

Perspectives of Feminism in Thamizhnadu, India: An Overview

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Abstract

The paper, 'Perspectives of Feminism in Thamizhnadu, India: An Overview', portrays the status of women in ancient ages to present. Especially, importance being given to the state Thamizhnadu, where women were held in high esteem during the Pre-independence period, including them in rule and power. The cultural traits of Thamizhnadu was an exemplar for feminism to the modern world and the warrior queens were the best examples for women upliftment and empowerment. Though women enjoy freedom in the current scenario, their rights have been abducted in many places with safety and security being a doubt. This paper also portrays how the Thamizh Kings of earlier centuries promoted feminism, and compares their position with that of the modern women - with education being the major tool for revolution among them.

Keywords: Feminism, women in eighteenth century, gender equality, women warriors, voices
of feminism.

Introduction

The concept of feminism had undergone intense discussion from earlier centuries to till date. This notion generally gives a view of gender equality and fights for the rights of women. The women around the world faced many issues in claiming their equality in education and profession, fought against gender discrimination, fought for the right to vote, inheritance, domestic and financial independence and the freedom in reproduction. The pre-modern society, dating back to eighteenth century and before had varied stands about feminist consciousness though the perspectives differed from one region to another. Though the first phase of feminism arose in the middle of the eighteenth century in India, Thamizhnadu, a southernmost state had cultural traits that treated women equally and they weren't ill-treated elsewhere. Not only women were given equal rights in education, martial arts, administration, rule and inheritance,

Thamizhnadu was ahead in femininity when compared to the rest of India. The state was against patriarchal society and women held an equal and higher status in all walks of life. Women were given education, trained in warfare, posted as Commanders-in-chief and were ruling their princely states. Even before the waves of feminism began in India, Thamizhnadu proved to be an epitome of equality and women empowerment.

Women in Ancient Ages.

During the Vedic era, the status of women was held high though men had control over their wife and daughters. Morality existed all over the nation; polygamy, female infanticide, gender discrimination and child marriage were not in practice. Women were given equality and education. Vital decisions were taken by them along with their husband. Altekar in his book, "Position of women in Hindu civilization" argues, "*The position which women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been.*" Hence the author pities the present status of women in India and confronts the people to provide better solutions for the merciless treatments of women. The period when Buddhism flourished in India was an important era where this religion was against many issues that prevailed in Vedic period.

- Women were independent.
- Widow Remarriage was not an offence.
- Sati was not known.
- Education was equal to both women and men.
- They had reproductive rights.

The Vedic and Buddhist eras were much secured and there were no abuses. Women contributed to the literature and were great scholars. But the status of women declined after the Indo-Aryan invasions which continued until Moghul conquests. The Moghul rule was also another reason for practicing Sati. Because women believed that it is better to die after her husband's death instead of suffering in the hands of the enemies.

Women during British conquests.

Compared to the modern days, the earlier century women were living in a state where:

- education was hindered,
- married at a very young age,
- polygamy was acceptable,
- treated as child-bearers and house maids,

Their whole world was locked inside the four walls of the kitchen with no equal rights neither in decision making nor in family issues. But their only job is to raise their children and gain priority with their husband. Domestic violence, rapes, sati, female infanticide, gender discrimination had a greater impact in the lives of women. Amidst all these oddities, the Hindu tradition worshipped many goddesses, believed the rivers and our nation to be feminine. But the real women were treated unfairly. Monthly menstrual cycle was another great pain where women were neglected in all household work and were isolated within their homes whereas north-eastern part of India worshipped menstrual cycles under the name of Goddess Kamakya Devi. Women upliftment and Empowerment was a hypothesis during those times and moreover, the women themselves weren't aware that they needed independence. Such eccentricities prevailed all over the nation but one state in India was totally different providing equality and justice to women which is none other than Thamizhnadu.

Feminism in Thamizhnadu.

When the rest of the country challenged for their rights and status, Thamizhnadu was in contrast during the eighteenth century. Women were given due respect and their status was held high. No feminist movement took place in that century, yet the society provided an honourable place for women. They were educated, independent, trained in martial arts, interfered in governance, ruled their princely states and many more. Even before the world discussed the notion, feminism and the waves of feminism began in the middle of the nineteenth century, Thamizhnadu treated women with due respects and was against patriarchal traditions. Perhaps, the authority was not masculine alone. Evidence from history gives a vivid picture that women played an important role in politics, administration, and warfare. Rulers of the eighteenth century, Rajah of Ramanathapuram, Chellamuthu Sethupathi and Rajah of Sivagangai, Muthu Vaduganathar were few among those, who gave equal rights to women in all aspects.

