

THE REVOLUTIONARY REFORMER AND THE VISIONARY LEADER: THE LEGACY OF DRAVIDIAN FEMINISM

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Abstract

Feminism is an ongoing struggle for every woman to overcome societal obstacles and attain dignity, rights and equality across all spheres of life. By promoting education, independence and self-respect for women, the Dravidian movement has gradually developed the feminine gender in Tamil Nadu. This study explores the concept of Thanthai Periyar and Dr. K. Veeramani showing how the feminist principles of one generation was carried forward to the next generation. It highlights the significance of Dravidian movement as a paradigm of gender equality, rational thinking and social transformation and demonstrates how their ideas continue to inspire defiance against the oppression of women in contemporary Tamil society. This study also examines how their ideas challenged traditional social institutions such as marriage, family and religion which often reinforced gender inequality. By situating Dravidian feminism within a broader social context, the article highlights its relevance to contemporary discussions on women's rights and social justice.

Keywords

Feminism, Dravidian movement, Thanthai Periyar, Dr. K. Veeramani, Women's empowerment, Self-Respect.

Introduction :

Across centuries, women have confronted several social and cultural restrictions that set boundaries for their education, freedom, participation in public life and even in their own family.

Social structures that enslave women were created and enslaved and tortured women directly and indirectly in the name of God and religion, claiming that rituals, laws and customs were the norms of life. (Marappan 630)

In India particularly in Tamil Nadu, women's discretion and independence often tied to traditional customs and family responsibilities that favoured male authority and discouraged women empowerment. During this time, several reformers in Tamil Nadu started movements to break the old beliefs that chained women to the patriarchal society and bring equality among all. Especially, the Dravidian movement emerged as one of the most influential social revolutions in South India, it is not only promoting the concepts of self-respect, rational thinking and social justice but also a gender equality. This movement disclosed the eyes of women to fight for their rights and gain recognition in a society.

Patriarchal values were deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping women's roles within the family and limiting their participation in decision-making processes. Marriage, religion and caste operated together to control women's choices and reinforce male dominance. In such context, feminist though did not emerge merely as a demand for rights but as a struggle for human dignity and self-respect.

This study examines how Dravidian ideology articulated and institutionalized ideas of women's equality through the frameworks of education, self-respect and rationalism. The study also seeks to understand how these feminist ideas questioned existing power structures. It further examines how Dravidian ideology offered alternative ways of conceptualizing women's roles in both private and public spaces. By connecting the philosophies of two major reformers, the article explores how these ideas influenced women's progress and continue to inspire modern Tamil society. By doing so, it emphasizes the transformative nature of Dravidian ideology in shaping gender-conscious social reform.

Feminism and the Dravidian Movement

Feminism in Tamil Nadu developed in a different way compared to Western countries. The Dravidian movement began in the early twentieth century. It strongly opposed the idea that women should remain dependent on men and household roles. Leaders like Thanthai Periyar, believed that true social progress could happen only when women were educated, respected and given equal chances in every field. This new phase of feminism begins in Tamil Nadu through the Self-Respect movement founded by Thanthai Periyar. Unlike Western feminist movements, which largely focused on legal and political rights, Dravidian feminism emerged as a social and cultural movement. It addressed everyday forms of oppression faced by women such as domestic control, religious restrictions and social expectations. This

approach made feminism accessible to women from different social and economic backgrounds. Through the Self-Respect Movement, the Dravidian leaders encouraged women to pursue education and questioned traditions that suppressed them.

Periyar's policies were of great benefit to the Tamils who had adopted the policy of atheism and had risen from conservatism to transcend the basic occult principles. Because the passing of the old and the passing of the new is the civilization of the Tamils. (Marappan 638)

It challenged practices such as child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry and equal property rights. This Dravidian movement encouraged feminism in Tamil Nadu a strong societal base for both women's freedom and social equality. The movement emphasized that education was the most powerful tool to achieve gender equality. It is based on the belief that when a woman becomes educated, she not only elevates herself but also reinforces her family and society. It gave women a new identity and confidence to question traditional gender roles.

