Chapter I
CHAPTER I

EVOLUTION OF POSITION OF WOMEN
IN TAMIL SOCIETY

The status of women in Tamil society has been changing from time to time. A careful examination of the evolution of Tamil Society shows that Sangam women occupied an important place in society performing a prominent role, that is, equal to men.¹

Right from the Post-Sangam era down to the modern times, religious practices, rituals, scriptures and some historical forces have created a secondary status for women in the Tamil Society. They were degraded from 3rd century A.D. onwards due to the "Kalabrah interregnum"². They were looked upon an almost venomous due to Aryan influence. They were not allowed to hold public office and had no claim to the throne.

Their role as housewives confined them within the houses i.e. "Illal" in a sense she was legally a perpetual minor. It was believed that women were fit only for household work and that their place was only in the kitchen. Socially, economically and politically, the condition of women was deplorable.

They did not have independence of thought and action. From birth to death, they were subjected to all sorts of ill-treatment. The deterioration in the position of women in Tamil society could be seen in the laws regarding child marriage, *Sati*, prohibition of widow remarriage, dowry system and absence of property rights.

In the process of socialisation of the society the Hindu-Law makers have prescribed a fixed role to men and women so that the integrity of the society could be maintained forever. The members of the society subscribed to these unflinchingly. Whenever it was put under alien pressure, the society had to purge out certain age old customs and added some new customs in the process of synthesis of two different cultures as *Tholkaapiam* says:

"Old must disappear and new must appear -
Is the age old custom"

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3 *Tholkappiam, Kalaviyal, 8th Commentry.*
I. SOCIAL EVILS

There are many factors such as social and economic, interacting with one another, which put the women under perpetual ignorance.

i) Sati

'Sati' is a Sanskrit term literally meaning "a virtuous wife" but historically has acquired the meaning of self-immolation of widows'. It was the practice of a wife cremating herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. Religious devotion in widowhood was recognised as proper for women of all classes. The Sati, then were the exception rather than the rule, and one cannot heard of a single instance of an unwilling woman being forced to it.\(^4\)

But in due course unwilling widows were also forced to abide this custom. The widow was administered intoxicating drugs to get her consent and remove the fear of death.\(^5\) In Tamil Nadu it was practiced not as a rule but options. In Kumbakonam there were more than eleven such incidents taken place, as reported by the Collector of Tanjore.\(^6\) This custom shows that the women life was tied with the men. She was living only for doing duties to her husband.

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ii) Child Marriage

Another important and vexes problem under which women were in the society suppressed was child marriage. Girl children were forced to marry before they attained puberty. Even in the Sangam age the girls were given in marriage in the tender age as Illango mentions in *Silappathikaram* that Kannage's age as 12 at the time of her marriage.

Megasthanes also mentioned in his *Indica* that such things happened in North India under Mauryan rule in the 4th century B.C. But in due course the marriage age was reduced even below 5 years as one could see the reports of Raja Ram Mohan Roy of Bengal and Vedanayaga Sastri of Tanjore of Tamil Nadu. Vedanayaga Sastri stated that a Maratha Bramin of Tanjore gave his daughter of aged 5 years to a man of 30 years in marriage.7 The reasons for the continuance of child marriage are varied and different. They are:

1. The threat of West Asian invasions encouraged the pre-puberty marriages and the seclusion of women among Hindus.
2. Unmarried girl after puberty was thought to be naturally sensuous, without self-control. This might have encouraged the custom of child marriage. It secured their purity.
3. Parents hesitated to shoulder the responsibility of their female child's chastity and other liability so they found the earliest method of disposing them in the name of marriage.

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This custom also led to some abuses such as:

1. Children could not get education and had no knowledge on social life, since they were married at the tender age.

2. The life in the new home was not always happy. Thus "the girl child from the movement of her birth to her death undergoes one continuous life of long suffering as a child wife, as a child mother and very often as a child widow".

3. Early marriage and early consummation curtailed freedom and joy of girlhood. Even before she could taste the carefree years of girlhood, she was compelled to be a mother.

