

Women's Empowerment In Property Rights Through Periyar's Propaganda

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Abstract

A galaxy of social revolutionaries and a few reform minded elites emerged in the nineteenth century to weed out 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. E.V.R. worked for the cause of women during his seven decades of public service with well disciplined supporters and followers. His papers and organisations came to his defense 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 social organizations E.V.R. courageously met the forces of orthodoxy and reactionaries. In this, Periyar's contribution towards women's welfare particularly his propaganda where ever he goes to meet the people and vigorously shouted the oppression and depression of women society till his dead.

Keywords: Women, Periyar, Property, Equality, Gender discrimination

Introduction

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 women, they would not wish to confine their lives to the kitchens, bedeck themselves with jewels and end up with innumerable problems of marriage.

E.V.R. in his long crusade against injustice singled out women. He thought against child marriage, *devadasi system*,¹ unequal marriage alliances, widowhood, ignorance and illiteracy of women. In his struggle against women inequality he advocated property inheritance right for women on par with men. He considered the biological otherness of women will not stand in the way of women exercising equal rights with men. The catch words of his propaganda included like this “women are not baby producing machines”, “women are not bedroom commodities”, “women subordination to men a shame on society”. E.V.R. served the society almost like a representative of women cause. Therefore, it is no denying fact that he is considered to be a great pioneer in the cause of women welfare and empowerment in the twentieth century and in the years to come.²

E.V.R wanted to reinforce his ideology on women rights through platform and press media. 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. At Tirunelveli district Self-Respect Conference held on November 28, 1927, E.V.R. as a 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, the following two resolutions were passed to that effect.³

“In Hindu families where the widows refused to a remarry, they should be given right to property of their deceased husbands”.

“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 KudiArasu 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.⁴

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, 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 work⁵. If not, how will the women live with self respect in the society? 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. ‘ 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 men⁶.”

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 Kurup⁷, 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 newspaper *KudiArasu* 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 property⁸.

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 reforms⁹.

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". 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 prostitution¹⁰. Hence, to eradicate these ills from society, he stressed the need to attend those ills by passing social legislations. While detailing some of the rules and regulations for the conduct of Self- Respect 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 family¹¹”.

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 KudiArasu 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 ground¹²”.

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. 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.” Thus, E.V.R. drew the attention of the masses to the point that the people should recognise the rights of women to property¹³.”

E.V.R. advocated enlightened ideas even long before the developed countries enabled their women to attain legitimate rights in society. In the first Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalpat under the Chairmanship of W.P.A. Soundarapandian in 1929 he adopted new policy guidelines to empower women¹⁵. The resolution stated that “This conference resolves that women should be given equal rights with men for property and for the privilege of succession and the rights and facilities to be employed in any profession or job, and that necessary steps should be taken by the government to employ a greater number of women teachers in schools including primary schools”. Another resolution stated that the age for a girl’s marriage should be above sixteen, and that if the husband or the wife disliked the alliance and wanted the marriage to

be cancelled, he or she should be given the right to get it concealed; that widows should be helped to get married again and that widows should be given the right to choose their partners without attaching any importance to religion or caste.¹⁵"

The activities of E. V.R. yielded positive results also. After the revolutionary propaganda initiated by E.V.R. a lot of young girls entered into the professional courses and job opportunities¹⁶. This progress of women was mainly attributed to E.V.R's propaganda. Women police personnel started becoming popular only after 1980. But even in 1931 itself, E. V.R. stated that women should enter police and military departments and serve the cause of the nation¹⁷.

He 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 the training for women should be given. He made a beginning in this respect in Tiruchirappalli. The first exclusive Women's Engineering College in Asia was also established by K. Veeramani in Thanjavur. Therefore, E.V.R. not only preached the ideology of women development but also established proper human resources development programmes for attaining this goal long before many others had thought about it.

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