



## Social Status of Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tamil Society

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### Abstract

*In Tamil Nadu, Women consist of fifty percent of the total population occupies a very low status in medieval and early modern society in Tamil. Lack of educational facilities, child marriages, prohibition of widow remarriages, prevalence of Devadasi system etc., were some of the social factors responsible for the low status and misery of women who were reduced to the position of glorified slaves. The women of weaker sections and low strata of society enjoyed comparatively more freedom since both husband and wife had to work to earn their livelihood, but their general condition was no better. Social barriers, Conservatism and female ignorance reigned supreme. Their economic position was pitiable. Therefore, the crusade for the emancipation of women became the first objective of the social reform movement, in the nineteenth centuries.*

**Keywords:** Prevalence, Emancipation, Infanticide, Widowhood, Child-marriage, Polygamy.

### Introduction

*“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”. The Progress of a country can be judged by seeing the status of its women. - Jawaharlal Nehru*

In Tamil Nadu, Women consist of fifty percent of the total population occupies a very low status in medieval and early modern society in Tamil. Lack of educational facilities, child marriages, prohibition of widow remarriages, prevalence of Devadasi system etc., were some of the social factors responsible for the low status and misery of women who were reduced to the position of glorified slaves.

The women of weaker sections and low strata of society enjoyed comparatively more freedom since both husband and wife had to work to earn their livelihood, but their general condition was no better. Social barriers, Conservatism and female ignorance reigned supreme. Their economic position was pitiable. Therefore, the crusade for the emancipation of women became the first objective of the social reform movement, in the nineteenth centuries.

### Importance and Scope of the Study

Women and men are equal in every human concern in this world. They are equally competing in almost all spheres of work and power and are equally achieving the set goals. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in South India has been eventful. Thus women's issues were raised for the first time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Social reformers all over the Tamil Nadu

showed their deep concern over women's issues such as female infanticide, widowhood, child-marriage, Devadasi system.

The present study deals with these women's issues and improving their social status are essential to realizing the full potential of economic, political and social development.

**Objectives of the study:** The following are the objectives of the present study: i. To cultivate the equal social status of women in Tamil Society. ii. To understand the different forms of women issues in Tamil Society. iii. To provide some suggestion to overcome of these issues.

### Methodology

The narrative and analytical method has been used to the present study. It critically examines the works and contributions made by social reformers for the attainment of social equality, based on rationalistic ideals among the people of Tamil Nadu.

**Status of women in the early times:** Women occupied an exalted position in Vedic society. They enjoyed fair treatment. But during the post-Vedic Period, women's status deteriorated “Manu Smruthi” imposed many restrictions on women<sup>1</sup>. Her rights were not recognised, though he stated that women should be respected and honoured. After the Muslim invasion in India the position of women declined further; many evil practices were followed in society curbing the rights of women.

In the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, During the British period, women's status had dropped to the lowest level. It was the worst period in the history of the country because of child marriage and sati system. Women were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They

were assigned a subordinate status. The marriage ideals, power and authority exercised by the joint family and caste system, combined with illiteracy, age old traditions, seclusion within the four walls of the house, made it difficult for them to seek fuller personality development. They had scant personal identity and few rights<sup>2</sup>.

### Women in 19th century

Cousin Margret, referring to the status of women at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, states that the condition of women was at its lowest point of literacy, individuality, health, social status, freedom of movement, initiative and economic status<sup>3</sup>.

The position of women in the nineteenth century was far from being satisfactory. It was their total seclusion which brought about their physical and mental degeneration. In many parts of India, especially in the north and east, the purdah had long become an established system both among Hindus and Muslims. The general insecurity and lawlessness which prevailed at that time made the seclusion tighter. The freedom and status which the Indian women enjoyed in ancient times were beyond the range of imagination. For centuries under Muhammeden rule there had developed apathy towards the lot of the women. The climax of that tendency was perhaps most marked on the eve of British rule. There was hardly any opportunity for girls to attend educational institutions. Among Rajputs, the girls belonging to richer sections received some kind of elementary education. Women in south India were not so much subjected to Zenana as their counterparts in the north. Similarly, mainly for economic reasons, the women belonging to the lower classes of society did not lead such a secluded life. They were called upon to work in their caste professions or in agricultural fields. Women in cities and towns were more confined to their homes than women in remote villages.

