

## **Role Of The Journal Kudiarasu For The Liberation Of Women In Tamilnadu - A Study**

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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 as 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 called, *Puratchi*. It was then replaced by *Pagutharivu*, (Rationalism), on 26 August 1934. He made quick substitutions of each banned journal. It illustrated the importance he attributed to printed media because 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.

Periyar E.V.R. worked for the cause of women during his seven decades of public service, with the help of 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 social organizations like Self - Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam, E.V.R. courageously met the forces of orthodoxy and reactionaries. In his newspapers and periodicals, many Dravidian and Self-Respect leaders, both men and women, contributed articles on the modernisation of the society and social reforms against the established social

order. Remarkable among them were S.Gurusamy, P.Chidambaram Pillai, Selvi Gnanam, Neelavathi, Lakshmirathan, Sathankulam Raghavan, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Indrani, R.K.Shanmugam Chetty, K.M.Balasubramaniam, Viswanathan, Venkatrama Sastry, Rengachari, S.S.Bharathi. In the journal, **Revolt**, P.Chidambaram Pillai continuously wrote articles on, 'The Right of Temple Entry', which was later published as a book<sup>1</sup>

### **Property Rights**

At the Self-Respect Conference held in Tirunelveli, on 28 November 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, the following two resolutions were passed to give effect to women rights.

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, women also should have property rights and like women, men also should have all virtues and good character and laws enforcing these changes should be made without any delay."<sup>2</sup>

The philosophy of Self-Respect E.V.R. refers to the assertion of one's individuality against exploitation, discrimination and injustice. According to him, if women did 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, women too have right to property and right to work. If not, how will women live with self- respect in the society?"<sup>3</sup> Then **Kudi Arasu** wrote that E.V.R's followers should 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.<sup>4</sup> Following this, **Kudi Arasu** wrote that, 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.<sup>5</sup>

E.V.R. showed keen interest in meetings in which focused on thoughts related to women welfare. 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 to 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."<sup>6</sup>

E.V.R. did not fail to criticize the government if the latter hesitated to support any legislation regarding social issues. Harbilas Sarda introduced in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1932, a bill for securing right of Hindu widows to claim the property belonging to their husbands. It was opposed even by the Government on the grounds that the three Hindu members, who took part in the debate, were against it. E.V.R. was 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 the Government did not 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".<sup>7</sup> 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 remove those ills by passing social legislations.<sup>8</sup> 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, 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".<sup>9</sup>

In 1937, the Government of India passed the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act in the Central Legislative Assembly. E.V.R commended this act in the editorial of *Kudi Arasu* thus: "The Bill 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".<sup>10</sup>

At a marriage held at Kanchipuram in June 1940, E.V.R. as a common man urged the need to give women equal share in the family property like their male counterparts. It was given wide coverage in *Kudi Arasu* thus : "If we give a share of our property to our daughters, the daughters- in –law 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".<sup>11</sup> Thus, through *Kudi Arasu*, E.V.R. drew the attention of the masses to the point that the people should recognise the rights of women to property.<sup>12</sup>

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.

## **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 could also earn. If she was able to eke out a living at least for herself, no husband would treat her as a slave. He strongly viewed that at present, women in India experienced much worse suffering and humiliation and wanted such slavish situation to be changed.

E.V.R strongly opined that as long as restrictions were imposed on womenfolk, women were subservient to men and depended 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 preached against them. E.V.R. focused on the fact that the slavish attitudes, timidity, superstitious beliefs, obstinacy in adopting traditional customs were all due to religion. He vehemently condemned *Penadimai* (slavery of woman) and *Pen Izhivu* (degradation of woman).<sup>13</sup> In his work, *Women Enslaved*,’ he viewed that on account of the hassles involved in child-bearing, women were dependent on others and such dependence formed the basis for the entrenchment of male dominance. Slavery of women did not affect only women and in another way, it affected badly men also.<sup>14</sup>

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 status of women. 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 was 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 danger. Its results., were pride, vanity, domestic quarrels and insecurity. He called upon women to discard their golden jewellery and be emancipated.<sup>15</sup>

## **Marriage**

E.V.R was vehement on marriage: "I do not accept the words 'Wedding' or 'Marriage'. It is a contract for companionship in life. For such a contract, registration is enough proof. The other marriage ceremonies meant 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 were abolished and provisions existed for divorce, widows' remarriage, intercaste marriage and the right to marry one's own choice, then ninety per cent of the prevailing prostitution would disappear.<sup>16</sup>In this regard, K.M.Balasubramanian, a lawyer and a Self-Respector, advised the Self-Respectors in the *Kudi Arasu* to register Self-Respect marriages under the Civil Marriages Act to gain legal recognition.<sup>17</sup>

### **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 free to declare that they can live without women. Besides, the problems of maternity compel women to 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."<sup>18</sup>He also pleaded for the enactment of a Self-Respect Marriages Validating Act in the legislature.<sup>19</sup>

