

Periyar and Women Empowerment: A Radical Vision for Social Liberation

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Abstract—This research examines the pivotal role of E.V. Ramasamy Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement in advancing women's empowerment in early twentieth-century Tamil Nadu. Departing from both nationalist and reformist frameworks, Periyar articulated a radical critique of patriarchy, religion, and caste as interlocking systems of women's subordination. Through his writings in Kudi Arasu, the Self-Respect Movement's print organ, and his organizational initiatives, Periyar challenged conventional institutions including marriage, chastity norms, and religious orthodoxy. This paper argues that Periyar's approach to women's liberation was distinctive in its emphasis on sexual freedom, its prioritization of gender equality over political independence, and its comprehensive critique of both public and domestic spheres of patriarchal control. Drawing on primary sources including Kudi Arasu editorials and scholarly analyses, this research demonstrates how Periyar's rationalist framework redefined women's education, marriage, and property rights as revolutionary acts of social transformation.

Index Terms—Periyar, Self-Respect Movement, Women Empowerment, Kudi Arasu, Patriarchy, Social Reform, Gender Equality

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of women's empowerment in modern India has been addressed through multiple discursive frameworks nationalist, reformist, and radical. Among these, the Self-Respect Movement, launched by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar in 1925, occupies a unique position in its comprehensive critique of patriarchy and its intersection with caste and religion. While the nationalist discourse subordinated the women's question to the larger cause of political independence, and reformist movements sought accommodation

within existing social structures, Periyar called for a total break with what he characterized as retrograde elements of tradition

Periyar's writings on women constitute a central pillar of his commitment to radical freedom. Unlike contemporaries who addressed women's issues within the framework of family or nation, Periyar viewed both these institutions as fundamentally limiting women's liberties. His approach was grounded not merely in a rights-based discourse but in a freedom-based discourse that encompassed not just freedom from patriarchy but also sexual freedom in a radically libertarian sense. This research examines Periyar's vision of women's empowerment through three interconnected dimensions: his critique of patriarchal institutions as articulated in Kudi Arasu, his programmatic interventions including Self-Respect marriages and educational campaigns, and his conceptualization of women's liberation as foundational to human emancipation.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

A. Origins and Ideological Foundations

The Self-Respect Movement emerged as a response to Brahminical domination in the Tamil Nadu Congress and the broader social order. Revolting against this hegemony, Periyar, along with S. Ramanathan, launched the Suyamarinthalai Iyakkam (Self-Respect Movement) in 1926. The Movement outlined its fundamental principles as: no god, no religion, no Gandhi, no Congress, and no Brahmins. However, as scholars have noted, the Movement's actual political agenda included in large measure an anti-patriarchal

stance that distinguished it from other contemporary movements

The Movement sought support from socially and economically backward non-Brahmin communities including Nadars, Kallars, Vaniyakula Kshatriyas, and Dalits, as well as low-caste Muslims and Christians. Its organizational reach expanded rapidly: within a year of its inauguration, sixty branches were opened in various Tamil districts, and within seven years, the number expanded to 117 branches with over 10,000 members. Provincial conferences drew thousands of attendees; the Virudunagar Provincial Conference of 1931 featured 15,000 participants in its procession and 3,000 women at the concurrent Women's Conference.

B. Kudi Arasu as a Vehicle of Radical Thought

The movement's ideological dissemination occurred primarily through its print organs, most notably Kudi Arasu (The Republic), launched on May 2, 1925. The Self-Respecters understood the power of media, recognizing newspapers as a key index of Brahminical authority in modern times. Kudi Arasu carried substantial rationalist arguments on social issues including reservation, Brahmanism, women's rights, patriarchy, child marriage, the devadasi system, and Brahminical marriage customs. The newspaper provided a platform for diverse voices non-Brahmins, women, and religious minorities and regularly featured columns by women Self-Respecters including Nilavathi, Jnanammal, Lakshmi Ammal, Moovalur Ramamirtham, Rukmani Ammal, Alarmelmangaiyath Thayammal, and Sivakami Chidambaranar. Through these writings, the Movement engaged in sustained critique of fundamentalist ideas propagated by contemporary magazines such as Swadesamitran, Suyarajya, and Ananda Vikatan.

III. PERIYAR'S CRITIQUE OF WOMEN'S SUBORDINATION

A. The Diagnostic Framework

Periyar's analysis of women's subordination identified multiple interlocking obstacles. Writing in Kudi Arasu, he argued that women's slavery meant the destruction of human society and that social liberation was impossible without women's emancipation. The magazine identified the ideas that protected inequalities by birth and the religious constructions that prevented society from even conceiving freedom.