Velu Nachiyar, the warrior queen, who drove away British from her state, the daughter of the former and wife of the latter proved as a living example of feminism in the eighteenth century. Kuyili, the first suicide bomb attacker in world history served as the Commander-in-Chief of Velu Nachiyar's women's troop. Vellachi, queen's beloved warrior friend shed her life in a bloody battle against the British. Another woman warrior, Udaiyaal was brutally murdered for saving Velu Nachiyar. History is filled with such examples of many warrior women who were martyred to safeguard their ethnicity and were the outstanding examples, not only of valour, but also the thriving feminism in Thamizhnadu.

Though women held higher status in various reigns, the aristocratic women did not enjoy all the benefits that the other class women enjoyed. They accompanied the kings in their campaigns and enjoyed privileges. Yet these aristocratic women had their power within the palace and they had their own limitations when they were in public. They weren't allowed to reveal their faces and were carried in

palanquins. The upper class women had full control over their family and their sole duty was to take care of their husband, children and their family. The lower class women also had responsibilities over their family but also assisted their husbands in their daily works like agriculture. There was a great decline in the status of women during the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. But, when compared to the other empires and dynasties, the Thamizh people were far ahead in cultivating the social and rebellious spirits of women right from their womb. Few instances from history dating back to the eighteenth century clearly depicts that feminism was at its peak and Her Excellency, the Royal Queen Velu Nachiyar and her companions were few among them who portrayed feminism and valour to the whole world.

The Rajah of Ramanathapuram, Chellamuthu Sethupathi can be rightly considered as an active social feminist. He provided his daughter, Velu Nachiyar, with high quality education, taught her politics, trained her in martial arts and allowed her in all administrative works. This shows the greatest belief that the King had on his daughter's wit and wisdom. The King never wanted his daughter to be ignorant. He involved her daughter while taking important decisions in administration and her thoughts were respected. The valiant queen even participated in a bloody battle against their enemies during the initial days of her marriage and won the battle along with her husband.

If the King was regressive in his opinions and thoughts, Velu Nachiyar would never have become such a gallant warrior queen who engraved her name in history. She was not only a brave warrior, but also excelled in education and spoke 5 languages in a perfect style which even the native speakers cannot. Neither revolutions nor feminism waves took place in that century yet the male society respected the women and dignified them. There were no second thoughts in gender discrimination, opportunities and social rights.

The Rajah of Sivagangai, Muthu Vaduganathar the brave courageous king, who married the valiant queen Velu Nachiyar was also progressive in his thoughts and actions. He never obstructed the queen in taking part in all the campaigns and public administration and rule. Women's regiments were formed under the guidance of the Queen and they participated in battles. Women were highly courageous and valiant; they never dominated the male and gave due respects to the learned.

Women in War Campaigns.

Decisions were implemented and the actions were taken only after a thorough discussion and mutual consent by both the king and the queen. Women's regiments were formed under the guidance of the Queen and they participated in battles. Women were highly courageous and valiant; they never dominated the male and gave due respects to the learned. The King himself regretted once for not consulting the

Queen while making an important decision to support the British against the attack on the brave Pulithevan which was a historical mistake done by the King and the Minister. This incident reveals the place of the Queen and her role in administration and rule. The Commander in chief of women's regiment, Kuyili, the first suicide bomb attacker who immolated herself for the victory over the British was an epitome of extreme feminism and patriotism. The military structure was highly disciplined where only the waves of patriotism had been haunting in the minds of the people.

Sexual assaults and abuses against women never came into the minds of the male as the society respected women and treated them with justice. If at all abuses prevailed in Thamizhnadu, in those days, women would have hardly stepped out of their houses, and they would not have reclaimed their territories. The History may be changed. When compared to modern days, crimes and violence on women in the battlefield are merely portrayed as collateral damage in military terms, injecting insecurity in all places. VaraRaturi, in her article titled, ***“Why do women's bodies become sites of war and caste and communal conflicts?”*** portrays the violence against women in combat zones. She says,

“The women whose rapes would be called “collateral damage” in military parlance, would never receive statuses of honour for dying or sacrificing their bodies in the battle. More often than not, these violent acts go unreported, unregistered, unremembered. In the book ‘Our Bodies, Their Battlefield’ Christina Lamb has collected stories from women who have been victims of such violence, humiliation and oppression, and these accounts are widespread.”

