

E. V. Ramasamy Naicker and Self Respect Marriage- A Study

Dr.L.RAVISANKAR.M.A.,M.Phil., Ph.D*

Associate Professor and Head,

Department of History,

Thiruvalluvar, College,

Vikramasingapuram,

Papanasam – 627 425

Abstract

An attempt is made to analyse the Role of **E. V. Ramasamy Naicker and Self Respect Marriage. Trying to remove the low status** in society The Self Respect Movement insisted on equal right to women like that of men. It wanted to bring changes in marriage system and severely criticised and opposed child marriage. It encouraged love marriage inter-cast marriage and re marriage of widows. This Movement sought support from the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin communities such as Nadars, Kallars, Agamudayars, Yanyakula Kshatriyas, Isai Vellalas and Goundars, as well as from the Dalits. Within a year after the inauguration of the Self Respect Movement, 60 branches were opened in different districts along with several sub-branches in the rural areas around Thanjavur, Coimbatore, Ramnad, Tirunelveli, South Arcot and North Arcot districts. Within seven years of its inception, the number of branches of the Self Respect Movement expanded to 117 with more than 10,000 members. In 1928 alone, the three major districts of its support i.e., Thanjavur, Coimbatore and Tirunelveli, together had a membership of 2,500, out a total membership of 4,000. Apart from this, more than 100 youth organisations, which were affiliated to the Self Respect Movement, sprang up in these areas over the years. To create awareness on self respect marriage and it impacts on society. To inculcate the knowledge of inter - caste marriage and its importance. To study the inter-caste marriage with examples. To eradicate the superstition beliefs from the Hindu society. To create spirit of interest in unity among the Indians.

Introduction

An attempt is made to analyse the Role of **E. V. Ramasamy Naicker and Self Respect Marriage. Trying to remove the low status** in society The Self Respect Movement insisted on equal right to women like that of men. It wanted to bring changes in marriage system and severely criticised and opposed child marriage. It encouraged love marriage inter-cast marriage and re marriage of widows. This Movement sought

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Objectives:

- To create awareness on self respect marriage and it impacts on society
- To inculcate the knowledge of inter - caste marriage and its importance
- To study the inter-caste marriage with examples
- To eradicate the superstition beliefs from the Hindu society.
- To create spirit of interest in unity among the Indians.

Early Life of E.V.R:

E.V. Ramasamy Naicker was born in 1879 at Erode as a son of Venkara Naicker and Cinnathai Ammaiyar. After his school study he deeply interested in welfare of poor and untouchable in the society. Thus his Movement organised annual provincial Conferences from which the central committee members and the leadership was elected. Usually these conferences were held like public meetings, attended by a large number of supporters.

Spreading of the doctrines:

The Movement, to propagate its ideas of self respect, launched a weekly, Kudi Arasu (Republic), which was continuously published from

2 May 1925 to 19 November 1933. In 1933, the British Government seized Kudi Arasu because of its socialist propaganda and arrested its publishers, E. Y. Ramasamy and his sister S.R. Kannammal.

From 26 November 1933, the Movement launched another weekly called **Puratchi** (Revolution or Revolt) under the editorship of E.V. Krishnaswami (brother of E.Y. Ramasamy). Soon **Puratchi** also had to be discontinued due to harassments by the Government and was substituted by a new daily, **Pakutharivu** (Rationality), which was started in 1934. Later on, this daily was converted into a weekly and then into a monthly magazine. It was published till 1938. In 1935, **Kudi Arasu** was revived and once again its publication was terminated in 1940. It was republished from 1943 to 1962.

One of the important activities of the Self Respect Movement which challenged the traditional Hindu marriage and introduced radical changes that it was the conducting of self respect marriages. Such marriages were conducted from 1928 onwards among various non-Brahmin castes. These marriages, which took place even in remote villages and were regularly, reported in **Kudi Arasu**, included inter-caste marriages, widow remarriages and marriages of consent.

