

Legacy Of Tamil society In Moovaloor Ramamirdham Ammaiyar

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Introduction

Women's movement in India emerged as a part of the social reform movement in the nineteenth century when individual reformers and organizations initiated efforts towards social reform. It was a period of Enlightenment marked by intense social reform activities. It is natural that one of the many subjects, the reformers and thinkers of this period touched was the women's question. They focused on the condition of women as reflected the degenerate state of Indian Society as a whole and took conscious action to change the situation. It stimulated the movement for social reform. Raja Ram Mohan Ray's efforts for the abolition of the custom of *sati* marked the beginning of this movement. It was followed by a galaxy of reformers who raised their voices against various restrictions imposed on women.

The United Nation's declaration of 1975 as the International Year of people with the First World Conference generated a new interest in and debate on social issues. The exhaustive countrywide investigation revealed that the equality granted by the Indian Constitution had been translated into reality and large masses remained unaffected by the rights granted to them more than 25 years earlier. It provided the intellectual foundation of a new reform movement that found expression both in activism and the academia. In 1917s to 1975s witnessed the growth of numerous reforms that took up issues focused on violence against people.

The roots of the Indian women's movement go back to the nineteenth century male social reformers who took up issues concerning women and started women's organizations. Women

started forming their own organization from the end of the nineteenth century first at the local and then at the national level. In the years before independence, the two main issues they took up were political rights and reform of personal laws. Women's participation in the freedom struggle broadened the base of the women's movement.

A galaxy of social reformers contributed a great deal for the emergence of a brilliant era of social reform in India through various organisations like the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishanan Mission. Some of the eminent social reformers are Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Ambujammal, Anchalai ammal, Manjubhashini, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Ruckmini Lakshimipathy.

Moovaloor Ramamirdham (1885 – 1962)

Moovaloor Ramamirdham took part and contributed to the society in various ways. She was a part of various movements such as Self-respect movement, Dravidar Kazhagam and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. Wherever she had been, she never failed to fight for the causes of annihilating patriarchy, women empowerment, anti-Hindi activism and she was always a vanguard of Dravidian movement. She had contributed much to the liberation of Devadasi women from the clutches of oppressive religious patriarchy. She had contributed to the social causes so much so that her name was given to one of the social welfare programme introduced by the Tamil Nadu government. She was born in 1885 in the district of Tiruvarur to Mr. Krishnaswami and Ms. Chinnammal. She belonged to an Isai vellalar family. Though She had got an education only from the Thinnai schools of the yesteryears, her feats in her lifetime cannot be matched even by those who are educated in the regular way.

In the early days, she joined the congress party in the year of 1921 at the conference which was organized in Tiruchi. She became the state committee member of the Congress party. She is

one of the reasons for Mayavaram becoming the fort of congress party in those days. Once Thiru.Vi.Ka said about Ramamirdham that she worked for her sisters even when she was working for the Congress party. From this we could understand that Ramamirdham was consistently committed to the women's cause no matter which political affiliation she belonged to and whatever positions she held in the party.

When Periyar quitted the Congress, Ramamirdham too decided to leave the party. The reason she gave for her breaking away from the party was she thought that the reformation programmes proposed by Gandhi were always betrayed by his own party members. She also made clear she was primarily interested in the social reformation and not in politics, thus it was natural that she left the Congress party. She not only joined the Self-respect movement but also participated in the betterment of the women folk.

The credits for making the Devadasi women participate in the Women's conference which was organized in Chengalpet goes to Ramamirdham alone. On 29th July, 1929, she gave a speech in the Self-respect conference. In the year of 1930, She participated in the second self-respect conference. In the year of 1933, she participated in the Sengundhar Conference, in which she talked about the evil practice of Pottu kattudhal. She said that women of various castes and communities were involved in sex-work both in the past and the present, but the shame is being placed upon the shoulders of the women only from this particular caste group. So it is inevitable that this vulgar and inhuman practice should be shunned and annihilated without any traces. Without annihilating it, the dignity of the Devdasi cannot be redeemed. So it is high time that we should do away with this inhuman casteist practice. She said that it could be achieved only by empowering the women of this caste group through education.

