SOCIAL REFORMS OF KANDUKURI VIRESALINGAM

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ABSTRACT

The position of women reflects the cultural attainment of society. In the early nineteenth century, women occupied a very low status in Indian society. Customs such as sati, child marriage and polygamy were widely prevalent. The ideas of the social reformers became manifested to some extend by the legislation made by the British government in India. In the “Formative Era of Modern India”, social reform Movement began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy who played a vital role. Besides him Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Viresalingam were founded societies and institutions for bringing about socio-religious reforms. They tried to eradicate the problem of widowhood. Among them Kandukuri Viresalingam worked hard for the upliftment of widows. According to him purified religion, social reforms and vernacular education were the three pillars of a regenerated society purged of its evil ways.

Key words: Polygamy, Vernacular Education, Vivekavardhai, Sanghasamskarna Samiti, Sakalavidyaprabodini.

Introduction:

The human society everywhere is composed of males and females and the society is stratified on the basis of sex. Women constitute half of the population; and thus, a significant segment of every society. Hence, their status, role and position determine the progress and development of the society as well as identify the culture and values on which the society is based1.

The reformist wind blew in the direction of emancipation of women for the first time in India during the nineteenth century. The ideas of the social reformers became manifested to some extend by the legislation made by the British government in India2.

In the Formative Era of Modern India, Social Reform Movement began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy who played a vital role. Besides him Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Viresalingam were founded societies and institutions for bring about Socio-religious reforms. They tried to eradicate the problem of widowhood. The cause of woman was a significant ingredient of their multi-faceted social reforms. Among the reforms, marriage reform is one of the
most important aspects. All of them were eager to liberate women from the evils of child marriage, enforced widowhood and sati. But the religious minded orthodox Hindus were opposed and they did not encourage widow remarriage. Enlightened reformers of the nineteenth century worked for the upliftment of widows by removing the legal obstacles in her way. They launched a vigorous campaign against social evils affecting Indian women and were also fought for women’s betterment.

The widow Re-marriage Movement was started to remove the disabilities of widows, which were enforced upon the Hindu widows, especially on the Brahmin widows. It created an impression that widow remarriage was permissible within the Hindu fold and that a widow could remarry, if she chooses. The nineteenth century marked a turning point in the history of India in that the British having brought India under their direct control started introducing a series of reform in collaboration with the educated Indians for the eradication of certain social evils that affected Indian society. The Social Reform Movement that started in the nineteenth century attached greater importance to woman’s emancipation.

The nineteenth century was a period in which the problems of women became the major concerns of the social reformers. The Leaders of the social reform movement who raised women’s issues were mostly men. Later on the movement was taken over by women. As a result the social reformers started widow homes and widow remarriage associations in different parts of the country to train them for an independent career. It also became less acute with the raising of marriageable age and spread of education. Kandukuri Viresalingam was one of the noted social reformers in India.

Kandukuri Viresalingam came from Telugu-speaking district of Madras Presidency. He dedicated his entire life to the cause of social reform especially for the emancipation of women. He was a member of the Brahma Samaj and Prarthana Samaj, he published his own journal, “Vivekavardhai” (Journal to promote Enlightenment) to encourage social reform. According to him purified religion social reform and vernacular education were the three pillars of a regenerated society purged of its evil ways.
Viresalingam made widow remarriage and female education were the key points of his progress for social change. In Andhra Desa widow re-marriage movement had its genesis as early as 1756, when some learned Telugu scholars expressed their views in favour of it.

Long after, in 1837, a Telugu Brahmin resident of Ratnagiri in Orissa published a pamphlet on this burning issue. After a gap of thirty eight years, in 1875 the first tract in Telugu in favour of widow re-marriage was published by Paravastu Venkataramacharlu of Visakhapatnam in his journal, “Sakalavidyaprabodini”. The attention of Viresalingam was drawn to this tracked by Kokkanda Venkataratnam from Madras and Dharmavaram Krishnamcharla from Bellary saying that he would find it out ragouts.

Later Viresalingam met the might challenge of the opponents of socio-religious reform by founding of Association to serve as media for expansion and propagation of his ideals, thus translating his writings into concrete and materialistic shape.

In 1874, he formed Widow Remarriage Association at Madras and in the same year he launched a journal “Vivekavardhini”, to create awareness of the need for special change.

By 1878, with the support of a few loyal discipline Viresalingam constitute the Social Reforms association, called “Sanghasamkarana Samiti”. And also founded the Prarthana Samaj at Rajahmundry where he delivered weekly sermons of it. Later on he assumed the leadership of South India Brahma Samaj and South Indian Social Reform Association both at Madras.

In 1879, the Widow Re-marriage Movement entered new phase. In 1880, Viresalingam Pantulu founded Widow Remarriage Association in Madras and he opened a school for girls at Rajahmundry and performed first eve of widow remarriage in Andhra in December 11, 1881.

In May 1882, Kandukuri Viresalingam Pantulu went over to Madras for brief stay of six weeks. On June 7, 1883 a widow remarriage was celebrated in Mylapore. Nearly one hundred guest were attended and mostly from the Hindu Widow Re-marriage Association. The marriage was celebrated under the aegis of Raghunatha Rao.
By the time Viresalingam Pantulu shifted his residence to Madras in 1892 and he performed twenty-nine widow remarriages but each marriage was performed with difficulties. Later in 1895, he founded a widow home in Madras which served as hostel as well as school. Later he shifted widow home and purchased three storied building in Purasawalkam which served widow home in Madras. In 1903 the Government of Madras encouraged education of both Hindu and Muslim widows. By his great effort of work towards widow remarriage he was popularly known as the “Vidyasagar of South India”.

In 1905, after his return from Madras he started widow’s home at Rajahmundry. Rajya Lakshmi, wife of Viresalingam gave full co-operation to her husband in his activities. In the widow’s Home, her responsibility and burden was heavier as she has to console helpless young widows of different temperaments hailing from varying strata of society and from different environment seeking protection.

Conclusion

The work of Viresalingam were appreciated all over India and his service were recognized by the government and was conferred the title of “Rao Bahadur in 1893”. He was bestowed with the highest tribute by Mrs. Ramabai Ranade who refers to Andhradesa as “Viresalingam’s Andhra”, so far as widow-remarriage was concerned was concerned.

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