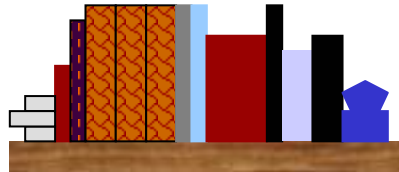


Women's history roundtable series



**What was the Other Half of the Coconut?:
Women in the Self-Respect Movement**

by

K. Srilata

Venue: Crossword, Venkatnarayana Road, T. Nagar

Time: 11:30 a.m.

Date: Saturday, March 14, 2009

A poet, fiction writer and translator, Srilata teaches Creative writing and Literature at IIT Madras. Srilata's PhD was on the print media and the Dravidian movement. Her book *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self-Respect History* was published by Zubaan/Kali for Women.

The Prajnya Women in Politics and Policy Resource Centre is a project of the Politics, Security and Women Initiative of The Prajnya Trust.

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WHAT WAS THE OTHER HALF OF THE COCONUT? WOMEN IN THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

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One of the most significant thrusts of the South Indian Dravidian movement, especially in its Self-Respect phase, was the creation of a specifically Tamil Dravidian press as a counter to the upper-caste nationalist “mainstream” press to which newspapers such as *Sudesanmitran* and *The Hindu* were seen as belonging. The creation of this press was part of a much larger political process by which a non-Brahmin “Tamil” identity was fashioned. With the launch of a number of Self-Respect journals, *Kudi Arasu* (1925) and *Puratchi* (1933) being among the most prominent, the Self-Respect movement created a non-Brahmin public sphere for the first time. These journals serve as important documents of what really went on during those exciting but often confusing years.

If, as feminists, we wish to understand Self-Respect history differently, to view it through the eyes of women who were closely identified with the politics of the movement, conventional histories and the substantial body of work by Periyar will simply not suffice. These narratives will never quite capture the “structures of feeling” which characterise the lives of women self-respecters during those turbulent years. My work grew out of my gradual recognition that we completely lacked the material basis as it were for a project that was simply begging to be done: the writing of a *women’s* history of the Self-Respect movement. By “women’s history”, I mean a history which provides a fuller and more meaningful account of the participation of women in the Self-Respect movement, enabling in the process, a richer and perhaps altogether different understanding of its gender politics, an asking of different questions. These translations then were motivated by a desire to map the critical voices of women Self-Respecters, voices that have remained unheard within the context of political as well as scholarly spaces over which the figure of Periyar has loomed so large. Such a mapping is crucial, I believe, if we wish to understand the complexities of women’s agency in the movement. Equally crucial, however, is a critique of the ways in which Self-Respect histories have been written (mostly with an exclusive focus on Periyar’s thought, work and vision), of the manner in which Periyar himself is read and represented.

While translation and archival work, I believe, is central to the feminist enterprise of retrieving women’s work, translating as a feminist has also meant translating with an eye to the texts’ quirks and to its layered sub-texts. This has often yielded unexpected results so that often what seemed like a straightforward “Self-Respect” text turned out to have unexpected depths.

About K. Srilata

A poet, fiction writer and translator, Srilata teaches Creative writing and Literature at IIT Madras. Srilata's Ph.D was on the print media and the Dravidian movement. Her book *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self-Respect History* was published by Zubaan/Kali for Women.

Srilata won the first prize in the All India Poetry competition 1998 organised by the British Council and the Poetry Society, India for her poem "In Santa Cruz, Diagnosed Homesick", the Gouri Majumdar poetry prize instituted by *The Brown Critique* in the year 2000 and the Unisun British Council poetry award 2007. Her work has been featured in *The BloodAxe Anthology of Indian Poets*, Penguin India's *First Proofs*, *Fulcrum*, *The Little Magazine*, *Kavya Bharati* and *The Hindu*. Srilata's anthology of poetry titled *Seablue Child* was published by the Brown Critique, Kolkata in the year 2000. Her book *Short Fiction from South India* co-edited with Subashree Krishnaswamy was published by OUP in 2007. She has co-edited an anthology of Tamil poetry in translation for Penguin India titled *Rapids of a Great River: The Penguin Book of Tamil Poetry* (forthcoming shortly).

She has just finished writing her first novel and is working on bringing out a second anthology of poetry. Her academic interests now include theories of creativity and literatures in translation. She has just started to blog and can be accessed at: <http://srilatawriting.blogspot.com>.

About Prajnya

Prajnya is a non-profit think-tank in Chennai that will work in areas related to peace, justice and security.

The Prajnya Trust was established in 2006 to promote the values of peace, justice and security by facilitating scholarship, advocacy, networking and educational outreach on related issues. It has been registered under section 12AA of the Income Tax Act 1961 (695/06-07). In September 2007, the Trust launched Prajnya Initiatives for Peace, Justice and Security, a new Chennai-based public policy research centre.

Prajnya's work embraces scholarship, advocacy, networking and educational outreach and is organized into thematic Initiatives. Politics, Security and Women in South Asia is our first Initiative, and its cornerstone project is the setting up of the Prajnya Women in Politics and Policy Resource Centre which compiles quantitative and qualitative data on women's participation in South Asia's public sphere.

The Women's History Roundtable Series is a program of the Resource Centre intended to facilitate conversations about women's history and promote knowledge about research in women's studies.