Central to Periyar's diagnosis was the observation that women were kept without freedom through sacred ideals such as marriage, chastity, untouchability, caste, religion, and denial of education and property rights. He argued that these institutions were devised by "selfish people with blind faith in God, and religion based on foolish devotion".

Periyar's conceptualization of women's freedom extended beyond conventional understanding. In a speech at the Puducherry Self-Respect Conference published in Kudi Arasu on March 8, 1931, he defined freedom as encompassing: freedom for knowledge and research, liberty to express opinions, and the establishment of fraternal relationships among people, all of which required the abolition of the discourses of religious men and God-men.

B. Caste, Patriarchy, and the Intersection of Oppressions

Periyar recognized the deep intertwining of caste and gender oppression, an insight that positioned him at the forefront of intersectional analyses. He observed that women were placed in the Sudra caste and deprived of freedom, property rights, and education. Writing in Kudi Arasu on October 5, 1930, Periyar stated: "Women are taught to believe that the whole of the Indian women is not worthy of getting freedom (as all the women are put into the Sudra caste) and are created by god as slaves to men, and they are treated as the moving corpses. These two atrocities must be abolished in India immediately and must not be allowed to last even a moment"

This analysis placed Periyar in critical opposition to the Congress-led freedom struggle. He argued that freedom obtained without programs for gender equality and without integrating women into the struggle would merely be a transfer of power that would be used for further subjugation of the poor and women. The Chennai Provincial Congress leadership, he noted, was in the hands of orthodox people who perpetuated these inequalities

C. The Critique of Religion

Religion constituted perhaps the most formidable obstacle to women's liberation in Periyar's analysis. In an article published in Kudi Arasu on June 8, 1930, he asserted: "If one says that he belongs to Hindu-religion and demands women's freedom, his statement cannot be accepted. Because, you should realize that there is

no freedom for women in the Hindu religion". He supported this argument by citing from Hindu sacred texts, including the Dharma Sastras and Parasarasmiriti.

Periyar argued that all religions were created by men for retaining male leadership and those who were not bold enough to oppose and destroy obstacles confronting women's freedom were either cunning or foolish. The central theme in all his writings was humanity itself there was no place for any kind of inequality by birth, including gender inequality. He strongly believed that the primary obstacle to women's freedom was religion, asserting: "If there is anything for consideration for not to abolish the Hindu religion, for the one thing it should be abolished as it is destined to destroy women's freedom".

IV. INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUES AND TRANSFORMATIVE INTERVENTIONS

A. Marriage as an Institution of Slavery

Periyar identified marriage as a key institution that kept women enslaved. Traditional marriage, with its religious sanctities, rites, rituals, and symbols like thali, was an arrangement that treated a woman as the property of her husband. He noted that no responsibility was given to the couple in marriage; parents held the final decision-making authority, which constituted a hindrance to women's liberation. However, Periyar did not reject the institution of marriage entirely but sought its radical transformation. In a speech published in Kudi Arasu on June 16, 1935, he redefined marriage as "an arrangement for man and woman jointly enjoy the natural happiness, and for loving each other and for taking a rest and relaxation in their life's tedious journey, and not only for giving birth to children"

To counter traditional marriage systems, Periyar introduced the Self-Respect marriage, in which men treated women as equals. Writing in Kudi Arasu on December 13, 1936, he declared: "Whether or not changes in any other matters, there must be equal freedom in the matters of married life. It is the first ambition of the Self-respect Movement". These Self-Respect marriages denounced Brahmin priests and Brahminical rituals, based on simple vows between partners, and became one of the movement's most revolutionary contributions. In 1967, the DMK government in Tamil Nadu amended the Hindu

Marriage Act to give legal recognition to Self-Respect Marriages

B. Chastity and the Double Standard

Periyar critically examined the concept of chastity as an instrument of patriarchal control. He observed that under the ideology of private property, chastity was insisted upon only for women and not for men. In an editorial published in Kudi Arasu on March 1, 1936, titled "Can woman be given right?", he questioned whether equality was possible in a world where such double standards prevailed. The imaginary concept of chastity was used to abuse women who came forward for public life. This insight reflected Periyar's understanding of how moral codes were deployed to restrict women's participation in public spheres and maintain their subordination within domestic spaces.