Christina Lamb, in her book, “Our Bodies, Their Battlefield” clearly depicts the hardships of women who were the victims of sexual assault by the militarists. She also demands justice for the terrific violence against women. The author lauds the survivors fighting for justice who encountered the unbearable sufferings and pain which broke hearts across the world. In deep anguish, a major question arises whether feminists had forgotten these under-privileged. Where had the so-called feminists of the modern era gone? The people, who call themselves educated, learned, socialists, reformists and etc. have muted their voices in many assaults and violence against women which vividly portrays that women need to fight more gallantly for her rights even in the twenty first century.

Whereas, the rulers of Thamizhnadu in earlier centuries were social democrats favouring equality to women in rule and power. They were given the highest ranks in the army bestowed for their courage. The history of Velu Nachiyar and Kuyili focussed on the power, leadership qualities and women empowerment which is beyond the boundaries of gender, caste and religion. Thus, when the rest of the world were fighting for the liberation of women and their rights, Thamizhnadu created a prototype for all types of feminism viz, Liberal, Socialistic, Cultural and Eco-feminism during the earlier centuries. The

pre-modern society of Thamizhnadu was far ahead in respecting feminism uncovering the astuteness, valiance and bravery of women.

Women, Education and Literature.

The Sangam age of Thamizhnadu was at its peak in literature. Women poetesses like KakkaiPadiniyar, Nachellaiyaar, Ovvaiyaar, Kavarpendu, Peymakal, Ilaveyni, Pottiyar, Karaikalammaiyar and many more contributed immensely to literature, writing extraordinary books on moral values, love, valour, culture and tradition of the Thamizh people. Women held royal positions in the Chozha dynasty, with KundhavaiNachiyar and PanchavanMaatheviyar being exemplars who were socially, economically and culturally independent. Various donations had been given by the royal women for the reconstruction of shrines and special hospitals (named Aathurasaalaikal) for women, which were present even in the 10th and 11th centuries. Women were knowledgeable, providing their astuteness and convictions in rule and power. This continued for a few centuries. There were many scholars during the Buddhism and Jainism period too. But, when the status of the women started to decline, their knowledge also began to shed off as they were confined to inhuman laws. After the medieval period and during the pre-independence period, it was the male, who conquered the literature world and to the pitiest, it was them who raised voice for feminism.

The Hindu orthodox family never allowed women to educate and empower. Instead, they were considered as material objects. Except for a few elite class people, most of the women were not given rights to education. It was during the second wave of feminism in India that the importance of women in anti-colonial protests and freedom fights were realised. Though feminism became the limelight of this period, there were many hindrances which overshadowed feminism.

Few voices for Feminism.

- It was Mahatma JyotiraoGovindaraoPhule who initially raised voice for women's education especially the lower class women. He along with his wife started the first school for women in India.
- In Thamizhnadu, Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman to complete medicine. A social worker and woman activist, she strived hard for the rights and education of women in male chauvinist society. Rebellion by nature, she raised her voice against the dominant male and fought for women's liberation.
- GayatriChakravortySpivak, noted author, feminist, and critic rose against the British and condemns them for their misunderstanding of saving the Hindu women from Sati. In her essay, "*Can the*

Subaltern speak?”she criticises the English for the statement, “White men saving brown women from brown men”.

- In spite of all these obstructions, the feminine activists and writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Chitra Banerjee, JhumpaLahiri, Vaasanthi and many more dominated the literature world and voiced for women rights through their writings.

Conclusion.

Feminism is a wide concept which is being spoken all over the world right from ancient ages to the modern age. Though voices have been raised for their welfare and equality over the centuries, women, in spite of being divided by boundaries, face similar problems throughout the world. . The notion, ‘weaker’ sex, has been imprinted in the minds of the female and made them believe that they were soft, weak, tolerant and tender-hearted. Even women didn’t realise that they need justice and equality in society. It was ‘education’ which transformed the lives of many light-hearted women into brave and gallant rebellions. Queen Velu Nachiyar was a best exemplar who inspired other women, both now and then, and transformed them into warrior queens. However, orthodox traditions hindered their rights and limited their exploration in all fields. Besides the oddities, the women of the current age excel in fields which once was said to be occupied by male alone. They are engineers, doctors, scientists, teachers, trainers, writers, administrators, business women, leaders and rulers who began to rule the universe. Though the literacy rate has been constantly increasing, sexual harassment, abuses, domestic violence and assaults are still prevalent in the society. After a very long struggle women have reached peaks in modern society.

But the question still remains: Are human beings actually civilized and educated? History says that even in ancient ages there were no abuses against women. But it is in the modern 21st century, with more educated and dignified people, that is witnessing barbaric and uncivilized suppression of women in all walks of life. Women of the forthcoming generations should not only gain knowledge but they should possess strong will and determination to survive and overpower the male dominant society.

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