This chapter is divided into four sections. While the first section deals with women's lives in the middle class milieu of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century Tamilnadu, the second section analyses the social reform activities undertaken by male social reformers. The third section deals with changes in women's lives and consciousness as well as their involvement in social reform activities during this period. The last section brings together the conclusions of the chapter.

1.1 Women's Lives in Middle Class Milieu

In this section, we portray the lives of Hindu Tamil women in the middle class milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The manner in which women were treated in the middle class households in the Tamil districts was extremely oppressive. This oppression began at the very moment a girl child was born.

In the middle class Tamil households, the birth of a girl child was normally not welcomed and in fact many families mourned it. The new-born girl child was "looked upon as a great piece of misfortune"\(^1\) whereas the birth of a male child was looked forward to and celebrated. At home, women were taught "that the first duty of a Hindu wife was to be the mother of sons".\(^2\) Hence, many mothers, out of social pressure, hated their own daughters for they had not been born as sons. Many refused to feed

---

them with milk or any other nourishing food. Even in upper class families, this was true.³

School education was basically meant for boys; and they were sent to school with elaborate celebrations. In contrast, girls were most often not even taught basic reading and writing skills. Instead, they were trained at home to become efficient wives and mothers. As Ambujammal, daughter of S. Srinivasa Iyengar and a nationalist women leader⁴, reminisced, her mother taught her only domestic arts, family rituals and particularly cooking, instead of sending her to school for formal education.⁵

Similarly, Muthulakshmi Reddy, a well known woman leader and social reformer,⁶ noted how boys in a family were treated differently from

---

³ In her autobiography, S.Ambujammal narrates how her mother detested her for she was born a girl, and how the entire family mourned her birth. See, S.Ambujammal, Nan Kanda Bharatham, Madras, 1973, pp.20-22, and 25.

⁴ S. Ambujammal, daughter of S. Srinivasa Iyengar, was born in 1899 in an orthodox elite Brahmin family in Madras city. Exposed only to Zenana Education, she learnt Hindi, English and handicrafts at a Ladies recreation club. She was married at the age of twelve. She joined the Congress party after an unhappy married life. During the non-cooperation movement in 1921, she collected money for the Tilak Swaraj fund. The Women's Swadeshi League and the Swayam Sevika (Women Volunteers who aided Congress party activities), was begun by her in 1932 at Madras. She, along with Vai. Mu. Kothainayagi Ammal, organised prabhāt peri at Tripcicane and Mylapore temples. Chosen to lead the foreign cloth boycott agitation at Madras as the ‘third dictator’ in 1930, she was arrested in 1932. During 1939-1940 she became the Secretary of WIA, and also played an active role in AIWC and Mylapore Ladies Club. After independence in 1947 she founded the Srinivasa-Gandhi Nilayam, in the memory of her father, to carry out Gandhian Constructive and other social welfare programmes. She translated Premchand’s Sevasadan to Tamil and in 1964 wrote her autobiography called, Nan Kanda Bharatham.

⁵ S. Ambujammal, op.cit., pp. 39 and 54-55.

⁶ Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first woman medical graduate from Madras. In 1926, she became the first woman ever to enter the Indian Legislature not merely as a member but as the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council. In 1927, she established the first childrens' hospital in India and in 1930, she founded the Ayyāj Home for destitute women and orphaned children. Reddy was one of the founder members of AIWC and from 1917 onwards, she was closely associated with all the activities of WIA. She also played a leading role in the agitations called women's voting right and the representation of women in Municipal and Legislative Councils. When she was the Vice-President of WIA, she secured the passing of the Devadasi Abolition Bill, the Child Marriage Restraint Bill and the Suppression of Immoral Traffic and Brothels Bill. In 1930-31, she became the president of AIWC, and for a while, she was also editing the WIA journal Stridharma.
girls: “The girls were made to do all the household work, were seldom sent to the school, and were actually told that they were much inferior to the boys... It was brought home to us that only boys needed education and the girls need only learn cooking...”

N.S. Rukumani Ammal, a nationalist woman activist, who later joined the communist movement, in an interview recollected that she was tied up in a cattle-shed and beaten up by her elder brother for desiring to have school education.

In fact, girls, whose fathers were courageous enough to send them to schools, found themselves being ostracized from their orthodox communities. Even when girls were sent to schools, they were taught only tailoring, domestic sciences and a bit of Tamil so as to enable them “to keep milk and dobbey accounts”. Girls themselves had to face enormous problems at schools and colleges as they were very few in numbers. For

---

8 N.S. Rukumani Ammal was born in an orthodox Brahmin family in Thanjavur district. Though she was involved in the national movement from the age of nine, her public and political life began when she joined the Women’s Swadeshi League, where she spun and sold khadi. In 1939, she joined the Congress Socialist Party. Arrested for her anti-war activities and individual satyagraha in 1941, she underwent a three year imprisonment. She joined the Communist Party of India in the 1950s.
instance, Sister Subbalakshmi\textsuperscript{11} as a child widow had to hide herself with a big black umbrella to avoid men staring at her while travelling all by herself to the school by a rickshaw.\textsuperscript{12} At college, the male students "clapped and jeered and cheered when she [Sister Subbalakshmi] entered the room. The professors seemed to find her presence embarrassing".\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, Muthulakshmi Reddy, who boldly marched to the school, had to put up with harsh criticisms and silly remarks of the passers-by.\textsuperscript{14} Even the few women teachers of her school had to travel "in closed carriages to avoid public gaze and even so crowds gathered around them".\textsuperscript{15} As a result of all these, there were only three female literates per 100 male literates in Tamilnadu in 1890.\textsuperscript{16} At schools, boys and girls were provided different kinds of education according to the pre-existing gender relations in the Tamil society. Girls, for instance, were taught "devotional music, basic principles of Hinduism, ideals of Hindu womanhood and duties of the Hindu wife as set forth in ‘Bharya Dharma’, principal episodes of Ramayana and Mahabharata, lives of Tamil saints and Indian history".\textsuperscript{17} In other words,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Sister Subbalakshmi was born in 1886 at Tanjavur district in an orthodox Brahmin family. Married at the age of eleven, she became a widow within a few weeks. The first Brahmin woman to become a Matriculate in 1905, she went on to win a gold medal for her F.A. examination in 1908. In the year 1911, she became the first Brahmin child widow to acquire a B.A. Honours degree and the Licentiate in Teaching. She started the Sarada Ashram, a widows home to educate Brahmin widows, in 1912, and in the same year she founded the Sarada Ladies Union. In 1927, she established an educational institution called the Sarada Vidyalaya and five years later in 1932, she started the Mylapore Ladies Club. An activist of WIA and AIWC, she proposed religious and moral education for women at the first AIWC Conference held at Poona in 1927. Nominated to the Tamilnadu Legislative Council by the Government of Madras in 1952, she was a member till 1956. Sister Subbalakshmi passed away in 1969.
  \item Monica Felton, \textit{op.cit.}, p.65
  \item S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 2.
  \item Census of India, 1891, Madras, Vol. XIII, 1892
  \item C.S. Lakshmi, \textit{Face behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature}, New Delhi, 1984, p.17.
\end{itemize}
women's education was meant to train them to retain their 'natural qualities' which were supposed to be fear, ignorance, shyness and sobriety.

