

MARRIAGE AND FEMALE AUTONOMY IN PERIYARITE IDEOLOGY – AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

MISS. P. KAVITHA¹

PH.D RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY, ANNAMALAI NAGAR,
CHIDAMBARAM, TAMIL NADU. EMAIL: palanikavitha6@gmail.com

DR. K. KUMARAN²

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, THIRU. VI.KA. GOVERNMENT ARTS COLLEGE,
THIRUVARUR, TAMIL NADU. EMAIL: kumaranhistory@gmail.com

Abstract: Marriage in early twentieth-century Tamil society operated within a Brahmanical legal and ritual framework that denied women autonomy in matters of consent, property, widowhood and marital dissolution. Between 1928 and 1944, E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) advanced a sustained critique of this structure through speeches, organisational resolutions and writings in *Kudi Arasu*. The Self-Respect Conferences at Chengalpattu (1929) and Virudhunagar (1931) openly rejected priestly mediation, Sanskritic rites, enforced widowhood and caste endogamy, while advocating inter-caste unions, widow remarriage, divorce and marriage based on mutual consent. Such interventions emerged at a time when child marriage remained prevalent despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and when Mitakshara inheritance norms reinforced women's economic dependency. Self-Respect marriages, conducted without Brahmin priests and grounded in rationalist vows, redefined conjugal authority and questioned the sacred status of indissoluble Hindu marriage. Marriage was recast as a contractual and social relationship rather than a sacrament rooted in scriptural sanction. Female autonomy thus appeared not as a moral concession but as a juridical and political claim directed against caste patriarchy. The reconfiguration of marriage formed an integral component of the wider Self-Respect Movement's programme of social transformation in colonial Tamil society.

Keywords: Caste Patriarchy, Female Autonomy, Widow Remarriage, Inter-Caste Marriage

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in early twentieth-century Tamil society functioned as a religiously sanctioned and legally regulated institution that reinforced caste hierarchy and male authority. Under the Mitakshara system of Hindu law, which governed much of the Madras Presidency, women possessed limited rights in ancestral property and remained economically dependent within the joint family structure. The ritual form of marriage, solemnised through Sanskrit mantras and Brahmin priestly mediation, defined the union as indissoluble and sacramental. Widow remarriage among upper castes was socially prohibited, child marriage was prevalent despite growing criticism and female consent held little legal or customary weight. Although the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 sought to fix minimum ages 14 for girls and 18 for boys at the time of enactment its enforcement remained weak in many districts of the Presidency.¹ It was within this socio-legal setting that E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973), later known as Periyar, advanced a radical rethinking of marriage. After resigning from the Indian National Congress in 1925, he founded the Self-Respect Movement (*Suya Mariyathai Iyakkam*) in the same year. The movement's critique of caste hierarchy soon expanded into a systematic attack on Brahmanical patriarchy. In the Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalpattu in February 1929, resolutions openly condemned child marriage, enforced widowhood and the authority of priests in matrimonial rituals. The conference advocated marriages based on mutual consent, the right to divorce and the legitimacy of inter-caste unions. Similar resolutions were reiterated at the Virudhunagar Conference of 1931, where speakers argued that marriage should be treated as a social contract rather than a sacred and irrevocable sacrament.

Periyar's weekly journal *Kudi Arasu*, first published in 1925, became a central medium for disseminating these ideas. Through editorials and speeches reproduced in its pages during the late 1920s and 1930s, he criticised scriptural injunctions drawn from the Manusmriti and other Dharmashastric texts that positioned women under perpetual male guardianship. He linked the denial of widow remarriage and property rights to what he termed Brahmanical domination over non-Brahmin communities. The practice of Self-Respect marriages began to take concrete shape from 1929 onwards. These ceremonies dispensed with Brahmin priests, replaced Sanskrit mantras with Tamil vows and emphasised equality between the partners. In several documented cases, couples publicly declared mutual consent and exchanged garlands without invoking religious rites. Such acts directly challenged both customary norms and prevailing interpretations of Hindu law in the Madras Presidency.² The redefinition of marriage was not an isolated reform but part of a broader ideological campaign that intersected with debates on women's education, property and public participation. Women leaders associated with the movement, including

Nagammai and later Maniammai, participated in conferences and organisational work, signalling that questions of marriage and autonomy were central to the movement's social agenda.