4. The practice of child marriage was responsible for the high rate of infant mortality.\(^8\)

This evil practice prevailed in Tamil Society in the 19th century also. Carmichael, a Lady missionary of Travancore (London Mission Society) describes about such kind of child marriages held at Kanyakumari region in the end of the 19th century. In such type of a marriage the girl of three years sat on the lap of her father or uncle with a banana in her hand. She did not know what was going on in and around her. A man of more than thirty years tied a "\(taali\)" around her neck. After one year, the bridegroom died due to plague and the young bride of 4 years became a widow\(^9\).

\(^8\) Census of India, 1891, vol.XIV, Madras Table VIII, Part B, Chintamani, February- March 1898.

\(^9\) Annual report of London Mission Society, 1837, p.68
Infant-marriage and enforced-widowhood were complementary to each other. It deeply rooted in the social fabric of Indian society even before two thousand years ago. Marriage was deemed to be the most sacred duty in a woman's life and every consideration was based upon this element.

Therefore, parents felt that it was their bounden duty to get their daughters married as early as possible. An unmarried girl was regarded as a curse to her family and remained a potent source of unhappiness. Hence parents gave their daughters in marriage at the earliest, irrespective of their tender age being incapable of undergoing the ordeals of maternity.

Since marriages were conducted in a limited circle among the same endogamous group, at times there arose paucity of bridegrooms, which propelled many parents to seek alliance for their daughters at the moment they were born, which resulted in mass infant-marriages.

This custom prevailed throughout India, particularly among the orthodox Hindus. A girl who remained unmarried at the time of her attaining puberty was relegated to the level of a *Sudra* caste and her father was deemed to have committed a grave sin for the neglect of his daughter's early marriage. Hence, the law books fixed the definite age-limit for the consummation of marriage for girls. Thus, Manu enunciated that “a man of thirty should marry a girl of twelve and a man of twenty-four, a girl of eight”.\(^\text{10}\) It was the child-widowhood that caused much agony to the girls. D.Sadasivan is in conformity with this view when he points out that “the wide prevalence of child-marriage and ill-assorted marriages, which made many young girls widows. Before a girl could reach the age of puberty, at times, her husband who was aged passed

\(^{10}\) *Manu Dharma shastra*, Reprint, 1972, p.4.
away. Then her fate was to remain as a widow the rest of her life".\textsuperscript{11} According to the Census of India, 1881, it was estimated that there were 54,000 widows below ten years of age in India and 24,787 of the same age group in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{12} The Government of India Census of Madras Presidency of 1891 stated that about 25 percent of the population were following the custom of infant marriages as a rule; among 15 percent it was fairly widespread and among the remaining 60 percent it was rare. \textsuperscript{13} Thus, infant-marriage led to infant-widowhood, which resulted in hardships for the widows. In June 1896, \textit{The Hindu} gave an account of the infant and early marriages. It stated that on the basis of the Census, out of 6,025,000 young boys in the Madras Presidency, as many as 1,000,000 were married before they reached the age of 14 and that nearly 8,600 of them were already married before they reached the age of 4. \textit{The Hindu} added that out of 6,000,000 girls in the Madras Presidency, as many as 627,000 got married before they reached the age of 14 and that out of 2.25 million girls who attained age of 4 as many as 24,000 were married before they reached the age of 4. It further commented that in Madras, about 28 per cent of children born, died before they reached the age of 1, and one half of them were dead before they reached the age of 9. “Our boys”, \textit{The Hindu} stated, “become fathers at the age of 18 and girls become mothers at the age of 14 and many die in the prime of life. This deplorable state of things is the legacy of ages and centuries”.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Census of India, vol.1, part 1,1901, p.431.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Hindu}, 1\textsuperscript{st} June 1896.
iii) Woe of Widows

The result of child marriage was the increase in early widowhood and child motherhood. Children who got married before they reached the stage of understanding became widows; even before puberty they became socially untouchables. They were not permitted to use all sorts of auspicious symbols.  

The widow was subject to several inhibitions and restrictions, which were imposed to live a life of moral purity. A Tamil Proverb says:

“Why should she who has the misfortune to the unmarried, Blacken her eyelids, paint the dot on the forehead and use saffron?”