Feminist Ideals of Thanthai Periyar

Thanthai Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was one of the prominent voices for women's rights in Tamil Nadu. Beyond sympathy and clarity his approach to women's liberation is deeply efficient. He believed that our society couldn't attain real progress if women were tied to religious customs, social and familial restrictions.

If the oppression that exists among

human beings in the world is to be abolished, the arrogance and cruelty with which society treats women as inferior must be destroyed. Only when this attitude disappears will the seeds of equality and freedom begin to grow. (Periyar 73)

He encouraged women to think critically and to reject superstition and blind faith. According to him, education was the best way to build self-respect and liberation. Rationalism played a crucial role in Periyar's feminist thought. He believed that blind faith and superstition were tools used to justify women's oppression. By encouraging rational thinking, he aimed to free women from fear-based obedience and empower them to make independent choices.

Again, he believed that the idea of the sacredness of marriage is but part of the patriarchal ideology to cheat women into accepting their own enslavement. (Manoharan 7)

For Periyar, marriage should be a relationship based on freedom and equality between partners. He rejected the idea that marriage should place women in a position of obedience or inferiority. Instead, he viewed marriage as a shared life where neither partner dominates the other. He wanted women to get educated not just to get job opportunities, but also to gain knowledge, courage and freedom of thought. Periyar also spoke strongly against treating women more harshly than men. He mentioned that society always expected women to be pure, obedient and to be calm but allowed men to wander freely. He wanted to cease gender discrimination and make people believe that a woman does not depend

on marriage or family life but on her ability, wisdom and self-respect. "He states that marriage should represent a life of freedom and equality and that it should not be a life of subordination or hierarchy" (qtd. in. Surya 424). For Periyar, feminism is not a separate movement but a part of his dream to construct a fair and equal society. He not only forced women to be independent, also asked men to change their thinking too because equality blooms both men and women stand and respect each other.

Periyar challenged the value that conservative Tamil Society placed on Karpu, which can be loosely translated as chastity, as a social hypocrisy that limits the freedom of women while placing no such limits on men. (Manoharan 6)

Periyar created several opportunities for women to engage in public and social life, take leadership roles and make their own choices through the Self-Respect movement. His vision of feminism was wider all over Tamil Nadu based on equality and justice that inspires Tamil society even today.

Vision of Dr. K. Veeramani

After Thanthai Periyar, Dr. K. Veeramani has played a significant role in upholding the Dravidian ideas alive in modern times. As a follower and thinker, he has carried forward Periyar's footsteps and strengthened the Dravidian movement in the modern era. Dr.K.Veeramani believes that women's freedom is a necessary part of a fair and rational society. His leadership demonstrates how feminist ideas can evolve while remaining rooted in foundational principles. By adapting Periyar's ideas to contemporary realities,

Dr.K.Veeramani ensured that Dravidian ideals on feminism remained socially relevant and responsive to new forms of inequality.

Like Periyar, Dr. K. Veeramani continues to speak against gender bias, superstitious and religious belief that control personal freedom. Under his guidance, many educational institutions and social organisations have worked to promote women's education and leadership especially in rural and backward communities. He also stresses that equality is not just legal rights but about changing attitudes. He insists that women should be treated equally even in their homes, workplaces and thoughts. His vision show that feminism is a continuous process, not a completed goal. Through his lifelong efforts Dr. K. Veeramani has ensured that the message of Dravidian ideals on feminism remains active still. His leadership has helped modernize the Dravidian feminist thought, blending Periyar's revolutionary principles with the realities of the twenty-first century. By combining rationalism with compassion, he has shown that feminism is not just a movement for women but a path toward a more humane and equal society. His visions keep the Dravidian movement alive as a living force for equality and justice.

Dr.K. Veeramani also focuses on the moral and emotional side of womanhood. He stresses that women should not only seek equality but also inner strength, the courage to say "No", reject fear, guilt and social pressures and pleasing everyone.