Scholarship on Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement provides an essential foundation for examining marriage and female autonomy in Tamil society. V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai's *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (1998) traces the ideological genealogy of anti-caste politics and discusses Self-Respect marriages as part of a broader rationalist intervention. K. Veeramani's *Periyar: The Great – Collected Works* (first compiled 1974; later editions) provides primary speeches and writings, indispensable for understanding Periyar's views on widow remarriage, divorce and women's property rights. Gail Omvedt's *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (1994) contextualises Periyar within anti-caste struggles and addresses gender as integral to social reform. S. Anandhi's essays on the Self-Respect Movement (2000s) examine women's participation and the reconstitution of marriage practices. While these works analyse caste and rationalism in depth, a focused historical study of marriage as a juridical and ideological site of female autonomy remains comparatively underdeveloped. The study aims to explore Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's speeches and writings published in *Kudi Arasu* between 1928 and 1944, alongside resolutions of the Self-Respect Conferences at Chengalpattu (1929) and Virudhunagar (1931), to trace how marriage was redefined through advocacy of widow remarriage, inter-caste unions, divorce and the rejection of Brahmanical ritual authority.³ It analyses the emergence of Self-Respect marriages from 1929, conducted without Brahmin priests and Sanskrit mantras and considers their later legal validation under the Hindu Marriage (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, 1967. It also evaluates Periyar's critique of Manusmriti injunctions, child marriage before the 1929 Act and Mitakshara inheritance norms to assess the centrality of female consent and property rights.⁴

The study adopts a historical-analytical method grounded in primary and legislative sources. Speeches and editorials of E.V. Ramasamy published in *Kudi Arasu* between 1928 and 1944 are examined alongside resolutions of the Self-Respect Conferences held at Chengalpattu (1929) and Virudhunagar (1931). Archival pamphlets, contemporary reports and documented instances of Self-Respect marriages are analysed to trace institutional practice. These materials are read in conjunction with legal texts, including the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), Mitakshara inheritance provisions and the Hindu Marriage (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, 1967, to correlate ideological arguments with specific socio-legal contexts.

Marriage Reform and Social Change

Marriage in the Madras Presidency during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries functioned within a combined structure of Dharmashastric interpretation, caste custom and colonial jurisprudence. The Mitakshara school of Hindu law governed most Hindu joint families in the Presidency, particularly in districts such as Tanjore, Salem, Coimbatore and Chingleput. Under Mitakshara coparcenary principles, ancestral property devolved through the male line and daughters were excluded from coparcenary membership. A woman's proprietary rights were confined largely to limited *stridhana* and widows generally enjoyed only a life interest rather than absolute ownership. Judicial precedents of the Madras High Court in the early twentieth century repeatedly affirmed these restrictions. Within this framework, marriage was not treated as a dissoluble civil contract but as a sacrament (*sanskara*), solemnised through Vedic rites and priestly mediation. Rituals such as *kanyadaan* symbolised the transfer of guardianship from father to husband and *sapthapadi* before the sacred fire marked the irrevocable completion of the union. The presence of a Brahmin priest and the recitation of Sanskrit mantras were treated as indispensable components among upper-caste communities.

Census returns from 1911 and 1921 recorded high proportions of married girls below fifteen years of age in several Tamil districts. Although the Age of Consent Act of 1891 had raised the age for consummation, it did not prohibit child marriage itself. Reform agitation culminated in the enactment of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in September 1929, which fixed fourteen as the minimum age for girls and eighteen for boys at the time of passage. The statute relied upon complaint-based prosecution and imposed modest penalties and contemporary reports from district officials indicated limited enforcement. Widow remarriage had been legally recognised under the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, yet among many high-status castes in the Madras Presidency it remained socially proscribed.⁵ Widows were expected to remove ornaments, avoid coloured garments and observe behavioural restrictions that marked permanent ritual loss. Marriage therefore combined economic dependency, ritual hierarchy and caste endogamy into a single institutional arrangement.⁶