### **Widows Remarriage**

E.V.R. also proposed changes in several aspects of marriage. The reforms of E.V.R. would 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.<sup>20</sup>

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 stand, 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 Arasu* 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 to the father's property. This practice keeps the Namboodri old man with six or seven wives".<sup>21</sup> Thus Periyar in his life mission, utilized his journals to ventilate his progressive views on women emancipation even though many of his journals were banned by the British Government for his extreme political views.<sup>22</sup>

### **Participation of Women in Public Life**

In the Nineteenth Century, the politics in India underwent a drastic change. The political movements against foreign rule, emerged. Though the political scenario changed, the status of women remained unchanged. The participation of men in political movements against foreign rule, was more. Women found it difficult to participate in the public life due to social restrictions. In spite of these restrictions, some women came forward to participate

in politics boldly. They faced many problems initially. But later, they held some posts in the movements. They started movements for women's suffrage and female representation in the legislatures. The same situation prevailed in Tamil Nadu also. The press, especially the self-respect press, highlighted the lives of women who overcame the social restrictions, their activities and their achievements. Because of the influence of the press, more women came forward to take part in the politics. An understanding of political system served as a prerequisite for political involvement. The self-respect press tried to impart such knowledge to the women community.<sup>23</sup> The main reason for the insignificant involvement of women in politics was the social environment which restricted the women to come out of their private sphere and participate in public life.<sup>24</sup>

### **Dravidian Movement and the *Kudi Arasu***

Being a Dravidian and non-Brahmin paper, the *Kudi Aarasu* concentrated on the Dravidian politics rather than the national movement. The evolution in the Dravidian Movement resulted in the Self-Respect Movement. In Tamil Nadu, the Self-Respect Movement challenged the I.N.C. and the domination of Brahmins in all spheres of the society. The Movement was founded by Periyar E.V.Ramasamy, a leading social reformer of India. Women liberation was one of the basic goals of this Movement. Although it aimed at reforms, it served as a training station for women in political field. To facilitate social change, the chairmanship of political and social meetings were forcibly placed on women cadres several times. The Movement-oriented journals such as *Kudi Arasu*, *Viduthalai*, *Pakuttharivu* and *Revolt* campaigned for women liberation from the beginning. They educated women in social, political and economical fields.

### **Equal Status for Women Cadres**

The male dominance resulted in the low or non-participation of women in public life.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the Self-Respect Movement provided equal opportunities to women in political arena. Their journal, *Kudi Arasu*, gave, more importance to women participation than that of men in order to induce women to emerge as leaders. The following instances evidenced that women were given priority in the columns of the *Kudi Arasu*. In 1932, the Salem District Self-Respect Conference was presided over by a woman cadre by name, S.Neelavathi and

the inaugural address was delivered by another woman cadre by name Annapoorniammal. The **Kudi Arasu** highlighted their speeches in detail in order to motivate the women community.<sup>26</sup>

The Thanjavur District Self- Respect Conference in 1932 was presided over by woman leader, S. Kunjitham. She delivered an inspiring speech. **Kudi Arasu** created political awareness among women.<sup>27</sup> While attending the Self-Respect Conference at Kolar Gold Mines in 1932, she was prohibited by the order 144 for her fiery speech. The news regarding her speech was utilized by the **Kudi Arasu** as a stimulus to other women cadres.<sup>28</sup> The journal highlighted the news of the First State Conference of Sengunthar Community held in Pudukkottai, on 27 March 1933. It turned the limelight on the Presidentship of Moovallur Ramamirtham in the Conference.<sup>29</sup>

To glorify the women's participation in politics, *the Kudi Arasu* gave major coverage even to minor instances relating to women. It praised the Presidentship of S.Neelavathi in the Thanjavur District Self-Respect Conference in the year 1933.<sup>30</sup> State level Self-Respect Conference was held in Madras on 26 and 27 December 1931. During the Conference, Periyar E.V.Ramasamy went abroad. In his absence, S.Kunjitham took the leading role in conducting the Conference successfully. She acted as the Convener of the Reception Committee. Her works and speech were given priority in the columns of the **Kudi Arasu**.<sup>31</sup> The journal covered the news of women's participation in large number under the title, 'Women's Liberal Enthusiasm'.

