Chapter Six

Gender and the self-Respect Movement: A Case for Female Agency

The protest against Hindi became a battle like the Purananuru battles where Tamil warriors were being sent to battlefields and jail by their women and where the women themselves entered the battle as supporters of their men. Many of these women went to jail with their children in 1939 protesting against Hindi. Not all the children were breast-fed babies. The mothers took them obviously because they were considered responsible for them and also possibly because there was a constant need to prove to themselves and others, whatever activities (sic), their roles as mothers would not suffer. (C.S.Lakshmi, 1990: WS-75)

Though perhaps not intended as a specific critique of C.S. Lakshmi's statements regarding the participation of the Self-Respect women in the anti-Hindi agitation of 1938-1939, S.Anandhi narrates an incident in which a member of the Congress ministry commented that these women were getting arrested to get milk for their children in prison (Anandhi, 1991: 33). At the Madras provincial Self-Respect women's conference held at Vellore in 1938, women activists demanded that the minister withdraw his comment and offer an unconditional apology (Anandhi, 1991: 33). This incident, I would like to suggest, gives us an important insight not only into the agency of Self-Respect women but also into the specific ways in which they questioned their construction and subsequent dismissal as "mothers" who could not be active political agents themselves. Curiously enough, this agency is made invisible even by those critics who, unlike Lakshmi, are sympathetic to the "gender" politics of the Self-Respect
movement. Most debates about gender and the Self-Respect movement are anchored around two opposing axes— one, the "anti-feminism" of the movement/the passivity of the Self-Respect woman/the gendering of the Tamil nation and language, and, two, Periyar's extraordinarily "progressive" vision of gender equality as stemming primarily from his critique of Brahminism and Hinduism, and, arising from this, the "progressive" Self-Respect marriage which is marked by the absence of rituals, the chanting of vedic texts, the Brahmin priest and the "enslaving" tali or manaqalasutra. The gendering of the Tamil nation and language in Self-Respect discourse is, as in the case of Lakshmi's arguments, often conflated with the participation of women in the anti-Hindi agitation, the organizing of women's conferences and the participation of women in these conferences.

Self-Respect Women and the Anti-Hindi Agitation

The anti-Hindi agitation of 1938 is among the most widely cited events in analyses of the Self-Respect movement from the perspective of gender. This event is invoked both to signal the presence of women in the Self-Respect movement and to argue that the Tamil nation is gendered. It might be instructive, then, to examine briefly the socio-political contexts in which both this agitation as well as other agitations in the name of Tamil were staged.³

In 1937, when the Congress Ministry assumed office in the Madras Presidency under the Chief Ministership of C.Rajagopalachari, it made compulsory the study of Hindi in the 1st, 2nd
and 3rd forms of 125 schools. The Self-Respecters, including the Justicites who had now merged with the former, agitated against what they perceived to be the imposition of an Aryan language on the Dravidian peoples, one moreover, as Periyar often liked to point out, was unsuitable to the needs and requirements of modern times. As we shall see, there was an entire history to this particular agitation and it was followed by other such agitations initiated by the non-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu. By a careful and deliberate process, the nationalist movement had constructed Hindi as the "natural" choice for a national language. In this, however, it was helped partially by the colonial attempts at reconstituting vernacular languages. Grammars of the vernaculars were rewritten in terms of European grammatical categories in an effort to "purify" and "standardize" them. More significantly for our analysis here, Sanskritized versions of languages were created and constructed as "authentic" even as Persian usages and dialects shared by larger linguistic communities were marginalized.

Here then, we have the beginnings of the hegemonic rise of Hindi, a language which, unlike Hindustani, was heavily Sanskritized. As Christopher King has argued, the modern Sanskritized Hindi of North India gradually became an important symbol of Hindu nationalism while Urdu became communally marked as the language of the Muslims (King: 1989). Writing about the development of Hindi up to the eighteenth century, Amrit Rai argues that prior to the decline of Mughal rule, a common language - Hindi/Hindavi united the linguistic and cultural traditions of Hindus and Muslims in India (Rai: 1984). This
Hindavi was inflected differently in different parts of the country. Two distinct languages, Hindi and Urdu, were fashioned later by a deliberate process of Sanskritization and Persianization respectively. British Orientalist scholars advocated Hindavi for the Hindus and Arabic and Persian for the Muslims, in place of a common and shared language, Hindustani. They were therefore among the earliest to link languages with religious groups. In much of early nineteenth century Northern India however, both Muslims and Hindus remained familiar with Urdu.

In the 1860's, questions regarding the proper official language for the North Western provinces began to figure in the vernacular press. The provincial government received a series of memoranda in 1868, 1869, 1872 and 1873 urging the use of Hindi as the official language. The Arya Samaj, which propagated Hindi throughout Northern India, was formed in 1875. The Nagari Pracharani Sabha (Society for the Promotion of Nagari) established at Benaras in 1893, aided the establishment of Hindi as a legitimate discipline of study. Both the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Samaj (established in 1880 under the leadership of Madan Mohan Malaviya, a prominent member of the Indian National Congress) enjoined its members to learn either Sanskrit or Hindi. Organizations such as the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Samaj were actively involved in the ongoing project of rewriting Indian history. According to their version, alien and immoral Muslim rulers had imposed their culture and values on Hindu India. Hindi, they argued, was a language of the masses and reviving it would help restore "Hindu nationality". As S.V

153
Rajadurai has demonstrated in his book *Hindu. Hindi. India*, the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Arya Samaj used Hindi to construct a Hindu India:

[The RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Arya Samaj] marginalized the Hindi that was widely spoken by the masses, a Hindi which was alive. They sought to artificially fashion a new language. In order to do this, they gave the name of "Hindustani" to the dialect popular amongst the masses.