In the patriarchal Tamil society, child marriage was an important custom, particularly among the Brahmins, the Arya Vysyas and a few other upper caste non-Brahmins. This practice led to familial violence against the girl, enforced widowhood, pre-pubertal consummations, problems of dowry and frequent child birth endangering the girl's health. For instance, in 1921 there were 856 child wives (in the 0-20 age group) per 1,000 Brahmin females in Tamilnadu. Among them, 48 were child widows. In 1931, there were 1,69,535 child wives and 6,951 child widows in Tamilnadu. Especially in 1930, when the Sarada Bill on restraining child marriages was discussed in the Legislative Assembly, "at least three million little girls and two million boys were hustled into marriage before the Act became operative". Forcible pre-pubertal consummation of the marriage was one of the serious after-effect of such marriages. In her evidence before the Age of Consent Committee, Sister Subbalakshmi claimed that 99 per cent of child marriages were consummated much before the girl attained puberty or before she completed her fifteenth year. To quote her,"Within the last five years I have come across more than ten cases like that among Brahmins. They [the girls] are married at ten or eleven. There is no girlhood

18 Census of India, Madras 1921. (See * page 53).
19 The table illustrates how many females had been married and widowed between 0-15 age group in Tamilnadu(See ** page 53).
20 Malathi Ramanathan, Sister R.S. Subbalakshmi: Social Reformer and Educationist, Bombay, 1989, p.63. For details of Sarada Act and the discussions around that see Chapter III.
at all among Brahmins. The mother-in-law treats the girl as if she were a [fully grown] woman, the domestic duties are on her shoulders. This results in derangement of the womb and there are other complications". She also said that she knew many girls of 14 or 15 years old, who had to have minimum three or four abortions every year, and many who gave birth to still-born babies at the age of eleven or twelve. Similarly, Bhagirathi Sriram, testifying before the Age of Consent Committee, noted that she had come across several others [other instances] where consummation had taken place before girls are fully grown affecting their health and their children permanently resulting in numerous miscarriages and infantile deaths. Lots of such girls are affected by T.B. [Tuberculosis].

Worst of all were cases of young brides who had become insane due to the shock and the agony of child bearing. Muthulakshmi Reddy noted that as a doctor she had come across many abortions and miscarriages as daily complaints among those young brides. She, while arguing in favour of Sarada Act in the Legislative Assembly, cited a case of a 12 year old young girl who was forced into pre-pubertal consummation by her 40 year old husband. Due to forcible consummations, many of these child wives had committed suicide. Since polygamy was widely prevalent and dowry was demanded from the girl's family, the young child bride was threatened that if her puberty was delayed or if she refused to cohabit with her husband.

---

22 Monica Felton, op.cit., pp. 160-161.
before puberty, her husband would take another girl as his second wife. This had led to forcible cohabitation and violence by the husband on his child wife. The plight of child wives was, thus, pathetic; and numerous instances of harassment of child wives were reported during this period. In 1926, at Triplicane in Madras city, one Kalayana Rama Iyer poured kerosene and set fire to his 15 year old child wife, Dharmambal. In her dying declaration, Dharmambal confessed that she was married to this 22 year old Brahmin for three years and began to cohabit with him only three months before her tragic immolation. According to her, her husband not only tortured her but forced her into sexual intercourse and when she refused, immolated her. Even though her dying declaration strongly indicted the culprit, her orthodox parents, who were staunch supporters of child marriage, refused to provide any evidence in favour of her.26 A year before this gruesome incident, at Royapuram hospital in Madras city, the 17 year old Pushpavathi, who was already married for a few years, died of burn injuries, which the police suspected to be a strong case of bride burning. In 1928, at Triplicane, the 16 year old Kamakshi was burnt to death by her husband, Ramaswamy Shastri, who locked her up in one room and set fire to her clothes. In her dying declaration, Kamakshi confessed that as soon as she began to live with her husband, he, along with his father and brother-in-law, tortured, sexually abused and harassed her.27 In 1929, at Tirunelveli, the 13 year old Muthammal was brutally tortured by her husband, Chinnathampi Pillai, an upper caste non-Brahmin, and by her father-in-law, Subbaiya

26 For details of court proceedings of this case, see Swadesamitran, 19 June 1926; 24 June 1926; and 5 August 1926.
27 Swadesamitran, 9 December 1925; 16 October 1928; and 22 November 1928.
Pillai. They tied her up at home for ten days, tonsured her head and starved her of food and water.28

While post-pubertal marriage was unheard of among the Brahmins, the compulsory child marriage for girls led to increase in dowry demands. As parents were in a hurry to get their daughters married before puberty, dowry demands spiralled. When the girl's parents were unable to meet the exorbitant dowry demands, the young wife was often tortured to death and she had also to accept the polygamous practices of her husband. Sister Subbalakshmi recollected how "in those days... there was practically no chance for a girl in a Brahmin family to get a husband when once she had attained her age. The parents of boys, who were in no such hurry, would make the most exorbitant demands for dowries, knowing that they could get almost anything they chose to ask".29 N.S. Rukumani Ammal, despite her orthodox Brahmin family background, had to remain unmarried all through her life because her father, a retired Village Munsif, and the sole bread winner of the family, could not afford to pay dowry or to meet the marriage expenses since she was the eighth child of her parents: "Nobody in the house ever uttered a word about [my] marriage unlike many Brahmin households where even young girls were married off".30

In this social milieu, motherhood was considered an essential feminine quality which ought to be fulfilled by every woman. The frequent

28 Swadesamitran, 21 December 1929.
29 Monica Felton, op. cit., p.89
child birth, however, ruined the health and the mind of these young child mothers. For example, Muthulakshmi Reddy’s mother delivered ten children, almost one after another, every year.\(^{31}\) Similarly Sister Subbalakshmi witnessed her mother as well as her sisters frequently delivering babies, almost seven to eight children each, causing severe pain and anxiety. Neelambigai Ammaiayar, an activist and a Tamil intellectual, delivered eleven children within 15 years of her married life leading to severe health problems and subsequent death.\(^{32}\)

Another problem directly linked with child marriage was the growing number of child widows. The Arya Vysyas and the Brahmins considered widowhood as a result of sins committed in previous birth and hence argued that the punishment had to be borne by them in the form of widowhood, which was considered as the will of God: “The humiliation and sufferings which widows were expected to endure were divinely ordained. Punishment, bravely borne, was also a form of penance through which the soul could be absolved for past sins and acquire the merit which would entitle it to a more fortunate existence in its next birth”.\(^{33}\) Though widow remarriage was not permitted among some of the upper caste non-Brahmins such as Vellalas and Chettiar\(s\), there was no custom of tonsuring widows, unlike the Brahmins. Some of the lower castes such as Kallars and Kammalans even allowed the widows to remarry.\(^{34}\)

