


# SOCIAL REFORMERS



# SHAHU CHHATRAPATHI ON EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

He was born as Yeshwantrao in the Ghatge Maratha family, of Kagal village of the Kolhapur district as Yeshwantrao Ghatge to Jaisingrao and Radhabai in 26 June 1874. Jaisingrao Ghatge was the village chief, while his mother Radhabai hailed from the royal family of Mudhol.

It is true that Chhatrapati Shahu's gender concerns were but a tiny part of his general concern for the marginalized but it should be borne in mind that women comprised 50 per cent of this section and would definitely have benefited from the socio-legal reforms that were aimed at improving the status of the backward classes. In so far as his contribution to gender justice is concerned – legislating laws for women's protection; passing orders, notifications in the interest of women; supporting women's education and educated women; taking a stand on the purdah, widow remarriage; responding, in the way he did, to the charge of moral turpitude – the feminist perspective, whether intuitive or intended, is more than evident.




In 1919, Chhatrapati Shahu enacted the Marriage Registration Act that gave legal validity to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages and widow remarriages. This was especially useful to those women who had the courage to break shackles and enter into a relationship of their own choice. They could avoid the sacred route to marriage and opt for the legal one instead. Raising the legal age of marriage to 14 years for women was also a brave step as the norm then was to get girls married off by the age of 10. His order that girls above the age of 18 were adults in their own right and did not require the consent of their parents for marriage was a revolutionary step in freeing women to write their own destiny.

He has thus taken into account a woman's perception and anticipation of violence. In other words, he senses that the threat of violence is as bad as, if not worse than, the violence itself. This, in fact, is one of the central theses of modern, feminist analysis of women's oppression exemplified by radical feminist Kate Millet's famous declaration, "Every woman is a victim of rape" – a fact that Shahu had recognized much earlier. Further, he notes that violence against women is not restricted to the lower classes, as is commonly believed, but occurs in the upper strata as well. Finally, he covers the ill treatment of wife, widow and daughter-in-law, even stepmother, under this Act, giving it a broad sweep. There is an implicit understanding of the workings of patriarchy on the ground and encompasses all women across the board. In other words, it is universal. In Shahu's own words, "...this Act is comprehensive enough to broadly cover most acts of oppression and cruelty against women". He used the word "oppression" in connection with women decades before the second-wave feminism brought it in vogue in the 1960s, in its literature and polemics.

Another law legislated by Shahu – The Kolhapur Divorce Act (1919) – states, “it is better to make specific provisions in the law itself to allow the husband and wife to divorce and thus build this relationship on a sound footing.” He obviously feels that the option to divorce is necessary in order to enjoy a good marriage. While men have always enjoyed the right to abandon their wives, women, for the first time, got a chance to opt out of painful marriages. The feminist intent behind this Act is unmistakable.

The law on “Girls dedicated to religion” (1920) cuts off the special rights and privileges conferred on girls who are “dedicated” to a religion and instead restores their stake in their natural family inheritance, making it distinctly disadvantageous for parents to cast away their daughters in the name of religion or tradition. It also recognizes and reiterates the daughter’s right to inheritance in her natal family. Once again, the feminist footprint is clearly visible.



Last, but not the least, when he was accused of moral turpitude by his caste and political enemies, he encouraged an independent enquiry, fully co-operated with the investigation and offered to proceed on leave while the enquiry was on. He did all this in order to clear his name honourably. Had he wished, he could have sabotaged the enquiry.

Chhatrapati Shahu took up the women's question where the Phules had left it off. He did it from his own unique standpoint and left the mark of his feminist sensibilities on it. In the process, he took the women's question forward into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That was his lasting feminist contribution.



# E.V.R PERIYAR ON WIDOW REMARRIAGE REFORM

E. V. Ramasami Naicker, popularly known “Thanthai Periyar” was born in an affluent family on 17 September 1879. His parents, Venkata Naicker and Chinnathayamma were deeply pious and religious. Venkata Naicker was a businessman in the town, Erode, and the family belonged to the Naicker caste.

Periyar was an active member in the Congress. His work in the Non Co-operation Movement in 1920-21, the Temperance Movement in 1922, the Khalar Movement in 1922-24 and the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924 had not only helped the growth of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu but also had in the process, promoted his image and status in the party as an important leader. After Periyar’s significant role in the Vaikom Satyagraha, the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, which met at Kanchipuram in 1925, unanimously passed a resolution praising Periyar as “one whose contribution to the success of the Satyagraha was highly remarkable and henceforth he came to be known as ‘Vaikom Veerar’ (Vaikom Hero).