Erode Venkata Ramasamy, born in 1879 in Erode, entered organised politics through the Indian National Congress but resigned in 1925 after conflicts over caste representation and the Vaikom Satyagraha experience in Travancore. In May 1925 he founded the weekly journal *Kudi Arasu*, printed initially from Erode. Through its columns he criticised Brahmin dominance in administration and ritual life. By 1928 his focus extended explicitly to marriage. Issues of *Kudi Arasu* from that year contain articles questioning the authority of Manusmriti and other Dharmashastric texts that described women as under perpetual guardianship. He argued that defining marriage as sacred ensured that women could neither exit abusive unions nor claim equality within them.⁷ The Self-Respect Movement formally consolidated these ideas at the Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalpattu in February 1929. Delegates passed resolutions condemning child marriage, supporting widow remarriage and rejecting the necessity of Brahmin priests in marriage ceremonies. Reports in Tamil newspapers and in *Kudi Arasu* described marriages conducted through the exchange of garlands and public declarations of consent. Sanskrit mantras were replaced with Tamil affirmations. The ritual of *kanyadaan* was repudiated on the grounds that a woman was not

transferable property. Marriage was described in conference speeches as a voluntary union between equals. This marked a deliberate departure from reformers who sought reinterpretation of scripture rather than its rejection.

In 1930 and 1931 *Kudi Arasu* printed speeches delivered at district Self-Respect meetings in Erode, Salem and Tiruchirappalli. Periyar criticised the asymmetry that permitted widowers to remarry while subjecting widows to lifelong austerity. He cited cases reported from Tanjore district where young widows, married before puberty, were confined to domestic seclusion after the death of elderly husbands. At the Virudhunagar Self-Respect Conference in 1931, resolutions reiterated the legitimacy of widow remarriage and affirmed that marriages conducted without priests were socially valid. Contemporary accounts mention specific ceremonies where widows remarried without ritual head-shaving, signalling defiance of established caste codes.⁸ Inter-caste marriage formed another central theme. Periyar argued in editorials between 1930 and 1934 that caste reproduced itself primarily through endogamy. He maintained that temple entry or communal dining would not erode hierarchy unless inter-marriage occurred. Publicly announced Self-Respect marriages in Salem and Madurai during the early 1930s involved partners from different non-Brahmin castes. Such ceremonies often faced local opposition, yet movement activists provided collective support. The replacement of Vedic fire ritual with mutual exchange of garlands symbolised removal of priestly authority and redefinition of legitimacy.

Divorce, almost absent from orthodox Hindu law, appeared frequently in Periyar's writings after 1932. He argued that indissolubility converted marriage into bondage, particularly for women without independent income. In speeches reproduced in *Kudi Arasu* in 1933 and 1934, he compared European civil marriage systems with Hindu sacramental doctrine, contending that mutual consent should govern both formation and dissolution. Although colonial courts occasionally granted separation on limited grounds, no statutory divorce regime existed for Hindus before Independence. Self-Respect marriage declarations included acknowledgement that separation was permissible if mutual harmony ceased, anticipating later legislative developments.⁹ Throughout the late 1930s, marriage reform remained linked to linguistic and anti-caste agitation. During the anti-Hindi protests of 1937–1938, speeches connected imposition of Hindi with Brahmanical cultural authority. Marriage rituals conducted in Tamil rather than Sanskrit were presented as acts of self-respect and cultural assertion. The critique of Manusmriti intensified during these years, with public burnings of the text reported in movement circles as symbolic repudiation of scriptural patriarchy. Documented Self-Respect marriages had spread across multiple districts of the Presidency by the early 1940s. Names of couples were often published in *Kudi Arasu*, transforming private unions into political statements.¹⁰ Women activists associated with the movement addressed conferences on questions of property, consent and education. Marriage reform was therefore embedded within a broader challenge to Mitakshara inheritance rules and economic dependency. Periyar argued that without property rights, marital equality would remain incomplete.¹¹

Between 1928 and 1944, the cumulative effect of speeches, editorials and conference resolutions produced a systematic redefinition of marriage. Ritual sanctity yielded to contractual logic; priestly mediation gave way to public declaration; widowhood lost its aura of irreversible stigma; caste endogamy encountered organised defiance; and the concept of divorce entered Tamil political discourse as a legitimate demand.¹² Female autonomy was articulated not as abstract moral uplift but as a concrete claim directed against identifiable legal doctrines, ritual practices and textual authorities operating within the Madras Presidency.