It was the complete dependence of women on men which reduced their position to one of abject surrender. 'Their fathers protect them in childhood; their husbands protect them in youth; their sons protect them in age' – such was the ancient saying which dominated the Hindu mind through the centuries. Protection in this case meant making the female dependent on her father, husband and son in childhood, youth and old age respectively. It was the system of denying Hindu women any right to paternal property which made them economically completely dependent on men. Their economic status was a vital cause of their misery and suffering. Much before the nineteenth century certain abominable socio religious customs had entered Hindu society which affected Hindu women in the most horrible manner. The most iniquitous of these customs were five, - infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, forced celibacy of widows, and last but not least, the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands. In nineteenth century India, the above mentioned customs were, if not universal or widely prevalent, yet prominent enough to catch the attention of the new rulers.

**Infanticide:** Destruction of female children at their birth was not a common custom. But its worst aspect was that it was practiced secretly. The reasons for infanticide varied. It was primarily due to economic cause, veiled by ignorant pride. They killed their infant daughters as it was imperative to spend large sums of money for the marriage of a daughter. The methods of killing the infants were extremely barbaric. At many places the child was destroyed immediately after birth by filling the mouth with cow dung or by immersing the head in cow's milk or by coiling the umbilical cord around the face. These are the cruelties associated with the custom.

**Child Marriage:** Child marriage and widow-remarriage were the two social evils which captured the attention of progressive-minded people in Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century. There were times in ancient India when girls selected their own husbands, if they were considered sufficiently grown up to exercise due to discretion. Indeed, for a considerable period in ancient Hindu history, there was perhaps no system of early marriage though there were probably exceptions to the rule. But by the time of the Manusmriti the custom had already become so familiar that the marriageable age for girls had been prescribed as twelve or even eight. Gradually, early marriage became an established custom. By giving them in marriage before they were of proper age, people felt assured that society would retain its moral purity. There were economic factors as well. To the poorer people, a girl was as much a burden to her parents as of use to her husband's family where she was required to remain in charge of the kitchen.

Child marriage produced many side evils. In the lowest and most ignorant strata of society, according to the depth of their economic misery, parents could sell away their child daughters as brides to those who could afford to meet their demands. The difference in age between the bride and the bridegroom was of no account.

The greatest evil arising out of child marriage was the growing number of child-widows. Without the economic means by which to sustain themselves, without benevolent from their immediate relations, and being subjected to suspicion, social stigma and superstition, the girl-widows lingered through their unfortunate existences. In the upper strata of society, some of them escaped misery through the custom of sati or self-immolation. But to the vast majority of widows in all strata and castes, life was one long misery.

In the Madras Presidency, child marriage was common among the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, and the Chettis. The Brahmins had their children married between the ages of six and seven which also, to a certain extent, accounted for the increase in the percentage of widows<sup>4</sup>.

**Polygamy:** Polygamy was an old social evil. It was popular among the Zamindars, rich landlords and mostly among people who were well to do. The practice was more common among

both the Hindu and Muslim societies. But the evil crossed all limits in course of time. It was confined mostly to the richer and higher sections of society. With their affluence and wealth, the rich could afford to become polygamous and licentious. It was neither a matter of shame nor sorrow to maintain a harem and to keep many wives. Rather, it was a matter of personal pride and social prestige if one affords it.

By the nineteenth century, such an absurd system of polygamy assumed monstrous proportions. On a single day a male could marry two, three or four wives. In his lifetime he could marry dozens of wives, even a hundred. There were parents who offered all their daughters to a single male. There was no upper age limit for the male; he could be of any age. Similarly, the brides of the same man could be as tender in age as possible. Still more absurd was the system that the Male was not required to maintain his numerous wives. The so-called wives remained in the houses of their parents. But now and again the husband could come to collect some money from the unfortunate father-in-law. The result of such a system was dangerous. Elsewhere, polygamy created various social and domestic complications. The upper class Hindus and Muslims, when polygamous, suffered family unhappiness and economic hardship. Among the Muslim, polygamy made the purdah system more stringent. The only happy feature in regard to it was that it did not become a common vice among the general population.

**Celibacy of widows:** According to Hindu customs, a marriage is indissoluble even after the death of one's husband. The Tamils prescribed monogamy as an essential condition to preserve the chastity of women. Severe restrictions were placed on widows who had lost their husbands lest should they go wrong, the most serious being the denial of the freedom to remarry.

