

ROLE OF PERIYAR E.V. RAMASAMY FOR WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical and contemporary role of women in politics, with a focus on India. It examines the evolution of political systems from early leadership figures like the "Mukhia" to modern democratic structures, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for women's political participation. The paper discusses the impact of India's freedom movements, which significantly contributed to women's involvement in politics, and how legal reforms, such as reservations and Panchayati Raj, have furthered women's political engagement. Despite formal equality in political rights, women's active participation remains limited due to socio-cultural constraints, gender roles, and family responsibilities. The paper also addresses the global context, where women's formal political rights often do not translate into meaningful political power. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of political participation as an indicator of democratic health and the need for continued efforts to overcome barriers to women's full engagement in politics.

INTRODUCTION

Politics has been an integral part of human society since its early stages, evolving alongside the growth of human knowledge and civilization. As societies became more complex, leadership structures shifted from informal figures like the "Mukhia" or "Sardar" to more organized political systems. Women have long been involved in politics, especially in India, where their participation has evolved from the early stages of the freedom movement to modern-day governance. The Indian independence struggle, in particular, provided a significant platform for women like Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Nehru to contribute to political change. Despite legal advancements that grant women equal political rights, their active involvement in politics remains constrained due to factors like social roles, family responsibilities, and deeply ingrained gender norms. Political participation, influenced by these factors, continues to be an important measure of democratic development, with women's engagement playing a critical role in shaping political dynamics worldwide.

Historical Retrospect

The most eventful period in the history of Indian women's struggle for emancipation, was the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century was perhaps the darkest period so far as Indian women were concerned. Political decay following the disruption of the Mughal empire and disorder due to the advent of various European powers, combined with fossilised customs, traditions, superstition and irrational bigotry, led to the disappearance of the previously existing 'mother cult'. Under the new conditions, women completely lost their

autonomous entity. The eighteenth century, with its intellectual stagnation manifested in the decay of knowledge and learning coupled with social degeneration, worsened the conditions of Indian women. Polygamy among the wealthier sections of society and **kulinism**, early marriage, the **sati** rites, killing of female children, and the throwing of the first female child into the holy waters were the most commonly prevalent practices.

Movement for Emancipation of Women in the Nineteenth Century

The dawn of the nineteenth century marked a period of significant social and intellectual transformation in India, fueled by the introduction of English education, exposure to Western thought, and a renewed appreciation for India's ancient traditions. This era gave rise to the Bengal Renaissance, which sought to address social issues, particularly the oppression of women. Reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar played pivotal roles in advocating for women's rights, with Rammohun championing the cause of women's emancipation across various aspects of life. The formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 provided a platform for political change, and though women were initially excluded, the persistence of reformers like Dwarkanath Ganguly led to the inclusion of female delegates, such as Swarnakumari Devi and Kadambini Ganguly, in the 1890 session. Women's participation in politics began to grow during the Swadeshi movement (1904-1911), as leaders encouraged mass mobilization, and women became increasingly involved in public affairs. This early involvement of women in political and social reforms marked the beginning of a broader movement for women's rights in India.

Women and Politics of Nationalism

The politicization of women began during the swadeshi movement of 1905-08 in response to men's call for their participation. Mrs. Ramsay MacDonald, who accompanied her husband in his tour of India, noted that: Swadeshi movement could not have succeeded without the help of women, some of whom do not know how to read or write, but in spite of this swadeshi movement is spreading very much in the places where one would hardly think there would be an opportunity of its growth.

Annie Besant

The entry of Mrs. Besant into Indian politics accelerated the process of women's participation in politics. Mrs. Annie Besant, the celebrated leader of the (Modern Review, August 1910, p. 12 4.) theosophic movement and known for her activities in social and educational fields, joined the national movement in 1914. She founded the Home Rule League in September 1915 with the object of achieving Home Rule for India. During the Home Rule agitations between 1914 and 1917 women began to wake up to a realization of their isolation from political movement. Mrs Besant's commitment towards emancipation of women was quite pronounced. She mentioned that the progress of India depended on women's emancipation. She was the first president of the Indian Women's Association founded in 1917, and was largely responsible for putting forward the demand for political representation of women. Her internment in June 1917 generated political consciousness among women in various parts of the country.

Gandhi and Women in Politics

The non-cooperation movement marked the beginning of Gandhi's leadership of the Indian national movement. The ideas and activities associated with the Gandhian movement encouraged the growth of women's movement. His experience in South Africa had made

Gandhi aware of the potentialities of women as passible resisters. Women, Gandhi believed, would make effective satyagrahis since they had an immense capacity for endurance and self-sacrifice. Gandhi, therefore, included women in most of his satyagraha campaign. For him, women's participation in the nationalist movement was necessary for ideological reasons as well as for the practical reason that with women involved, the national movement would be linked to every home in India. His call to women met with unexpected response and galvanized mass mobilization of women in active politics.