Institutionalisation of Self-Respect Marriages and Legal Recognition

The formal adoption of Self-Respect marriage as an alternative mode of solemnisation began with resolutions passed at the Self-Respect Conference held at Chengalpattu in February 1929. The conference declared that marriage did not require Brahmin priests, Vedic fire rituals, or Sanskrit recitations in order to be valid. Instead, it affirmed that a union could be solemnised through the public declaration of mutual consent before witnesses. Soon after the conference, reports in *Kudi Arasu* described marriages conducted in Erode and Chingleput districts without priestly intervention. In these ceremonies, the couple exchanged garlands and read out statements in Tamil affirming equality and voluntary partnership. The rejection of *kanyadaan* was explicit; a woman was not to be treated as a transferable gift from father to husband.

These practices had acquired a recognisable pattern by 1930 and 1931. The Virudhunagar Self-Respect Conference of 1931 reaffirmed the Chengalpattu resolutions and encouraged district organisers to conduct marriages in a uniform manner. Movement activists prepared printed formats in which the bride and groom announced their names, declared that they entered the union by choice and acknowledged the right to separate if mutual understanding failed. Witnesses from local Self-Respect associations signed registers maintained by organisers. The presence of a gathered public replaced ritual sanctification by a priest. Reports from Tiruchirappalli and Salem during 1931–1933 recorded widow remarriages conducted under these procedures, without ritual head-shaving or removal of ornaments. Such acts directly challenged entrenched caste restrictions that treated widow remarriage as a stigma despite the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856.¹³

The removal of Sanskrit mantras marked a decisive shift in authority. Traditional Hindu marriage ceremonies in the Madras Presidency relied upon Vedic recitation, including *sapthapadi* before the sacred fire. In Self-Respect marriages, Tamil replaced Sanskrit. Organisers argued that participants must understand the words spoken during their own ceremony. Speeches published in *Kudi Arasu* in 1933 emphasised that incomprehensible ritual language fostered dependency on priestly intermediaries. By substituting Tamil vows affirming equality, the ceremony itself became intelligible to those involved. The exchange of garlands, sometimes accompanied by tying of the *thali*, functioned as the visible sign of union.¹⁴

Instances from the mid-1930s show expansion beyond initial centres. A marriage in Coimbatore district in 1934 between individuals from different non-Brahmin castes was conducted in a public hall without religious icons. In 1936, a ceremony in Madurai district involved a widow who declared before assembled witnesses that she retained the right to dissolve the union if subjected to ill-treatment. These events were not isolated. Names of couples and places of solemnisation were often printed in *Kudi Arasu*, providing documentary evidence and creating a model for replication. Legal uncertainty accompanied the spread of these ceremonies. Colonial courts recognised marriages performed according to customary rites. Since Self-Respect marriages rejected recognised ritual forms, questions arose regarding their validity in inheritance disputes and legitimacy of children. Some couples chose registration under the Special Marriage Act of 1872, although its requirement of renouncing religious affiliation deterred others. Despite this uncertainty, organisers continued to conduct ceremonies outside priestly frameworks. The persistence of such marriages through the 1940s indicates that social practice had stabilised even without statutory clarity.¹⁵