The central aim of self respect marriages was to free the institution of marriage from Hindu rituals, which emphasised monogamous familial norms and chastity for women and thus legitimised patriarchy.¹ accordingly, these marriages were conducted without Brahmin priests and recitation of religious texts. More significantly, they did away with the tying of the **tali**. In keeping with the rationalistic content of the Self Respect Movement, often these marriages were arranged in times which were treated as inauspicious by the Hindu calendar (**Rahu kalam**) and some of the marriages took place at midnight,² which is generally considered to be inauspicious. All these challenged and subverted the religious aura that entrapped the institution of marriage.

Self Respect Marriage with Examples:

The self respect marriage between Sivagami, a young widow belonging to an orthodox Hindu family from Thanjavur district, and Sami Chidambaranar, a Tamil scholar and a dedicated activist of the Movement, took place in 1930. Though Sivagami had given her full consent to marry Chidambaranar, there was stubborn opposition for the marriage from both the families. This forced Periyar to shift the venue of the marriage from Kumbakonam, the town from which Sivagami hailed, to Erode, Periyar's own native town well known for trading activities.³ The marriage, which was presided over by E.V.R. Nagammal, did not have any of the rituals of traditional Hindu marriages, including the tying of

tali. The couple exchanged rings, took an oath which emphasised friendship and equality between them, and addressed each other as comrades and friends instead of the usual 'husband' and 'wife'. And, as if to highlight the political dimension of the marriage, it was arranged in the venue of the second Self Respect Conference itself. In the evening, to propagate the need for widow remarriages and self respect marriages, the married couple were taken out in a procession in the streets of Erode by the Self Respect Movement activists. People indeed gathered in large numbers along the route of the procession to watch the iconoclastic couple.

The marriage between Kamalambal and Nallasivan which took place in the same year at Nagarkoil near Kanyakumari, generated lot of tension among the members of the Saliar caste, who were traditional handloom weavers. It was a marriage between a widow and a widower, each of them having a child from their previous marriages.⁴ The marriage was conducted by Periyar and Nagai Kaliyappan in a cinema Hall. In the course of the marriage, the bridegroom transferred Rs.5,000 worth of his property to the bride in consonance with the Self Respect Movement's ideal that women should have equal property right as men. About 2,500 people visited the venue of the marriage to witness the unusual event.⁵

The self respect marriage between two activists of the Movement, S. Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam, took place at Pallathur in Ramanathapuram district in 1930. The marriage was attended by about 2,000 male and 500 women activists of the Movement. In addition, about 100 local people also participated in it.⁶ Interestingly, as part of this wedding, the audience were allowed and encouraged to ask questions about man-woman relation marriage and women's emancipation. One of the participants asked Periyar why the Self Respect Movement allowed a second marriage. Periyar responded that marriages could only be tentative arrangements between men and women and they should not be treated as eternal. He further said that men and women should have equal right to marry anyone of their preference even after having first marriage, and divorce should be permitted.⁷ To conduct this inter-caste marriage in 1930, the Movement had to organise a protection committee to guard against the possible disruption by the groom's caste men, and, as expected, they turned up in large numbers at the venue of the marriage and created trouble. To protect the couple from their anger, Periyar took them to Erode and kept them as his guests for some time.

There were many such marriages which were organised by the Self Respect Movement under severe social constraints and opposition. Men and women who underwent these marriages had to encounter a hostile society and relatives. For

instance, the marriage between Kuthusi Gurusami, a Thondaimandala Mudaliar (an upper caste) and Kunchidam, who belonged to the much despised Isai Vellala caste, a caste from which **devadasis** were drawn, was conducted in 1929 at Erode. This inter-caste marriage was bitterly opposed by the groom's family and his relatives performed religious rites to mark him as dead while he was still alive. His outcaste status and different kinds of humiliations at the hands of his relatives and caste people continued for years. Speaking at the marriage, Periyar mentioned, "From the time the news about the inter-caste marriage of Gurusamy came out, the hardships (he had to face) were unmentionable"⁸. Incidentally, few hours before the marriage, Gurusamy was falsely informed by his brother-in-law that his sister was dead; hoping that at least such a play on emotions would stop the marriage. But the marriage did take place.