---

33 Monica Felton, *op.cit.*, p.37.
As soon as a girl or a woman became a widow, she was denied every little pleasure of day-to-day life. For instance, she was not allowed to eat three meals a day, and was given once a day a meal of tasteless food cooked without spices. She was also not allowed to eat pickles, betel nuts and so on. In marking her out as a widow, she was not allowed to adorn herself with flowers and her head was also tonsured. She had to wear only coarse white sarees without any blouse and also had to cover her shorn head with the end of her saree. She was further not allowed to go out of the house, see or talk to men, attend weddings or any other rituals. In short, she was a mere wageless labourer, drudging the whole day at the backyard of the house, starving to death.\textsuperscript{35} Sister Subbalakshmi who herself was a child widow, but one who was fortunate to escape all these tortures, recollected how she had seen many child widows in her family circles who “lived like ghosts, haunting the kitchens and backyards of their parent’s house, pale, undernourished, hard worked”.\textsuperscript{36} More than all these harassments, the orthodox families considered widows as inauspicious and the sight of them was treated as unlucky as the sight of black cats.\textsuperscript{37} While many child widows did not even understand what it meant to lose one’s husband, they had to undergo the above ordeals. For example, Parvathi, a nine year old child widow, was told that her boy-husband was dead and thereafter she would be treated as a widow. She had never met the boy except on the

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp. 27-28. A. Madhaviah’s novel \textit{Muthu Meenakshi} succinctly brings out the plight of widows in a Brahmin household. In this novel, the heroine becomes a child widow and she narrates how she was forced to drudge at home, allowed to eat only one meal in a day, that too only the leftover food. She was not allowed to see menfolk even at home. Since she was considered inauspicious, she was blamed for any disease that occurred to anyone at home, and she was cursed for poor harvests or if cows did not provide milk.

\textsuperscript{36} Monica Felton, \textit{op.cit.}, p.42.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 73
occasion of marriage and she certainly could not feel any sorrow for what had happened to him. However, she wept because everyone in the family showered sympathy on her and they appeared to be miserable. On the other hand, Meenambal, another child widow, knew quite well what was in store for her when she came to know about the death of her husband. She narrated in the following way what she felt about the miserable condition of being a widow: “It was just that the sorrow was too much to be borne. Besides, I knew perfectly well what would happen to me when I attained my age, and the sort of life I would have to lead when I grew up and my father passed away”.

1.2 Social Reform Activities and the Women’s Question

Given this context of women’s subordination, social reformers, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, highlighted the low status of women and attempted to generate certain idealized Hindu culture as opposed to the colonial project which denigrated the same as barbaric. Thus, the women’s question became the central focus of the colonizers as well as the indigenous social reformers. It is indeed the intervention of colonialism which necessitated the reconstruction of indigenous culture as a means to reconstruct the self-image of the educated middle class. In this process women became the object for reconstructing the ‘ancient Hindu culture’. As a result, the newly emergent middle class focussed its

38 Ibid., p. 75.
39 Ibid., p. 125.
attention on the women's question even before it developed fully the ideology of nationalism. A new ideology of Hindu womanhood (which was in fact a reconstituted patriarchy) was developed, not only as opposed to pre-existing patriarchal ideology but also as opposed to the images of Western woman. The social reformers claimed that their attempt to reform the conditions of women and to reorder the Hindu society had the sanction of ancient Hindu scriptures, particularly the Hindu shastras. To highlight this scriptural sanction, they reconstructed the lives of ancient Hindu women from ancient mythologies, literature, etc. The ancient Hindu women, in their view, were always educated and intelligent, enjoyed freedom, respected by the family as well as the society, yet traditional, obedient, and maintained the so-called Hindu virtues of womanhood. 41

Within this redefinition of Hindu culture, gender relations and patriarchy, the social reformers undertook reforms on behalf of women by urging the colonial government to introduce legislations to curb child marriage, evils of widowhood, dowry system and so on. They also formed associations to mobilize the indigenous society against these pre-existing cultural practices. 42 Apart from the social reformers, middle class novelists and writers as well as non-Brahmin caste associations too took up the issue of women's subordination. Let us see below in detail how each of these groups - social reformers, writers and non-Brahmin caste associations - addressed women's issues.

41 Vijay Agnew, Elite Women in Indian Politics, New Delhi, 1979, pp.3 and 9
1.2.1 Early Social Reformers and Women's Issues in Tamilnadu

The social reform activities in Madras began with the founding of the Veda Samaj in 1860. This association not only propagated the need for women's education and widow remarriage, but also consistently attacked Hinduism and even idol worship. C.V. Raghunatha Shastri, a member of the Samaj, was the first one in the Tamil-speaking areas to initiate anti-child marriage campaigns. However, the Samaj died out soon. In 1869, Mary Carpenter, with the help of Rama Iyengar and Raghunatha Shastri, founded a formal school for girls "with admission restricted to girls from the higher castes and classes". Elsewhere, down south at Nagercoil, Sesha Iyengar, a Brahmin pleader, conducted the remarriage of his widowed daughter in 1873. This may be the first widow remarriage in the Madras Presidency. Following this, he propagated the idea of forming a society for widow remarriage at Nagercoil, which was to offer financial help and advice to those who arranged widow remARRriages.

Following this, at Madras, in 1874 a meeting was organised to set out the objectives of the Madras Hindu Widow Remarriage Association. The Association aimed at encouraging "the marriage of Hindu widows to the extent of its means and opportunities and so far as may be compatible with the preservation of the hold on and their influence in orthodox Hindu Society". The members of this association “decided to publish extracts

43 R.Sundaralingam, Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1852-1891, Tucson, pp. 81-82.
44 Ibid., p. 83.
27

from the Shastras which expressly approved of widow remarriages". Even while encouraging widow remarriages, the Association neither approved of inter-caste marriages nor advocated dismantling of caste system.

The Hindu Women's Remarriage Association, which was started by R. Ragunatha Rao in 1882, also considered it important to seek the sanction of shastras for its reform activities. Even though this Association had a section of radical social reformers such as G. Subramania Iyer and Chentsal Rao as its members, it was the traditionalists like Raghunatha Rao who dominated it. The Association approved of marriages of girls above ten years and advocated remarriage only for child widows whose marriages were not consummated. In other words, only marriages for "virgin widows" was permitted, that too in accordance with vedic rites. In 1883, the Association requested the Government of India to amend the Hindu Remarriage Act of 1856 so as to remove the clause which banned the inheritance rights of widows who remarried. In the same year, the Association conducted the first widow remarriage and took out a procession at Mylapore in Madras. In 1884, it organised a conference at Madras to promote widow remarriages. In 1885, the Association again organised a similar conference at Madras.