She took efforts to change the name of the Nagabasattar sangam to Isaivellalar sangam and she acted as a pillar of that association which involved in activities to uplift that oppressed caste-community. She helped several marginalized women such as poor women, Devadasi women and she fought relentlessly to liberate the Devadasi women from the clutches of the oppressive patriarchal system which objectifies women and denies their dignity. She also helped conduct Self-respect marriage and Widow re-marriage through the association.

On 1st August 1938, Tamil Nadu saw a mass agitation which was against the imposition of Hindi by the Congress leadership. Ramamirdham took part in the agitation and contributed immensely and with much sacrifices. She was one of the leaders who lead the long march which was organized against the imposition of Hindi. Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy gave a felicitation address to those who participated in the march and in it he said that if the cadres needed any guidance about how to go about it they have Ramamirdham. This shows the confidence Periyar had on Ramamirdham's integrity and leadership quality.

On 11th September 1938, Anti-Hindi force, which had started its march from Tiruchi, reached Chennai. Ramamirdham gave a welcome address in Tiruvallikeni for those who had come all the way from Tiruchi to protest the imposition of Hindi. On 13.11.1938, she attended a conference which was organized at Chennai. Ramamirdham supported a motion that this conference should be presided by Neelambigai. She took great efforts to make this event possible. On 14.11.1938, She participated in a protest which was staged in front of Hindu Theological School which was started from kasi Vishwanathar Temple. She participated in the protest and went and got imprisoned in Vellore jail. Because of this reason, Ramamirdham ammiyar became anti-hindi fighter in Tamil Nadu.

When Moovaloor Ramamirdham spoke against the imposition of Hindi in 17.7.1948, She said that in other countries it is women are experiencing fast paced development in their lives. So it is inevitable to focus on the education of women folk for the greater development of the nation. If only women get educated the society and the people of the country will develop themselves. So we should be in the fore front to fight against the onslaught of Hindi in India.

In the year of 1949, Arignar Anna established the party of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam after breadking apart from the mother organization called Dravidar Kazhagam, she became one of its pioneering leaders. In the second conference of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, she was given an award for the services she has exerted to the women and marginalized of the society. Anna presented her a shield and honoured her. She has written a novel called 'Mathipetra mainor or Dasigalin Mosavali' in the year 1938. In it she has realistically depicted how the Devdasi women have been treated in an inhuman way and it stands as a proof to this day about her social services. This novel which consists of 303 pages became popular among the public and served the greater cause of spreading the awareness about the plight of Devadasi women. In the year of 1945, she has written a short story called 'Damayanthi' in the Dravida Nadu newspaper.

Moovaloor Ramamirdham, the one who served for the society by fighting against the oppressive social-cultural practices which suppressed the women folk, the one who proved to be a wonderful organizer of two important milestone movements of the modern Tamil history, passed away on 27.06.1962. Her name will be ever remembered until Dravidian legacy is alive in Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

Their aim was to improve their position within the established structure of the family and society and not to demand equality with men. They accepted the existing pattern of sex structured roles, but attempted to elevate their status within that frame work. They did not want to alter the conventional functions and divisions in the family. They limited their efforts to educating public opinion to proscribe oppressive convention and practices. The girls education could still be terminated at any time if a suitable marriage could be arranged. Those women who received education had done credit to their sex by leading the movements for social reforms, to prevent child marriages, to terminate the devadasi system etc.

The study indicates that there existed two contradictory moralities for women. On the one hand high value was set on karpu among women by the Hindus and the desire not to run away risk by late marriage and late consummation resulted in child marriages. Because of this system the girl child from the moment of her birth to her death underwent one continuous life long suffering as a child wife, as a child mother and very often as a child widow. The society developed a stereotyped ideals of pativrata which reduced women to physical, mental and priritual slave of men. On the other hand there developed a well established institution of prostitution. It condemned the innocent victims who were often girls, destitute and neglected children to a life of unspeakable horror and misery. Another allied institution was the devadasi system. In the name of religion, women of certain communities in Tamilnadu were dedicated to temple service and they became priests' own prostitutes. The ceremony of dedication precluded matrimony but it was in no way a prelude to the difficult discipline of voluntary celibacy. The dedicated girls became either openly or secretly prostitutes. Mahatma Gandhi said,

“It is not right that for our lust a single sister should lead a life of shame and humiliation”.

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