

Vedhathiri Maharishi and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy View on Women Empowerment

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Abstract: *Vedhathiri Maharishi and Periyar were two icons of Tamil Nadu who identified that women were subjugated in society and took measures to correct it in their own unique styles. While Maharishi was a soft spoken Yogi and relied on spiritual and yogic principles to explain women empowerment, Periyar on the other hand was an outspoken critic of religion and was of the opinion that women enslavement derived from religious teaching and social norms which are male chauvinistic by design.*

Keywords: Feminism, Education

1. Introduction

The creations in this universe are designed with a proportion that would be unique along with a service that is purposeful. Hither go the Nature has endowed women with the responsibility and capacity of giving life to the next species. This forfeited duty speaks of the value and Nobility entitled on the feminine gender. Women entity in nature has the endurance and power to lift oneself along with the ability to lift the collective human community

The primordial man was a hunter gatherer, living in segregated groups under different geographic locations. The beliefs, practises and lifestyle differed in pursuits due to locations and necessities. Man has been advancing with his intelligence, hence the need of the hour is the reconstruction of the habits and action that may cause pain.

This paper attempts to describe the work undertaken by two leaders in Tamil Society towards freeing women from domestic bondage and empowering them. Both as different as chalk and cheese, yet their goal was the same and they adopted their unique styles to achieve their goal. One was Vedhathiri Maharishi, a spiritual leader and yogi, and Periyar, a social reformer and political icon and noted anti religion crusader.

Vedhathiri Maharishi:

Maharishi was the founder of simplified kundalini yoga (SKY) practises. His efforts established an education system Vision for Wisdom at Aliyar which includes various disciplines in Yoga for Human Excellence, courses through certificates, Diplomas, UG,PG and Doctorate Programmes. The majority of the aspirants are women. He has encouraged even meditation process for women on easy and approachable process.

Doctrines of Maharishi

Woman's values:

Maharishi believed that the society is based on the assistance and intelligence of womanhood. Without allowing the credit to be understood, the women were made to suffer disgrace and slavery within the family due to male chauvinism and patriarchy. According to Maharishi it has become imperative to recognise the greatness of women and correct and refine

this detesting situation by realisation and applying a better doctrine for life. If the lives of women are nurtured through physical health and reform, plan should be implemented to achieve a successful life.

Community Kitchen:

Cooking is taken up individually in every house hold, requires lot of effort by increasing the responsibility of the women as cooks. Maharishi said that the community kitchens should be established for a large group of persons. The food prepared can be shared collectively as per Maharishis plans this will enable the women to contribute their daily routine to spiritual and societal and to get educated. This is a very important factor contemplating to equal rights to women. It bears fruit only when the kitchen and child rearing responsibilities are made common and collective.

The Children are to be nourished with parents only upto the age of 5 under Maharishis plans of education. The next 5 years will follow basic linguistic education under their guidance. The rest of the learning for development would be based a boarding system under Erudite Masters. These are plans elucidated by Vedhathiri Maharishi under his 14 Vedhathiriyian principles to improve the systems of the society. The plans and implementations included women in every step. The enhancement of knowledge, freedom with rights to enjoy the world was provided in equity with men.

Fifty percent of the world population is women. The remaining half is men given birth by women. Maharishi upholds the women who conceive, rear them after giving birth with safety and secured measures. Hence Maharishi felt that the women are equalent to the divine energy from which all life forms are being evolved. The importance and the divine value of women responsible for the creation is clearly pictured.

Wives Appreciation day:

August 30th of every year is celebrated as the day of prayer for the welfare of the wife. It is the death anniversary of Maharishis wife Annai Logambal. Many reformers have spoken and worked for the upliftment of women in the society. But it was Maharishi who got this celebration in every SKY centres. The celebration is based on the couple seated together. This celebration includes a poem to be

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recited by the husband. The poem speaks of the glory of women who has who has left her birthplace and come to live with him like a detached saint. He happily narrates, the way the wife took up the family chores with love and compassion and the good luck that had made him a husband. The ideas recited in the poem are nothing but true. The husband gifts a bouquet and the wife gifts a fruit to the husband in return.

Maharishi quotes this example to establish the importance of wives in the society. *Thaiyalar* is a tamil word denoting women meaning blend or joining together. It is women who integrate families, societies and the world together, under a single thread. The word "*Thaiyalar*" has been highly contemplated with reference to intellectuality of this gender. In a cloth that is weaved there are warp and wefts. The warp is "*Nerizhai*" and the weft is "*Ooduizhai*". There is no place for weft without warp, hence the tamil literature, Thirupavai quotes women as "*Nerizhaiyal*". Men are only the weft with predominance to women. Womens education is in the field of literature, politics, warfare and spiritual arena should not be neglected. Maharishi believed women should be relieved from the tasks of Kitchen and Child rearing to become independent. To become simplified spiritually, trained by Maharishi through the art of mind power makes their mind rest and subside.