The above instances, which were among the several marriages reported in the pages of **Kudi Arasu**, give an idea of how the Self Respect Movement politicised marriages and used them as public events to propagate views on the women's question. That was why marriage venues were decorated with the symbols and slogans of the Movement for instance, the self respect marriage venue in a small village near Cuddalore in 1928 had welcome arches bearing slogans like "Long live Self Respect Movement" and "Long Live **Vaikom Veerar**".⁹ The walls inside the marriage hall were adorned with large posters explaining the objectives and activities of the Movement. To propagate the idea of these marriages the Movement also brought out calendars and posters carrying the portraits of self respect couples.

Invariably, all these marriages, whether they were held at the house of Marimuthu belonging to the lowly cobbler caste or political elite like W.P.A. Soundara Pandian, were attended and addressed by activists of the Movement, especially by women activists. They spoke on these occasions on themes relating to women's emancipation and demanded legislative protection of women's rights.¹⁰ In an effort to popularise such marriages, Periyar personally attended most of the marriages during the early days of the Movement, even if they took place in remote villages.

During the three decades of its career, the Self Respect Movement organised several thousand self respect marriages in the Tamil speaking areas. At a self respect conference, T.S. Kunchidam, one of the women activists claimed that every year about 2,500 to 3,000 Self Respect marriages were conducted.¹¹ Between 1929 and 1932 alone, about 8,000 such marriages took place.

The Movement also supported and organised various associations like the Tamilnadu Priest Boycott Association, Tamilnadu Widow Remarriage Association (Vidhwa Yivaha Sabha),

to assist men and women who came forward to have inter-caste marriages, widow-remarriages, and marriage with devadasis¹². A close associate of Periyar, Ramanathan claimed that the widow-remarriages conducted by the Movement would run into many thousands.

While some of the participants in these marriages viewed women's emancipation as the aim of these marriages, there were others who treated them merely as against Brahmin domination and they used these marriages to dispense with Brahmin priests and Sanskritic scriptures. An exasperated Periyar, addressing a marriage in 1931, objected to calling every anti-priest anti-ritual marriage as self respect marriage, and said that, with time, one of the objectives of the Movement should be to do away with marriages themselves. Then, freeing marriages from rituals themselves¹³ was no doubt a step ahead.

Another important aspect of the Self Respect Movement was the numerous conferences it organised. These conferences, which were periodically organised at the provincial, district and taluk levels, were characterised by slogan-chanting processions, long speeches aimed at propagating the ideology of the Movement and passing of resolutions on various social and political themes. The Self Respect Movement used these conferences as a regular political site to take up women's issues and to encourage women's political participation. These conferences were attended by women in large numbers.¹⁴

The first Provincial Self Respect Conference was held at Chengelpet, near Madras, in 1929. Apart from articulating its views on themes like Simon Commission, caste oppression and religious institutions, the conference dealt specifically with "marriage and other rituals". One of its resolutions demanded the raising of the marriageable age for women to 16 years and the right to divorce along with equal right for women on property. The second Provincial Self Respect Conference, which was held in 1930 at Erode, demanded proper divorce legislation. It also demanded the implementation of Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act and opening up of vigilance home for the freed prostitutes.¹⁴ Within the ambience of this conference, two other conferences were organised: a youth conference and a women's conference. The fact that there was a separate conference for women did not come in the way of the general conference and the youth conference taking up women's issues. The Erode Youth Conference, for example, appealed to young men to come forward and marry widows and devadasis who were willing to marry. In 1931, the Virudhunagar Third Self Respect Youth Conference passed resolutions demanding equality for women in all spheres of life. It also requested the government to open birth control clinics to

propagate contraception, since child birth had been of great hindrance for women's freedom and their intellectual activities. Almost all the general conferences underlined the importance of property rights for women.¹⁵

