

## **Contribution of Women Activists in the Self- Respect Movement of Tamil Nadu**

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**Abstract:** In Tamil Nadu many women activists played a vital role in the Self Respect Movement of Tamil Nadu. This paper will focus information about women activists from Tamil Nadu who dedicated their lives for Social Reformation. Reformation refers to abolition of some social practices which are deep rooted in the society for centuries. These practices are of great intervention to the development of the country. To achieve this not only men, women also have involved a lot. Among the women activists some of them are worth mentioning. They are Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Nagammaiyar, Dr.S.Dharmambal, Maniammaiyar, and Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy.

**Keywords-** devadasi, widow remarriage, dravidian, depressed, liberation, empowerment

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Self-Respect Movement in Tamil Nadu was begun by E.V. Ramasamy "Periyar" in 1925 as a movement to raise consciousness amongst the oppressed castes of Tamil Nadu against the exploitation of the upper castes, mostly Brahmins. He demanded entry into temples, which was banned to the schedule castes in Tamil Nadu, though the North Indian temples had opened their doors to all. Under his guidance, this movement passed major resolutions to improve the condition of women. They passed the resolutions for widow remarriage, women's right to property, prohibition of dowry and against the institution of Devadasis in Tamil Nadu.

#### **Objectives of the study**

- To study the contribution of women activists in Tamil society for the upliftment of downtrodden people
- To examine the women's Empowerment in Tamil Nadu
- To highlight the impact of Self Respect Movement for the liberation of Women.

#### **Methodology**

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

#### **Ramamirtham Ammaiyar**

Notwithstanding the difficulties, women slowly started getting released from the clutches of enslavement and moved towards empowerment. The Self Respect Movement had provided space for and encouraged political activism among women. To explore how far the movement had succeeded in raising the consciousness of women about their own plight<sup>1</sup>, one needs to construct case histories of these women activists. The portrait of an extraordinary woman who began her life as a devadasi, but transformed herself, over the years, to become a front –ranking participant in the Self-respect Movement. Ramamirthammal was born in 1882 to Krishnasamy of Tiruvarur and Chinnammal of Muvalur in the isai vellala caste, associated with the devadasi system.

In her words: 'I was born in a traditional non-devadasi family.... My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution through the devadasi custom. They also advised him not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount to my family through the profession. .... Given my talents in music and dance....So my parents forced me into this custom. It was during this time that I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those religious texts which advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons'<sup>2</sup>.

A number of former devadasis, inspired by Periyar's concerns for gender and caste equality, joined the Self-Respect Association and became important activists for the Dravidian Movement. This was probably also a

reflection of the increasing numbers of lower-status devadasis who had been dedicated due to their family's declining economic fortunes in the colonial period. Ramamirtham Ammaiyar began her political career in the Indian National Congress. After meeting Gandhi at Mayuram in 1921, she became a Congress propagandist at Thanjavur district, campaigning for non-cooperation movement at the village level. Within the Congress, she allied herself with E.V.Ramasamy, Varadarajulu Naidu and other leaders who believed in an ideological struggle against the conservative opinion by launching a social reform movement<sup>3</sup>.