The Tamil Nadu Women's Conference was held on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1938 in Madras. This Conference was chaired by Neelambikai Ammaiyar. In this Conference, she gave E.V.Ramasamy, the evergreen title 'Periyar' (the great man). This incident was highlighted in the columns of the **Kudi Arasu**.<sup>32</sup> The **Kudi Arasu** respected the power of self determination of women. The leading women cadres like Neelavathi and Maragathavalli left the Movement for some reasons. Among the two, the former joined the I.N.C. which was opposed to E V.R.. The **Kudi Arasu** did not find fault with her decision and thought that it was an example of women's self determination for which the Movement struggled.<sup>33</sup>

### **First Anti-Hindi Agitation and the women**

Immediately after assuming the Government in 1937, the Congress Ministry announced the introduction of compulsory Hindi in the schools of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil lovers vehemently opposed it for it would cause the decline of Tamil. Afraid of the compulsory introduction of Hindi, Periyar E.V.R. anti-Hindi campaign against compulsory Hindi in 1938.<sup>34</sup>

The anti-Hindi agitators planned to conduct a Conference in Sholavandan in Madurai District on 8 May 1938. To meet the expenses, they planned to charge delegation fee from the participants. The cadres were ready to pay the fee even to participate in the Conference. Knowing that the success of Conference depended upon the female participation, the organizers announced the fee exemption for women through the *Kudi Arasu*.<sup>35</sup> ‘This effort encouraged the women to participate in the Conference. The *Kudi Arasu* covered the events of the Conference and published the speeches of eminent women speakers, with the motive of mobilising the women community against the imposition of Hindi.<sup>36</sup>

### **Imprisonment of Women with their Babies**

Motivated by the propaganda, women were ready to go to jail. Even mothers went to jail with their kids. Comparatively, they were less in number but in enthusiasm, they were equal to men. The *Kudi Arasu* publicised the arrest and imprisonment of Moovallur Ramamirtham Ammal, Dharmambal, Malarmugathammal, Pattu Ammal and Seethammal. Among them, Seethammal was arrested and imprisoned with her two children, aged one and three. The *Kudi Arasu* published the photographs of arrested women, with their babies. This caused a stir in the sentiments of women.<sup>37</sup> The journal published the particulars of imprisoned women, with photographs regularly.

### **Challenge and Response**

Because of the vigorous agitation, Periyar E.V.Ramasamy was arrested and imprisoned. In this situation, the *Kudi Arasu* carried the news of Narayani Ammal’s Challenge to the Government. She challenged the Government that unless the Government released Periyar within a week, she would undertake demonstration in front of the Chief

Minister's house and would get arrested. Just as she had challenged, she demonstrated in front of the Chief Minister's house on 17 February 1939 and was imprisoned for six months.<sup>38</sup>

Because of the high spirit of the agitation, the Government changed its policy and issued an order on 21 February 1940 that Hindi would be taught as an optional paper instead of a compulsory paper.<sup>39</sup> The participation of women in the agitation was one of the important causes for its success and the propaganda launched by **Kudi Arasu** served as the fundamental cause for their participation .

### ***Kudi Arasu* on Women's Participation in Congress Movement**

Though the **Kudi Arasu** was an anti- congress journal, it did not underestimate the role of women in the Movement organised by the I.N.C. It praised women' participation in the Non Co-operation Movement as they, worked hard, faced so many hazards and went to prison.<sup>40</sup> 'Almost all the nationalist papers had registered the role of women of Tamil Nadu in the Civil Disobedience Movement in glowing terms. **Kudi Arasu**, the anti-Congress paper, criticised the Civil Disobedience totally, but it praised the participation of women of Tamil Nadu in the Movement. It remarked that the women of Tamil Nadu participated and went to prison fearlessly. Thus it showed its respect for the press ethics.<sup>41</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Deputy President of the Legislative Council, was a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi, even though she was not a member of the Congress Party. In spite of having difference of opinion with Gandhian ideology, the **Kudi Arasu** praised her activities who was the real follower of Gandhi.

### ***Kudi Arasu* and Women's Franchise**

When women's organizations urged for the voting right, the **Kudi Arasu** extended its full fledged and unconditional support to the cause of women enfranchisement. Madras was the first Presidency in India which passed a resolution in favour of women's franchise. The **Kudi Arasu** insisted on women voters registering themselves on or before 20 June 1936.

By late 1936, the Government had announced that the general elections to the new legislatures would be held in February 1937. Women organisations contacted parties to nominate at least some women candidates for the general constituencies. Suitable women candidates' names were given to the political parties by Muthulakshmi Reddy.<sup>42</sup> But the political parties were not ready to field women candidates in the general constituencies. They fielded women candidates only in the reserved constituencies. The ***Kudi Arasu*** published the names of these women candidates irrespective of their parties.

### ***Kudi Arasu* and Municipal Women Councillors**

In municipal councils also, women councillors worked effectively and ***Kudi Arasu*** highlighted the services of women councillors. For instance, it publicized the work done by Kannammal, the lady councillor of Erode Municipality. She presented a memorandum to the Municipal Council to insist on the employment of women within the municipal jurisdiction. ***Kudi Arasu*** urged other female councillors from other local boards also to present such memorandum for suitable resolutions. After a few days, the same journal published the news regarding the resolution on women's employment, which was successfully passed in the Erode Municipal Council.<sup>43</sup>

Though there were special journals for women, the ***Kudi Arasu*** played a leading role in Tamil Nadu in the field of women liberation. Some times it outranked the special journals too. It followed the technique of exposing the matters related to women issues, whether they were big or small, to make motivate women towards public life.

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