The Self Respect Movement not only took up women's issues as one of its central concerns, but also provided great impetus for women to participate in all its forums and activities. For instance, as we have noted earlier the movement organised special women's conferences within the ambience of its general conferences. In the context of organising separate women's conferences, one may note that Periyar passionately believed that women's emancipation would be possible only by the efforts of women themselves, and was sceptical of man's advocacy of women's emancipation.¹⁶

"As of now men's struggle for women's liberation has only strengthened women's enslavement". The proceedings of the women's conferences were fully conducted by women activists themselves. Lakshmi Ammal delivered the inaugural speech at the Erode Self Respect Women's Conference in 1930. The Conference demanded, inter alia. Compulsory education for girl's up to the age of 16, effective and immediate implementation of. Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Divorce Act, equal property right for women, speedy implementation of the Devadasi Abolition Bill, election of women representatives to all public bodies such as legislatures, corporations and municipalities.¹⁷

While special women's conferences provided an exclusive space for women activists of the Self Respect Movement to articulate themselves on women's issues, their participation in general conferences was also substantial. That is women were not 'ghettoised' within the Movement. Often the much honoured role of delivering the inaugural addresses of the general conferences fell on the shoulders of women activists. To cite a few instances; in 1931, Indrani Balasubramaniam inaugurated the Third Self Respect Conference at Virudunagar⁹⁴; in 1932, T.S. Kunchidam inaugurated the Thanjavur district Self Respect Conference⁹⁵; in 1933, Trichi Neelavathi inaugurated the Ramanathapuram District Third Self Respect Youth Conference⁹⁶; in 1934, R. Annapurani inaugurated the Tiruchengodu Taluk Adi Dravida Conference in 1937, Meenambal Sivaraj presided over the Tirunelveli District Third Adi Dravida Conference in 1938, the Madurai Self Respect Conference was inaugurated by Rajammal, and in 1944, Kanagammaiyar Ramasamy inaugurated the Madras Fifth Self Respect Conference. In the course of the inaugural addresses, these women speakers discussed various aspects of the women's question.

Some leading women activists were elected to the Central Council of the Organising

Committee, through the conference every year. For instance, at the Third Provincial Conference in Virudhunagar in 1931, Indrani Balasubramaniam was elected as council member. When the **Samadharma** Party (The Socialist Party, started by Periyar along with M. Singaravelu Chettiyar in 1932) conference was held at Erode in 1933, S. Neelavathi and

K. Kunchidam were elected as propaganda secretaries to establish the Self Respect League in villages. Few other women activists like R. Annapurani and Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal were chosen as district and inter-district samadharma propagandists. In 1945, Ramamirtham Ammal and Dr. S. Dharmambal were nominated as members of the Central Executive Committees of Thanjavur and Madras district units of the Dravidar Kazhagam, respectively. This participation was in a sense the result of Periyar's effort to break the culture of silence which characterised the women activists of the Movement. He insisted that even the most inarticulate women activists should utter at least a few words in the women's conferences. The success of these self respect conferences in politicising women can be summarised in the following words of Singaravelu Chettiar.

Conclusion

This Dravida Movement paved way to the appearance of several organisations towards social welfare. Finally this movement put fourth great efforts to reduce the domination of Brahmins and increase the participation of Non –Brahmins in politics. Periyar for most appeal to people was to develop self respect. He preached that the Brahmin had monopolised and cheated other communities for decades and deprived them of self respect. His self respect Movement espoused rationalism and atheism and the movement had currents of anti-Brahminism. Thus commonly known as Periyar also referred to as Thanthai Periyar he is also known as father of a Dravidian Movement.

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