She joined the Self Respect Movement after E.V.Ramasamy's break with the Indian National Congress. She acted as a relentless campaigner against what she viewed as women's slavery, elaborating how Brahmanical Hinduism and upper-caste men were legitimizing women's sexual oppression<sup>4</sup>. She played a prominent role in the Chengalput Self-Respect Conference. She was one of the eminent thinkers selected by Periyar for preparing his famous action plan, popularly known as Erottupathai (the Path of Erode). Along with Periyar, Ramamirtham also conducted many self-respect weddings devoid of priests and Sanskrit mantras. She was knowledgeable in Sanskrit and was able to explain to people the meanings of the mantras which were not only hollow but demeaning as well. She encouraged inter-caste marriages and personally helped in people of different castes coming together in wedlock. When the first anti-Hindi agitation broke out in 1938, the Dravidian Movement organised a marathon march from Tiruchirappalli to Chennai, covering a distance of 925 km in 47 days, receiving tumultuous welcome all along. Ramamirtham was the only woman to take part of it<sup>5</sup>. She had no formal education and she was only self-educated to read and write Tamil. As a result of her, made intellectual within the Self Respect Movement. She authored essays regularly in Kudi Arasu on the condition of women. In 1936, she published a voluminous novel in Tamil running into 303 pages, with the title *Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipettra Mainer* (The Treacherous Net of the Dasis or a Minor Grown Wise)<sup>6</sup>. She started 'Uvathi Saranalayam' a welfare organization for devadasis and gave a new life to Devadasis. An irrepressible activist and a writer, Ramamirtham finally quit the Dravidar Kazhagam in 1949 to join the Dravida Munnetra kazhagam founded by C.N.Annadurai and few others. Her decision to leave the Dravida Kazhagam was based on her opposition to E.V.Ramasamy's late marriage with a young political lieutenant of his Manaiammai. She fought heroically for the uplift of women and she, along with Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, stood in the forefront of the crusade against the 'Devadasi' system. In a fitting tribute to Moovalur Ammaiyar's memory, the Tamil Nadu government headed by M. Karunanidhi has named its 'marriage assistance programme for the poor' after her<sup>7</sup>. She died in the year 1962.

### **Nagammaiyyar**

Nagammaiyyar, the wife of E.V.Ramasamy, was a member of All India Congress Committee. She acclimated herself to his way of life, started wearing coarse and heavy Khadi and entered public life along with him. When he was imprisoned for picketing liquor shops, she organised a band of volunteers assumed leadership and continued picketing along with her sister-in-law Kannammal. On seeing this, a number of women from Erode participated in this agitation. Gandhiji, when asked about the winding up of the agitation, stated that, "its withdrawal was in the hands of those two women at Erode." This is clear statement to E.V.Ramasamy's principle that women in society should also be encouraged to take active part in the public life like men.<sup>8</sup>

Vaikom Satyagraha was a Social Revolutionary movement in Travancore for the depressed class people were prohibited from walking in the streets that surrounded the Hindu Mahadevar temple. The Kerala Congress leaders appealed to Periyar to take up the leadership in the struggle. He led the agitation and was sentenced to a month's imprisonment. Immediately Nagammaiyyar led the movement throughout the Travancore State. It was due to the growing popularity that the movement had secured in Travancore.<sup>9</sup> They roused the public consciousness greatly. This incident showed Nagammaiyyar's confidence and her leadership. This Vaikom incident also sowed the seed for women liberation movement in India.

When Periyar started the Self Respect Movement, she carried on the propaganda with the same unrelenting spirit. S.Ramanathan, one of the fellow activists of the Movement, observes that the zealous participation of Nagammaiyyar in all the efforts of her husband was responsible for the massive success achieved by the Movement. She had toured almost all the districts of Tamil Nadu, carrying the message of the movement. She was the editor of Kudi Arasu, one of the chief propaganda organs of Self Respect Movement for more than ten months. When Periyar was away for a European tour, she requested the subscribers to continue their support and cooperation to celebrate the anniversary of the Self Respect Movement. Nagammaiyyar has been noted among the circle of Periyar for her warmth and hospitality. When it came to the question of entertaining the guests, she did not hesitate to throw Periyar's code of abstinence to the winds and feed them splendidly. Even when Periyar brought guests at midnight, Nagammaiyyar was ready to receive them.

While C.Rajagopalachari recalls the tasty dosais served by the lady, Thiru.Vi. Ka pays the following tribute to her: "When it comes to hospitality no one can be a match for Nagammaiyyar. Nobody can deny the way in which she received the volunteers who came to her residence with a smile and chivalrous words". The

following words of Periyar uttered when she breathed her last aptly sums up his sense of indebtedness to her: "As I have all along had Nagammaiyar as my life companion, I cannot recollect any occasion when I have been her life companion". In 1989 Tamil Nadu Government had started E.V.R. Nagammaiyar Memorial Women Free Bachelor Education.