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15 Subramania Bharathiar, *Chakravarthi*, Thokuthikal, Ethal. 5.

There are several references in the 'Purananuru' anthology, which advert to the practice of widows shaving off their hair as a sign of mourning.\textsuperscript{17} They were called 'Kalikala Magalir' by reason of their discarding the ornaments. In later times the widow was called 'Arutali' that in one whom is bereft of the 'Taali'.\textsuperscript{18}

In respect of food too, there were several inhibitions, which were imposed to reduce social impulses. An austere diet, which was just enough for keeping the body and soul together as all that was provided for the widow. She had to sleep on the floor.\textsuperscript{19}

In a family of ordinary means she had to be a kitchen maid, menial servant, a nurse and a housekeeper all in one. She was not allowed to move in the society freely. So, she was kept out of all festivities. By custom, she was not required to contract a second marriage. She was a "drudge" to her parents. There was no sympathy for her. Her sole "asset" was her untold sufferings.

She was not considered either a member of the society or that of her family. She was considered a sinner whose very presence was shunned as inauspicious. Besides, she suffered the legal disabilities also. She had no right to acquire her deceased husband's property and depended upon the family as a hanger-on for her bare existence. Thus, she became a burden and nuisance to her family. A girl became a mother before she ceased to be a child.

\textsuperscript{17} Purananuru, 25, 26 & 280.
\textsuperscript{18} ibid, 14, 280.
\textsuperscript{19} ibid, 248, 250.
If the baby she begot happened to survive, it was so feeble and week that there was no possibility for it to become a healthy youth, with vigour and verve. This unhappy manifestation led, in due course, to the degeneracy of the Hindu society.

In the opinion of R.P. Karkaria, “The physical deterioration of a large portion of the Hindu community, is chiefly due to this custom of infant marriage”.20 Added to this, enforced-widowhood led to moral deterioration. The French Roman Catholic Missionary Abbe Dubois who visited Tamil Nadu in 1792 described the condition of widows as follows:21

“Widows, who in the learned tongue are called *vidhava*, a word akin to the Latin *vidya* are held in much less respect than other women and when they happen to have no children, they are generally looked upon with the utmost scorn. The very fact of meeting a widow is calculated to bring ill luck. They are called *moonda*, a reproachable term which means ‘shorn-head’, because every widow is supposed to have her hair cut off”.

In India in the year 1881, there were 2,09,36,626 widows lived. From among them totally there were 3,96,656 young widows below the age of fifteen.22 They were all segregated from the main society and kept under darkness permanently.


Yet another account is given by the Government of India in its Census Report of 1901, which reads as follows:23 “When young, she was given away in marriage by the father, by a solemn religious act to the husband and he being no more, there is no one to give her away and since Hindu marriage must take the form of a religious rite, her marriage becomes impossible”. A widower could marry again, if he so chose whereas a widow could not. True to the maxim that ‘once a widow, always a widow’, she was forced remain a widow forever.

iv) Institution of prostitution

Another social custom that degraded the women of India is the institution of prostitution. It is a social evil practised from the Sangam age. This age-old system is mentioned in the Sangam literature and they were called "Parathaiyar" or "Kanigaiyar".24 The Parathaiyar of the Sangam age were the precursors of the ‘Devaradiyar’ or ‘Devadasis’ attached to temples during the medieval period of South Indian history. The ‘Devadasis’ were not commonly associated with prostitution in the early period. In fact, the Devadasi system did not become common in South Indian temples earlier than the 7th century A.D.25 "Dasis or Devadasis" are dancing girls attached to the Tamil temples who subsist by dancing and music and the practice of "oldest

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24 Natrinai, 320.

25 Women dancers called "Adigaimar", otherwise known as, "Manikkattar" and "Kanikaiyar" in the inscriptions of the 8th century A.D.
profession in the world". The system however fostered prostitution though immorality, which was much, disapproved of by the Smriti writers. Edgar Thurston mentions, "it is one of the many inconsistencies of the Hindu religion that though their profession is repeatedly and vehemently condemned by the Sastras; it had always received the countenance of the church".

