CHAPTER II

THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND
THE WOMEN’S QUESTION

Women’s participation in the national movement in Tamilnadu and the manner in which the national movement addressed the women’s question are still unexplored areas in the existing historical literature. While a number of books and monographs on the national movement in this region, written from differing ideological perspectives, a prominent unifying feature of these studies is the absence of women in them.¹ Most of these studies begin and end with an inevitable reference to Annie Besant of the Home Rule Movement; others carry stray statements about isolated participation of women in nationalist agitations.²

In this context, the present chapter elaborates how the national movement in Tamilnadu, which was by and large male and Brahminical in its leadership addressed the women’s question and what were its ideological content. It further explores in detail the nature of women’s participation in the national movement, and how far women’s voices within the movement were autonomous of the male leadership.


² David Arnold, op cit., p. 136. For instance, Arnold states, “In one incident on 25 January Mrs. Rukmani Lakshmipathi posted two volunteers outside a store selling foreign cloth in Rattan Bazaar Road to picket and distribute leaflets advocating the boycott of foreign goods.”
The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section deals with the views of the male leadership on women's issues. Their views being the dominant discourse within the movement, this section, in a way, details the ideological boundaries within which the national movement as such addressed women's issues. The second section explores the nature of women's participation during different phases of the movement such as the Gandhian Constructive Programmes and the Civil Disobedience. The third section details the dominant ideological tendencies which marked the position of women activists on women's issues. The fourth section, which is a brief one, gives an account of the divergence between the women activists and the Congress as an organisation. The last section brings together the conclusions arising out of the previous discussions.

2.1 Male Nationalists on Women's Question

In detailing the views of the male leadership of the national movement in Tamilnadu on women's issues, we have adopted an illustrative mode of presentation, i.e., we have chosen to present the views of two prominent leaders of the Tamilnadu Congress - S. Satyamurthi and Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar - as typical of the ideological tendencies which dominated the national movement in the Tamil districts. Our choice of Satyamurthi is informed by his outspoken involvement in women's issues throughout his active political career. Moreover, he was an orthodox Brahmin, thus typifying the dominant leadership of the Tamilnadu Congress. Similarly, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar had written extensively on women's issues, especially in the prescriptive style. But, in contrast to Satyamurthi, Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s status as a non-Brahmin leader
within the Congress party in Tamilnadu gave his politics a different inclusive ambiance.

2.1.1 Satyamurthi on Women's Question

S. Satyamurthi, an orthodox Smartha Brahmin, was born in 1887 in Thirumayyam. Before becoming a full-fledged Congress activist, he practised law at the Madras High Court as a junior lawyer under Srinivasa Iyengar, a nationalist leader. In 1918, Satyamurthi was selected as the Secretary of the Congress delegation which represented the nationalist viewpoint on Indian Constitutional Reform before the Parliamentary Committee at London. In 1925, he was elected as the President of the Madras Municipal Corporation and in 1935, he became the President of the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress Committee. Also, in his long career as a nationalist, he occupied such positions as the Vice President of the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress (hereafter TNPC), President of the Madras District Congress Committee and Secretary of the Congress Parliamentary Board.3

His career in the Brahmin-dominated Tamilnadu Congress is only one facet of his life. True to his Smartha Brahmin status, he also had a close association with the Sanadanist Association and the Brahmana Mahasabha.

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3 For further details see, P.G. Sundararajan, The Life of S. Satyamurthi, Madras, 1988. The Parliamentary Committee was set up in 1918 to draw a scheme on Indian Constitutional Reform. The Committee invited the Congress and the Muslim League to represent their viewpoints on the scheme. The Congress demanded self government while the women's organisations represented by Sarojini Naidu and others demanded broadening of the franchise to include women. The Committee in 1919 published the Government of India Bill or Montagu-Chelmsford Scheme of Reforms.
In a public meeting at Madras, Satyamurthi proudly declared that he was a sanadanist and hence opposed to social legislations on matters such as prevention of child marriage and temple entry by Dalits. In 1934, when he contested election at Madras, the sanadanists belonging to two major sanadanist associations at Madras, i.e. the Hindu Central Committee and the Dharma Sevaka Sabha, supported him because he promised to forestall the implementation of the Sarada Act and the Temple Entry Bill (which promised to open the temples to all, irrespective of caste). Interestingly, during the Madras Corporation election for the Triplicane division, he was totally dependent on the orthodox Brahmins and promised them that he would not undertake social reform measures which would harm the Brahmins. In short, Satyamurthi represented the most orthodox Brahmin nationalist opinion within the Tamilnadu Congress.

Satyamurthi elaborated his views on women, particularly on womanhood, marriage, women's education and legislations for women, in a series of letters to his 16 year old daughter, Lakshmi. Written from prison in 1941, a collection of these letters, originally written in English, have been translated into Tamil and published recently by his daughter. Though these letters were written as late as in 1941, they stand only as a systematic articulation of his earlier stance as reflected in his positions on various social legislations. Interestingly, for Satyamurthi, these letters had a

5 Swadesamitran, 9 November 1934. See also the correspondence between S. Satyamurthi and the President of the Hindu Central Committee and the Vice President of the Dharma Sevaka Sabha, between 7 September 1934 and 25 October 1934, in Indian Social Reformer, 24 November 1934.
6 Fortnightly Reports, June 1929.
7 S. Satyamurthi, Arumaip Pudalvikku (To My Dear Daughter), Madras, 1988.
manifesto-like quality: "These letters... are not to be thrown out. They are to be reread often and to be preserved... they have to be reread and enjoyed even in future".8

The basic assumption that pervade these letters is that women are essentially mothers and wives; and it is men's duty to make them realise the importance of their role as mothers. Since, a woman's primary task, according to him, is to run the household and take care of her husband and the children, she should not work or be employed outside the home. He wrote, "a woman must assist her husband in his household tasks instead of troubling him."9

Since motherhood is the primary task of women, marriage is a necessary practice and women, according to Satyamurthi, must not think that marriage can come in the way of their freedom. He argued against simple civil marriages for the Brahmans, and claimed that the Brahmanical rituals constituted an important aspect of marriage. To him, even if the sanskritic incantations and some rituals symbolised women's subordination, they were important aspects of the Brahmanic life and were also part of ancient customs of Indians and hence deserved to be preserved.10 He prescribed Pativrath Dharma and chastity as essential aspects of family life.11 In his view, Sita of Ramayana represented the ideal womanhood since her sole desire was to share Rama's happiness and sorrows; she was always

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8 Satyamurthi to Lakshmi, letter dated 1 July 1941, in Ibid., p. 143.
9 Satyamurthi to Lakshmi, letter dated 11 July 1941, in Ibid., p. 179.
10 Satyamurthi to Lakshmi, letter dated 11 July 1941, in Ibid., pp. 175-77.
11 Satyamurthi to Lakshmi, letter dated 16 July 1941, in Ibid., p. 201.
While Satyamurthi set the boundaries for women as home and hence their destiny as ritual-bound marriage, he was not averse to their getting educated, but only if such education did not violate those traditional boundaries. What kind of education did he advocate for women? For women, the education should not be formal or higher education. They had to learn from their experiences and surroundings. Advising his daughter about women's education, he observed, "[For women] education has to be sought throughout life time. The world, nature and the living beings, these are the greatest teachers... You might ask why the same kind of education cannot be given to men... They have to earn money for livelihood; they need technical education". He suggested, women could, however, learn Hindi, English, Sanskrit and Tamil, a bit of world history, geography, family hygiene methods, music and painting. One may note here that this itinerary of women's education suggested by Satyamurthi would necessarily keep them home-bound rather than allowing them to traverse the public sphere of employment.

He was also not averse to women forming recreation clubs. Here too his position was similar to that on education. He suggested that women should form recreation clubs, just as the European women did, in order to socialise with other women of the same class. However, woman must,
according to him, ensure that her participation in such clubs did not erode her interest in household duties and family welfare. For Satyamurthi, women's club, as in the West, had to be part of women's life because such clubs were part of the modernising efforts for women—a social marker to distinguish the 'new woman' from the traditional woman. However, this modernising efforts should not threaten the family and women's roles as wives and mothers.

In consonance with his idea of home as the legitimate place for women, Satyamurthi was very apprehensive about women's participation in politics. In his own words,

No doubt women members of legislative councils and other local bodies realise their duties and work hard. But I doubt whether they can contribute as much as men... Even in the west... women in the public have not achieved anything... women do not possess the capacity for public life. Even if they are involved they must not forget that they are women. Nowadays they also claim their rights and equality with men; what can one say about them?

The views of Satyamurthi about women are, thus, indeed traditional. But we need to point out the specific ideological attributes of this valorisation of tradition in the context of colonial domination and nationalist struggle. Perhaps the best way to approach this issue is to look into Satyamurthi's position on various marriage-related social legislations, during the colonial period.