Only women in our society are more affected by such a mentality. They become the burnt out candles in the joint families,

in offices and in factories. The basic reason is, they want to please everyone to make them happy rather than not having the courage to refuse anything. We should learn to emphatically say “no” and “not possible” when needed. (K.Veeramani 34)

His approach on feminism foregrounds a human-centered ideology that links women empowerment to the restructuring of society as a whole. In recent years, Dr.K.Veeramani has continued to express the spirit of the Dravidian movement through various speeches, writings and public addresses. He strongly encourages women entering economic and political spheres not as just a public speaker but as decision-makers. His reformist initiatives enabled women to emerge as leaders and articulate their political voices in the movement. This proves that he not only speak in words but also through his actions. He believes true feminism must challenge every form of inequality like caste, religion and class because they are interconnected. His idea is that when one group is oppressed, the whole society becomes weaker.

Dr.K.Veeramani pays special and unique attention to how language shapes gender equality. He points out that even in our daily conversation, many Tamil phrases disrespect women. He emphasizes that using respectful language in education and public speaking is also a part of women’s liberation. He argues that real feminism should begin from the family. When men and women share equal roles, responsibility and respect at home,

it naturally leads to a strong society. He frequently addresses students and youth to see equality as a shared responsibility, not a women-only issue. He reminds that respecting women is a mark of intelligence and culture, not a weakness.

Feminism in Modern Tamil Society

Today, Tamil women participate more actively in politics, education, employment and many other fields than earlier generations. The principles of Dravidian movement play vital role for this massive social change and create a mindset that values women’s voices and educating women in both public and private life is an enormous cultural change.

Periyar E.V Ramasamy’s fundamental philosophy was centered on the belief that all men and women should live with dignity and have equal opportunities to develop their physical, mental and moral faculties. He was committed to eradicating all forms of unjust discrimination and promoting social justice and a rational perspective. (Tamilmani and Kannan 3116)

Tamil Nadu government introduced many government policies supporting education, reservation and welfare of women are also inspired by the earlier Dravidian concepts. At the same time, women in modern society struggles in different forms such as workplace bias, sexual harassment, online harassment and societal pressure to follow the earlier traditions. Even though women are beginning to work in various fields equal to men, they are still expected to shoulder most of the household responsibilities without equal contribution from men.

Thus, modern society presents differently but obstacles to women never ceased. Also, women still earn lower wages than men, showing that gender inequality is gradually rooted everywhere.

Media plays a major role in portraying women as objects of beauty rather than individual intelligence. Films, advertisements and social media reinforces regressive expectations on women about beauty and behaviour. Though we are digitally grown, women with digital growth face new forms of harassment such as online bullying and body shaming. Even with increased opportunities, women still struggle for decision making for their own bodily autonomy and equal access to health care, showing that modern feminism remains a crucial movement.

The Dravidian movement still continues to shape the thoughts of people in Tamil Nadu. In the present age, it reminds society that women's empowerment is not a modern trend but it is a continuing legacy of Tamil rationalistic thought. The spirit of self-respect, equality and justice that began decades ago still inspires new generations to fight for a balanced and bright future.

Conclusion

The rise of feminism has been a long and powerful struggle towards equality and social justice firmly rooted by the ideals of Thanthai Periyar. Both Periyar and Dr.K.Veeramani viewed feminism as more than women's rights they saw it as a path to social development, rational thought and dignity for all. In today's world, where gender inequality and women oppression still appear in new forms, the Dravidian principles still remain relevant.

It calls for women to stand with courage and men to share the responsibility. Dr.K.Veeramani's leadership has shown how the principles of the past can adapt to the challenges of the present without losing their core values. The continued relevance of Dravidian feminism lies in its ability to question authority, reject injustice and promote rational human values. It reminds society that feminism is not a temporary movement but a continuous process of social reform. The Dravidian movement continues its principles not only as political or social ideas but as an inspiring force to question injustice and build a society based on equality, respect and human values.

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