### **S.Dharmambal**

S Dharmambal was born in a small village named Karun Thattankudi near Thanjavur. She fought vigorously for the implementation of women education, widow remarriage and was inter-caste marriage. The anti-Hindi agitation of 1938 forms an important milestone in the history of the Dravidian Movement as well as the history of Tamil Nadu. The imposition of Hindi was opposed many Tamil people like E.V.Ramasamy, Somasundara Bharathi, Sami Venkatalachalam, Ramamirtham ammaiyar, S.Dharmambal, all of whom carried on a virulent campaign against it. The people of Tamil Nadu were generally in sympathy with the movement, for they thought that if Hindi became the Rashtra Bhasha, they would lose opportunities for employment in other provinces.

One of the highlights of the agitation was a marathon march by a hundred volunteers from Tiruchirappali, spanning a distance of about 480 kilometres and reaching Madras after six weeks. When attempts were made by some interested people for organising a fitting reception for the volunteers, Dharmambal undertook the task and organised a grand reception for them at the Triplicane beach, with the Tamil Savant Maraimalai Adigal occupying the chair. Dharmambal was jailed in the course of the agitation. She played a prominent role in convening a Tamil Nadu Women's Conference on 13 November 1938, which resolved to join the picketing of Hindu Theological High school on the next day. She led a batch of five women on the first day and was sentenced to one year's imprisonment. In this famous Conference held in Madras under the Presidentship of Neelambaigai Ammaiyar daughter of Maraimalai adigal, the conference endorsing the resolution passed by the Madras Thyagaranagar Womens's Development Association conferred the title "Periyar" (the Great Man) on E.V.Ramasamy in recognition of his selfless service to the Tamils<sup>10</sup>. Rajaji assured Samiappa Mudaliar in the legislative council that the government would consider abolishing the scheme of teaching Hindi in schools. On June 18, 1939, when a women's delegation led by Dharmambal met the Rajaji, he once again asserted that 'no compulsion' was attached to the teaching of Hindi<sup>11</sup>. Despite these assurances and conciliatory moves, the government was not prepared to take any step to remove the element of compulsion. In contrary, the Congress government then took more drastic measures to suppress the activities agitators. On 3 August 1939, the police raided the house of Dharmambal, forced open a room and confiscated all the files relating to the anti-Hindi agitation.

S. Dharmambal started a movement called 'Elavu Varam' as, till 1940 the Tamil teachers had no due recognition in the society and they were also not paid equal salary like the other teachers. As a result the Educational Minister Thiru Avinasalingam Chettiar announced equal pay to Tamil teachers like other teachers<sup>12</sup>. She was also the president of Chennai Manavar Mandaram- an association found for to make the students to improve their Tamil and to score good marks in Tamil. Following the footsteps of Periyar, Dharmambal encouraged inter caste marriages and widow remarriages. When young men came to her seeking employment, she helped them in getting employed and made them marry young widows. When she breathed her last in May 1959, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam flags flew half-mast and the leaders of the party recalled her services to the Dravidian ideology. When Chief Minister Karunanidhi introduced a scheme for the rehabilitation of widows, he named it after Dharmambal, as a mark of gratitude to her services.

### **Maniammaiyar**

Maniyammai was a staunch crusader for the cause of the liberation of women, empowerment of women and ascendancy women in political circles. She stood for the annihilation of caste and promulgation for the prohibition. She advocated self Respect Marriages, inter caste marriages while condemned child marriage and the ritual marriage. Following Periyar, she stood for the eradication of untouchability and elevation of the bottom line people. She awakened the depressed class people from the deep slumber and advocated reservation to the needy people in recruitment of public postings. Maniammaiyar was born on March 10, 1917 in Vellore in the middle class family. Maniammai was studied upto SSLC. From her childhood onwards she was listening and reading Periyar speeches and writing. She was very sincerely followed the theories and philosophy of Periyar in her life mission. Maniammai married Periyar on July 9, 1949. The age of Periyar was 70 and that of Maniammai was 30 at the time of their marriage<sup>13</sup>. Periyar explained that the sole reason for the marriage was to ensure that Maniammai would be his legal heir and no more. "Periyar thought she was selfless enough to maintain all the property acquired by his Trust," said Arulmozhi, an advocate and a promoter of Periyar's ideals. "Even though it was against his ideals, he had to marry her to confer the rights to his property." "No woman has taken as much criticism and abuses as she has," Arulmozhi said. "Society treats women who take a controversial stand harshly. But she had full knowledge of her decision and continued to be Periyar's caretaker till he passed away." After

Periyar's death, Maniammai became the leader of the Dravidar Kazhagam for five years until her own death in 1978. Many regard her as Tamil Nadu's first woman political leader. She began to tour around the state and consolidates the party at a time when many members were looking to shift to the Congress or the DMK. "As a person, she was very simple," said Viduthalai Rajendran, a Periyarist who worked alongside Maniammai. "She didn't wear silk saris or jewellery at all. She was dedicated to the liberation of women."