15 Satyamurthi to Lakshmi, letter dated 26 April 1941, in Ibid., p. 123.
Let us begin with the Child Marriage Restraint Act which was introduced in the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1929. Satyamurthi, despite being active in the Congress party, launched virulent attacks on the government (for introducing the legislation which according to him, was opposed to the interest of the Brahmins) and on the Congress party and women’s organisations (for supporting the Act). He organised and participated in Sanadhanada Dharma conferences which opposed the Act.17

Satyamurthi held that every aspect of Brahmanic life was controlled and directed by Hindu Shastras which could only be interpreted by male religious pandits and mutt leaders, and the British government had no right to interfere in such indigenous rituals and religious beliefs. When the Congress party itself approved the legislation, Satyamurthi threatened to resign from the Congress or otherwise lobby within the party to mobilise opinion against the legislation. He argued that despite “so much of opposition against the Sarada Act, Congress intentionally has intervened in the religious and personal matters of people…” and “[he] might have to resign from Congress temporarily and show his sympathies for friends who agitate against the Act”.18 At times, he even claimed that the passing of the Sarada Act was the government’s tactics to break the national movement by alienating the orthodox sections from the Congress party and the national movement.19 Satyamurthi suggested a long drawn out satyagraha to force the government to withdraw the legislation or otherwise violate the Act by performing child marriages. Addressing the orthodox Brahmins,

17 Swadesamitram, 3 December 1929.
18 Swadesamitram, 28 October 1929
19 Native Newspaper Reports (hereafter NNR), 12 October 1929.
Satyamurthi remarked,

We should be ready to launch a struggle against this draconian legislation, which would mean at least thousands of us should be ready for a satyagraha and the violation of the Sarada Act. This would make others realise what it means to tamper with our private and religious lives.\(^\text{20}\)

For him, the private had to be kept out of reach of Western/colonial intervention, i.e., it had to be retained as an uncolonised space untiller colonial domination. For Satyamurthi, the Hindu, Brahmanic or Shastric tradition had to be considered as indigenous Indian culture which regulated sexuality at the private sphere of family; and marriage was part of such regulation which could not be intervened through public institutions such as courts and legislatures which in any case were manifestations of Western culture.\(^\text{21}\) He argued, “We should not reform Hinduism on the basis of western culture... for Hindus marriage is a sacred ritual... parasara smriti demands marriage for girls before 12 years, otherwise the parents have to bear the great sin... I cannot approve legislation which punishes with imprisonment for violating the minimum marriagable age”.\(^\text{22}\) His position on the Hindu Marriage Dissolution Bill or the divorce bill was also predicated on the binary opposites of private/public and indigenous/Western (colonial). He dismissed the concept of divorce as vulgar and unsuitable for the Hindus. Addressing the Triplicane Hindu Mahasabha, Satyamurthi remarked, “The custom of divorce is only followed by the Europeans which appears only to be vulgar and unsuitable for Hindu

\(^{20}\) Swadesamitran, 22 August 1929. C. Rajagopalachari, another Congress leader, however, opposed Satyamurthi’s views and criticised him.

\(^{21}\) Swadesamitran, 22 August 1929.

\(^{22}\) Swadesamitran, 18 October 1928.
tradition. If we bring about a legislation abolishing divorce practices of the Europeans living in India, will they keep quiet? So, this piece of legislation which harasses the Hindus, should not be permitted.”23

He also opposed the efforts to abolish the devadasi system.24 As early as 1927, when Muthulakshmi Reddy’s resolution to abolish the devadasi system got passed unanimously in the Madras Legislature, Satyamurthi orchestrated a meeting of a few devadasis in Madras city to mobilise their opinion in favour of the system. He was so committed about the need to perpetuate the system that he argued that devadasi families should dedicate at least one girl to the Hindu temples instead of many.25 According to him, devadasi system needed to be protected because it was essentially part of the indigenous Hindu/national culture. He cautioned the protagonists of devadasi abolition that if the system was abolished, the non-Brahmins would demand the abolition of temple priests (who were Brahmins).26 Perhaps we have to recall here that in 1929, when Muthulakshmi Reddy

23 Swadesamitrau, 20 July 1929.
24 In the Tamil speaking areas of South India, Devadasis were known as tevaradvials (slaves of the God) and in later years they had been referred to in day to day vocabulary as tevadiyal, a pejorative term representing devadasis as prostitutes. The young devadasi, before attaining puberty was married away to God through the mediation of the temple priests by the tali-tying ceremony or the Pottukattu ceremony. After she attained puberty, the nuptial ceremony was performed through symbolic consummation rites which signified her union with the God and she came to be known as Nitya Sumangali. The patrons of the system i.e., the landlords as well as the temple priests were allowed to have sexual contracts with the devadasis. Devadasis were granted the inheritance right over the landed income as long as they provided female heir to the temple as the next devadasi. For details on devadasi system see Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, Nitvasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India, Delhi, 1987; Amrit Srinivasan, ‘Reform and Revival; the Devadasis and her Dance’ Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XX, No. 44, 1 November 1983.
25 Muthulakshmi Reddy to the Editor of Tamilnady in 1927, in M.R. Papers, subject file no.11, part. II, p.344.
26 Ibid., file no. 11, part II, p. 344.
introduced an amendment to the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926 to completely dispense with the service of the devadasis in all temples and also to enfranchise them to hold Inam lands without any obligation of providing service to the temples, Satyamurthi raised a series of objections in the legislative council and even persuaded Reddy to introduce a separate bill, so that the non-Brahmins did not demand other things such as the dispensation of temple archakas of the Brahmin caste. He tried to delay the bill as long as possible. Significantly, Satyamurthi’s argument was challenged by a section of devadasis themselves. The meeting of devadasis at Mayuram town, for instance, condemned Satyamurthi’s reluctance and noted that he was more worried about the position of Brahmin priests and not about the devadasis. Importantly, they also pointed out that his logic of preserving the devadasi system as part of ancient religious tradition was equal to the logic of preserving sati as religious tradition. Thus, in the politics of Madras Presidency, where the non-Brahmin opinion under the leadership of the Justice party and the Self Respect Movement contested the Congress led Brahmin-dominated nationalists, both the Brahmins and the devadasi system as part of the Brahmanical Hinduism stood for indigenous/national culture.

Interestingly, according to Satyamurthi, devadasi system as part of the indigenous culture was not inferior to that of the English/colonisers.

27 The Madras Legislative Council Proceedings (hereafter MLCP), January - February 1929, p. 622; see also Swadesamitrā, 21 February 1929.

28 There were many devadasi associations at Thanjavur, Tirunelveli and Coimbatore districts which organised meetings in favour of Reddy’s Devadasi Abolition Bill and in their resolutions condemned Satyamurthi’s attitude. For details of the proceedings of such conferences see M.R. Papers Subject file no. 11, Part III; Subject File No. 12 and Madhar Marumanam, vol. II, No. 3, Vegudhama, November.

29 Tamilnadu, 5 November, 1927 in M.R. Papers, subject file no. 12.
Invoking a perverse analogy, he argued that the Christian nuns too led a life similar to that of devadasis and neither the government nor the social reformers had said anything against that.30

The only social legislation relating to women which Satyamurthi supported was the effort to curb prostitution. He considered the problem as harmful for peaceful family life. Affirmation of the family as the norm is central here too. Satyamurthi, as a Legislative Council Member, argued that there is no need for a fresh legislation, since sections 52 and 71 of the City Police Act gave enough powers to the Police Commissioner to deal with brothels or houses meant for prostitution. He uncritically accepted the notorious City Police Act which empowered the police to enter brothels and subject prostitutes to various harassments. About rescuing prostitutes or minor girls from brothels and placing them in rescue houses, Satyamurthi strongly objected to any such custody for prostitutes. He was afraid that these women would be placed in Missionary Homes run by Christians and might be converted to Christianity, against the Hindu sentiments of the local people. Missionaries were thus carriers of the colonisers' culture, alien to indigenous Hindu culture. He sought the public opinion against placing prostitutes in Missionary Homes:

I know even in such cases (placing minor girls in a proper custody) what will happen. The only bodies who will take care of such girls will be the missionary homes. Again is not this a matter on which public opinion has to be invited and we have to be guided by that opinion as to what is the kind of suitable accommodation for these unfortunate victims of commercialised vice?31

30 M.R. Papers, subject file no. 11, part II, p. 344.
31 MLCP, 10 October 1928.
To sum up, in Satyamurthi’s discourse on women, the Brahmanical/Shastric traditions signified the indigenous or national culture; and women as wives and mothers, bounded by such traditions remained as uncolonised sites. To surrender such tradition, according to him, was to allow the colonial project to expand its hold on the limited uncolonised space in the indigenous society. More importantly, to resist any transformation of tradition along the Western way was, to affirm the masculinity of the colonised Hindu upper caste male. Reacting to the Age of Consent Bill, he noted,

I too have a daughter... by violating the Sarada Act, I would get her married even before she attains puberty or 12 years. I am willing to accept the punishment of even imprisonment. Every Brahmin should violate this act and exhibit his manliness.32

The key word here is manliness. Satyamurthi’s binaries of indigenous / Western, private/public and uncolonised/colonised, at one level, denied women their voice in the name of nation, and treated them as a mere site/trope to affirm the colonised male's masculinity and the so-called national culture.33 At another level, his definition of the indigenous, excluded the voices of the non-Brahmin Hindus and the non-Hindus from the voice of the nation.

2.1.2 Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar on Women’s Question

32 Swadesamitran, 20 July 1929; and 26 October 1929.
Let us now turn to Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar's views on women's question. As we have noted earlier, the choice of Thiru.Vi.Ka. is informed by the fact that he was a non-Brahmin nationalist within the Brahmin-dominated Congress party in Tamilnadu and also his politics had an ambiance which was less orthodox compared to that of Satyamurthi. Thiru.Vi. Ka was born in 1883 in a lower middle class Mudaliar family. His early political career started with his participation in Annie Besant's Home Rule Movement and he gradually became an executive committee member of the Congress party. During his long association with the Congress party, he presided over many state, district and taluk level Congress committees. As one of the first trade unionists in Tamilnadu, he had led many labour struggles, including the historic Binny Mill strike of 1921.4 A prolific writer in Tamil, he authored nearly 30 books till 1940. He was also the editor of the nationalist Tamil newspapers Desa bhaktan and Navasakti which primarily highlighted labour issues. Given his non-Brahmin background, he attacked the separate dining for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students practised in Seramadevi Gurukulam, run by the nationalist V.V.S. Iyer and funded partially by the Tamilnadu Congress Committee.35 He also welcomed the Devadasi Abolition Bill, and addressed conferences of Isai Vellalas (who were associated with the devadasi system) and other social reform conferences to advocate devadasi abolition - unlike the mainstream nationalists like C. Rajagopalachari and S.Satya murthi.36

