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A Study on Periyar and Vethathiri Maharishi's Perspectives on Women

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Abstract: *“Being bestowed birth in human form is one of the rarest” As the renowned Tamil poet Ouvaiyar rightly said being born as a human being itself is an act of wonder. Yet the human community for numerous years lived just like other animals. Over the ages with rational thinking man embarked on a transformative phase. Hence there mushroomed many clans and each of these clans were later referred to as an individual society, but in this societal set-up some unwritten rules and written laws were created in the name of culture and people of the respective society were bound by them. This led to utter confusion. Our ancestors left no stone unturned in their efforts to get rid of these confusions in the society. We call this as reformation. Reformation implies restoring the order which involved plugging the holes that were left unchecked. This noble initiative of reforming is what drove Periyar and Maharishi. They waged a silent war against this domineering group of people and emerged victoriously.*

Periyar chose the path of agitation and Maharishi the path of non-violence in their

attempts to facilitate individual freedom and liberty of women. The aim of this paper is to research on their views and efforts. This essay will deal with a portion of this paper which involves a discussion on the reasons behind women enslavement and the reforms these stalwarts have made.

Keywords: *Vethathiri Maharishi, Periyar, Enslavement, Women, Sati, Chastity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Who can rise to the greatness of women?” said the great Indian poet, Thiruvalluvar. Gandhiji called a woman as the noblest of God’s creations. “Mother and father are the first known Gods,” said the great poet Ouvaiyar. All the rivers in the world which provide water to feed and sustain the human community are all considered womanly in their nature. Hence Kavimani Desiga Vinayagam Pillai in his verse mentions a line which translates to “To be born as a woman is itself a great boon”. Is being granted with such a boon and being bestowed with woman life sufficient for a peaceful life of hers? The dark minds of the medieval men filled the lives of women with darkness too.

In the early age, womanhood was glorified by sanctifying the God of knowledge as a woman (kalaimagal) and worshipped.

But people continued refraining woman from advancing in knowledge, by restricting her to being just a cook. Womanhood was glorified by sanctifying the God of courage as a woman (malaimagal) yet they characterized an ideal woman as someone with timidity, ignorance, shyness, and chastity and shrunk her boundaries within the walls of her home. Womanhood was glorified by sanctifying the God of wealth as well as a woman (dhanalakshmi) yet they refused women even their fair share of ancestral wealth. We shall analyse how such a state for women into being and the solutions that were proposed by reformers.

II. PERIYAR'S AND VETHATHIRI MAHARISHI'S PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN ENSLAVEMENT

Periyar perceives that in our country there are two most pressing issues that need to be solved. The first is the issue of untouchability which is uncommon even among animals. The second is treating women in India as undeserving of freedom, created by God only to be slaves of men and considering them merely to be moving corpses. Without addressing these two evils India is not to be considered a country with complete freedom.

Further, he expresses some popular beliefs on women in the early times. The woman was believed to:

1. Be frailer compared to men
2. Not having the capability of protecting herself
3. As having the duty of giving birth to and protecting her children and hence not suitable for any other vocation.
4. Depending on a man for survival needs including food.

A. The Lure of Male Child

In India, women were considered as cursed beings by Hinduism. The sastras considered that the sins committed by them during their previous births resulted in them being born as female. Immaterial of how many girl children a couple had, their family was considered as one without an heir if there was not a single male child. In a gathering that falls silent, they used to compare the noiseless situation to a house that has just seen the birth of a girl child. Girl children were not considered as rightful heirs.

B. Scriptures bearing instances of women enslavement

Scriptures from the Tamil society have by far supported women enslavement.

Facilitating the faulty intention of a husband by a wife to knock the doors of a prostitute is the height of chastity

Just by being distracted by the Gandharva spirits in the sky her husband Jamathagni considered her wife Renugadevi to have lost her chastity and convinced his son to slay her head.

Even after proving her purity by standing the test of fire, Sita Devi even during her pregnancy was abandoned in the forest

Nalan's wife completely trusted him and accompanied him to the forest. Yet he abandoned her while she was asleep at midnight.