In 1884, some of the important educated Brahmins, particularly lawyers, administrators, educationists and journalists, formed a new

46 Ibid., p. 86.
47 Ibid., pp. 89-91.
association called the Madras Mahajana Sabha in Madras city. The Madras Mahajana Sabha sent a delegation of Brahmin elites as representatives from the Madras Presidency to the first Indian National Congress in 1885. None of these representatives were successful in convincing the Congress party to discuss and pass resolutions related to social issues such as child marriage. Hence, a section of them convened the National Social Conference in Madras in 1887 with provincial committees all over India. Even the formation of the Social Conference did not result in much activism. Members of this Conference as well as of the Congress party refused to support the Age of Consent Bill of 1890. In fact, the Social Conference omitted any reference to the Bill, fearing opposition from conservatives who were also the supporters of the Congress activities. In short, the voice of the progressives within the Conference was indeed feeble. Significantly, the reaction of the leading Congress party activists towards the Age of Consent Bill of 1890 was negative. Leaders like Madhava Rao, Somasundaram Chetty, Salem Vijayaraghavachari and Saminatha Iyer openly criticized the Bill and opposed it vehemently. Encouraged by the opposition from the Congress leaders, the orthodox sections of Tamil society mobilized public opinion against the Bill in various areas like Salem, Palghat, Coimbatore, Thanjavur and Mayuram.

On the other hand, some radicals like G.Subramania Iyer played an important role in propagating the Bill. In 1889, amidst strong criticism from the orthodox sections and possible ostracisation, Iyer boldly conducted the

50 Ibid., p. 324.
remarriage of his daughter who was a twelve year old child widow. Soon he was excommunicated from the Brahmin community following strong opposition from the Hindu conservatives and traditionalists of the Congress party. Subsequently, Iyer, along with K. Natarajan, started in 1890 the Indian Social Reformer and in 1892, they founded the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association. The association advocated female education and campaigned against nautch parties, untouchability and child marriages. It extended membership only to those who agreed to educate women in their household, postpone marriages of their daughters beyond the age of ten, inter-dine with lower caste people and attend widow marriages. 51

The reformers efforts did not go once again uncontested. The opposition to the Hindu Social Reform Association came from the Hindu revivalists in the form of the Theosophists. The Theosophical Society, particularly under Annie Besant, propagated that Hinduism was superior to all other world religions, and extolled the virtues of ancient Brahminic traditions. One of the objectives of the Society, of course in the name of social reform, was to instill new pride and self respect among the colonized Hindus. The Hindu revivalists were not only opposed to any kind of social legislation (since it was implemented by the colonial Government), but they also propagated caste division, Varnashrama dharma and above all Brahminic Hinduism as national culture. In this context, they criticized the reformers like G. Subramania Iyer as “atheist and materialist” and also as “unpatriotic” wounding the “national Self-Respect of the Hindus”. 52 The

51 Ibid., pp. 314-327
52 Ibid., p. 329.
reformer's programme, they alleged, were denationalizing.

1.2.2 Social Reform Ideas in Tamil Writings

Around the late nineteenth century, social reform ideals about woman found expression not only in the activities of social reformers, but also in Tamil novels and poems. The first Tamil novel, *Prataba Mudaliar Charitram*, was written by Mayuram Vedanayagam Pillai in 1879. In this novel, Pillai highlighted the importance of women's education and argued how education could enable women to be efficient in household affairs. He had portrayed the heroine of this novel, Gnanambal, as an intelligent, brave and educated woman, who had learnt Dharma Shastras and Needhi Shastras and showed how her moral education enabled her to be a fully developed person in every way.\(^5^3\) In his essay, *Penkalvi,* (Women's Education) Pillai explained the advantages and the necessity of women's education, and through this work, he campaigned for women's education. Pillai asserted that educated women would be able administrators of household affairs, good counsellors to men, personal secretary and advisers to their husbands, talented accountants, efficient health advisers, good cooks, accomplished musicians and sophisticated conversationalists.\(^5^4\)

Through another famous novel of his, *Suguna Sundari,* Pillai argued against the practice of child marriage. In this novel, the heroine, Suguna Sundari, an educated, well-informed woman campaigns against the practice

of child marriage. While doing so, she highlights how in ancient India, shastras approved of late marriages and how epic women like Sita and Droupati had only post-pubertal marriages. In an essay, Penmanam, he also narrated the pathetic conditions of child widows and advocated widow remarriage. He also condemned those men who treated women as slaves. He noted,

...men have treated their dogs and cattle with much more warmth and affection while they treated women as slaves and enforced conditions on them. Thus great injustice has been done to human beings.

Though Vedanayagam Pillai consistently campaigned for women's rights, it was only within the existing patriarchal values that he advocated changes in women's lives. He not only glorified Pati-Vrath dharma, but also advocated that women must not violate such feminine virtues as chastity, subservience to men, etc. In his novel, Pratapa Mudaliar Charitram, the well-educated Gnanambal confesses to a male cousin about how inferior women are to men:

Women, however educated they may be, are not supposed to compete with men and even if they do they cannot succeed. Women are like tiny plants which grow for a short period, produce quickly and wither away. But men, like strong trees, grow slowly, but provide benefits for much longer years.

55 S. Vedanayagam Pillai, Suguna Sundari, Madras, 1979 (first published in 1887), pp. 75-76.
56 S. Vedanayagam Pillai, Pen Madhi..., op.cit., p. 120.
57 Ibid., p. 102.
58 S.Vedanayagam Pillai, Pratapa Mudaliar ..., op.cit., p. 58.
Similarly, B.R. Rajam Iyer, another social reform writer, wrote *Kamalambal Charitram* in 1896; in this novel he portrayed his heroine, Kamalambal, as well educated and talented, yet homebound, subservient, and chaste. She worshipped her husband even when he ill-treated her. Even a radical social reformer like A. Madhaviah was not an exception to this kind of portrayal of women, particularly educated women. In his first novel *Padmavathi Charitram*, he presented an image of educated women as similar to Kamalambal or Gnanambal.

However, A. Madhaviah's second novel *Muthu Meenakshi* contained rather radical views on women's question. A. Dhandayudam notes "the publication of [this novel] is an adventurous and rebellious attempt in the history of Tamil novel".