In one of his earliest and a very popular book *Penin Perumai*\(^{37}\) (The glory of women) Thiru. Vi. Ka. defined feminity as encapsulating patience, endurance, sacrifice, selflessness, beauty and love, and essentialised feminity as motherhood. Denying that feminity is a product of history, he argued that these qualities in a woman were “as natural as the combination of sand, water, air, light which ultimately produce the environment, with the living beings like even the trees”.\(^{38}\) These divine like feminine qualities in a woman, according to him, enabled her to attain motherhood and sacrifice her life for the other living beings. Thus for a woman “sacrifice is not slavery but a divine duty”\(^{39}\) and the sole objective for a woman was to attain this divine-like motherhood.\(^{40}\)

In his view, good mothers were national assets since they gave birth to brave and efficient men and transmitted moral values to the new generation of children. To be a good mother, a woman required good moral conduct which, according to Thiru.Vi.Ka., could be imparted through education.\(^{41}\) Opposing the western type of education, he suggested that girls should be provided with education that would ingrain in them traditional moral and religious values and train them in such household duties as child rearing, cooking, cleaning the house and hygiene methods. It could also include specific physical exercises in the form of husking and

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pounding of rice, spinning and tailoring and so on!\textsuperscript{42}

As part of this female education which merely affirmed patriarchy, he permitted women to participate in certain restrictive kinds of intellectual activities. For instance, in 1938, in the course of a Tamil conference, he urged women to contribute to the growth of Tamil literature just as the women of the Sangam period did.\textsuperscript{43} We may remember here that while he could call women to contribute to literature, his definition of literature was bounded by certain moral middle class norms: he argued against women reading novels, because of their alleged morally corrupting tendency. He also requested women to participate in the proceedings of Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam and other religious discussions.\textsuperscript{44} We may note here, in his personal life, Thiru. Vi. Ka. admired and idealised his educated wife Kamalambigai not so much for her intelligent mind or autonomous thinking, but for her ‘feminine qualities’ such as patience, endurance, efficiency in fulfilling his desires and of other family members. In short, Kamalambigai stood as a metaphor for his idealised ‘new woman’ who was educated, yet homebound.\textsuperscript{45}

Given the centrality of motherhood in his discourse, Thiru. Vi. Ka. treated marriage as an important aspect of a woman’s life. The marriage had

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\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 73, 75, 76, 81, 86 and 100.
\textsuperscript{43} Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaranar, Thiru Vi Ka..., 1982, pp. 613-614.
\textsuperscript{44} Thiru. Vi. Ka. was an ardent Saivite and learnt the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy from Mylapore Tanikasala Mudaliar and in 1903, he founded the Bhakta Jana Sabha. From then onwards, he tried to forge a strong alliance between his nationalist politics and Saiva Siddhanta activities. For details see S. Sachithanandam Pillai, ‘Thiru. Vi. Kavin Samayam’ in E.Sa. Visswanathan (ed.), Tamil Thentral Thiru. Vi. Ka., Madras, 1987 (2nd edition), p. 90.
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to be based on ancient Tamil practices in contrast to Western practices. He claimed, "Western marriage customs are not acceptable to us... Adopting western culture or accepting the west as our model for everything would only destroy our national development. For instance, having late marriage, say at the age of 30 or 35, just as in the west, is not acceptable for us". Similarly, Thiru.Vi. Ka. condemned the practice of divorce and separation also. As procreation and child rearing are the defining features of women as mothers, Thiru. Vi. Ka. strongly opposed birth-control methods as propagated in the West. According to him, marriage was meant for procreation and not for mere "physical excitement", and only under certain circumstances, self-control as a method of contraception could be followed. In his words,

> There has been various birth-control methods advocated in the west... I do not appreciate any one of those methods... some of our women, after having Western education, due to their ignorance, adopt birth-control methods.

As part of his anti-Western nationalist discourse, he cautioned women activists and social reformers not to push legislations for women too far which would lead to the identification of national movement with the colonial government. Thus, unlike other kinds of reforms such as labour

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49 Ibid., p. 251.
reforms, reforms for women had to be advocated with caution. For Thiru.Vi.Ka. the key aim was to achieve national liberation and the women's question had to be resolved only within this project and without sacrificing the so-called spiritual superiority of the national culture to the Western norms. He argued that the struggle for women's liberation in the West was a struggle against men and involved only violence. In contrast, women's liberation in India must aim at fulfilling women's traditional roles.

In arguing for women's traditional roles, Thiru.Vi.Ka. consistently glorified ancient Tamil women in all his writings and speeches. Speaking at the Tirunelveli District Congress meeting, for instance, Thiru.Vi.Ka. contended that the ancient Tamil women were famous for their valor and chastity. He idealised Kannagi for her chastity, Manimekalai for intellectual capacities and Andal for her devotion. He also invoked mythological characters such as Sita, Kunti and Droupati as brave women of the epic period who were mothers, had equal education and proved to be valorous. Importantly, when he cited Droupati as an example to be emulated by women, he took his Droupati from the Jain Mahabharata, since it depicted her to be chaste and married only to Arjunan and not to the other four brothers as in Vyasar's Mahabharata. Thus, Thiru.Vi.Ka. mobilised history, literature and mythology in his own selective manner to propagate

52 In the Tamil epic Silapathikaram Kannagi had been portrayed as a chaste woman who could burn entire Madurai with her power of chastity. Manimekalai the heroine of another Tamil epic known as Manimekalai was noted for her charity work and intellectual capacities. Andal, who probably lived in the 7th century A.D., was a Bhakti poet who wrote 30 stanza long song, the Thiruppavai and Nachiyar Thirumozhi expressing her love and devotion for Lord Vishnu. According to legend Andal was married to Vishnu and she came to be regarded as consort of Lord Vishnu.
patriarchy which privileged tradition against the Western/colonial.

While Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s views on women were not very different from that of the orthodox Satyamurthi, we need to note that it contained certain elements of apparent progressiveness. As we have noted earlier, in the case of devadasis, he not only welcomed Muthulakshmi Reddy's Devadasi Abolition Bill but also condemned the conservative nationalists for their support for the devadasi system. However, this apparent progressiveness of Thiru. Vi. Ka. could have been based on traditional norms. Devadasis being not constrained by the norms of middle class family, they were often viewed as the 'inferior other' of 'respectable' women. Moreover, they were drawn from certain non-Brahmin castes, thus affirming the inferior status of such castes. Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s plea for devadasi abolition might have been a means to affirm traditional familial norms as well as the honour of the non-Brahmin castes.54

Moreover, Thiru. Vi. Ka. also recognised that the idealised private space of home, bounded by the needs to preserve the private as uncolonised, need not be non-oppressive in reality. For instance, he contended that India lost its freedom from the day when women lost their freedom and pushed into slavery by selfish men who only treated women as sexual objects and slaves. He went on, "a fragile woman's freedom was grabbed by a strong male".55 However, this recognition did not lead

54 In fact, Muthulakshmi Reddy's discourse on devadasi abolition was marked by such concern about familial norms, while the non-Brahmins caste associations opposed devadasi system to uphold their caste honour. See Anandhi S., 'Representing Devadasis: Dasigal Mosavalai as a Radical Text', Annual Number, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXVI, Nos. 11 and 12, March 1991.

55 Ibid., pp.34 and 37; see also Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s speech at the 5th anniversary celebration of Indian Youth Association at Colombo, in Kumaran, 19 August 1926.
Thiru.Vi.Ka. to free women from domestic slavery and allow them to emerge as equals to men in public sphere. In short, his views were substantially similar to those of Satyamurthi.

2.2 Nature of Women’s Political Participation in the National Movement

From the nationalist male leadership’s position on women’s question, let us now move on to the nature of women’s participation in the national movement. While this section is a prelude to an analysis of the nationalist women activists’ stance on women’s issues, it is simultaneously an effort to render women, who have been ignored in the existing literature, visible. The section begins with a brief introduction on the nature of women’s participation in the national movement, and then moves on to detail their activities in the Gandhian Constructive Programmes and the Civil Disobedience Movement.

For many women in Tamilnadu, involvement in national movement began around 1921 when Gandhi visited some towns and villages in the region. It was also the period when Gandhi’s Constructive Programmes were formally accepted as an integral part of the Congress policy. Following this, at Mayuram, a small town in Thanjavur district, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, a devadasi, met Gandhi in 1921 and joined the Congress party. In 1922, she organised a number of Congress meetings around Mayuram town and in small villages nearby. Her campaign was mainly about the essence of khadi.

56 For a detailed life history and political activities of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar see chapter IV; Swadesamitran, 14 November 1922.
liquor boycott and women's participation in the Congress party activities. She was also running a 'national school' at her village, Moovalur, to educate both men and women about nationalism and Gandhism.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, Asalambigai Ammaiya,\textsuperscript{58} also met Gandhi in 1921 at Cuddalore, a small town in South Arcot district, and became an ardent supporter and campaigner of khadi. Soon after her contact with Gandhi, she translated his biography into Tamil and involved herself in Congress Party activities.\textsuperscript{59}

In 1922, a large number of women joined the Non-Co-operation Movement and many of them utilised the Congress platform to express their opinions on the national struggle, Congress party and problems specific to women's political participation. Some of them even undertook the responsibility of organising Congress meetings. At Thirupapuliyur, a village near Cuddalore town, a nationalist meeting was organised where one Kamalambal Ammal spoke about the essence of khadi, the drain of wealth and requested women to join the national movement.\textsuperscript{60}

Following the participation of women in the Non-Co-Operation Movement, and encouraged by their enthusiasm, the local level Congress

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 26 November 1922; 27 November 1922; and 25 January 1923.

\textsuperscript{58} Asalambigai Ammaiya was born in an orthodox Brahmin family, in 1875, at Cuddalore. At the age of eight, she had a child-marriage and at the age of 11 she became a child-widow. After that she joined a school and studied up to fifth class. At home, she informally learnt Tamil classical literature. At the age of 17, she began writing in Tamil, small pamphlets and booklets on temple culture and religious hymns. She contributed many articles for women's journals and Tamil literary journals.