Thus Indian scriptures have portrayed women as slaves. People who read these scriptures also preferred women to remain the same way. Further, the qualities of human beings were compartmentalized into those that were masculine and the ones that were feminine. Bravery, anger, toughness, and leadership were viewed as masculine qualities and kindness, gentleness, composure, and caring were viewed as feminine qualities.

C. Smritis and Women

Though the Smritis had many perspectives for the upliftment of the society, some of their prescriptions paved the way for women enslavement. Some instances are mentioned below

A. Even if the husband loses his character and doesn't have even traces of goodness in him, the wife is supposed to worship and treat him as a deity

B. Among the dharmas of a good wife, the best dharma is implicit obedience

C. No one should consume the food served by a wife who chooses not to respect her husband's command.

D. Yagna, rituals and spiritual fasting are not meant for women.

These are some instances of women enslavement indirectly mentioned in Smritis though the importance of women is mentioned in a few places too.

D. The False Glory Bestowed on Women

In our scriptures, there are also instances where women are glorified beyond measure. While writing about women the intention of the writer about women is also a concern. Before putting down the words on paper womanhood is to be considered on par with motherhood. When a writer ventures into writing with such an outlook, just as the sky pours from above to quench the thirst of the earth, pristine content would flow from the pen to serve the reader. In contrast, the works of some writers tend to stimulate sexual thirst. Does literature really ask for describing their physical features is a question that needs contemplating?

E. Chastity

One of the main reasons behind women enslavement is chastity referred by the word Karpu in Tamil literature, the exact meaning of which translates to keep one's word, honesty or truth. There has been no evidence to the fact that chastity has got only to do with women. While talking about marital love alone the reference is two-fold concerning the lead male and lead female characters whereas when it comes to chastity the references have been made only with women. Had these holy books and scriptures been written by women, would they have conferred the meaning of the word Karpu (chastity) as Pathiviratham (virtuous wife) or would they have given a more generic meaning is a question we need to think through?

Vethathiri Maharishi's perspective on chastity is that it is a generic virtue that applies to both man and woman alike. He talks about this in the following verse which translates to

“It is the common duty of men and women to respect chastity”¹

For women to break free from the bonds of enslavement a virtue like a chastity should not be associated with women alone. When the world of men is not pure how can the world of women be pure? A man who has bad morality and does not observe chastity would spoil the health and purity of an innocent woman and bring undesired health effects to her offspring. Hence purity in morality is a common need among both the sexes.

F. Names to Refer Marriages

According to some customary rituals followed in olden days, marriage was called by certain names like Kannikathanamuhurtham, Tharamuhurtham, and Vivaagasuba Muhurtham. The word Kannikathana translates to giving a virgin woman as a charity which reflects the subtle intention that something which has been accepted as charity can be used by the receiver however he pleases. To this Vethathiri Maharishi poses a question “Without a woman how would your presence on earth be a possibility?” and voices his opposition to rituals like these.

G. Refraining Woman Education

More than physical beauty the beauty of a woman's intellect is far more attractive observed a famous Marathi poet. The reason women were abstained from receiving an education was the belief that the knowledge or art learned would go in vain once they get married.

H. Indispensability of Woman Education

The fruits of woman education reflect in the virtuous upbringing of the progeny. The Tamil poet Bharathidasan puts forth his observation in his book titled as KudumbaVilakku, the meaning of which translates into the following

“Women without education are like barren land in which grass may manage to grow, but not virtuous offspring.”²

Only those women who are educated can contemplate. They only will have the courage and they will not have to depend on others to protect their chastity. Instead, their education empowers them to protect their chastity by themselves. Such women also see that their husbands also guard their chastity. This has been the outlook of Periyar.

I. Property Rights

In our country, since only the male child is being considered as the rightful heir and female child on getting married becomes a part of a new family, women were declined property inheritance rights. When education and the training on a vocation are given by her parents to a girl child, she becomes capable of earning a property by her.

Vethathiri maharishi's view is that the dependence on her husband for survival needs

like food and clothing in a woman's marital life needs to be changed.

