Help-Mate" gives Periyar's views on the situation and the rights of Women. "He refers Valkkai tunai a word for marriage taken from Tirukkural, which means help-mate in life". HE also objected the dowry system which burdened the bride's family.^{xiii}

PROPERTY RIGHTS

At Tirunelveli district, self-respect conference held on November 28th 1927. E.V.R. as a president pleaded with the Government to give equal rights to women like men to inherit and possess property as that would make them economically independent. 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 sex discrimination"^{xiv}

E.V.R. emphasized the need once again in his editorial Kudi Arasu in December 1929 thus: like men, women should have all virtues and good character and laws enforcing these should be made without any delay EVR addressed large gatherings in which the problems and right to women had been focused.^{xv} E.V.R. wrote in Kudi Arasu thus: "It is the duty of those who work for the liberation of women to see women shedding fear and survive attitude that stand in the way of their securing their right to property"^{xvi}.

E.V.R 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 kitchens bedeck themselves with jewels and end up with problems of marriage.^{xvii}

WIDOW RE-MARRIAGE

EVR also reformed and modernized several aspects of marriage. EVR opposed the widowhood ever since his niece, Ammayi aged ten, lost her thirteen year old husband due to cholera.

Recognition

It was a rude shock for him and then forth he took a vow to eradicate the child Marriage and popularize widow-marriage.^{xviii} EVR gathered statics from the 1921 census report of India and highlighted the plight of 26, 31,788 widows in the country.^{xix} According to EVR, living the life of a widow under compulsions sinful.^{xx} If a man can marry again at the instance of the death of his previous wife, why cannot women remarry at the death of her husband? EVR also strongly condemned polygamy.^{xxi}

EMANCIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

EVR opined that as long as restrictions are imposed on womenfolk, women have to subservient to men and depend on them for help. He condemned Pennadimai (Slavery of Women) and Pen Izhivu (Degradation of Women).^{xxii}

EVR gave certain practical suggestions to empower women. He advocated that all teaching jobs in schools must be given to women and in the job oriented institutions like nursing schools, polytechnics and engineering colleges, training for women should be given. He advocated fifty percent of reservation for women in all jobs. In fact, EVR's views on women development through education, employment and marriage at higher age would help them to attain status and empowerment in society. EVR wanted women in particular to have the option of postponement of marriage, late marriage and postponement of conception, even forgoing children and limiting children to one or two irrespective of gender.^{xxiii}

CONCLUSION

Periyar's humanism, original thinking, outspokenness, frank expression of views, courage of conviction and crusade against injustice singled out women to secure equal opportunities in society. His views against child marriage, Devadasi system, unequal marriage alliances, Widowhood, ignorance and illiteracy of women, showed him as a representative of women cause. Hence, it is no denying the fact that he is considered a great pioneer in the cause of women welfare and development in the twentieth century. Periyar's services to human society are multidimensional and he was the morning star and harbinger of human right movement in Tamilnadu. Since his death in 1973, his philosophy has social vision and message and his revolutionary ideas are spreading all over the world.

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