\textsuperscript{59} Asalambigai Ammal, 'Enathu Jeevia Kurrippukkal' \textit{Bharathi}, Vol. 3, No. 4, April 1931.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 16 August 1922.
outfits supported them and even organised special public meetings for them. For instance, in 1923, the Tamilnadu Provincial Congress, in its Trichi meeting, nominated E.V.R. Nagammaiyar as its women representative for the All India Congress Committee. In 1924, at Thiruvannamalai, a small town in North Arcot district, a public meeting for women was organised under the aegis of the Congress party which was chaired by a woman activist, Padmasini Ammal, and attended by a large number of women (numbering about 900). In the course of the meeting, Mayuram Marudammal, Thillai Ammal and other women activists spoke about “women’s duties in public life”, “the essence of khadi” and “the Punjab riot”, for nearly two and a half hours. They, then formed a small women’s association to support Congress activities, with a membership fee of four annas per head. In turn, the Thanjavur Congress district conference passed a resolution requesting women to co-operate with the Congress in all its activities, particularly in its Constructive Programmes. During the Civil Disobedient Movement in 1930, women’s relationship with the Congress party became even more significant with a larger number of them attending Congress meetings, participating in satyagraha activities, occupying leadership roles in boycotting foreign cloth and liquor shops, and organising Swadeshi Leagues.

61 Swadesamitran, 4 December 1923. See also S.C. Sivagami, ‘Nagammaiyar’, Pakutharivu, 1 May 1935. E.V.R. Nagammaiyar, wife of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker entered politics in 1920 as a Congress activist. From 1920 onwards, for six years she participated in most of the Congress proceedings and later elected for the All India Congress Committee membership. Along with E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, she had sold khadi on the roads of Erode. In 1921, she, along with S.R. Kannammal, led the anti-liquor agitation at Erode. In 1924, she provided the leadership for low caste women and participated in the Vaikom Satyagraha/Temple Entry Movement, even after E.V. Ramasamy Naicker was arrested. Later on she joined the Self Respect Movement.

62 Swadesamitran, 10 January 1924.

63 Swadesamitran, 27 May 1925.
2.2.1 Women in Gandhian Constructive Programmes

Gandhi devised the Constructive Programmes mainly for women, so that they could utilise their essentially 'feminine qualities' such as self sacrifice, endurance and patience, in the arena of public activities. These programmes were also meant to train women in organised activities of the Congress to prepare for a long drawn out agitation like satyagraha and imprisonment. Keeping this in mind, Gandhi and the Congress party advocated khadi spinning and selling as activities of importance by women to the national economy. The propaganda reassured women that they need not neglect their traditional domestic roles since khadi spinning could be done at home during leisure hours. Gandhi also claimed that in ancient times even Sita of Ramayana "donned clothing made of tree bark and given up all luxuries". Following Gandhi's advice, a large number of Tamil women took to khadi spinning, organised Khadi spinning classes, conducted meetings to propagate khadi, and wrote about their experiences in khadi activities. Padmasini Ammal, a woman activist from Madurai, despite her upper class and caste (Brahmin) background, carried khadi sarees and clothes on the head and sold them in Madurai streets. At home, she spun khadi for her livelihood. Similarly at Erode, E.V.R. Nagammaiyar, along

64 Kumari Jayawardene, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, New Delhi, 1986, pp 96 and 97; see also Madhu Kiswar, 'Gandhi on Women', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XX, No. 40 and no. 41, 5 October 1985 and 12 October 1985.


66 Padmasini Ammal, wife of Srinivasa Iyengar, was born in an orthodox Brahmin family. She was the first woman activist in Madurai district to propagate Constructive Programmes. She, apart from running the Bharatha Ashram, organised Congress Party meetings. She was imprisoned for Civil Disobedient activities in 1930.

67 Swadesamitrani, 24 October 1922; See also Madurai Zilla Thiyagigal Malar, Tamilnadu Congress Committee, Madras, 1948, pp. 18-20.
with her husband E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, carried khadi clothes on her head and sold them in streets and at various houses, despite her upper class background.\textsuperscript{68} In Madurai, women Congress activists formed the \textbf{Madurai Sakodarigal Sangam} to mobilise women for the Congress activities, particularly for khadi spinning and selling, and for organising foreign cloth boycotts. The Sangam conducted spinning classes and some of its activists, who were not directly involved in the Constructive Programmes, registered themselves as members of the Congress party and participated in propaganda work. The Sangam was organised by the noted women nationalists of Madurai, Thayarammal, Seethalakshmi Ammal, Padmasini Ammal, Pichamuthu Ammal and Subbalakshmi Ammal.\textsuperscript{69} The Sangam also organised a charka procession in which 200 women participated.\textsuperscript{70} During Diwali celebration, a special women’s committee was formed by the Sangam to sell khadi clothes. A. Pichamuthammal, A. Akiladammal, L.K. Lakshmi Ammal, S. Thayarammal and some other women were members of this committee.\textsuperscript{71} At Pollachi, under the leadership of the then TNPC President Dr. A. Pichamuthammal, a charka procession was organised and she spoke

\textsuperscript{68} S.C. Sivagami, \textit{Pakutharivu}, 1 May 1935.
\textsuperscript{69} The Madurai Sakotharigal Sangam was started in 1924. See, \textit{Swadesamitran}, 8 May 1930; and 12 May 1930. See also \textit{Madurai Zilla Thiyagugal Malagp}, 30.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 12 May 1930; 28 June 1930; and 7 July 1930.
about the ancient Hindu tradition of khadi wearing.\textsuperscript{72} At Salem, Alarmelu Ammal and Kamakshi Ammal were appointed by the Women's Swadeshi Organisation to conduct spinning classes.\textsuperscript{73} At Peraiyur, Ammapettai Spinner's Conference organised a spinning competition for women.\textsuperscript{74} At Coimbatore and at Tirunelveli, during the Diwali celebrations, women activists appealed to families to buy only Swadeshi goods and wear only khadi.\textsuperscript{75} At Trichi, a \textbf{Swadeshi Sangam} was started with hundred women members and V. Kalyani Ammal as its president.\textsuperscript{76} In South Arcot district a nationalist women's association appealed to women to spin and wear khadi to compensate the loss of 60 crores of rupees to the Indian economy.\textsuperscript{77}

Finally, in Madras city, in 1931, women Congress activists organised the Women's Swadeshi League to conduct charka classes, khadi selling programmes, Hindi classes and to organise Congress propaganda meetings. The League was organised by S. Ambujammal, Manjubhasini, Janammal and Visalakshi Ammal.\textsuperscript{78} The league also organised \textbf{Bhajan} sessions, where women sang nationalist songs along with religious hymns.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 25 June 1930. A. Pichamuthu Ammal, an Indian Christian, a medical practitioner at American Mission Hospital, Madurai, for 13 years, had her higher education for six years at London, joined the Congress Party in the 1920s. In the 1930s, she became the President of TNPC. It was during her presidentship, more than 2,000 volunteers entered jail within three and a half months. She herself was arrested and imprisoned for one year during the Civil Disobedient Movement. She was also the Secretary of the Sakotarigal Sangam.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 20 June 1930.

\textsuperscript{74} Kovai Aiyamuthu, \textit{op cit.}, pp. 472-473.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 26 June 1930.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 16 April 1931. At Mayuram, one Kamalambal started a Khaddar Development Board to promote khadi and organised a khadi conference.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 26 August 1931.

similar to Prabhat Peri, at important Hindu temples, particularly at Triplicane Parthasarthy temple and at Mylapore Kabalishwarar temple in the early hours. These classes were mainly attended by Brahmin women of Madras city, and a few Gujarati and Marathi women. Vai. Mu.Kothainayagi Ammal conducted these classes. After the release of women satyagrahis from prison, the League organised the Desa Sevika Sangam as part of the League to carry out Gandhian Constructive Programmes, to organise swadeshi propaganda meetings and to mobilise women for Congress party activities. The League organised a swadeshi week and also a swadeshi exhibition. A Takli procession and spinning competition was also organised by the League. Many Congress women activists wrote and spoke about the “pleasant experience” of khadi spinning and how khadi spinning was primarily an ancient custom of Tamil women. Women activists who sold khadi and spun khadi maintained diaries about their village level activities related to khadi programmes. One Saraswathi Ammal confessed that her spinning experience was like delivering a child and developing an eternal bond with the child as a mother did.