“We don't require an awful state in this world when a woman gets her survival needs fulfilled in exchange for dedicating her physical body. Every woman has the right to a vocation which helps her fulfil her needs and perform her duties.”³

J. Child Marriage

One of the greatest evils for the health and discipline of womanhood is child marriage. “By giving way to practices like this we get delayed in our pursuit of spiritual fulfilment. A man's mind which is incapable of knowing a girl's delicate childhood can never harbour thoughts of God” These were the thoughts of Gandhiji on child marriage.

The reasons quoted by the Hindu Dharmasastra in favour of child marriage are:

1. When a girl comes of age for marriage it might be too late that she might fall in love with a boy hailing from a different caste against her parents' choice of the bridegroom.
2. Child marriage eases the process of a girl's adapting to a new family and becoming one with it. Marrying past a girl's childhood in some cases may bring in some issues in adapting to the new family.

K. The Evils Brought on By Child Marriage

Age	Number of Widows
0 - 1 years	1515
2 years	1785
3 years	3485
3-4 years	9076
4-5 years	15019
5 -10 years	105482
10-15 years	185339

Due to the consequences. This has also been cited as a reason for women enslavement.

1. This may lead to women developing various ailments and shorten their lifespan.

From the population survey conducted in 1931 in India, the numbers of the girls each of who were married before the completion of 15 years of age and later became widows are below:

L. Remarriages

The fact that, on being bestowed with birth both man and woman, be it by the philosophy of nature or in a societal set-up, are in no way inferior to one another, is a widely accepted one by the intellectually advanced world. A man who has enjoyed worldly joys to the fullest, in the demise of his wife, even in his ripe age tries to marry again. But women who have been widowed even at a very young age are forced to spend the rest of their lives alone by our age-old societal setup.

Leaving the widows who were not interested in remarriages, Periyar proposed that the society should facilitate the interest of those widowed women who were interested in remarriage. He brought in a revolution by himself conducting many remarriages for the widowed women in his own family.

M. Birth Control

It was earlier considered sinful to prevent child birth and hence women in those times delivered many children and women of those times suffered

2. As women may not inherit property or have a source of income, they may have to depend on others to help them raise their children.
3. They may have to give birth to weak and sick children.

To revolutionize this, Periyar put forth his efforts from the year 1928. He even released a book on birth control in the year 1930.

N. The Practice of Sati

Earlier there existed the practice of Sati where a widow immolates herself on her husband's pyre. This practice had been prevalent in India during the 17&18th century BC. Rajaram Mohan Roy fought a big struggle for the abolition of this practice. Vethathiri Maharishi's advice was sought for bringing this practice back to force by some Members of the Parliament. He replied if this practice is to be

adopted by each widow let's make it equally applicable to widowers as well. By the efforts of many, this idea subsequently got dropped.

O. The Role of Women

Women are also contributing to women enslavement apart from men. They acknowledge being enslaved and facilitate enslavement. Instead of appreciating their freedom and considering them at par with men, most women in our country prefer to remain as mere beauty conscious dolls. In those days illiteracy, lack of rational thinking, implicit obedience and having a frail body despite a strong will paved the way for woman enslavement.

P. The Importance of Womanhood

Vethathiri Maharishi appreciates that half of the world population is the female population and the remaining half is the male population brought into existence by the female population. He put forth that women are not lesser than men, greater than men or equal to men. But they must be placed in a much higher position where they must be respected and taken care of.

“The omnipotent almighty God found that for any life to gain birth the most suited way is through highly potent womanhood which he devised so wonderfully. Among all those living how many are aware of such a wonderful resource as this?”⁴

Hence he describes the importance of womanhood. He also declared the birthday of his wife Annai Logambal, the 30th of August to be observed as the World Wife Appreciation day, thus signifying womanhood and setting an example to live by.

III. CONCLUSION

In the present day, a prevalent thought is that women enslavement is no longer in existence and it is a thing of the past. But there are still some women enslavement practices existing in the society. The lure of a male child, the ideas on chastity, property inheritance rights, remarriage all reflect hues of women enslavement. To bring about a positive change, man and woman should realise the importance of each other in their lives. A woman should realise her innate physical abilities and dispense her duties and responsibilities in life depending on it.

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