This novel, written as an autobiographical account of a Brahmin widow, is a moving portrayal of a child widow's sufferings and ill-treatments meted out to her in an orthodox Brahmin household. Madhaviah provides a heart rending account of the feelings of the child widow, Muthu Meenakshi, who, due to harassments, contemplates running away from home to escape from the endless sufferings. In Sundaresan, the hero of the novel, Madhaviah creates an image of a social reformer who not only educates Muthu Meenakshi, but also marries her after she becomes a widow. Through this character, Madhaviah asserted that even shastras

---

permitted remarriages of widows and cautioned the orthodox society that the banning of widow remarriages would only lead to widows indulging in prostitution.\textsuperscript{62}

Despite his approval of seeking sanctions from shastras, Madhaviah condemned and criticized social reformers who always cited examples from shastras and vedic scriptures, and who glorified Hindu traditions. He pointed out that ancient Hindu traditions or customs were irrelevant to bring about radical changes and that the so-called glorious Hindu past never existed, and that the vedic scriptures too contained evil values and customs.\textsuperscript{63}

In this context, he argued for similar education and syllabus for both men and women, and also pointed out that women's education should bring about compatibility and equality between men and women. Of course, he did talk about the possibility of having efficient housewives and mothers too through women's education.

In the early twentieth century, Subramania Bharathi, a Tamil poet of great eminence\textsuperscript{64} ushered in a radical trend within the social reform activities by challenging reformers who made references to ancient shastras. He condemned men who glorified Hindu customs, and argued that shastras were written by selfish men to suppress women's rights. Hence, he

\textsuperscript{62} A. Madhaviah, Muthu Mecnakshi, Madras (first published in 1903).
\textsuperscript{63} A. Madhaviah's speech at the Coimbatore District Social Reform Association in 1915, at Erode. See A. Madhaviah Asara Seerthirutham, Social reform series in Tamil, No. 1, 1915.
\textsuperscript{64} For biographical details of C. Subramania Bharathi, see R.A. Padmanabhan, Chithirabharathi, Madras, 1982.
advocated destruction of shastras along with ancient traditional values. It was Bharathi who, for the first time, campaigned for women's participation in public life, particularly in the national movement. Until then, social reformers were not concerned about women's role outside the private sphere.

According to Bharathi, women should be educated not only on conventional themes such as cooking, tailoring and painting but also about patriotism, imperialism, women's role in politics, science and technology and other new fields. For Bharathi, women's education was important to teach them about modernity. In one of his writings addressed to Tamil women, he suggested that women themselves should carry out propaganda measures in favour of women's education, that they should form women's associations to discuss the problem of illiteracy, and that they should donate all their valuables for the cause of women's education. He also cautioned women not to depend upon menfolk to improve their condition.

Bharathi propagated that the practice of child marriage was equivalent to committing murder and all those "shameless, villainous" men who encouraged and practiced child marriage should be "strangled to death". While campaigning for widow remarriage, Bharathi insisted that the reform activities of this sort, which directly affected women, should be

66 C. Subramania Bharathi, Penkallukku Katturaigal, Madras, 1935. These essays were mainly written between 1910 and 1920, and were published in Swadesamitran.
carried out by women themselves and widows must take the initiative to remarry anyone of their choice.68 Toward this end, Bharathi thought, women should be made conscious of their own plight and men could never liberate women. Through his story, Chandrigaiyin Kathai, Bharathi not only advocated widow remarriage, but also highlighted that even orthodox women could reform themselves and develop counter-consciousness with regard to the remarriage issue. This novel also portrayed women as intellectually capable of questioning those ancient scriptures and societal norms which oppressed women. In this story, Gomathi, an orthodox, illiterate and subservient, yet intelligent, woman, expresses her anger against the male dominated Brahmin society and encourages her widowed sister-in-law, Visalakshi, to get remarried. While doing so, she remarks,

Vishalakshi, you must tear away into pieces and burn those contemptible Shastras written by men for their selfish motives and you should courageously seek the help of some social reformer to get remarried to a man of your choice. 69

Through the character of Visalakshi, Bharathi represented women as strong willed and in need of no sympathy for being widows. According to him, they needed only men of progressive outlook to marry them.

As part of his modernizing efforts, Bharathi vehemently condemned all those traditional beliefs and practices with regard to marriage, and advocated mutual love and compatibility as criteria for married life. And through his ideal “new woman” (pudumaippu), he advocated marriage

68 C.Subramania Bharathi, Penkallukku... op.cit., p. 119.
based on love and marriage of consent. In his famous poems *Panchali Sapadam*, he idealized Droupati of Mahabharata. He portrayed her as a great polyandrous wife of the five Pandavas. In Droupati, he located a modern woman with the power of Goddess Shakti and Bharatha Matha. He also considered women’s liberation as a prerequisite to national liberation. For him, the political struggle against imperialism had to be carried out along with the struggle for women’s emancipation. He noted,

Nations are made of home and so long as you do not have justice and equality fully practiced at home, you cannot expect to see them practiced in your public life. Because it is the home life that is the basis of public life, and a man who is a villain at home cannot find himself suddenly transformed into a saint the moment he gets to the councils or to the courts of Justice.

Bharathi also advocated post-pubertal marriages, right to divorce, property rights for women, freedom for women to interact with men other than their husbands, equal education and employment opportunities, and equal participation of women in politics.

1.2.3 Non-Brahmin Caste Associations and Social Reform

The Home Rule League, started in 1916, began propagating Hindu revivalism in various districts of Tamilnadu through pamphlets, public meetings and so on. Its idealization of Brahmanical Hinduism and Brahmanical values created a sharp rupture between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, and also led to an awareness among the non-Brahmins about

---

70 C.Subramania Bharathi, Bharathiyar ..., *op.cit.*, p. 211.
71 Ibid., p. 112.
73 *Swadesamitran* (Madhar Pakudi), 10 May 1918.
their condition within the Brahmin dominated socio-political environment in Tamilnadu. This awareness resulted in the formation of various non-Brahmin caste associations during this period. The Adi Dravida Mahajana Sangam (1892), Sengundar Mahajana Sangam (1908), Nadar Mahajana Sangam (1912) and the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Sangam (1919) were all formed with the aim of reforming caste norms.\textsuperscript{74}

As a first step towards raising women's issues among the non-Brahmin castes, E.V. Ramasamy Naicker\textsuperscript{75} participated in many non-Brahmin caste conferences and made them pass resolutions in favour of abolition of child marriages and polygamy, widow remarriages, divorce, property rights and education for women. For instance, the third Kongu Vellala Conference held in 1929, attended by about 5,000 people, passed resolutions favouring marriage reforms such as conducting inexpensive and non-ritualistic marriages.\textsuperscript{76} At the Vellala Conference held at Madras in 1926, resolutions related to promotion of women's education, remarriage of widows, legislations for women's rights, inter-community marriages, inter-dining with lower castes, reduction of marriage expenses, etc. were passed. The Conference also decided to organize separate women's gatherings every month in order to discuss vital issues like property rights for women. It further demanded performance of rituals without Brahmin priests.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} E.Sa.Visswanathan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.88.
\textsuperscript{75} For details of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker's politics, see Chapter IV.
\textsuperscript{76} Swadesamitaran, 25 February 1926.
\textsuperscript{77} Indian Social Reformer, 30 October 1926.
Similarly, the Sengundar Mahajana Sangam at Coimbatore passed resolutions in favour of women's education, prevention of child marriages, curtailment of marriage expenses, and property rights for women. Above all, the Sangam brought out a report on the condition of devadasis and also made efforts to marry them off by providing financial and moral assistance. We may note here that Sengundars were one of the castes from which devadasis were drawn traditionally. It also passed resolutions in support of the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act which provided inam lands to devadasis, without requiring them to perform duties for temples.