Equally large number of women took part in foreign cloth boycott and in picketing shops selling foreign cloth. Ammubai, Seshubai (pregnant at

79 Swadesamitran, 13 January 1931; and 19 February 1931. See also S. Ambujammal, op cit., p. 147.
80 Swadesamitran, 27 July 1931.
81 Swadesamitran, 9 July 1930; 11 March 1931; and 13 April 1931.
82 Swadesamitran, 21 July 1930.
83 Swadesamitran, 5 August 1922; 7 October 1922. Interestingly, the Kongu Vellala caste conference at Pollachi passed a resolution that women of their castes should be presented with charkas as part of their dowry! See Swadesamitran, 22 February 1926.
84 Stridharma, Vol XIII, No. 10, August 1930.
that time), Bhagirathibai and Govindammal picketed such shops at
Coimbatore and forced them to be closed.\footnote{Swadesamitran, 19 March 1931.} Again at Coimbatore, around
hundred volunteers led by 12 women activists took out a procession, singing
swadeshi and other nationalist songs in front of the Bombay Wearhouse
selling foreign cloth.\footnote{Swadesamitran, 13 February 1931; and 18 February 1931.} At Madurai, on 15 May 1931, around 69 foreign
cloth shops were effectively picketed and closed down by women. Thirty
four women volunteers took out a procession from the Congress office
before picketing these shops.\footnote{Swadesamitran, 19 May 1931.} At Tuticorin, under the leadership of
Sarathambal, 36 volunteers picketed foreign cloth shops.\footnote{Swadesamitran, 22 June 1931.} In Madras city,
Rukumani Lakshmipathi,\footnote{Rukumani Lakshmipathi was born in 1892 in a Brahmin family. She had learnt Latin, French, Hindi, Urdu
and English and married Dr. A. Lakshmipathi, an ayurvedic medical practioner. In her long political career, she
occupied the post of the Vice President of the Madras District Congress Committee and became the member
of the TNPC and the All India Congress Committee. She organised the Madras Youth League and edited a
newspaper called ‘The Voice of Youth’ in 1929. She was also a member of Women’s India Association and
attended the 10th International Women’s Suffrage Alliance Congress at Paris in 1926.} took out a procession in front of the China
Bazaar and persuaded people not to buy foreign clothes, for which she was
arrested and imprisoned for six months.\footnote{Law (general), G.O. No: 1144, 21.3.1932.} R. Sivabogam Ammal, a leader
of Madras Congress Association, went to picket the Chellaram’s shop in
Madras on 12 February 1932 and was arrested.\footnote{Ibid., G.O. No: 663, 18.3.1932.} Similarly, Sakuntalabai,
S. Ambujammal, Gnanambal, Kamalabai, Indirabai, Gomathi Ammal and a
few other women were arrested for picketing at the Ratan Bazar in Madras
and for distributing Congress pamphlets on boycott of foreign cloth.\footnote{Ibid., G.O. No: 661, 18.2.1932; G.O. No: 304, 28.1.32; G.O. No: 1060, 7.3.1931; G.O. No: 1062, 7.3.31. See
also S. Ambujammal, \textit{op cit.}, pp. 148-150.}
Women activists were also arrested and convicted at Madurai, Tirunelveli, Trichi and Salem for picketing foreign cloth shops.\(^93\)

**2.2.2 Women in the Civil Disobedience and Other Satyagraha Activities**

The mass participation of women in the Civil Disobedient Movement and in other satyagraha activities were an expansion of women's participation in the Gandhian Constructive Programmes. During the salt satyagraha in 1930, a large number of women marched to Vedaranyam to participate in the satyagraha activity. Ma. Po. Sivagnanam, a nationalist himself, notes that in 1930 many upper class women of Madras city wore tri-coloured sarees and participated in salt satyagraha at Madras beach.\(^94\) Cuddalore Anchalai Ammal\(^95\) and Rukumani Lakshmipathi played an important role in the satyagraha. The latter organised many public meetings to motivate women to violate the salt law and collected funds for satyagraha activities.\(^96\) For violating the salt law, she was imprisoned for a year in Vellore jail. Following this, in 1932, Lakshmi Sankara Iyer at Tirunelveli district, Vai. Mu. Kothainayagi Ammal and Saraswathi

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93 For details of women who were arrested during this period, see Law (general) G.O. No. 1070, 16.3.1932; G.O.No. 1539, 15.4.1932; G.O.No. 1475, 27.4.1933; G.O.No. 918, 7.3.1932; G.O.No. 1671 (3(s)), 23.4.1932; G.O. No. 2602, 11.7.1932.


95 Cuddalore Anchalai Ammal, born in Vanniar caste peasant family in 1890, entered national movement in 1920. She participated in Neil Statue Satyagraha, Non-co-operation Movement, toddy shop picketing, foreign cloth boycott, Salt Satyagraha and individual satyagraha. She had undergone five years of imprisonment for these activities. In 1934, she contested election as a Congress candidate from women's constituency at South Arcot district and won the election.

96 Rukumani Lakshmipathi to A. Lakshmipathi, Vellore, letter dated 23 April 1931.
Pandurangam from Madras, Ratnammal, N.S.R. Janaki Ammal and Pichamuthu Ammal from Madurai, Kamalambal and Bhagirathi Ammal from Coimbatore were arrested and convicted for imprisonment varying from 6 months to one year along with a fine of Rs 200. Women also took part in anti-war individual satyagrahas from 1939, and in anti-war propaganda activities during World War II. In 1939, K.P. Janaki Ammal of Madurai was arrested and convicted for six months rigorous imprisonment and kept as a ‘C’ class prisoner at Vellore Jail. She was the first woman in South India to be arrested for individual satyagraha and kept in ‘C’ class. Similarly in 1940, at Erode, Pankajammal was sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment with a fine of Rs 200 for participating in individual satyagraha. In 1941, N.S. Rukumani, Radhabhai, Janaki Ammal and Manaloor Maniyammal were arrested for their individual satyagraha activities. During this time, around 30 women activists were sent to Vellore Jail for their participation in individual satyagraha.

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97 Law (general) G.O. No. 984, 10.3.1932; G.O. No. 918, 7.3.1932; G.O. No. 3050, 18.8.1932; G.O. No. 2253, 8.6.1932; G.O. No. 1884, 10.5.1932; G.O. No. 1389, 5.4.1932; G.O. No. 600, 16.2.1932.

98 Interview with K.P. Janaki Ammal, Madurai. K.P. Janaki Ammal was born in 1917. At the age of 12 she joined the Madurai Palaniyappa Boys Company, a drama troupe which propagated social reform ideals and nationalistic cause through puranic stories. In 1934, she married Gurusami, a musician in the drama troupe. Both of them entered the Congress party, though Janaki continued her acting and became the Vice-President of the Tamilnadu Actors Association. In 1936, she became a full-time Congress activist and later on joined the Congress Socialist Party. In 1939, she became a member of Indian Communist Party (Madurai Branch). In 1939 and 1941, she was arrested for her anti-war propaganda. In 1943, she organised trade unions for women mill workers of Madurai and in 1944, she became a leader of the Kisan Sabha in Madurai.


100 Indian Annual Register, August-September, 1940, p. 236.

2.3 The Dominant Worldview of the Women Activists in the National Movement

As we have seen above, women's participation in the national movement in Tamilnadu was quite substantial. In this context it is important to analyse the woman activists' perception of politics and the manner in which they addressed women's issues. This will help us understand whether their voices, given their specific location within oppressive middle class families and within patriarchal Congress politics, differed from that of the male leadership of the movement.

The present section deals with this set of issues. It begins with an analysis of woman activists' perception of Gandhi, proceeds to detail their discourse on womanhood, and concludes with an analysis of how the woman activists played certain "politics of respectability" which inferiorised the 'other' women and affirmed middle class familial norms.

2.3.1 Women's Perception of Gandhi and His Programmes

The involvement of women in the national movement was primarily due to Gandhi and his Constructive Programmes. Many women idealised Gandhi, worshiped him as Lord Krishna and made conscious attempt to build a link between Gandhi and themselves even at an emotional level. Women leaders and activists used Gandhi's name and mythologised him as a saint in mobilising women for nationalist politics. Those women who found family life oppressive sought an outlet in Gandhi's Constructive Programmes and thus resolved contradictions of personal life by addressing
public problems. For instance, when some kind of misunderstanding cropped up between Subbalakshmi Ammal and her husband over her daughter's school education (i.e., she wanted the daughter to be educated contrary to her husband's wish) and subsequent unhappiness in her personal life, she found solace in her devotion to Gandhi and in her involvement in the national movement. Following the tragic death of her two sons and the misbehaviour of her brother-in-law, Subbalakshmi moved to her mother's house in Madras where she began getting involved in political activities, which changed the course of her life: "She became a great devotee of Gandhiji and Tagore. She began to wear only khaddar by listening to Gandhi's injunctions and bought a charka and learnt to spin through the khadi vastralaya (sic)... From those days, to the end of her life (she lived upto 80 years) she never wore anything but khadi". She not only responded to Gandhi's khaddar programme but also helped the Congress party with funds, attended political meetings in the city, and picketed few foreign cloth shops despite strong opposition from her orthodox family members.

Similarly, many women sought Gandhi's advice on their personal problems and familial unhappiness and strictly adhered to his instructions. Some women found that with his advice they could turn their unhappy personal life into a wholesome life through political involvement. The case of S. Ambujammal is rather illustrative in this context. Ambujammal's political career began with collecting Swaraj fund for the Congress party in

103 Ibid., p. 17.
the 1920s. During the Non-Co-operation Movement she regularly read Gandhi's speeches and other messages through newspapers. According to her, her unhappy married life forced her to choose the option of involving in public activity:

My domestic life was a failure, a thorough failure. I was very disappointed and very depressed; so I wanted to take my mind out of it. If I continued in that frame of mind and at that emotional plane, I would have become a very frustrated, neurotic patient. Fortunately, my reading and Gandhiji's message helped me; so that I could make myself useful in some way; so that I could spend my life with some sense of satisfaction and have a vocation.104

She further noted:

Many times I read Gandhi's book Arogya Sadhana and the important contents of the book impressed me a lot. It can even be said that from that time my entire course of life changed. So much so ... I certainly believed that I took a rebirth... In this book, Gandhi has written that the married couple must treat each other as brother and sister and involve in the national movement. This advice was very much suitable to my life. So I decided to observe this kind of life. Hence, I also accepted Gandhiji as my guru.105

Her elaborate descriptions about Gandhi's three days stay at her place in Madras and her feelings about Gandhi clearly reflects how she idealised and venerated Gandhi who for her was a guru, god and an ideal man with all the qualities of Ram of Ramayana.