Abbe Dubois stated "the profession of the dancing girls, who call themselves 'deva-dasi' servants of the gods, was required to embrace the persons of all castes. They are taken from any caste and are frequently of respectable birth.

It is nothing uncommon to hear of pregnant women, in the belief that it will tend to their happy delivery, making a vow, with the consent of their husbands, to devote the child then in the womb, it should turn out a girl to do service to the pagoda. And, in doing so, they imagine they are performing a meritorious duty. The infamous life to which the daughter is destined brings no disgrace on the family". According to the Madras Census of 1881 and 1891, the number of female 'dancers' in the Madras Presidency was 11,573 and 13,671 respectively. They were the common property of the priests.

During the 19th century concubine was a common practice. Accordingly people kept women illegally for their private pleasures;

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26 Census of India, 1901, op.cit., p.151.

27 Dr.C.Paramarthalingam, Religion and Social Reform in Tamil Nadu (Madurai: Rajakumari pub, 1997), p.23.


concubine confused the calm family life by creating either between the kept women and her partner or between the husband and wife. Rich people and temple trustees kept Devadasis as concubines.\textsuperscript{30} Due to this custom the birth of illegal child increased and the number of orphans were also increased and created social problems.

v) Dowry

Another important social evil under which the women of Tamil society suffered is 'Stridhana' or 'Dowry' system. Even in the modern period this problem continued even among the educated class. "Dowry" in legal terms means 'any property or valuable given by one party at, before or after the marriage, as consideration of the marriage. This implies that it is nothing but an unwilling extraction from bride's father of all material things that the bridegroom's parents desire for agreeing to accept the girl in marriage to their son.\textsuperscript{31} The practice of Dowry originated in poverty and also in the apprehension of parents that their daughters might not get married after they had grown up.

In the 19th century the 'Dowry system' was fairly prevalent among all the castes and communities in Tamil country. The amount of dowry was depended mainly on the social status, education, occupation and wealth of the proposed bridegroom. The amount was paid either in cash or in the form of gold jewellery or property.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Dr.C.Ramarthalingam,\textit{ op.cit.}, p.29.

\textsuperscript{31} T.S. Devados (Ed.), R. Balasubramanian,\textit{ Hindu Family and Marriage} (Madras: University of Madras, Dr.S.Radhakrishnan, Institute for Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1979), p.112.

The Dowry system has reduced a father to penury and driven a desperate girl to suicide as a relief from ignominious virginity. Marriages by purchase quite often lead to "broken homes" and divorces. Dowry system is as bad as prostitution. In both the cases there is a "lack of immoral code of life".

II. ECONOMIC FACTORS

i) Denial of Rights to property

In ancient times, Hindu women had equal rights to property with their husbands. "The Mitakshra", the law of Hindu society in most parts of India, says, "wife's ownership in the husband's property was certainly shown by the sastra". Therefore the ownership in the husband's property was vested in the wife also.33

The inscriptions of Cholas give many examples of women of the upper classes owning property in their own right and disposing of it as they chose.34 Later when woman was treated as a dependent minor her right to property was generally denied. The Hindu law gave unequal and indifferent treatment to women. They were discriminated against in marriage, marital status, divorce, widowhood and inheritance.35 In a joint Hindu family father was the head of the family. Sons acquired rights in the family property as soon as they were born. Daughters had none and a widow without a son had a share in the property until her remarriage or death.36

33 T.S. Devadoss, op.cit., p.121.
34 K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, op. cit., p.552.
ii) Denial Right to get Education for Material Benefit

Another prime evil of women is “denial of right to get education”. This has given birth to innumerable socio-economic evils and permanent subjugation of women of Tamil Society. Until the recent times women of India were not allowed to get education and they were brought up under gross ignorance and away from the active public life.

Though they were considered as life partners of the men but in actual life they were treated as slaves of the customs and property of men. The rays of hopes for deliverance stepped into Indian Society only in the 19th century, though, then and there some philosophers preached against these social evils, even from the ancient period.