While widow-marriage prevailed among the Hindus in very ancient times, gradually it was abandoned and came to be regarded as a sin. The forced celibacy of widows became a strict social custom which few could dare defy. Society imposed the duties on widows as prescribed in the Manusamhita. It was one of the most severe codes of conduct which the widow was required to observe in accordance with semi-religious injunctions. A widow had no right to remarry.<sup>5</sup> Society paid its habitual regard to the widow who remained above suspicion. Her life was adjusted to a formal routine of fasting, devotion, prayer and pious works. Through the centuries, such became the lot of the Hindu widow.

In normal cases, the austere celibacy of the widow was no social evil. But the real trouble arose with the spread of the evil of child-marriage and with the consequent increase in the number of child widows. Little girls, who while marrying knew nothing of their husbands, became widows on the death of those unknown or even unseen persons. For them, the laws of widowhood constituted a code of tyranny. The position of child widows was most pathetic particularly among the higher castes.

Prohibition from wearing ornaments, restrictions in diet and clothing, tonsuring of their heads, suppression of desires leading to secret immorality, pregnancy, infanticide, suicide and homicide etc., were some of the miseries, humiliations and evils of the practice of enforced widowhood.

The treatment of widows varied from place to place, and also according to their age. Old widows had an established place in the Hindu joint family. They commanded respect and played the role of counsellors in domestic matters to their younger relations. It was the younger widows who suffered ill treatment so frequently. People regarded their persons as inauspicious of even ominous. They deserved neither sympathy nor pity from men since God had shown them no mercy. Extreme ignorance also led people to believe that young widows were responsible for family misfortunes. They were denied many privileges in day to day life. They could not take part in many ceremonies and functions. In former times, at least there was the Sati which put an end to the untold miseries of the widows, but now she cannot ascend the funeral pyre along with her husband and was compelled to lead a life that was worse than death<sup>6</sup>.

**Sati:** Among many irrational social customs, the most unnatural was the custom of sati or the immolation of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Sati, the cruellest social malady, caused immeasurable havoc to the nineteenth century Hindu society. The practice of Sati resulted in the irrecoverable loss of many valuable human lives. Sati which was prevalent in North India was practiced in South India also. But unlike the North, the magnitude of the practice in the South, particularly in the Tamil districts was less severe, where it was practiced by the nobles. The campaign against the sati system began in the British occupied territories in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

**Devadasi System:** The Devadasi seem to have held a considerable position in the Tamil country. Though the origin of the system is not known, we find frequent references to them in inscriptions and Tamil literature during the medieval period. It is curious to note that all ancient cultures seem to have at some time or other associated dance with religion. Like the other ancients, the Tamils also had given much importance to temples and dancing therein. The rise of the system as a separate caste seems to date from about the ninth and tenth centuries AD during which much activity prevailed in the Tamil country in the matter of building temples and elaborating the services held in them<sup>7</sup>. An inscription of 1004 AD reveals that about four hundred dancing girls attached to the great temple of Tanjore lived in free quarters and were allowed tax free land out of the endowments<sup>8</sup>. Some medieval records reveal that the profession was supported by the king for revenues out of which a police force was maintained. During the medieval period, these women seem to have enjoyed a considerable social status and position. They were allowed to meet the wives of the kings and were even allowed to stay with them. It seems they were even allowed to chew betel with them, "a thing no other person may

do, no matter what his rank may be”<sup>9</sup>. They led a life of cultural case and pleasure and provided amusement and intellectual companionship to those who could afford the luxury”<sup>10</sup>. After the breakup of the Vijayanagar Empire they lost their social position and influence due to lack of patronage and support without which they became victims of pleasure and pelf in the succeeding centuries. Though they lost their social position and importance, they continued their profession due to necessity, economic and religious. In the nineteenth century, in Tanjore, Pudukottai and other places, they continued to enjoy royal patronage. In other places, they were supported and eagerly sought after by Muslim and other native officers<sup>11</sup>.