To quote her,

I did not even notice how time flew in those three days when Mahatma stayed at our place. I was keenly observing what he was doing, what did he need,
where did he go, how did he talk and other manners. After he left Madras, I felt very helpless. Everywhere and everything in the house appeared empty and opaque. I aimlessly roamed about inside the house, simply staring at all those objects that he used and touched, since they appeared to be precious and holy to me.\textsuperscript{106}

It is this boundless admiration and devotion for Gandhi which forced her to begin Satyagraha at home to convince her father that she should be allowed to go to Wardha Ashram to live with Gandhi. Her narration about her Ashram life and her interaction with Gandhi at Wardha clearly brings out her notion of public life and the relationship between her as a Congress activist and the party leader, Gandhi. For her, Gandhi is nothing less than an almighty and he could spiritually engulf her into whatever he did in politics. The best example towards this is her narration about her experience at the 48\textsuperscript{th} Indian National Congress held in Bombay in 1934: "[In the Congress camp] every day morning I crossed six gates to reach Gandhi's place. Throughout the day I spent my time with him and only in the evening I got back to our camp... I enjoyed sitting in front of Gandhi. Instead of observing the Congress proceedings, I showed more attention to Gandhi's conversation and his actions".\textsuperscript{107}

Even Muthulakshmi Reddy, who had all along criticised the local Congress leaders such as C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthi for their views on women, openly revealed her "great love and respect" for Gandhi.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., p. 127.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., pp 179-180. It may be noted that this was the first time Ambujammal attended the All India Congress Meeting. Along with her, eight female delegates from Tamilnadu attended the Congress. Mrs. R.V. Shastri, Kothainayagi Ammal and Janammal from Madras, Padmavathi Asher from Tiruppur, Vedavalli Thayammal from Salem, Chandrakantha shah and Indumathi Shah from Kumbakonam attended the Congress. See AICC file, 1934, p. 19.
in all her writings and speeches. In 1930, she not only resigned her Madras legislature position as member and deputy speaker of the Madras Provincial Legislature, but organised prayer meetings for Gandhi's recovery from illness and advised women to take up khadi and swadeshi goods.\textsuperscript{108} Even while she sympathised with the Self Respect Movement for its progressive stance on women, she refused to stand for elections from the Justice party platform because of her devotion to Gandhi.\textsuperscript{109} She remarked, "As for Gandhiji, he is so different from ordinary mortals, he is a unique world character and it is difficult for any one of us to realise the greatness of his mind and soul".\textsuperscript{110} During 1937 election, remarking on the Congress victory, she noted that the Congress party in power might not take up or address women's issues but she is hopeful that Gandhi would guide the party to take up those issues, given Gandhi's commitment to removal of social inequalities.\textsuperscript{111} Women leaders also used Gandhi's name to impress upon women about the Congress programme. Asalambigai Ammal told women that Gandhi was pleased with Tamil women and respected them, so they must wear khadi and spin khadi to please him further.\textsuperscript{112} Rukumani Lakshmipathi, in all her public meetings eulogized Gandhi as an incarnation of God.\textsuperscript{113} Similarly, Vai. Mu. Kothainayagi spoke and wrote all along about Gandhi's spiritual qualities, saintly virtues, and his birth as a boon to Indians.\textsuperscript{114} The name of Gandhi, even now, could evoke all kinds of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{109} Muthulakshmi Reddy, Autobiography, Madras, 1964, pp. 104-105.
\item \textsuperscript{111} M.R. Papers, Vol. II, part I, pp. 113-115.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Swadesamitran, 24 April 1925.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Swadesamitran, 11 March 1931; and 6 June 1931.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Swadesamitran, 21 August 1931.
\end{itemize}
nostalgia among many women activists of that time. Rangamani Ammal who was active in the Quit India Movement recalled how she kept a fast at home for two days when Gandhi himself observed fast in 1942. At the insistence of Gandhi she had donated her precious diamond earnings to him. In her interview she narrated, as follows how she met Gandhi for the first time in 1942 at Madurai: "when Gandhi arrived at Madurai, myself and my brother travelled all the way from Tirunelveli to Madurai to see him. I was very near to Gandhi; I suddenly prostrated in front of him and worshipped him. In my life, I have never even prostrated in front of God but I could do that in front of Gandhi! Immediately, I saw a spiritual contact engulfing me with Gandhi. I endlessly read all his writings including 'Harijan'\textsuperscript{115} Similarly, another woman activist, Alarmelmangai Rajagopalan, in an interview, recalled her first meeting with Gandhi in 1947 and how that remained as an unforgettable event in her entire life.\textsuperscript{116} The Madras government in its fortnightly report, cynically noted how women of Tamilnadu thronged to see Gandhi and worshipped him: "Several emotional women bestowed jewellery and other personal articles of value upon him... however, this success is much more an indication of interest in Gandhi’s personality than of a warm espousal of his doctrines".\textsuperscript{117}

The politics of women’s participation in the national movement in Tamilnadu, as seen through the prism of their relationship with Gandhi, is quite revealing. Their political participation was, at one level, akin to women’s pre-existing involvement in religious experience, i.e., seeking the

\textsuperscript{115} Interview with Rangamani Ammal, Madras, 6 January 1989.
\textsuperscript{116} Interview with Alarmelmangai Rajagopalan, Madras, 26 February 1988.
\textsuperscript{117} Fortnightly Reports, May 1929.
liminal space of freedom offered by religious experience as an escape from domestic distress. Instead of religious experience, now they sought political experience which was spiritualised by the presence of God-like Gandhi. At another level, the so-called spiritual aura of Gandhi rendered the public space of politics free from unfamiliar dangers for women. It was not public space as such, but a tamed, spiritualised public space, which the middle class women activists traversed.

### 2.3.2 Women’s Discourse on Womanhood

If women’s perception of Gandhi was strongly marked by certain pre-existing traditional religiosity, it is important to probe into whether their views about women’s issues were any different from the traditional views of the male leadership of the national movement. Let us first analyse the nationalist women’s views about womanhood and how they extended such notions to their public participation.

Asalambigai Ammal’s writings are quite illustrative in this context. She considered the ‘feminine qualities’ such as patience, love, endurance, self-sacrifice and religiosity as natural qualities in women which had to be expressed in women’s familial roles such as loving wife, nurturing mother and dutiful daughter. To her, only these essential qualities would help women to produce valorous men for the nation. She further instructed women that they “must not consider household work as secondary, must observe all their caste norms and the familial customs... must not learn

English or follow Western culture, must learn only Tamil. Family discipline, rituals and religious practices should also be observed to avoid anarchy in the family”. She also argued that there was no need for any legislations to improve the condition of women since each caste and community could take care of the same.

Similarly, Rukumani Lakshmipathi considered family work as the primary duty of women who had to run the house with utmost care and discipline. For women, according to her, the family should be their centre of activities even if they are involved in public life. In a letter from Vellore prison, she noted what the family should be: “what I care for more than anything else is the discipline in the house, when that is broken, there is bound to be anarchy resulting in unhappiness and misgivings besides misunderstandings... there are factors which can’t be ignored like home, society, nation and so forth”. Writing from jail, Rukumani Lakshmipathi revealingly instructed her niece, Sarojini, “I want you to ... attend to the children’s dress and odd little household affairs: Further get the sitting room dusted everyday, particularly the piano, keep all the things neat and clean...”.

Ambujammal also expressed similar views. Narrating her experience of attending women’s recreation club, she wrote in her autobiography,

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119 For Asalambigai Amma’s views on woman, see Bharathi, Vol. 3, No. 4, April 1931.
120 Rukumani Lakshmipathi to her niece, letter dated 28 December 1932, in possession of Dr. Indira Ramamurthy, Madras.
121 Ibid., Letter, n. d.
None of those women who visited the club [women's recreation club] ever neglected their household duties. Instead [we] performed all the important household duties of daily routine and also made sure that [our] children or men at home did not face any problem due to [our] regular visits to the club.122

Similarly, all through the text, she appreciates her mother for her obedience, patience and her subservient role at home. She also points out that all women must learn the art of child rearing, etc.

It was this family-centered, patriarchal ideology on womanhood, which women activists uncritically extended to the public space. Women drew analogy between the family and the nation and argued how women's Shakti (power) and talents in the family needed to be extended to their public activities for the regeneration of the nation. For instance, S. Jayalakshmi Ammal, writing about women's role in the national progress, noted: "we are parts of the Goddess Shakti. Knowledge and wisdom are personified in Saraswathi... The greatness or ignomity, the unity or discord of a family is due to the woman concerned. House- hold management is practical statemanship. The same power of administration is required in both cases [home and nation]".123 Another woman, Gowri, noted that the "inherent qualities" of women such as patience, endurance, self- sacrifice and nurturing abilities could be utilised for the welfare of the nation.124

122 S. Ambujamma1, op cit., p. 81.
Similarly, speaking at the Tamilnadu Women’s Political Conference, Lakshmi Sankara Iyer, a leading woman nationalist, suggested that women, even while at home, could contribute to the nation by attending to their family members, by infusing patriotism in their children and by sacrificing themselves as mothers and wives.\textsuperscript{125} The primary role of women was to be mothers and motherhood was considered as a natural quality in all women. It was argued that women as mothers could contribute for the national movement by educating and infusing patriotic values in their children.\textsuperscript{126} Writing about the role of women in politics, Pavalam noted, “It is also not to be forgotten that woman’s home is a sanctuary where great and noble men are to be reared... Motherhood is a great thing in life... Nature has designed the noble function of motherhood".\textsuperscript{127} To fulfill these roles in the family and outside, women activists argued, women should be provided with ‘national education’. According to Sister V. Balambal, this education must teach women about “feminine qualities”, patriotism, ancient Indian traditions and customs, and about women’s primary duties in their families.\textsuperscript{128} Similar views were also expressed by Visalakshi. In public life, women activists argued, the non-violent struggles such as satyagrahas and swadeshi work were the only kind of activities which were best suited for women, since both these were based on love and affection; and hence women would be able to contribute the maximum.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 31 January 1936.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Stridharma}, Vol. XIV, No. 7, May 1931; and \textit{Mangai}, October 1946.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Indian Ladies Magazine}, Vol. IV, Nos. 8-9, March 1931.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Swadesamitran}, 15 March 1921;and 6 May 1921. For Visalaksi’s views, see, \textit{Stridharma}, Vol. XIV, No. 3, January 1931.
\textsuperscript{129} See Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Saraswathi Ammal’s speeches at Madras Swadeshi League’s meeting. \textit{Swadesamitran}, 7 July 1930.
Another activist Kamalabai, who went to jail during the Civil Disobedient Movement, in her lengthy narration about her experiences in the jail, claimed that women’s involvement in the freedom movement would never threaten peaceful family life of women. She further assured that women even after involvement in these activities could return back to familial roles without any change in their personal life. In this context, they constructed a history of ancient Tamil women who valorously fought for the Tamil nation, who excelled in education, who enjoyed freedom, yet remained chaste, traditional, religious and as an epitome of traditional feminine virtues. They asked women to read the life histories of all those great virtuous women to realise their “womanly duties” towards the nation. While these arguments were deployed by women activists to evoke women to join the national movement, the same arguments simultaneously valorised traditional familial norms for women.