The Devanga Conference held in Coimbatore supported widow remarriage, women's education, property rights for widows, women's freedom to choose their life partners and forming of women's associations. It also demanded a ban on liquor and polygamy. In 1929, the second Devanga Women's Conference recommended domestic science, child rearing, medicine, etc., to be included in the school syllabus for women.

Likewise, the Balija Naidu Conference held at Kannalampatti in 1929, recommended widow remarriages and property rights for widows, particularly inheritance rights for widows even after remarriage. The Agamudaiyars as well as the Karunegars also passed similar resolutions in their women's conferences as well as in their general conferences. Finally,

78 Swadesamitran, 21 January 1929; and 24 January 1929. Similar resolutions were also passed by other caste conferences held at different places. See Swadesamitran, 4 March 1930; and 24 May 1930.
79 Indian Social Reformer, 15 January 1929.
80 Swadesamitran, 11 April 1925; and 29 May 1929.
81 Swadesamitran, 3 June 1929.
82 Swadesamitran, 16 June 1929.
83 Swadesamitran, 1 July 1929; and 27 May 1930.
the Nattukottai Chettiars campaigned through meetings, pamphlets and so on, for women's education and against bride price, gifts during marriages and other expenses. Some of them asserted equal ritual status for women as well as equal education for them in vernacular language, apart from having special education on home science, tailoring, etc. Some others asked Chettiar women to participate in public bodies. These activities of the caste associations, later on, culminated in the formation of the Self Respect Movement and in its struggle against women's subordination.

1.3 Changes in Women's Lives and Consciousness

The continuous campaigns carried out by male social reformers in favour of women's education, widow remarriage, etc., had certain impact among the middle class, upper caste women, albeit the reinforcement of 'new patriarchy' and Hindu values through these reform measures. For instance, in the Tamil speaking areas, the total number of female literates increased from 58,711 in 1891 to 214,220 in 1931. Even though the increase was at the rate of 3,887 female literates per year, the increase itself could be attributed to the activities carried out by social reformers in Tamilnadu. The increase in female literacy was more significant among some of the upper castes such as the Brahmins, the Vellalas, the Arya Vysyas, the Chettiars and the Balija Naidus. For example, in 1901, among the Tamil Brahmins, there were 58 literates per 1,000 females and in 1921

---

84 M. Kathiresan Chettiar, Nattukottai Nagarathargalin Seerthirutham, Karamodi, 1911, p.30. See also M.Chinnaiya Chettiar, Elugnargallukku Aalosanai, Mahpalanjani, 1938, p.65.
85 For details of the activities of the Self Respect Movement, see Chapter IV.
there were 210 literates per 1,000 females. Some of the social reformers even educated their child widow-daughters at home or sent them to school to have formal education. For instance, Sister Subbalakshmi, a child widow, was taught at home by her father as well as sent to formal school and later on to college for higher education. As a result, she became the first Brahmin woman in the Madras Presidency to pass the Matriculation examination; and in 1911, she became the first Brahmin woman to acquire a B.A. degree from the Madras University. In 1913, she passed the teacher training course too.

1.3.1 The Formation of Women's Associations

In Tamilnadu, the earliest women's associations took the form of women's gatherings in the houses of social reformers, organised mainly by elite Brahmin women belonging to such households. For instance, before the Sarada Ladies Union came to be organised in 1912, Brahmin women from Egmore and some upper class Christian and Parsi women used to meet at Sister Subbalakshmi's house to discuss religion and philosophy. They organised study circles on Ramayana and Mahabharatha. Later on, Sister Subbalakshmi formalised these meetings and formed the Sarada Ladies Union. The main objectives of the Union were (i) to raise the consciousness of women by means of lectures on various issues related to social,
educational and moral problems, so as to enable them to realize their responsibilities in their households as well as in the public; (ii) to educate women to involve themselves in philanthropic and social work and to broaden their conceptions of welfare activities; and (iii) to train adult girls, particularly widows, to become teachers, nurses, etc. so that they would be self-reliant.

In 1927, the Union founded an educational institution for women called Sarada Vidyalaya89 and in 1932, the Union organised the Mylapore Ladies Club in order to enable the elite Brahmin ladies of Mylapore to meet and play badminton and tennis, and to learn Hindi, English, etc. S.Ambujammal, Janammal, Savithriyammal and Mrs.Seethapathy were the executive committee members of this club.90 The Sarada Ladies Union also organised many meetings on social welfare activities meant for women. For instance, in 1914, Annie Besant addressed the members of the Union on “What Women Can Do for Their Country”. In 1915, B.Seshamma spoke about “Female Education - Its Past and Present Conditions”. In 1921, Muthulakshmi Reddy spoke about the need for social reforms to change the position of devadasis and untouchables.91

The Sarada Ladies Union also helped Sister Subbalakshmi to start the Sarada Ashram for widows. After acquiring Licentiate in Teaching, Subbalakshmi along with one Ms. Lynch, started the Sarada Ashram for

---

90 S.Ambujammal, op.cit., p. 200.
91 Malathi Ramanathan, op.cit., p.70.
widows in order to educate them and make them self reliant. At first, five child widows, Ammukutty, Parvathi, Seethalakshmi, Lakshmi and Subbammal, joined the Ashram; they were also admitted in the Presidency Secondary Training School for regular schooling. By 1914, the Ashram accommodated 30 child widows, all from Brahmin families. Hence the Ashram itself was called the Brahmin Widows Home, which later on admitted a few married women and unmarried girls. By 1920, the Home accommodated 93 Brahmin girls.

To reverse the norms of the orthodox Brahmin life, the young widows at the Ashram were allowed to grow their hair even if they were tonsured before coming there. They were encouraged to wear coloured saris, blouse, etc. Their life at the Ashram, unlike in their orthodox houses where they used to drudge the whole day, was regulated by physical exercises, study hours, and holidaying around various new places.

