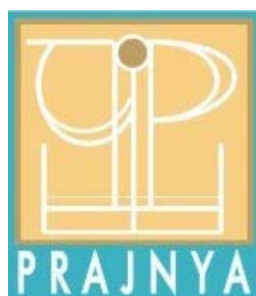


**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
IN THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT, 1935-1945**

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This paper aims to study the participation of women in the Dravidian movement in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It begins with an overview of the genesis of the movement, while focusing on women's activism in various campaigns. The paper profiles the handful of women whose work was documented briefly.

A Brief Account of the Dravidian Movement

The roots of the Dravidian movement can be traced to the early 20th century political activity around the issue of greater representation of non-Brahmins in the political sphere. The movement worked towards the upliftment of the lower castes through education. It awakened ethnic fervour among the Tamils, linking Tamil/non-Brahmin identity.

The alienation of a growing class of affluent merchants and landowners gave rise to the Justice party. Sir P.T. Thiagaraya Chettiar, Sir P.T. Rajan, and V.V. Ramaswami Nadar were a few of the prominent leaders of the party. John Christopher Baker in *The Politics of South India* observed that most industrialists of that period were non-Brahmins. As Brahmins had better access to English education they were absorbed into government services and other fields such as medicine, law, engineering etc.¹ In 1921, The Justice Party, put forth a plea for communal representation in government services hoping to attract non-Brahmin voters.² By the 1940s, this had evolved into a demand for a separate Dravida Nadu and the party was reconfigured as the Dravida Kazhagam.

It was during this period that E.V. Ramaswami 'Periyar' came on the scene. He was greatly attracted to the non-cooperation movement started by Gandhi and plunged wholeheartedly into the activities of the Congress and the struggle for Swaraj. He advocated the use of Khadi and urged people to give up untouchability. He opposed the injustices meted out to the

¹ Ramamurti, P. *The Freedom Struggle and The Dravidian Movement*. Page 12.

² Ramamurti, P. *The Freedom Struggle and The Dravidian Movement*. Page 44.

Harijans,³ including instances where they were not allowed to walk the streets where upper caste Hindus lived and prevented from entering temples. Similarly, Periyar expressed his displeasure over Brahmin and non-Brahmin boys being fed separately at a school run by V.V.S Iyer, a congress leader.⁴ Gandhi came to Madras to try and effect an amicable settlement on this issue. Discussions were held at the end of which Gandhi proposed that the boys be fed together but the cooks would be Brahmins. Periyar rejected the proposal on the grounds that it implied that food cooked by non-Brahmins was impure for the Brahmins.⁵

Such instances prompted him to start the Self-Respect movement, which dealt with social reforms like widow remarriage, equality of the sexes, marriage without rituals etc. He organised a number of conferences —“Abolition of Zamindari”, “Abolition of money lending”, “Abolition of Capitalism” — which attracted large crowds, especially the youth.

The objective of the Self-Respect movement was a casteless society and complete equality for the masses. This was to be achieved by the eradication of social evils and freeing society from the shackles of superstitions and blind faith in God and religion. It fought for equality of women in education, employment and property rights. It also endeavoured to popularise self respect marriages conducted in the absence of priests and religious rites. The Self-Respect movement worked for reservation in educational institutions and in government jobs for previously excluded communities. Periyar spent most of his life trying to make people see that the lack of education had resulted in their backwardness.

When C.V. Rajagopalachari formed the first Congress ministry in 1937, he imposed Hindi as one of the subjects in one of the high schools in Madras to begin with. He was a firm believer in Hindi being the national language. This was firmly opposed by Periyar and others like Somasundara Bharati. The people of Tamil Nadu felt that they would lose employment opportunities in other places if Hindi became the national language. Periyar and his followers

³ Ramamurti, P. *The Freedom Struggle and The Dravidian Movement*. Page 74.

⁴ Ramamurti, P. *The Freedom Struggle and The Dravidian Movement*. Page 74

⁵ Ramamurti, P. *The Freedom Struggle and The Dravidian Movement*. Page 74

tarred Hindi name boards at railway stations and burnt copies of the constitution because it contained provisions for thrusting Hindi on non-Hindi speaking people.

The participation of women in the Dravidian movement

The Dravidian movement was successful in allowing women to express themselves on a public platform. Women successfully debated on public issues and were involved in social work and were on a par with men in bringing about social reforms. The entire credit for bringing about this change goes to Periyar. Women were able to function as an independent group in organising their own conferences.

The movement used these conferences to take up women's issues and encouraged women's participation in politics. The first provincial Self-Respect conference was held at Chengleput, near Madras in 1929. It discussed issues including the Simon commission and caste oppression. A demand for equal property rights for men and women was made. The 2nd conference at Virudunagar in 1931 argued that women should not be recruited only for professions like teaching and medicine but that they should be inducted into the army and police. They also called for local magistrates to identify those temples which encouraged the devadasi system⁶.