Women's Movement in Post-Non-Cooperation Period

There were major socio-political shifts in the position of women in the post-first world war period. The single largest contributory factor was the large-scale spread of institutionalized female education which heralded the advent of women student community with considerable contacts outside the family, particularly with the realm of politics. Revolutionary ideas spread rapidly through private conversations, circulation of prohibited literature and the girl students with women political activists.

Muthulakshmi Reddy

Muthulakshmi Reddy was born in the princely state of Madras presidency under the British Rule. Her father Naranayanaswamy Iyer was the Princepal of Magaraja's College. Her mother was Chandrammal, a Devadasi. Because of the marriage with a devadasi, her father was ostracised from his family. Narayanaswamy Iyer broke the tradition and sent Muthulakshmi to school. Her enthusiasm for learning was so great that Muthulakshmi's teachers decided to instruct her in subjects beyond those approved by her father. At the onset of puberty, she was obliged to leave school, but tutoring continued at home. Her mother Chandrammal wanted to search for a bridegroom but Muthulakshmi had different aspirations. She expressed a need to be different from the common lot. She was against the subordination of women to men and rebelled whenever she heard people say that only boys needed education.

Her father suggested that she can become a school teacher, but she had higher aspirations. She entered Madras Medical College by facing lot of difficulties and completed her studies in 1912, she became House Surgeon in Government Hospital for Women and Children in Chennai. In 1914 when she was at the age of 28 years married Sundara Reddy with the proviso that "always respect me as an equal and never cross my wishes". After the marriage with Sundara Reddy, she got her surname Reddy.

During her college days, Muthulakshmi met Sarojini Naidu and began to attend women's meetings. She found women who shared her concerns and addressed them in terms of women's rights. The great personalities who influenced her life were Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant and Periyar E.V.Ramasamy. They persuaded her to devote herself to uplifting women and children. She worked for women's emancipation at a time when women were confined in the four walls of their room

She had a number of firsts to her name: the first female student to be admitted into a men's college, the first woman House Surgeon in the Government Maternity and Ophthalmic Hospital, the first woman Legislator in British India, the first woman Deputy President of the Legislative Council and the first alderwoman in Madras Corporation. Muthulakshmi Reddy was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1926. This nomination marked the beginning of her life long effort to 'correct the balance for women by removing social abuses

and working for equality in moral standards”.

She continued to fight for her cause till the end of her life time and never let anything stand in her way. Even at the age of 80, she was energetic and vibrant. She was the prime mover behind the legislation that abolished the Devadasi System and played a keen role in raising the minimum marriage age for women in India.

After Independence

The increase in the number of women voters since independence and their eager participation in voting, has made all the political parties to pay special attention to organising them, campaigning among them, and choosing them to contest elections. Definitely in the earlier years such campaigning among women and soliciting their votes was done rather casually. Mobilisation in the past have been mainly at the time of elections in the form of ad-hoc promises, made on populist and opportunistic short-term basis, rather than on long term goals of a social change for women. However, to the extent there was any correlation between the campaign promises and voting support, it also reflected on the low impact that the women's movement had made in educating the women, as well as in making a dent on the patriarchal politicians. More recently the parties have organised regular party forums, cells and front organisations specially for women. These women's cells not merely mobilise and campaign among women seek their support and membership for the parties' issues during election as well as normal period, but also quite often take up issues concerning women.

Despite the increase in the number of women contesting the election women still constitute only 1 to 2 per cent. Even where seats are reserved as in the panchayats, they do not come forward so easily. Out of these contestants, the ones who get elected constitute still smaller percentage. While those who belong to the major political parties stand a better chance of success, the non-party candidates and those who belong to minor political parties are hardly successful.

In the early years after independence the parliament did witness many women like Renuka Roy participating vigorously in the Hindu Code Bill etc. More recently many women MPs belonging to all the parties are drawing attention to issues like atrocities against women, women's rights, statutory women's commission as well as social crimes like sati, dowry, rape etc. still by and large such participation is confined repeatedly to a few women. A majority of them are silent on many issues, particularly on the general, political concerns.

There are various problems and limitations in front of women members - social and personal. We still have to go a long way before the rural poor women can participate freely and boldly and take initiative in making decisions and monitoring the programmes for women's rights. Also, possibly taken representation of one or two women cannot overcome the patriarchal and high class/castes-oriented panchayats way of arriving at decisions.

PERIYAR FEMINISM

In the Indian society, where women are suppressed in the name of religion, race community and more, Thanthai periyar single handedly initiated the fight. In a society where stones, wood and soil are worshipped as Gods and Goddesses, women alone are not treated as women.

Especially in the days of Periyar, women were considered as “cursed beings” and treated as sales commodity, prostitutes, children – bearing machines, who don't have the right for inheritance and the right to remarry on becoming a widow. To eradicate this state of

slavery, Periyar spread new thoughts.