Since many of these widows did not have any education, either at home or at formal institutions, before joining the Ashram, Subbalakshmi organised preparatory classes to prepare those illiterate widows for higher education. English, Sanskrit and Mathematics were taught regularly and

---

94 The then Justice Party member in the Legislative Council, and a representative of the Depressed Classes, M.C. Raja argued that the Government should not fund the "Brahmin Widow's Home", since it only served the interest of Brahmin widows while neglecting the education of lower caste girls. He also argued that the Brahmin girls had been provided with too many facilities like the Ice House Hostel, Victoria Hostel, etc., while the non-Brahmin and Indian Christian girls have been accommodated in congested areas. He also pointed out that the widow's home should be reconstituted on "broader and non-sectarian basis" providing accommodation to all women students of any caste and creed. See Jagan Mohini, Vol.27, No.12, December 1950.
with these rigorous training, child widows were able to join the Presidency Training School within six months.96

In 1913, Sister Subbalakshmi and Ms. Lynch opened the Triplicane Government Secondary and Training School with the help of Government funding. The school taught mainly drawing, painting, music and dances such as Kummi and Kollatam, based on Hindu religious traditions. This experiment was a total success. In the very year of founding of the school, 221 girls joined for elementary and high school education, and 29 girls went for teacher training programme. By 1920, 455 girls joined the elementary classes, 79 girls went for teacher training and 163 girls were admitted in high school.97

The remarkable achievement of the widow's home was that every year, six to eight child widows cleared the S.S.L.C. examination and in 1918, four child widows of the Home went to study medicine at the Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi. In the same year, twelve of them became school teachers. In 1920, the Home also sent eight widows for Nurses Training. Two of them, by then, became medical doctors and were sent to London for higher studies. While most of them completed the B.A. degree and the Teacher Training courses, some of them got remarried according to their choice. K.Kamala and Dr. Akila, two child widows of the Ashram, remarried on their own. At least 63 child widows received the Government scholarship for higher studies.98

97 Monica Felton, op.cit., pp. 115 and 132.
98 Malathi Ramanathan, op.cit., p.63.
During this period, women of various non-Brahmins castes also organised separate women’s conferences to discuss different social issues that affected women and about problems specific to their castes. For instance, in 1918, the Arya Vysya Women’s Conference held at Coimbatore, discussed child marriage, women’s education, and dowry problems. Around 500 women attended the conference where one Annapooranammal elaborated on women’s duties for the caste’s upliftment. In 1929, at the second Devanga Caste Women’s Conference, about 300 women participated in the discussion on women’s education. The Conference recommended domestic science, handicraft work, etc., as part of women’s education. The Karunegar Caste Women’s Conference too emphasized the importance of education in training young girls as efficient wives and mothers.

Apart from organizing and participating in local women’s associations, the educated middleclass women began to address problems related to women in the Indian National Social Conference organised under the aegis of the Congress Party. In one of the Social Conference held at Madras, Alarmelmangai Ammal moved a resolution to abolish the caste system and also demanded that the Government must introduce legislations to promote women’s education, property rights for women, and inter caste marriages. In 1909, at the ‘Mahila Parishad’ or the Women’s Congress held at Madras, many middle class women took up issues such as women’s

99 Swadesamitran, 22 May 1918.
100 Swadesamitran, 3 June 1929.
101 Swadesamitran, 16 June 1937.
102 New India, 27 December 1914.
education, marriage expenses, raising the age of marriage, aspects of Hinduism and the place of Tamil in the education of girls, etc. In one of these meetings, Kamakshi Ammal elaborated the need for separate associations for women. She explained that the women's associations could provide a platform for all women to express their views on various issues related to women. She further confessed that even an educated woman did not feel comfortable to come forward to speak in public, because she had been kept behind the doors for years. She cited this as a reason why a separate women's association was needed. According to her, women's associations could train women to be efficient mothers and talented wives by devising some special training programmes.

In 1917, Women's India Association was started with almost similar aims and objectives. According to one of the founder members of the Association, its main objective was to remind women of their responsibility towards India as daughters of the country, to make them realize their duties outside their families, and to prepare them to be efficient mothers and wives. One of their leaflets pointed out that the Association would bring out pamphlets and monthly bulletins in various vernacular languages, dealing mainly with problems of hygiene, marriage laws, voting rights, child bearing and rearing, and women's role in the public.

103 *Indian Social Reformer*, 3 January 1909.
104 *Swadesamirian*, 14 March 1912; and *Indian Social Reformer*, 10 June 1917.
105 See Chapter III, for details of WIA's activities.
1.3.2 Social Reform Ideas in Women’s Speeches and Writings

Apart from organizing women’s associations and participating in them, many women began expressing their views on the conditions of women and the nature of womanhood through speeches and writings. Krupa Sathianathan, a Christian convert and the first woman to join a Medical College (though not completing the course) was the first Tamil woman to write an autobiographical novel called *Saguna*, which initially appeared as a serialized story in the *Madras Christian College Magazine* in 1887 and 1888. From 1881 onwards, she regularly wrote articles for the *National Indian Journal* 106 and in 1893 she wrote another novel, *Kamala* which was a story portraying the life of a widow in a Brahmin family. The heroine of the novel lives in the orthodox home of her husband but desires to study and learn a lot. Unfortunately, she becomes a widow. It is then that a childhood friend urges her to realise how women have been oppressed under orthodox customs and traditions. The author portrays Kamala, a widow, as a person who while recognizing the burden of widowhood in the traditional families, is still hesitant to accept her friend’s proposal to marry her.107 Her autobiographical novel, *Saguna*, was her first hand account of day to day interactions between the colonizers and the colonized in the nineteenth century. In this she has beautifully portrayed her life at the Zenana Mission School and her interactions with the women missionaries.108

In the early twentieth century, Pandita Visalakshi Ammal wrote many novels which took up women's question and resolved it in a conservative fashion.\textsuperscript{109} In the novel \textit{Vanasudha}, Visalakshi advocated the importance of educating women even at home, since such education, according to her, could make women realise their important duties at home. In the novel, the heroine, Vanasudha, receives education through a social reformer who later marries her. It is through this informal education, Vanasudha learns how to respect the elders, how to be subservient to her husband, and how to cultivate \textit{Pati-Vrata} qualities. She could now read Ramayana and Mahabharatha on her own and follow the morals advocated in these epics. It is only through her education, she realizes the meaning of true love as real wealth. She also realizes how her husband himself could be a source of happiness, joy, inspiration and sustenance.\textsuperscript{110} In the novel, \textit{Gowri}, Visalakshi emphasized that education itself was an attribute towards being a good charactered, religious women.\textsuperscript{111} In another novel, \textit{Sujatha}, she advised women to assist their husbands in performing family dharma and also to protect their chastity like Sita or any others of ancient tradition.\textsuperscript{112} In \textit{Saraswathi}, the heroine is advised by her sister that for a woman marriage is inevitable and she cannot lead a life of a single person. She further states that the concept of single woman is against the Aryadharma and Stridharma.\textsuperscript{113} 

\textsuperscript{109} Pandita Visalakshi Ammal wrote several novels. They were \textit{Gowri} (1906), \textit{Jalajakshi} (1902), \textit{Nirmala} (1903), \textit{Gnaranjini} (1907), \textit{Sujatha} (1908), \textit{Vanasudha} (1909), and \textit{Aryakumari} (1910).
\textsuperscript{110} Pandita Visalakshi, \textit{Vanasudha}, Madras, 1909, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{111} Pandita Visalakshi, \textit{Gowri}, Madras, 1906.
\textsuperscript{112} Pandita Visalakshi, \textit{Sujatha}, Madras, 1908.
\textsuperscript{113} Pandita Visalakshi, \textit{Saraswathi}, Madras, 1909.
In almost all her novels, Visalakshi advocated the importance of Pati-Bhakti, chastity, observance of patience, and other traditional values for women. In her novels, the chaste and patient women were always rewarded with good charactered husbands. Significantly, Visalakshi Ammal started a women’s journal called Hitakarni in 1909, which carried articles and stories emphasizing the so-called “proper” behaviour for women.