In 1974, Maniammai organised a controversial Ravan Leela to protest against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi attending the Ram Leela celebrations in the Delhi. Effigies of Ram, Sita and Lakshman were burnt, since followers of Periyar always saw the mainstream version of the Ramayana as a demeaning to Dravidians. She also led protests against the censorship of *Viduthalai* during the Emergency. Hundreds of Dravidar Kazhagam members took to the streets and many were arrested. Maniammai was told by a senior Congress leader that if she did not rein in the protests, the party would be banned. "She asked them to go ahead and ban it," said Kolathoor Mani. "She said that if she gives up what their party stands for, then why even has one?" Maniammai also played a big role in carrying out Periyar's welfare measures. Periyar had started homes of destitute women and orphanages for girls, which he handed over to Maniammai to look after. Maniammai was a symbol of sacrifice. She passed away on March 16, 1978.

### **Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddi**

Muthulakshmi was born as the eldest of the four children to Narayanasamy and Chandrammal at Pudukkottai Tamil Nadu on August 30, 1886. In those days when girls were generally not sent to school, Narayanasamy engaged tutors to teach her at home. She passed the matriculation examination in 1902. Muthulakshmi's desire to study was hampered by her family circumstances but her father was keen that she continued her studies. So he sought the help of the Maharaja of Pudukkottai, and thus Muthulakshmi was able to join college. She was a brilliant student and her excellent academic records impressed everyone. She passed as the first woman medical graduate in the country in 1912 from the Madras Medical College winning several gold medals and prizes. She married Dr. Sundar Reddy, a well known surgeon, on the condition that she would be treated as equal and given the freedom to do what she wanted. In 1922 Dr.Muthulakshmi found cancer in her sister's rectum and she stayed by the bedside of her suffering sister who passed away in a year. This induced Dr. Muthulakshmi to concentrate more on cancer

She became the first Indian member of Women's India Association (WIA), Madras in 1918 and she was the President of WIA Madras for 30 years. Dr.Muthulakshmi was a Member and Vice-President of Madras Legislative Assembly from 1927 to 1930. She was an active member of the Freedom Struggle of India. In 1930 she founded an orphanage, named "Avvai Home" for the female children of the devadasis. She was the prime mover behind the legislation that abolished the devadasi system in 1929 and played a key role in rising the minimum marriageable age for women in India. She presided over the epoch making Self Respect women's conference in 1930. She was the first woman to be nominated to the Madras Legislative Council. As a member of the Council, she introduced a scheme of free education for girls up to class eighth. Apart from being an extraordinary doctor, Muthulakshmi was also an exemplary orator and writer. She translated Mahatma Gandhi's speeches from English to Tamil. She addressed the women's conference in Chicago, USA, in 1933.

In 1949 she initiated Cancer Relief Fund of WIA and set up a Cancer Hospital. In 1954 she formed Cancer Institute. She was awarded "Padma Bhushan" in 1956 by the Government of India. Dr. Muthulakshmi made her son to be with the Cancer Institute for serving the poor cancer patients of India, after his completing his studies in Medicine at USA. Today, Adyar Cancer Institute is serving the poor cancer patients from all over India, in a notable way<sup>14</sup>. The DMK rule under Karunanidhi's leadership has named after Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy its Expectant mothers Financial Assistance Scheme by which a monthly allowance is paid to a pregnant woman for two months before and after delivery for taking nutrition meal. This great woman of India passed away on July 22, 1968.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The multi-dimensional role played by women activists and their feminist ideology is to be understood from their innate sense of gender equality and social justice. The women can get back their rightful place in society if law is properly enforced to check male superiority. They advocated that women have to step in and involve themselves for their liberation and not solely depend on males.

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