After Independence, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 introduced uniform conditions for Hindu marriages, including provisions for divorce.¹⁶ However, it required solemnisation according to customary rites of either party, leaving ambiguity for ceremonies lacking traditional ritual. In Tamil Nadu, political change in 1967 brought the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam to power under C.N. Annadurai. That year, the State enacted the Hindu Marriage (Tamil Nadu Amendment) Act, 1967, inserting Section 7-A into the principal Act. This provision recognised marriages solemnised by a simple declaration in a language understood by the parties, in the presence of relatives or friends, accompanied by exchange of garlands or tying of the *thali*. Priesthood and Vedic ritual were not required.¹⁷ Section 7-A gave statutory force to practices followed since 1929. The emphasis on intelligible declaration reflected the earlier insistence on Tamil vows; the acceptance of garland exchange mirrored long-standing Self-Respect procedure. Judicial decisions of the Madras High Court after 1967 upheld marriages conducted under Section 7-A as valid, thereby settling earlier doubts regarding inheritance and legitimacy.¹⁸ From the Chengalpattu resolutions of 1929 to legislative recognition in 1967, Self-Respect marriage evolved from conference declaration to routinised ceremony and finally to statutory validation.¹⁹ The absence of Brahmin priests, the elimination of Sanskrit recitations, the use of Tamil vows and the maintenance of written records created a distinct and repeatable institutional form. The amendment of 1967 did not invent a new custom; it acknowledged a social practice established through nearly four decades of organised repetition across Tamil districts.

Critique of Hindu Marriage and Women's Autonomy

In the Madras Presidency of the early twentieth century, Hindu marriage rested upon a combination of scriptural authority, customary enforcement and judicial recognition. The Mitakshara school of Hindu law governed most joint families in Tamil districts such as Tanjore, Salem, Coimbatore and Chingleput. Under Mitakshara coparcenary, ancestral property devolved through male lineage; sons acquired a birthright in joint family property, whereas daughters were excluded from coparcenary membership. A married woman's proprietary rights were largely confined to *stridhana* and even this was often subject to managerial control by male guardians. Widows typically held only a limited estate, lacking absolute ownership and power of alienation. Decisions of the Madras High Court in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries repeatedly affirmed these principles, reinforcing the economic dependence of women within the household.²⁰

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy began addressing these structural foundations of marriage in the late 1920s through speeches and articles published in *Kudi Arasu*. His critique did not remain confined to social custom; it explicitly targeted textual and legal sources. Among these, the Manusmriti occupied a central place. He cited verses that described a woman as under the guardianship of her father in childhood, husband in youth and son in widowhood. Public meetings during 1929–1932 included references to these injunctions as evidence that scriptural sanction lay behind the denial of female autonomy. Rather than reinterpret such texts, he rejected their authority altogether. In speeches delivered in Erode and reproduced in *Kudi Arasu* in 1930, he argued that a legal system drawing legitimacy from such injunctions could not guarantee equality within marriage.²¹

Child marriage provided a concrete example of scriptural and customary authority overriding individual consent. Census returns of 1911 and 1921 recorded substantial numbers of married girls below the age of fifteen in the Madras Presidency.²² In several districts, particularly Tanjore and South Arcot, the proportion of married girls aged ten to fourteen remained significant. The Age of Consent Act of 1891 had raised the age for consummation but did not prohibit the marriage itself. Families continued to arrange marriages for girls before puberty, often to secure alliances within caste networks. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, enacted in September 1929, fixed fourteen as the minimum age for girls and eighteen for boys at the time of passage. Enforcement, however, depended upon complaint-based prosecution and rarely resulted in conviction.²³ District-level reports from the early 1930s indicate that prosecutions were few relative to the scale of the practice.²³ District-level reports from the early 1930s indicate that prosecutions were few relative to the scale of the practice. The speeches of Periyar between 1928–1931 associated the child marriage directly with the rendition of denial of consent. He said that a girl who was married before reaching maturity was not able to make informed choice. He wrote in 1930 in editorials in *Kudi Arasu* of instances where girls who were married off to much older men were widowed before they reached adolescence. Further restrictions were enforced by widowhood based on the caste norms. He linked child marriage with forced widowhood by revealing the effects of the early marriage tradition on womanhood independence. His reaction to the Sarda Act was not to consider it a complete solution but to confirm that even the colonial laws were aware of the evil of premature marriage.²⁴