Similarly a number of women started special women’s journals also. In 1912, Revu Thayaramma started Penkalvi, which carried articles relating to women’s education, and women’s problems such as early marriage and dowry. In 1924, Sister Balambal started a journal called Chintamani which also dealt with similar issues. In the same year, Vai. Mu. Kothainayaki Ammal brought out the journal Jagan Mohini. There were also other journals run by women such as Girahalakshmi, Kathanidhi, Indian Ladies Magazine, Stridharma, Madhar Manoranjani, Mangai, Pudumaippenn, and Tamilnadu.

As we have seen earlier, a trend within the social reform activities glorified Hinduism and ancient traditions. By referring to shastras, this group challenged social practices such as child marriage, widowhood and dowry. They argued that ancient Hindu or Brahmin women enjoyed freedom, were well educated and had only late marriages. Similarly, a section of women writers wrote and spoke in support of Hindu revivalism. They idealized Hindu women as opposed to Western women who were seen as representatives of colonial culture. While they elaborated the importance of women’s education, they assured men that women would not loose their
‘femininity’ and womanly virtues by having formal education, and instead, women’s education would teach women the qualities of Pati-Bhakti, chastity, patriotism and prepare them to be ideal Hindu women. For instance, Alarmelmangai wrote numerous articles in newspapers emphasizing women’s desire for education and that women should be taught only Hindu religion, moral education, stories of ancient virtuous women like Damayanthi, Aadirai and Sita, extracts from Mahabharatha, Ramayana, Manusmriti, Dharma Shastras and Needhi Shastras, hygiene methods, family accounts, midwifery, interior decoration and a little bit of regional geography. These women writers also opposed missionary education claiming that Hindu girls taught in missionary schools by Christian nuns would not only be converted to Christianity and lose their Hindu values, but also would impart Christian values to their children.

In contrast to these women, there were radicals like K.D. Rukumani Ammal who demanded similar kind of education for both boys and girls. She countered the general notion that women should be trained as efficient mothers and wives. In her words, “It seems to me that to give our girls in the short school life only such a training as is calculated to make them good wives and wise mothers is a very narrow and one-sided view of education. The questions of women’s education is not only of domestic but of national importance”. According to her, women should be taught about nationalism and the role of individuals in national development. She

---

114 Many women reformers like Swarnam, C. Andalammal, Kanagampujammal, Saraswathibai and Alarmelmangai wrote letters and articles in Swadesamitran expressing these views.
115 Swadesamitran, 8 February 1905
116 Swadesamitran, 21 March 1916.
117 Indian Social Reformer, 16 December 1917.
asserted that women also had to be imparted with English education just as men. Further, she argued, “the domestic ideal of women’s education...may satisfy men, but not women educated on modern lines. As this ideal urges upon the necessity to train our girls to become good wives and wise mothers, it may reasonably be asked what attempts if any are proposed to be made in our school and colleges to train our boys to become good husband and wise parents”.  

While both revivalists and radical women social reformers condemned child marriage, bride price, polygamy, extravagance in marriages, puberty celebrations, dowry system and widowhood, it was the latter who questioned the existence of patriarchal values in the family and in the public. In an association meeting Srimathi Rangapapa remarked,

If they [men] think they are higher than us, that is being foolish. Today we have decided to show them the truth that men and women are equal and thus they need not provide us the independence. We would struggle and attain it on our own.  

Similarly, Yadugiri Ammal asserted that women have equal intellectual abilities. She claimed that men treated women as slaves and prevented their efforts towards liberation. She not only accused men for demanding moral behaviour from women, but also pointed out that the slavish mentality of men, on the one hand, made them accept the colonial domination and, on the other hand, oppress women at home. She posed “how could our men, who are slaves of the British, dominate their own

118 Indian Social Reformer, 23 June 1918  
119 Swadesamiiran, 16 May 1918.
womenfolk?". Somewhat similar views were expressed by Thangammal Bharathi. She claimed that men not only tried to imprison women, but also ridiculed and disrespected womanhood through their speeches and writings. She suggested that women had to protest against their own brothers, husbands and other male relatives, who harassed them. According to her, the best way a woman could resist harassments by men was to refuse to do household work. She also highlighted how Soviet Russia achieved revolution and asked women to adopt those revolutionary methods in their struggles.

1.4 Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that women's issues such as women's education, child marriage, dowry and widowhood, became subjects of debate and social reform activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Tamilnadu. Significantly, even the educated middle class women, who were primarily drawn from the upper caste Brahmins, slowly came to participate in this process by forming their own associations and through their writings. All this happened in the face of stiff opposition from 'no-changers' like the Theosophists and the die-hard conservative elements within the Indian National Congress.

Importantly, these sporadic and uncoordinated activities were inscribed with divergent ideological tendencies. While women writers like Visalakshi Ammal offered an extremely conservative resolution to the

120 Ibid., 16 May 1918.
121 C. Subramania Bharathi, Penkallukku... op.cit., pp. 17-19.
women's question by valorising traditional 'feminine' virtues, Subramania Bharathi could traverse a completely different path which sharply contradicted the middle class norms with regard to women. While some emphasized the importance of independent women's organisations, others functioned within the framework of caste associations. In fact, these divergent tendencies evolved in the course of time into three broad ideological formations which found their organizational framework in the National movement, the autonomous women's organizations and the Self Respect Movement, each of which we shall analyse in the following chapters.
* (Footnote 18)

CIVIL CONDITION OF FEMALES OF 0-20 AGE GROUP FOR SELECTED CASTES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmins</td>
<td>0-20</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arya Vysyas</td>
<td>0-20</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balija Naidu</td>
<td>0-20</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, Madras, 1921.

**(Footnote 19)**

CIVIL CONDITION OF FEMALES OF 0-15 AGE GROUP IN TAMILNADU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years - Age Group Married</th>
<th>No. of Females (All Religion)</th>
<th>No. of Widows (All Religion)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921 0-15</td>
<td>1,69,535</td>
<td>6,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931 0-15</td>
<td>1,93,029</td>
<td>4,505</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hindu Females Married</th>
<th>Hindu Widows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921 0-15</td>
<td>1,69,167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931 0-15</td>
<td>1,71,973</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 1921, Madras.
CASTE-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF LITERATES PER 1000 FEMALES, 1901-1921.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tamil Brahmins</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Chettiars</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sengundars</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Arya Vysyas</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Balija Naidus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Vellarars</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Nadars</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Census of India, Madras 1901-1921.*