# Self-respect marriages

In a leading article of *Viduthalai*, Periyar states that a self-respect wedding is based on rationalism. Rationalism is based on the individual's courage. Some may have the courage to conduct it during the time which almanacs indicate as the time of the planet Rahu and that, particularly in the evening. Some others may have just enough daring to avoid the Brahmin priest and his mother tongue - the Sanskrit language. Some may feel nervous about not keeping the traditional lamp burning in broad daylight. Some others may have the rotten thought that conducting a wedding without 'mangala sutra' is disgraceful.

Still, the self-respect weddings conducted during the past thirty years have some basic limits. They are: Brahmins and their *mantras* should be utterly avoided; meaningless rituals, piling mud pots, one on another, having the traditional lamp during day time, ritual smoke - all these should be avoided. Rationalism does not approve of these. Periyar then asks why can't the government pass an Act that legalizes weddings which avoid the above-mentioned superstitious practices. If all these details cannot be accommodated in the Act, the latter can legalize weddings which don't have Brahmin priests, the Sanskrit language and the so called holy fire.

# Widow-remarriage

On the remarriage of widows, Periyar states that among the atrocities perpetrated by the Hindu male population against women, here we have to consider the treatment meted out to widows alone. If a girl loses her husband, even before knowing anything of worldly pleasures, she is compelled to close her eyes to everything in the world and die broken-hearted. Even in Periyar's community at the time, there were widowed girls below the age of 13 years. Periyar stated how it is a touching sight to see the parents of those widowed children treating them like untouchables.


He goes on to say that whatever may be the reason for the present state of the Hindu society, my firm belief that the low position given permanently to widows may prove to be the reason for the utter ruin of the Hindu religion and the Hindu society.

If we try to find the reason for such conduct, we will have to conclude that they instinctively feel that women are slaves, subservient to men and that they must be kept under control. That is why these people treat women like animals. They seem to feel that giving freedom to women is equivalent to committing a very serious crime. The result of this attitude is that there is no independence or freedom to one half of the human race. This wicked enslavement of half of the human race is due to the fact that men are physically a little stronger than women. This principle applies to all spheres of life and the weaker are enslaved by the stronger.

If slavery has to be abolished in society, the male arrogance and wickedness which lead to the enslavement of women must be abolished first. Only when this is achieved, the tender sprouts of freedom and equality will register growth.

One of the reasons why Periyar hated Hinduism and the orthodoxy practiced in the name of Hinduism was the practice of child marriage. Many of the girl children who were married before they were ten or twelve years old became widows before they knew the meaning of the word. According to the 1921 All India Census the details of the child widows reported living in the country that time were as follows.

- ▶ 1 year baby widows - 497
- ▶ 1 to 2 year child widows - 494
- ▶ 2 to 3 year child widows - 1,257
- ▶ 3 to 4 year child widows - 2,837
- ▶ 4 to 5 year child widows - 6,707

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- ▶ **Total number of widows - 11,342**
  - ▶ 5 to 10 year young widows - 85,037
  - ▶ 10 to 15 year young widows - 232,147
  - ▶ 15 to 20 year young widows - 396,172
  - ▶ 20 to 25 year young widows - 742,820
  - ▶ 25 to 30 year young widows - 1,163,720

**Total number of widows - 2,631,238**

Periyar was deeply disturbed when he realized that among the widows in India, 11,892 were little children below 5 years and that young widows below 15 years numbering 232,147 were denied the pleasures of life.

With regards to the re-marriage of widows, Periyar stated that it is the practice of our people to refer to such a wedding as "a widow's marriage". Such an expression is used only with reference to women and in connection with men. Just as this lady is marrying another husband after the death of the first husband, many men marry again after the death of the first wife. But the second marriage of a man is not referred to as "a widower's marriage", though that is the proper thing to do.

Periyar himself was a widower. After becoming one, he took a second wife. He claimed that in the ancient days, both men and women in the country had this practice. There were numerous instances in sastras and puranas of women getting married again after the death of their first husband.

Periyar further stated that this is not an unusual practice in the rest of the world though it might appear strange for us at the present time. Christian and Muslim women marry again after the death of the first husband. 90 percent of women in Muslim countries get married again soon after the death of the first husband. This may be unusual in certain sections of Indian societies. But it is a common practice in certain other sections of our society which are called very backward communities