The anti-Hindi agitations also elicited considerable participation by women. The women wore sarees with the Tamil flag printed on it and chanted anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans.⁷ A meeting was organised in Madras on September 11, 1938 and was addressed by Ramamritham Ammaiyar, Narayani Ammaiyar, Va. Ba. Thamaraikanni Ammaiyar, Munnagaara Azhagiyar among others. Activists like Dr. Daramambal, Ramamirthammaiyar, Malar Mugathammair, Seethammal, Unnamulaimmar, Bhuvanewari Ammaiar, Sivasankari, Sarojini Ammaiar,

⁶ Bharadwaj.S Anandhi. 1991. "Women's question in the Dravidian Movement c.1925-1948." *Social Scientist*. 19: 5-6 Page 30.

⁷ Bharadwaj.S Anandhi. 1991. "Women's question in the Dravidian Movement c.1925-1948." Page 33.

Damakoti Ammaiar, Jayalakshmi Ammaiar courted arrest.⁸ A total of 73 women were arrested, of which 37 went to jail with infants.

Activist Profiles

Annai Nagammaiyar

E.V.R. Nagammaiar, the wife of E.V. Ramaswami, was a member of the All-India Congress Committee. She organised a group of women volunteers and carried on picketing when her husband was arrested for violating prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. She raised public consciousness by carrying on a propaganda through the streets of Travancore to fight for the rights of non-Brahmins to walk the streets where Brahmins lived.

Movalur Ramamirthammaiyar

Being a devadasi, she emerged as an irrepressible activist championing the cause of women, devoting herself to the abolition of the Devadasi system. She brought many Devadasis to Mayawaram in 1925, and conducted marriage for many of them. She was proficient in both Tamil and Sanskrit. She translated Sanskrit slogans into Tamil and consequently self-respect marriages gained momentum.

T.S Kunjitham Guruswami

On December 8, 1929 the marriage of Kunjitham Ammaiar with Kuthusi Gurusami was concluded in the presence of Periyar and Nagammaiar. Kunjitham Ammaiar argued that Indian women were treated as animals only valued for reproduction purposes. She faulted parents for illiteracy among girls. She taught women self respect. She showed the world that women were in no way inferior in their fight for self respect.⁹

⁸ Bharadwaj,S Anandhi. 1991. "Women's question in the Dravidian Movement c.1925-1948." Page 32.

⁹ This section draws primarily on Valarmathi.M. 2002. *Suya Mariyadai Iyakka Veeranganaigal* (Women and Self Respect Movement). Tamizhmathi Pathipakkam. Thanjavur. Pages 15-23.

Sivagami Ammaiar

Married at 11, Sivagami Ammaiar lost her husband 3 months into the marriage. At 18, she married again with the help of Movalur Ramamirthammaiar. Her speeches condemned blind faith in palmistry and horoscopes. She was also part of Periyar's temple entry campaign.

S. Neelavathi Ammaiar

Neelavathi Ammaiar married Ramasubramaniam in the presence of Periyar and Nagammaiar, without the knowledge or consent of family. She wrote prolifically on subjects like the fall of Hindu religion and growth of other religions due to untouchability and despair of widows; the future of India and Self-Respect movement; the position of girls and duties of youth; women's organisations and the position of women; and the slavery of women and male domination.

Miranda Gajendran

Miranda Gajendran was involved in the struggle for a separate Dravida state.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar

Neelambikai Ammaiyar's writings survived the social criticisms of those days. Her works involved the translation and incorporation of literary works of Thiruvaasagam, Thevaram, writings of Ramalinga Adigal and Periyar and was thus as an amalgam of the freedom movement, Tani Thamizh Iyakkam, religious and atheist work — a wide spectrum indeed. She appreciated women who stepped away from their traditional roles in the patriarchal society.

Other women involved in the Self-respect movement about whom much less has been written are: R. Annapoorni Ammal, Girija Devi, Pandithai Ranganayaki Meenambal Sivaraj, Indirani Balasubramaniam, Alarmelu Mangai Thayarammal, Lakshmi Ammal, Maragatha Valli, A. Annamalai Ammal, Sivadhanu Ammal, S.R. Gandhi Ammal, K.A. Janaki Ammal, Suba Visalakshi, Manjula Bai, S.V.Rajammal, A.Ponnammal, Valliammal, Salem Sivakami Ammal, Trichy Shanuga Sundarambal, Erode Kamatchi Ammal, Kanthammal Sundara Vadivelu, Manoharam Ammaiar, Kottaam K.V.Kamatchi, Paripoorna Thammiar, and Maniammaiar.

Summary

Periyar's unparalleled efforts to transform the lives of the people of Tamil Nadu, especially women, brought about a radical change in the lives and aspirations of the women. The efforts of the various women activists have played a role in alleviating the degree of suppression of women in various spheres. Though many women had actively participated in the Dravidian movement, not much has been written about them.

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