Besides, every temple of note in the Tamil country had a band of these dancing girls, Abbe Dubois and Buchanan during their travels saw many girls recruited for temples by various methods<sup>11</sup>. In the Chengalpattu District it was the custom among the weavers to dedicate the eldest daughter to be a Devadasis. In some cases, the pregnant women in order to obtain a safe delivery made a vow to dedicate the child, if it turned out to be a girl to the temple service. Many girls were forcibly removed to the temple on account of their exceptional beauty and charm to be utilised for the services of god. There who were attached to the temples received a fixed salary from the temple which of course was too meagre for their maintenance. They were obliged to sell their favours out of necessity and force of circumstances to persons who could afford the luxury. The accounts of Buchanan say clearly that in the early part of the nineteenth century, they were often engaged to receive every person of note travelling on account of the government. Many of them were permanently kept by the native officers who, in many a case, had more than one wife.

During the period under survey, this class formed a separate caste, having its own laws of inheritance, its own customs and rules of etiquette and its own panchayats<sup>12</sup>. Dancing girls dedicated to their usual profession of caste, were formally married in a temple to a sword or a God by some men of their caste. There were two divisions among them, Valankai and Itankai (right and left hand castes), though there were no clear distinctions between them. During the period under review, only a small percentage of them served in the temples for which they received payment in cash which was too meagre for a decent living<sup>12</sup>. Hence the majority of them were forced to earn their bread by means of prostitution for which alone they were trained.

The challenges before the educated Indian elite in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were unprecedented. The advent of the British in India had brought not only a new form of government, but also new knowledge, new ideas and new technology. The members of the newly educated class discovered to their distress that the society which had bred them and about which they often boasted was not the ideal one, but ridden with many evils such as discrimination against women. For the first time, the deep and silent waters of Indian tradition were disturbed. Social reformers found that, on the one hand, there was the Indian

society, basically hierarchical and accepting norms of discrimination based on caste and gender, on the other hand there was the West, with its dazzling ideas of equality and liberty, offering new technology for a better society. Reformers were tempted to harmonise the traditional and the progressive. As they started to examine the extent Indian social structure, they realised that women’s issues in this context were important. The colonial context generated different responses from the British ruling elite. The colonial rulers critiqued Indian society in a patronising manner, and took upon themselves the role of patrons attempting to improve a rigid Indian society. Women’s issues in this perspective became important for the British rulers, as they wanted to bring out the ‘uncivilised’ dimensions of the Indian culture, and the inefficacy of Indian men in improving the situation. Thus women’s issues were raised for the first time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Social reformers all over the country showed their deep concern over women’s issues such as Sati, child-marriage, female infanticide, widowhood, purdah, polygamy, devadasi and education. Social Reformers like Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddi, E.V. Ramasamy, M.C. Raja, C. Ayothidasa Pandhithar and others from all parts of the country raised their voice against some of the unjust practices. These great humanists have dedicated their lives to the society. They fought against caste system and inequality prevalent in the society. Their effort to bring about equal status for women in the society is also remarkable. Their objective is to uphold Social Justice (Dharma) for all, irrespective of their caste, colour and creed. They fought against caste system and social inequality.

The anti-nautch movement or upliftment of Devadasis was a social purity movement which attracted the attention of social reformers in Madras Presidency. There were Devadasis as a professional dancing caste from early medieval times and they were attached to temple service. They perfected the art of music and dancing. They were symbolically consecrated to the deities in the temples. They rendered services like dancing and singing in temples during worship and other festive occasions like taking the deity in a procession. In return, they were paid a portion of the produce from the temple lands. Though they were to maintain lifelong celibacy, in course of time these girls turned into hereditary prostitutes. They also suffered from venereal diseases which affected those who came in contact with them. They served as concubines to rich people and not only exploited them but also created problems in their family life. Their indecent, obscene words and gestures in dance performances during marriage functions adversely affected the psychology of young boys<sup>13</sup>. The collection of money by village officers to protect their profession perpetuated the evil. The maintenance of Devadasis or concubines was regarded as a status symbol. The greater the number of concubines, the greater was the status symbol of a man. Nowhere in the world was professional prostitution given the rank of a special caste by itself as in India. Annie Besant commenting on this practice said that this ‘scandal was a cancer in our midst’<sup>14</sup>.

The anti-nautch movement spread to the whole of Madras Presidency from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the agitation to abolish the appointment of Devadasis in the temple service was continued. Missionaries protested in the name of morality and decency against the whole system and social reformers supported them. Public opinion was also strong for the abolition of the system of Devadasis. Thus it was an indirect result of the advent of Christianity into India<sup>15</sup>. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a vigorous campaign was launched, with the enthusiastic support of Christian missionaries for rescuing music and dancing from its association with prostitution and for destroying the caste mould in which girls of the dancing community were held<sup>16</sup>.