Opinion on practise of Sati:

There was an intention to revive the practise of Sati by the religious leaders. This was a ritual banned during the British period. The wife was forcefully made to walk into the funeral pyre of the husband. When asked for his acceptance he wanted the resolution with a small amendment. The amendment was that the husband should also walk into the funeral pyre if the wife dies. The religious leaders zealots realised Maharishi's intention and walked away to bury the intention.

The Deficit of Womanhood:

Maharishi speaks of the weakness of the women hood also. The desire for gold in women will generally create hatred and enmity followed by pains. The metal gold, says Maharishi, brings only pains after a tedious effort of mining, extracting, augmenting and marketing. He wanted the women to discard the use of gold in a remarkable manner. They need not be attracted by the glitter of metal. The craze of silk was also considered as an act against love and compassion. The silk was obtained by killing thousands of worms. Maharishi wanted women to devoid themselves from alluring dress up through silk and gold. Maharishi believed that abstaining from these materials will empower women intellectually and spiritually.

Periyar:

Given the near-visionary impact of Periyar's life, it becomes somewhat difficult to separate his political and social legacy. But though his vision has been politicised and rather wrongly attributed to blind Anti Brahmin and Anti Hindu sentiments, much of the significance of his work has been lost in the political rhetoric.

If a line has to be drawn between Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy's political and social life, it would be the moment he quit the Congress party in 1925 to start his now iconic Self Respect

Moment. The principal crux of the Self Respect movement was to bring social equality and equity in a society plagued with caste and patriarchy, propagating that Man had to develop Self-respect to gain Individuality. At a point in time when the Indian Independence movement was gaining widespread traction and was seen as the ultimate social standing to be part of, Periyar declared "*Self-Respect Movement* alone could be the genuine freedom movement. Political freedom will not be fruitful without individual self-respect."

A little known fact is that the title of "Periyar" or the learned one in Tamil was itself awarded to E.V. Ramasamy in a first of its kind "Tamil Nadu Women's Conference" on 13th November 1938 by Dr. Tharambal, Ramamirthammal. The conference was presided by Neelambigaiyar daughter of Maramali Adigalar who was a strong critic as well as a friend of Periyar.

It is a widely made common mistake to look at Periyar's Self Respect Movement and his ideals of Women's freedom as two different social ideals. In fact the Self Respect movement enshrined the ideals of Individual freedom and upliftment" of not just the down trodden castes, but also of women. His ideal was "We are fit to think of 'self-respect' only when the notion of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' is banished from our land". This not only encompasses the fact that the ideas of Superiority and Inferiority were to be found between different caste and creeds but also between men and women. Periyar a strong opponent of the Chaturvarna System. so were women treated inside the house by being treated as untouchables at certain times and were looked upon as lower than men in social standing by being confined to the kitchen and made to serve men of the household.

Periyar famously said

"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."

Periyar had strong opinions on women empowerment and women's issues. His opinion was that women's rights are suppressed socially with sanction from the Hindu religion, its scriptures and social practises including marriage and right to property. If inequality 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, Periyar opined.

Thoughts on Marriage

Periyar was of the view that weddings were backward and discriminated against women and laid the foundations for her to be enslaved with in the house hold. He believed that

the concept of “Mangalsutra” was itself deprecating to women and equated it to Men claiming the Women as property. In addition the mantras chanted during the ceremony in Sanskrit by the Brahmins were crude in the manner that they offered the bride to the gods first, the Brahmin next and then the Groom. In an act of defiance against this system of marriage, he advocated the “Self Respect Marriage” in which he proposed that marriage between a Man and Women was a contract based on mutual self-respect and equal footing. The Self Respect Marriages went on to become a defining aspect of the Self Respect movement and many of Periyars famous quotes and speeches were given during many of these marriages he officiated since 1925. In addition he vehemently fought for widows remarriage when it was considered a taboo and was also strongly against Child Marriage and was single handily responsible for rescuing a number of children from marriage personally and opposed it in many of his speeches.

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[6] World peace (Tamil) – Vedathiri Maharishi

Women Right to Property:

Women's right to father's property was a very tricky subject in Hindu households. All through his life he advocated for women as equal member of a house holds and be given the same rights and privileges of sons in a family. This unfair proposition even led him to marry his caretaker and well-wisher Maniammai, to whom he wanted to bequeath property, but was not allowed to because of existing laws and customs which prohibited bequeathing property to daughters. Again it was in 1986 that the DMK government under Kalaingar Karunanidhi legalised property bequthing to women and made it a right for women to father's property.

Rights of Women in house and society:

Periyar always considered women as being with individual agency and of equal stature to men in social and domestic standing. He encouraged women to take up leadership roles and responsibilities in his many social initiatives. Periyar was someone who practised what he preached. In his early days when he was part of Congress and Gandhis fight for enforcing prohibition, he empowered his wife Nagammai and his Sister to spear head picketing of toddy with such vigour that even Gandhi acknowledged the work of these two women in the success of the movement.

2. Conclusion

Although the style and approach of both Maharishi and Periyar was different, both had their own effects on women empowerment. As a pioneer in women empowerment Periyar took a very strong and frontal stance against women enslavement and spoke and fought vehemently against it. Whereas Maharishi followed decades later and with his soft spoken nature instilled the importance of women empowerment to his disciples.

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