C. Education as a Revolutionary Instrument

Periyar treated women's education as a means to dismantle inherited systems of subordination. In an article entitled "Chastity" published in Kudi Arasu on February 12, 1928, he noted: "The same people who made the means of the development of knowledge unavailable to the oppressed people long ago, at the same time the same people made the means of the development of knowledge unavailable to the women also and women have been kept oppressed and repressed"

Grounded in his rationalist critique, Periyar argued that literacy and critical inquiry would enable women to question scriptural sanction, resist enforced marriage practices, and claim property and civic rights. He rejected the notion that women's learning should serve family honor or religious duty, insisting instead on scientific temper and independent thought. His campaigns for widow remarriage, birth control, and equal inheritance were closely tied to his insistence on educational access.

D. Property Rights and Economic Empowerment

Periyar connected women's subordination to their economic dependence. The denial of property rights to women was not coincidental but structural to their enslavement. In his analysis, the concept of untouchability was created to retain caste hierarchy and upper-caste status, and women of untouchable families were subjected to even greater oppression.

Writing on property rights for women in Kudi Arasu on October 5, 1930, Periyar emphasized that the atrocities inflicted on those made untouchables were worse than those inflicted on any other people. He warned that unless such atrocities were abolished, Indians would not be worthy of ruling themselves -1.

V. PERIYAR'S DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

A. Beyond Nationalism and Reformism

Periyar's approach to women's liberation differed fundamentally from both the nationalist and reformist paradigms. While nationalism subordinated women's issues to the larger cause of national liberation, Periyar argued that freedom for women took priority over freedom from colonialism. He challenged patriarchal tendencies within Indian nationalism and refused to defend native traditions as "national".

Unlike reformers who sought accommodation within existing structures, Periyar called for radical reconstructive work that would destroy the traditional structures that perpetuated inequality. He emphasized the need to give up the past, which he characterized as full of obscurantism: "The unnecessary ancient principles of the Tamils have become useful only for deceiving outsiders and to plunge into foolishness. It has become a duty of the rationalist that such speech should not be evoked for any reform from now on".

B. Politicizing the Personal: The Critique of Family

Scholars have noted that the Self-Respect Movement politicized the personal, making the family a central target of critique. This represented a radical departure from traditions that treated the family as a natural and private sphere beyond social critique. Periyar's writings consistently called for transforming the family by changing the terms of marriage, challenging gender-based socialization, and recognizing women as individuals rather than as wives or mothers

This approach shares similarities with later Western radical feminism. Scholars have drawn parallels between Periyar's analysis and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, particularly in their critique of child-bearing and child-rearing as structures that limit women's liberties. Such comparisons highlight Periyar's prescience in identifying the fundamental structures of gender oppression.

C. Women's Participation and Leadership

The Self-Respect Movement distinguished itself by providing substantial space for women's leadership and participation at a time when women's voices were marginalized. Women leaders like Annai Meenambal, who became the first woman to preside over a Self-Respect Conference, and Veeramal campaigned actively for women's rights and against caste oppression. The Women's Conference of 1929 declared that "Self-Respect" was the birth right of everyone rather than "Self-Rule," indicating a prioritization of social freedom over political independence.

The Women's Conference of Tamil Nadu in 1938 passed a resolution to address E.V. Ramasamy as "Periyar" (the Great One) for his service toward women and their empowerment. This recognition from women themselves underscores the significance of his contributions.

VI. CONCLUSION

Periyar's vision of women's empowerment emerges as remarkably comprehensive and radical for its time. His analysis identified the interlocking systems of patriarchy, caste, and religion that constrained women's lives, and he offered both critique and constructive alternatives. Through the Self-Respect Movement, and particularly through its print organ Kudi Arasu, Periyar articulated a vision of women's liberation that went beyond conventional reformism and nationalism.

His key contributions include: the recognition of gender and caste as mutually constitutive systems of oppression; the critique of marriage and family as institutions that required radical transformation; the emphasis on women's sexual freedom and bodily autonomy; the insistence on women's education as a revolutionary instrument; and the prioritization of women's liberation over political independence.

While later Dravidian political parties may have diluted aspects of Periyar's radicalism, his legacy continues to shape debates on social justice in Tamil society and beyond. For contemporary feminist scholarship, Periyar offers a non-Western perspective on gender oppression that resonates with intersectional analyses and radical critiques of patriarchal institutions. His insistence that "women's slavery means the destruction of human society" remains a

powerful call for recognizing gender justice as fundamental to human emancipation.

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