### Role of Social Reformers

K. Veerasalingam and R. Venkataratnam Naidu were pioneers in taking up this social purity work. Muthulakshmi Reddi, the Veteran champion of the Devadasis says, this dedication became identical with an evil profession and it grew to the extent of purchasing and adopting young innocent children and training them for an immoral life, at an age when they could not very well see the future before them. Again, she wanted to save them from enforced prostitution and brought home the fact that state and religion should guard the morality of the people and improve the moral tone of society. It was sickening to her that the Hindu temples, instead of protecting their chastity exposed them to an immoral life. Muthulakshmin Reddi felt that the status of Devasis could be improved by relieving them of compulsory temple service and the self-confidence of the community improved, by offering education to their sons and daughters and by encouraging their marriages. Due to her efforts the Hindu Religious Endowments Act was passed in 1929 in Madras Legislative Council, realising Devadasi community from temple service and giving Inam lands of the temple to their families. Devadasi Act XXXI<sup>17</sup> was finally passed in 1947 to root out the system once for all.

The growth of education, increasing enlightenment among the public, changing public opinion, awakening in the community, government's legislative measures and the efforts of social reformers, all helped in the quicker realisation among the public. Had Government taken concerned efforts for the eradication of the system by educating and rehabilitating the Devadasis, the system would have disappeared much earlier.

E.V. Ramasamy generally known as EVR and Periyar was a remarkable social reformer of Tamil Nadu, who devoted his entire life for the eradication of superstitious beliefs, religious absurdities, irrational customs, Women Liberation, untouchability, caste superiority which enslaved the downtrodden and increased inequality among men and women. In India the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a series of social reform movements starting from Brahma Samaj to Ramakrishna Mission which aimed at revolutionalising the social set up and bring equality among human beings. E.V. Ramasamy have

delivered many lectures and written many articles on women's rights between 1926 and 1973. Liberation of women from their 'slavery', and equality and equal rights of men and women were among the basic conditions over which E.V. Ramasamy wanted to build up the social structure. Ever since the inception of the Self-Respect Movement, he had been propagating the equality of men and women, their equal rights in law and in social life. Pen adimai (meaning 'slavery of women') as he described the status of women, was to be ended for realizing self-respect and progress of the society. E.V. Ramasamy bestowed as much time and attention for propaganda on raising the state of women as on abolition of untouchability and caste inequality<sup>18</sup>.

E.V. Ramasamy thoughts on the topic of the condition of women at home, society and state and ways of granting them equal status and equal rights are contained in a booklet Pen en Adimai Anal? (why did the women become a slave?) and repeated in the columns of Kudi Arau and Viduthalai and were mentioned several times in Self-Respect marriages. Indeed, such marriages were occasions when E.V. Ramasamy expressed his most radical feminist view points.

The degradation of women (pen izhivu as he put it) was also attributed to a superstition of women it was necessary to eradicate to belief that 'manliness' (aanmai) and 'slavery of women' (pen adimai) were Gods innovations. He appealed to women to overcome the dependence on men and to shed their belief that women could not live without men. E.V. Ramasamy's thesis on this delicate subject was based on extensive and intensive observation of western countries and a good deal of study of the historical past. He mentioned that the liberation of women was as necessary as the removal of untouchability to become fit for self-government. He regretted that half the man powers of the society were being wasted due to the practice of pen adimai<sup>19</sup>.

### Conclusion

One very hopeful development which has occurred during the last 10 years is the emergence of the women's movement wherein women have started raising their voices against inequality, patriarchal values and the inegalitarian social structure. A society is made up of both men and women from all states. If women from whichever state is weak and exploited, it is not a healthy society. And when a society is healthy, then the nation will march ahead. To fulfill these dreams women in general and particularly from weaker section need to be empowered for development of the nation. The study presented the social status of women and their awareness regarding their rights equal to men in Tamil society. The activities of the Social reformers helped to change the attitude of the people towards girls' educations. Every woman should aware of their constitutional rights in the society and tried to improve their conditions. Both men and women should aware of about the concept of women empowerment.

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