The issue of the consent was also further raised to the organization of arranged marriage. Periyar disapproved of the ceremony of *kanyadaan* which embodied the gift of the daughter by the father. He suggested in speeches at the Self-Respect Conference in Chengalpattu in February 1929 that this ritual contained the idea that a woman had no will of her own. He argued that marriage should be founded on express mutual agreement as opposed to paternal agreement. Self-Respect marriages, where bride and groom declared in Self-Respect that they accepted each other as mates, were a direct reaction to a lack of female consent in traditional ones. Another object of criticism was the norms of patriarchal inheritance by the law of *Mitakshara*. Taking into consideration the fact that daughters were not part of the coparcenary property, they were economically insecure which depended on marriage and goodwill of male relatives. The widows with less than an extensive estate were not able to dispose of property at will. These rules of property as applied by he in the early 1940s related to power of inequality in marriage. His argument was that in the absence of autonomous economic rights a woman could not make meaningful choice as to continuation or dissolution of marriage. In 1942 *Kudi Arasu* also associated property reform with divorce demand, saying that the indissolubility and economic dependence made marriage coercive.²⁵ Divorce, which was not in the orthodox Hindu law was the focus of his criticism. Marriage among Hindus was sacramental and indissoluble except in exceptional customary cases. Periyar cited the imbalance in which the male gender could leave wives at will but the female gender had no legal solution. He contrasted this with the civil marriage systems in Europe on the idea that both entrance into and exit out of marriage must be ruled by mutual agreement. Self-Respect marriage statements incorporated the recognition that they could separate in the case of a lack of harmony between them. Though Hindus would not be provided with statutory means of divorce, until the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, the need expressed in the 1930s repackaged the issue of marital dissolution as a matter of choice and not reprehensibility.

Incineration of *Manusmriti* in open rallies in 1930s was a symbolic act of refusal of scriptural approval. In the anti-Hindi agitations of 1937-1938 language imposition was associated with Brahmanical textual authority through speeches. Reform in marriage was brought out as non-separable with breaking the hierarchical scripture. Periyar attempted to break the tie between sacred text and civil position by rejecting *Manusmriti* and *Dharmashastric* injunctions. Instead, he argued that legitimacy was based on social utility and equality as opposed to divine command.²⁶ The net impact of such criticisms reshaped the conceptual foundation of marriage in the Tamil society. Child marriage was criticised as deprivation of informed consent; *kanyadaan* as a figurative transfer of property; *Mitakshara* inheritance as the institutionalised dependence of the economy; and indissolubility was criticised as the denial of personal freedom. Female autonomy was therefore a composite assertion that entailed age of marriage, the right to choose a partner, right to access property and the ability to dissolve the marriage. These arguments were not only abstract. Marriages held after 1929 under the name Self-Respect included the proclamations of the equality and the right of separation. The refusal to accept scriptural stigma was shown in widow remarriages at Tiruchirappalli and Salem in the early 1930s. The inter-caste marriages undermined endogamy which maintained property and status among male dominated lineages. Every religious innovation in a ceremony was associated with a particular legal or scriptural rule being criticized.

CONCLUSION

The critique of Hindu marriage articulated between 1928 and 1944 altered the terms in which gender, law and social authority were debated in Tamil society. Scriptural injunctions, once treated as immutable foundations of domestic order, were subjected to public scrutiny in political meetings and print culture. Marriage ceased to be insulated within ritual sanctity and entered the domain of rational argument. This shift carried implications that extended beyond ceremony. When consent, property and dissolution were framed as conditions of legitimacy, the family itself became accountable to principles previously associated with public law. The consequences unfolded gradually. Legislative developments after Independence, particularly the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and the Tamil Nadu Amendment of 1967, reflected conceptual transformations initiated decades earlier. Recognition of priestless solemnisation and divorce provisions indicated that the state had absorbed arguments first advanced in movement forums. More enduring, however, was the reorientation of political language. Female autonomy came to be discussed in relation to inheritance, education and civic participation rather than confined to moral reform. Marriage reform thus functioned as an entry point into a broader reconstitution of authority in twentieth-century Tamil society, where domestic hierarchy could no longer claim immunity from historical change.

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