In 1938, at the Tamil Nadu Women's Congress conference, the title 'Periyar' was aptly given to honour the reformatory activities of E.V.Ramasamy. This title was conferred to him because of his activities that were so far impossible and unheard of to the reformatory leaders born in India. Moreover, there was a complete void of such leaders in South, who are above or on par with him. So, whenever his name is voiced or written, it should be accompanied with the title 'Periyar'.

Amidst his varied social reformatory activities, he prioritized Women's elevation. Women, who form one half of world's population and stand as the reason for the birth of people, are enslaved in the name of chastity, love, prostitution, widowhood and are denied of inheritance. For their national growth and self – respect, Periyar wrote a touching, thought – evocative book, 'Why did woman become a slave?', to remove the barriers and enable women free and independent living, by pinpointing their pitiable plight and bringing about an upturned revolution.

During the 1920's, he published the most reformatory feministic ideas for women's liberation. Even during the years of freedom struggle, he found innovative methods to dispel casteism such as inter – caste marriages and widow remarriages. He is an idealist, who started practicing his preaching from his own household. He considered the law of Divorce to be an important protective weapon of women.

The Picketing of Toddy Shops – 1921

In the Berhampur meeting, Gandhiji remarked that, “a powerful force and great success in India could be possible, if other half of the human race participated in the freedom struggle” A significant aspect of the Gandhian movement was the active involvement of the womenfolk in freedom struggle. When Gandhiji asked the congressmen to work for prohibition by picketing toddy shops, there was an immediate response from E.V.R.Periyar and a hundred other Congress men, who picketed toddy shops; they were arrested and sentenced to a month's imprisonment.

His wife Nagammaiyar and his sister Kannammal continued the struggle. On seeing this, a number of women from Erode participated in this agitation. Gandhiji, when asked about the winding up of the agitation, stated that “its withdrawal was in the hands of those two women at Erode”. Probably, this was the first occasion in India, when two women of the same family conducted the demonstration against toddy shops.

Women Participation in Anti-Hindi Agitation

The anti-Hindi agitation attracted the notice of Tamil women also and they held the Tamilnadu women's conference at Madras on 13th November 1938 and spoke vehemently against the imposition of Hindi. Periyar was a special invitee for the conference. The title of Periyar was conferred in this conference, presided over by Neelambigai, daughter of great Tamil savant and scholar Maraimalai Adigal, Dr. Dhar- mambal and other women. The conferred title 'Periyar' means the 'great'. Since then, the title has been used by all people to refer to E.V. Ramasami. After his conference, a number of women marched in a procession shouting slogans against imposition of Hindi. As a result, many of them were arrested.

Periyar did not fail to scold women for being responsible for the slavery – 'women could do all the services done by men; I say certainly they could do. But their craze for jewels, clothes, cat walk and slavish self-respect less craze should be eradicated. This is like

a disease that has to be removed by cutting deeply with a sharp instrument and by applying a burning medicinal powder'. Like a father he instructs that it should be cut off by pressing tightly. He wanted women not to be different from men even in their clothing.

"Our Country is enslaved and our Society is suppressed. Unless we all have the urge to change in all walks of life, we will have no deliverance" – E.V.R.

Periyar was drawn to the Indian National Congress, in order to fight against the British rule in India and to achieve Indian Independence. He was also a social reformer, a freedom fighter and a Gandhian worker. He encouraged women to participate in all aspects of National activity. He himself set an example to others. Periyar was the great leader who was involved along with his family, i.e. his wife Nagammaiyar, and his sister Kannammal to help the people of Kerala with maturity, magnanimity, experience, enthusiasm, patriotism and humanism. Golden Jubilee of Vaikom Satyagraha was celebrated in 1975 in Kerala. "For erecting a monument in memory of Vaikom Satyagraha, Kerala government decided to give 8 cent of land and Rs.2 lakhs."

"Vaikom M.L.A., K.Ajith had informed K. Veeramani, the leader of Dravida Khazhagam that they are going to celebrate the Vaikom Satyagraha for three years from 2008 to 2011, in Vaikom in Kerala".

In memory of Periyar, brothers of Kerala had erected a Periyar statue at Vaikom. In Tamilnadu, Chief Minister M.Karunanidhi had announced that "Periyar Samathuvapuram" will be constructed, with Periyar statue in 95 places. Periyar was a Humanist who started Dravida Khazhagam. "It was attached to International Humanist and Ethical Union. (IHEU) on 06.04.1994. Periyar Maiyyam was organized in Chicago in 1994."

Periyar says; "I will say that women can definitely do all jobs and services that men are doing. But, for this the craze for jewels, dress, decoration and the consequent affected style of walking - and all such things that reflect a low, slavish attitude without self-respect, should leave women altogether. Nobody should think that I am against decency, neatness and pleasing appearances. These are essential and they can be achieved by simple means and without expense." "Women shouldn't become dolls and jewel stands". "Our women are better than the women in western countries by their intelligence, ability and courage. Why shouldn't our women come out for public life in large numbers? Women should be shaped not just to suit their husbands but also to serve the society and win name and fame.

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