The nationalist women writers also contributed to such an ideological tendency. As an illustration, let us take the writings of Vai. Mu. Kothainayagi Ammal (hereafter Vai. Mu. Ko., as she was popularly

130 Stridharma, Vol. XIV, No. 6, April 1931.
known), who wrote nearly 115 novels and many poems within a short period of twenty years. At the peak of the national movement, along with her political activism, she also edited the Tamil magazine Jagan Mohini, which propagated nationalist views. A Tamil woman writer of some eminence and an activist, Vai. Mu. Ko. was probably the only Tamil woman at that time who wrote tirelessly till her death and saw all her novels being published one after another without much problem. Before analysing her writings, let us have a brief look at her nationalist activities to contextualise her novels which are products of her location within the national movement and her experiences in an orthodox Brahmin family.

Vai. Mu. Ko.'s political career began with her participation in the All India Women's Conference and Mylapore Sarada Women's Association. Earlier, in 1921, attracted by Subramania Bharathi's nationalist poems, she used to sing them on the streets. From 1930 onwards, she became a full-fledged Congress activist, travelling all over Tamilnadu, propagating Gandhian Constructive Programmes by addressing local meetings and

132 Vai. Mu. Kothainayagi Ammal, popularly known as Vai. Mu. Ko, was born in 1901 in an orthodox Iyengar Brahmin family and married as a child at the age of five. Being a child wife of an orthodox Brahmin family, she was not allowed to have formal education and she self-educated herself in reading and writing Tamil. Till she was 20, she did not know how to write Tamil and her first drama 'Indira Mohana' (1924) was written out by her friend Pattammal, while she narrated orally the theme. See Aranga Srinivasan, Ezuthulaga Nayagi, Madras, 1988.

133 It is important to note that during the early 20th century, there were less than one per cent of women who were literates, and only very few women could find leisure to write such lengthy novels and short stories. Even if they managed to write, the publishing world, primarily dominated by men, did not encourage women's writings. Elsewhere we have noted the plight of Ramamirtham Ammaiayar in trying to publish her novel. Of course Vai. Mu. Ko, given her caste and class background and her kind of writings could find some place in the literary world.

134 Aranga Srinivasan, op cit., p. 63.
singing nationalist songs on the stage. In 1932, she was arrested for protesting against the Lodhian Commission and also for leading a procession of women to boycott foreign cloth at the China Bazaar.

Being an ardent Gandhite, she not only propagated khadi wearing and khadi selling but "began wearing khadi at a time when it was most daring to do so". Given her involvement in khadi programmes, most of her novels and poems ended praising Gandhi and khadi. The characters in her novels speak about Gandhi and his programmes at ladies clubs or propagate khadi for Diwali wearing. Her book of poems, Swadesiya Kirtanai, praise Gandhi, khadi, Bharathamatha and the 'feminine virtues' of women.

Let us first take her novel Veera Vasantha where she discusses the concept of women's freedom, what it meant to them and how modernity, which was associated with Westernisation, could destroy women's lives. The heroine of this novel, a girl from a Westernised Tamil Brahmin family, falls in love with a Christian and becomes pregnant but she is forced to get married to a Hindu boy. When he finds out about her earlier relationship and the pregnancy, she commits suicide. She also leaves behind a suicide note for her father in which she has confessed that this "disaster" was caused by her association with a Christian boy and if only she had followed the Hindu dharma sincerely, along with her caste norms and other traditional

135 Ibid., p. 113 and 127. See also interview with Vai. Mu.Ko.'s daughter-in-law Padmini Srinivasan broadcasted by the All India Radio, Madras, on 15 March 1988 at 1.05 p.m.
136 Indian Annual Register, January-June 1932.
roles of women, she would have remained chaste and a virgin. She further writes, "I think now, because of your official status and attraction to foreign life you gave up the traditional practice of marrying girls off before puberty; and this has resulted in an evil sin that has brought me to this state. You have lost me because you gave up your traditional norms ... Having been born as a Hindu woman with high status, I still gave up my mother-tongue, customs of my motherland and moved happily and proudly with a man who does not belong to us. I now know its consequences... I also know that independence is the enemy of women..." 139

In short, in this novel, the tradition-bound Hindu womanhood stands for the national culture, and Westernisation, for immorality, waywardness and blind freedom. The Christian character in the novel was her imagery of Western colonial man who destroys women’s lives, whereas traditional Hindu Brahmin man, according to Vai. Mu. Ko., would not have indulged in such home breaking activities. To her, a true traditional woman, who loves her nation, must, thus, oppose the Westernisation process even if it comes in the form of women’s freedom. For Vai.Mu.Ko., the concept of freedom for women was to realise traditional womanly virtues such as chastity, endurance, patience and other gender based norms to avoid bringing shame to families. For Vai.Mu.Ko., caste system was an essential element of tradition which needed to be preserved to make women virtuous. In her another novel, Sudanthira Paravai, she argues, through the life story of a working woman who marries a lower caste man, that violation of caste

norms reflects too much of freedom granted to women and thus the degradation of the Hindu society. **Ironically, Sudanthira Paravai** means 'free bird'.

For Vai.Mu.Ko., women's education too must help woman realise her traditional feminine virtues and womanly duties. An educated woman must realise that her freedom was within home and in performing her roles as wife and mother. In her novel, Rojamalar, she wrote that girls should be imparted education only in girls' schools to protect 'stridharma', and the education itself, she commented, must make women realise their duties within the family.

As far as marriage for women was concerned Va. Mu. Ko., like Satyamurthi, approved the practice of child marriage. Though she herself was a child wife, she treated such marriage as essentially a Brahminical custom and hence approved it. Also, the early marriage for women, according to her, kept the family in peace and relieved women of all kinds of "emotional pains". In her novel Kizakkuvelluthathu a woman character, Akila, says, "Women who are married off at their childhood would not face all those troubles of emotional pains, failure of love affairs and other volcanic kind of experiences in life".

Vai. Mu. Ko.'s novels, thus, mimic the nationalist male leader's thought on women's question: women in their traditional roles stand as a

141 C.S. Lakshmi, op cit., p. 104.
trope for Hindu Brahmanic culture which also, stand for the national culture. In short, the stance of Vai. Mu. Ko. as well as other women activists of the national movement exhibit hardly any autonomy, but was contained and bounded by the hegemonic discourse of the nationalist male leadership.

2.3.3 "The Politics of Respectability": The Middle Class Hindu Women Vs the ‘Other’ Women

The same ideological tendency, which privileged traditional patriarchal norms, found expression in the middle class women activists' effort to distance themselves from the not-so-respectable ‘other women’ who also contributed to the national movement. It is indeed true that most of the women who participated in the major activities of the Congress party, particularly in the Gandhian Constructive Programme, were from middle class families, and they were considered both by the Congress party and women themselves as “respectable”. But there were others too.

In fact, a large number of prostitutes and devadasis also took part in the national movement despite opposition from the middle class men and women. For instance, in 1921, during the Non-Co-operation Movement, prostitutes in large numbers participated in the movement, attended public meetings and sang national songs on the stage.143 In 1927, when Gandhi arrived at Mayuram town, the devadasis organised a meeting to welcome him and presented him with bags of money and golden bangles. Many of

143 Kalki, 'Deviyarin Desa sevai', in Anandavikatan, 17 September 1931.
them even assured him of their continuous participation in the national movement.\textsuperscript{144} Many middle class women were afraid of being confused with those ‘fallen ones’ in the public.\textsuperscript{145} As one would expect, the Congress party as well as Gandhi, given their understanding on woman’s role in the public and private spaces, marginalised these women.\textsuperscript{146} A best illustration of this is Gandhi’s conversation with the devadasis at Mayuram in 1927, when Devadasis in large numbers came forward and gifted gold ornaments to Gandhi, he wanted to make sure before accepting them, whether they had given up their devadasi profession and led a “respectable married life”. Some of the devadasis, for fear of being abused by Gandhi, assured him that they led a monogamous family life with their husbands and children. Still, Gandhi insisted that they should display their \textit{tali} or \textit{Mangal-Sutra} to confirm their marital status! When they, given their caste norms, did not wear one, Gandhi advised them to wear \textit{tali} as the mark of a “respectable Hindu woman”. He also insisted that they should take up khadi spinning for their livelihood, instead of the “immoral devadasi profession”. When some of the devadasis replied that they would not be able to earn enough to live through spinning khadi, Gandhi of course did not have any answer.\textsuperscript{147}

Another instance when the Congress Party and its middle class

\textsuperscript{144} Press clipping of \textit{Tamilnadu}, 15 September 1927 in \textit{M.R. Papers}, file no 12, p.42.

\textsuperscript{145} Similar tendency was prevalent among middle-class women all over India. see Geraldine Forbes, “The Politics of Respectability” \textit{op.cit.}, p.69. I have taken the phrase ‘the politics of respectability’ from Forbes.

\textsuperscript{146} For Gandhi’s views on prostitutes see Madhu kiswar, \textit{op.cit.}, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XX, No. 40, 5 October 1985, p. 1693.

