

Social Status of Women in Tamil Nadu

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The aim of this paper is to highlight the condition of the women in Tamil Nadu through the ages. In this attempt, the development of their activities for their cause is portrayed further, attempt is made to trace the customs and traditional practices which blocked their development equal to men flocks. As a matter of fact, the ancient Tamil literature portrayed that both sexes were equal and women had equal right to some extent with men in enjoying freedom, for acquiring knowledge, education and spirituality. Women in ancient Tamil society enjoyed in practice some status unlike in other parts of India. Manu's *Smriti*, the sacred Hindu code highly influenced the North Indian Society which assures the subordination of women in all stages from the cradle to grave. Manu enunciated the perpetual tutelage aim the following terms "Her Father protects her in childhood, her husband in youth and son in old age". But the sacred ancient Tamil Work *Thirukkural* spoke very highly of women in their social setup.

The position and status of Tamil women in the medieval period evinced a steady decline due to the patriarchal system and other factors like foreign invasions. From the eleventh century onwards, when the Muslim invasion of India brought in its wake, a clause of two cultures - Hindu and Muslim, which culminated in Hindus dinging further but firmly to the old, outmoded cruel laws, the women having been denied of property rights their seclusion in society and sub-ordination to men thereafter become complete. For a while the caste system took firm roots and further restrictions were imposed in the life of women. The

irony of the situation is that the women were treated as slaves and personal possession and properties of men fold in a caste-ridden and tradition-bound society. There were many social im-pediments like infanticide, child marriage, widowhood, prostitution, illiteracy and devadasi system which, hampered women's development. The concept of chastity was applied only to women. The dichotomous acceptance of women as goodness and household servants came to be practiced in the Tamil society.

A number of social legislations were passed to uplift the position of women in society in the modern period. Two regulations were passed by the British Government to suppress infanticide i.e., Regulation XXI of 1795 and Regulation II of 1804. In 1890 the infanticide Act (Act. II) was passed. In 1829 Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General of India abolished sati by Regulation No. XVII of 1829. With initiative from Eshwaar Chandra Vidyasagar, on 17th November 1895, Grant a member of the Governor General's Council introduced the Hindu Widows Remarriage Bill. Amidst opposition, the Bill was passed in to on Act on 19th July 1856 entitled the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act. The Brahmin Marriage bill was passed on 19th March 1872, which is practically a Civil Marriage Bill Between two natives regardless of caste or society. On 2nd December 1898 a most interesting inter marriage occurred in Madras which was possible only through this Act. Govindrajulu Naidu and Sarojini Chattopadhyaya, belonging to Baliya and Brahmin communities were married. The Child Marriage Restraint Act also known as Sarda Act of 1929 fixed the minimum age for marriage for males at eighteen and for females at fourteen, later amended to fifteen by the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. Through Section 48 of the Madras Act IV of 1919, of the first time in the annals of the country. Women were given the privilege of suffrage in the Madras Presidency. On 1st April 1921 K. Krishnan Nayar successfully moved a resolution in the Madras Legislative Council recommending to the Government that sex disqualification entitling men to vote, be made

applicable to women. In the 1926 elections, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Hannan Angelo were the first women candidates to contest for Madras Legislative Council. In 1929 Muthu Lakshmi Reddy was unanimously selected by her fellow members as the first women Deputy President of the Madras Council. On 1st February, 1927 Harbilas Sarada introduced a bill to restrain the solemnization of child marriages among Hindu declaring such marriage invalid. N. Subba Rao, Madhava Rao, Malathi Patwardhan, Manijeri Rama Iyer, Bhagirathi Sriram, Sadasivaiyer and sister Subbulakshmi are from Madras who gave evidence against the evils of child marriage. The Madras Legislative Council unanimously passed a resolution in 1928, recommending sixteen as the minimum age for girls and twenty-one for boys. The Child Marriage Prevention Act became law from April 1931.

On 18 February 1922 Sohanlal introduced a bill to amend Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code by raising the consent in both marital and extra marital cases. The Justice Ministry whole heartily supported the bill even though there was a great deal of opposition from the Brahmin member of Madras. The Madras suppression of Immoral Traffic Act No. 5 of 1930 prevented brothel keeping. The Act empowered the police officer, authorised for the purpose, to arrest without warrant any person committing the offence. The Government of Madras implemented the Act on 1st April 1932. On 2nd February 1929 Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced a bill to amend the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926 during P. Subbarayan Ministry with a new section '44 A' added to section '44'. This amendment enfranchised the devadasis in respect of the land held by them freed them from obligation to perform services in temples. It became an Act on 13 1929. M. K. Gandhi praised Muthulakshmi Reddy's Act saying that "such designation would receive the hearty support of all lovers of purity in religious and general social life. In the mid half of 1930 the Government of Madras issued an order to the effect that the system was abolished by law.'

In 1937, the Government of India passed the Hindu Women's Rights to property Act in the Legislative Assembly. E.V.Ramasamy, commanded this Act in the editorial of *Kudi Arasu*. The Bill that was forwarded by Bhagavan Das was at last put in to Act against strict orthodox opposition and at least it has established the necessity of Hindu Women's right to property on a firm ground".

To correct the focus with new thinking and ideology that would "marginalized section" (women) of society from the "dominant culture", Periyar inter alia, took up the cause of women as his life mission right from the day when he entered public service. Through press and propaganda and through Self-respect Movement and Dravida Kazhagam, as also with some like minded people, he tried to beard the Lion (orthodoxy and reactionaries) in its den. The booklet "The Benefit of a Helpmate" gives Periyar's views on the rights of women. It may be summarized as follows: "what is marriage today? Marriage is an agreement Marriage of lust is not good of importance is knowledge, love, suitability and experience. Marriage is for life. There is no root for old Tamil customs, nor for Aryan traditions. Periyar objected to terms like "giving of a maid" and "given in marriage". He wants them substituted by Valkaitunai (Life Partner) a word for marriage taken from the *Tirukkural*, which means "help make the life". Periyar's aims were reached through subsequent legislations aiming at equality of sexes, the right of the widows to remarry, facilities for divorce, raising the marriage age, right of property and abortion laws. Legislative measures taken along these lines are The Hindu Marriage Acts of 1955 and 1967 and the Medical termination of Pregnancy Bill of 1969.

In Tamil Nadu the spate of social reforms initiated by the Justice and Dravidian parties did not stop with the general aspects alone. Women can to be talked about highly. The movement for reform started in the Central Legislature, had its echo in the State Legislatures

which extended their support in the realization of these reform measure. Much of the social legislations were initiated to raise the social status of women in the beginning of the twentieth century. Muthulakshmi Reddy, an ardent pioneer for the cause of women's development and persons like E.V. Ramasamy, who worked for women emancipation, poets like Bharathi and Bharathidasan through their writings created the awareness, about the suppression of women in all walks of life. The Self-Respect League and Dravida Kazhagam served the cause of women in initiating various reforms for them. The Dravidan party governments passed many legislations to uplifts the status of women in Tamil Nadu.

Notes and References

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