The problem of women's education has a vital bearing upon the social, political and intellectual development of the people. It has the most profound influence upon the whole texture of national life. The education of a single girl means the uplifting of a whole family in a large sense than the education of a single man. As Mahatma Gandhi says: “Education means an all round drawing out of the best in the human body, mind and spirit. Education is an important social activity whereby the state, society, school, home etc. play a great role on the growing and developing mind of the child and thus make him or her a full-fledged social being. So, both men and women should be educated in order to adjust themselves to the society. Education can help in the formation of character which is very important for human being”.

In the early times i.e., in the Sangam period, all the high avenues of learning were open to women. The tradition of highly educated women in early times conserved in classical literature. When conditions became unsafe, restrictions were placed on the freedom and education of women.

As a result of child marriage, enforced widowhood, sati and temple prostitution, education of women did not receive encouragement either from the government or the people. It was a deep-rooted belief for several years that women should not be educated. The Tamil Proverb says:

"That though she reads and studies endlessly, women's thought is always an after thought."

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38 This view gained strength, perhaps, because of the established custom of devadasi children along attending schools. Kenneth Ingam, Reformers in India, 1793-1833, An account of work of Christian Missionaries on behalf of social reform (London: 1956), p.56.

39 Herman Jeissen, op.cit., proverb no.3471, p.383.
They felt that female education was meant only for Devadasis who had to learn the fine arts in order to dance in temples and on public occasions. The Principal Collector of Coimbatore Mr.J.Sullivan, in his letter dated 23rd November 1822 stated that the education of women was almost entirely confined in the Coimbatore District to the dancing women, who were generally of the kaikolah caste, a class of weavers.40

In the early years of 19th century the number of educated women was meagre. The returns of the indigenous schools showed as many as 5480 girls in a total enrollment of 18,110.41 Thus the women of the Tamil Society suffered a lot until the work of socio religious reformers, Christian missionaries and government’s amelioration works proved fruitful.

III. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING FOR THE ELEVATION OF WOMEN

Lack of provision of facilities for the education of girls, conservative attitude of parents, child marriage, inefficiency of the system of education, unsuitable curriculum for girls, co-education, lack of women teachers were some of the hindrance in the way of progress of female education.42 Though the women folk were put under socio-economic restriction, there were some reformers worked then and there, for the mitigation of suffering of the women folk.

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41 Revenue Board Consultation, dt. 10th March 1826, vol.314, p.875.
42 Stri Dharma, Madras, November 1933, pp.14-17.
The Christian missionaries played a vital role in the elevation of the status of women. Their ultimate aim was to convert the Indians into Christianity. For this purpose they took education as a tool and started their operation in India especially in Tamil Nadu as because the education was closely connected with their religion.

Though the educational system was well established in India, the majority of the Indians were away from the influence of education due to caste rigidity. Hence the missionaries employed various methods of preaching to achieve their object of conversion. They entered in the field of female education even in the 18th century itself, but at that time their efforts were restricted to the Christian community only. The vernacular language was used as the medium of instruction. They mainly emphasised on 'Gospel Knowledge'.

The missionaries had the object of preaching Christianity when they took up female education. To preach Christianity, they should reach females in India. Thackwell reports, "we shall never evangelise the country, till we elevate the females.

The women of this country are the upholders and supporters of idolatry and the daughters of this generation are to be the wives of the next and the mother's of the following. All know the moral influence of the mother over the child.

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It is therefore of vital importance to the success of the missionary causes and spread of Christianity that the women be educated". So their prime aim was to evangelise the ladies through education. Christian women were found in the Government girls' schools and in the schools started by the Sourashtras at Kumbakonam, Dindigal and Madurai. Up to 1900, the mission had furnished the great majority of teachers for all girls' schools started by Hindus.

In the 19th century when Western Humanitarian ideas spread in India, the then time-honoured social customs were put under severe criticism. Though there were strong opposition from the reactionary section of the Hindu Society, the untiring efforts of social reformers, Christian Missionaries and Governmental machinery and other non-Governmental organisations, the public opinion was created in support of the abolition of evils related to women.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion shows that the women in India were subjugated under various social evils except the Sangam period that is up to 3rd century AD In the medieval period these evils were forcefully enforced. In course of time there were many factors helped for the removal such evils.

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