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Tamilnadu} in \textit{M.R. Papers}, Subject file no:12, p.42. Ramamirtham Ammal, Dasi Janagathammal and few other devadasis were present in their debates with Gandhi.
women activists displayed its "politics of respectability" was when the colonial government marked out the devadasis and prostitutes and ridiculed them with remarks about their lives.\footnote{The government classified women prisoners in jail and allotted separate wards according to their economic and social status. For instance, the upper class women were given 'A' class, middle-class woman with 'B' class. The prostitutes, devadasis and a few other women were put in 'C' class, even if they possessed economic status. 'C' class women prisoners were neither given proper food nor a hygienic place to sleep.} The Tirunelveli District Magistrate, referring to two women political prisoners' classification to 'C' ward in prison, stated,... These two women (Kanthimathi Ammal and Periyarachi Ammal) are out to achieve a cheap martyrdom. They look bold and bad, the common street walking type and I don't think that the public can take them seriously.\footnote{Law (general), G.O. No. 1671 (3 (s)), 23.4.1932.} Similarly the Madurai District Magistrate referring to two leading political activists, Thayarammal and Seethalakshmi, remarked that the former was "a concubine of a Nattukottai Chetti" [a man from the Chettiar caste] and the latter "an ordinary prostitute"\footnote{Ibid., G.O. No. 1539, 15.4.1932.} Neither the Congress party nor the women activists reacted to these remarks. Instead the Congress Party and the women activists made lots of noise about government's alleged removal of "respectable" Hindu women's tali, kumkum (the vermilion mark on the forehead) and gold bangles inside the jail. The Tamilagam, a local daily, not only condemned the Magistrate of Tellicherry for the alleged removal of the tali of a woman prisoner, but proudly declared that "for Indian women the tali is more valuable than even
their lives and they will not bear to be deprived of their holy chain". At the Madras Legislative Assembly, the Congress party members demanded immediate explanation from the Law Member over the alleged removal of kumkum from the forehead of married women inside the jail. Women's India Association too sent its memorandum to the government protesting against the removal of the traditional symbols of married Hindu women.

2.4. Women’s Perception of the Congress Party and the Relationship with the Party

Though the voices of the woman activists were thus not different from those of the male leaders, there were however some discordant voices among woman activists. The personal relationship that women shared with Gandhi and their devotion for him did not fully lead women to respect the Congress Party given the local Congress Party’s attitude towards women’s issues. After their long time involvement in all important Congress activities, women activists began to realise that the Congress party had no interest in women’s initiatives and representation in the public institutions. While we need to record these protesting voices, we also have to bear in mind that these voices were feeble and existed only as a subordinated discourse.

151 NNR, 27 February 1932. Similar protest was made by one A.K. Chandra Mudaliar in Dinamani (Tamil Daily). See Public Press, G.O. No. 316, 15.2.1941.
152 Law (general), G.O. No. 3219, 1.9.32; G.O. No. 1911, 11.5.1932.
153 Law (general), G.O. No. 1552, 16.4.1932. See also Muthulakshmi Reddy, op. cit., p. 99. This politics of respectability is often a feature of history writing itself. For instance, have a look at the following descriptions of Rukmani Lakshmipathi’s arrest during the Salt Satyagraha by a woman historian: “Rukmani Lakshmipati was the first woman to pay the penalty attached to a violation of the Salt Law. The incarceration of a lady of her calibre, capacity and culture, not to speak of her integrity and interpidity, moved popular imagination powerfully.” See Saroja Sundararajan, op. cit, p. 470 (emphasis mine).
Muthulakshmi Reddy, for instance, insisted that the women's issues be given priority in the Congress activities because women must also gain equal rights and opportunities. She argued, "... We should boycott [foreign cloth], we should picket liquor shops in a quiet, and peaceful manner, actuated by the same spirit, we should prevent the violation of Sarada Act, the marriages between young girls and old men". Until then, she further insisted, women would not join the Congress, though they have equally sacrificed their life for the national cause. She strongly protested against Gandhi's decision not to involve women in satyagraha. According to her, "This division of sexes in a non-violent campaign seems to [women, to be]... unnatural and against all the awakened consciousness of modern womanhood... No marches, no imprisonments, no demonstrations organised for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them".

In 1935, when the Government of India Act was passed, the Congress government accepted separate electorates and partial representations for women, contrary to its earlier campaigns against reserved seats for women. Initially women activists from the Women's India Association lobbied with the government for separate electorates and reserved seats for women in councils. The Congress party strongly opposed this attempt and forced some of the women activists to take a stand against separate electorates.

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154 M.R. Papers, Vol. II, part I, p. 161. Muthulakshmi Reddy's politics dwelled simultaneously in two realms - the nationalist politics as well as the politics of autonomous women's groups. For a detailed analysis of her politics, see Chapter III.

155 Ibid., p. 49.

156 Ibid., pp. 481-483

157 The Government of India Act 1935 included some of the recommendations of the Franchise sub-committee, such as voting right for women above 21 years, with other qualifications such as literacy and property. The constitution also set a tone for partial self-government for India by allowing more number of Indian representatives in various government bodies.
This sudden change in Congress attitude towards women's representation shocked many women activists. Obviously Congress Party had not even consulted women activists about their representation. Despite this, many women took part in the council election of 1937, fielded their candidates in reserved seats. Because many women were convinced that the Congress party would not address women's issues in the Legislative Council and thus women ought to have their own representatives to take up the legislations for women. Women's India Association prepared the list of Candidates as well as women voters and opened a separate booth to aid women in registering their names for the voters' list.

Finally, when the Legislative Council elections were announced in 1937, the Congress party nominated eight women to contest the election. Among them were Rukumani Lakshmipathi who contested from Madras city women's constituency, K. Lakshmi Ammal, from Dindigul women's constituency and Mrs. Yakub Hasan from Madras city women Mohamadan urban constituency. The total number of women, who enrolled their names in the voters, list were 1,523,248. Among them, 479,278 (i.e. 31.5 per cent) women voted. In the case of the upper house, 55.1 per cent of women voters cast their votes.

After these women candidates won the elections, the Congress party, now in the Legislative Council with a majority, refused to offer any of them...
ministership or the position of parliamentary secretaries, though they stood by the Congress men in their decision to boycott Round Table Conference (though women would have benefited a lot from participation in it), and the Lothian Committee, which was actually offering more concessions to Indian women. The Women's India Association strongly protested and criticised the Congress men for monopolising all power, but in vain.

Following this, women's associations particularly those which were active in the Congress led activities condemned the Congress party in public. For instance, one Kalyani Ammal contended that the Tamil women have struggled for the past seventeen years in the national movement and boldly entered jails but the Congress party ignored their contributions, their capacities and experiences and refused to appoint women in important positions. The editorial in Grahalkshmi, a women's journal in Tamil, condemned the Congress party and cautioned women against the Congress party's role in the Legislative Council. Again, in 1939, when the Congress party refused to appoint women as presidents or vice presidents in District Boards, Grahalkshmi promptly highlighted how “the women of Tamilnadu have been ridiculed and taken for granted by the Congress party which had not even appreciated women's equal contributions”. It further noted, “we do not sympathise with their [Congress party's] narrow-minded politics... we appeal to women Congress activists and other women in general to guard against such marginalisation and agitate against the

161 Stridharma, Vol. XVI, No. 5, March 1933.
163 Swadesamitran, 27 July 1937.
164 Grahalkshmi, Vol. 1, No. 8, August 1937; and Vol. 1, No. 3, March 1937.
Congress party." One may note here that it was not the first time the Congress party ignored or excluded women from obtaining representations in the council. As early as 1926, when women for the first time contested elections from the Congress platform, a woman candidate who had served the Congress for many years was removed from her candidature and replaced by a male candidate. Noting this fact, one Sulochanabai from Mangalore strongly protested against this discrimination. In her own words,

"These zealous Swarajists who want to march onward to Swaraj, have in their excitement failed in their fundamental duty to the country. Even if they succeed in overthrowing the present government and installing themselves at Delhi, they will bring little relief or comfort to us. We would remain the same dumb, suppressed creatures as we have been for so many hundred years."  

The scathing criticisms made by women activists about the Congress Party has to be seen in the context of the nationalist ideology on women and the role of Congress party in marginalising women's issues. During 1937, when the Congress ministry was in power in Madras legislature, it stopped the financial aid for girls education below the third form classes.

The Congress party also, unlike the earlier social reform organisations or the Self-Respect Movement, did not organise any programme specific to women's problems such as child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry, and property rights. In 1940, the Congress made all
attempts to curb the tendency of separate women's organisations to criticise it for its anti-women politics. With this purpose, the Congress in 1940 floated a women's cell within the party. Because of this, many women activists who were prominent supporters of Gandhi and his ideas did not even take the membership in the Congress party. S. Ambujammal, the then leading Congress activist, correctly observed, "Muthulakshmi Reddy and Sister Subbalakshmi ... sympathised with the freedom movement of Gandhiji. They didn't like the political atmosphere that pervaded even the women's welfare work in the Congress... They didn't want to enter politics on the Congress side".

2.5. Conclusion

The main conclusions which emerge out of the foregoing discussion can be summarised as follows:

1) The male leadership of the national movement in Tamilnadu treated women as a "principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture." In tropising woman for the nation, they affirmed the pre-existing traditional roles of women and mobilised such roles to mark out the national from the colonial. Within the parameters of this discourse, to reform is to devalue the national.

2) Importantly, the voices of the women activists in the national

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168 AICC Papers, 'Note on A.I.C.C. Women's Department' in WD - 9, 1940-1941, pp 31-35.
169 Transcript of interview with S. Ambujammal, op cit.
movement were hardly different from those of the male nationalist leaders. At one level, their participation in the public sphere of politics, was an extension of their traditional roles in the family-centred patriarchy. At another level, through a certain politics of respectability, they reaffirmed the middle class familial norms as central to their concept of honour. Patriarchy came out unscathed in their voices. The voices of those women who contested this nationalist resolution of the women's question were in fact few and extremely feeble within the national movement.