The Hindi language they attempted to create was different from Hindustani in two respects. Firstly, all Arabic and Persian words and phrases were removed in the process of fashioning this Hindi. Secondly, this language was primarily Sanskrit based. These organizations reasoned that Arabic and Persian were both languages of a foreign culture. They belong to a people who invaded and attacked India. Sanskrit represents the true India because it is the language of our religious texts (Rajadurai: 1993, 135-136)

Rajadurai also points out that those who used such arguments in favour of the adoption of Hindi were dominant in the Congress (1993: 136). Interestingly, the sections of the Hindu community which did benefit from a change in official language from Urdu to Hindi were the Brahmins, the Rajputs, and the Baniyas, educated in the Hindi-Sanskrit rather than the Urdu-Persian tradition. The growth of the Hindi movement which was supported by the entire spectrum of the nationalist leadership, from the Arya Samajis to the members of the Indian National Congress, lead to a significant re-alignment of caste-dominance among the Hindus. In April 1900, the Lieutenant Governor of the North Western Provinces issued a resolution giving Nagari equal status to that of Urdu.

The use of Hindi in place of English and other regional Indian languages had always been used by the Indian National
Congress as an ideological weapon in the struggle for freedom, in 1925, the Congress adopted a resolution to conduct all its proceedings in Hindi. English, or the provincial language, was to be used only if the speaker was unable to speak in Hindustani. Gandhi, in fact, berated the Tamil Congress delegates to the Karachi Congress meeting in March 1931 for not using Hindi and argued that the use of Tamil was an act of tyranny by a minority and that the Tamil delegates could easily learn Hindi in three months by studying it three hours a day (Irschick 1986: 212). A bill making Hindi a compulsory subject in all the provincial schools was introduced in the Madras legislature when the Government of India Act of 1935 came into effect. And, as I have already mentioned. Chief Minister Rajagopalachari announced the compulsory study of Hindi at the primary level in certain schools of the Madras Presidency in the year 1937. Speaking at a convention of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Rajaji said:

My decision to make Hindi compulsory in schools is like a mother forcing her child to drink milk. There is nothing wrong with such a compulsion. (Kudi Arasu 6/6/1937)

Rajaji also argued that learning to read and write in Hindi would enable one to become a scholar of Sanskrit and read the Ramayana. The Tamilnadu Congress leader S.Satyamurthy welcomed this as a move which would ensure literacy in Hindi within the next decade (Rajadurai & Geetha, 1996: 610). Rajaji's announcement triggered off a large-scale agitation by the activists of the non-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu. In February 1938, at an anti-Hindi procession and public meeting organized at Kancheepuram, the
Self-Respecters and the Justicites passed a resolution condemning the imposition of Hindi. The Justice Party and the Self-Respecters formed a boycott committee in Madras city on June 1st, 1938, and picketed the home of C.Rajagopalachari. In August 1938, Periyar organized a march from Trichi to Madras city to protest the imposition of Hindi (Irshick 1986: 220-226). The Criminal Law Act was used consistently against the protesters and over 800 of them were arrested (The Hindu. April 12, 1939). Periyar was sentenced in December 1938 to nearly two years imprisonment both for speaking at the women's convention and for picketing the Hindu Theological School at Pedha Naicken Palayam where Hindi had been introduced. It was while he was in prison that he was elected president of the Justice Party. He was released in May 1939 before completing his sentence on grounds of ill health. After his release, Periyar met Ambedkar and Mohammed Ali Jinnah in Bombay and convinced them of the rationale behind the anti-Hindi agitation. In February 1940, the British government withdrew the compulsory Hindi programme. At the same time, in a move to appease all major political parties whose support it required for the war, it permitted the continuance of Hindi as an optional subject in the first three forms of high schools (Rajadurai and Geetha 1996: 667).

Gendering of the Tamil Nation and Language: "Mother-Metaphors"

What is especially striking about the anti-Hindi agitation, and what concerns us most here, is the active and large-scale participation of women. As we already know, many among those arrested and sent to prison were women. Many of the meetings and
conventions organized as part of this agitation were addressed by women leaders such as Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Narayani Ammaiyar, Thamarai Kannu Ammaiyar and Munnagra Azhagiya (Anandhi, 1991: 32). A Self-Respect women's convention was held in Madras city on the 12th and the 13th of November 1938 under the leadership of Neelambikai Ammaiyar. Among other things, the convention passed a resolution condemning the imposition of Hindi (Rajadurai and Geetha 1996: 656).

Anandhi tells us that women often participated in processions and meetings clad in sarees printed with the Tamil flag (carrying the symbols of the three ancient kingdoms, Chera, Chola and Pandya) chanting anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans. The image of the Tamil woman wearing the Tamil flag could well be read as a powerful signifier of a gendered Tamil nation. As Sumathi Ramaswamy has argued, not only is Tamil feminized in the discourse of the anti-Hindi agitation which she reads as part of a larger Tamil "revivalism", it is also feminized specifically as a mother:

... the personification of Tamil as mother enabled revivalists, especially in situations that appeared as crises and that demanded public response and resistance, to deploy different parts of Tamilttay's [Tamil mother's] body — her womb, her milk, her tears, her scarred face, her fettered limbs, etc. as symbolic devices with which to awaken and arouse a "sleeping" Tamil populace to activism. This is especially true during the Hindi protests when revivalists circulated tracts that contained provocative images of Tamilttay being fettered in chains, or being confined to a dungeon (1992: 361).^6

Sumathi Ramaswamy specifically mentions that Lakshmi's arguments about the Self-Respect Tamil mother reflects her own position (1992: 379).
Defense of the Self-Respect Movement's Gender Politics

How then might we read the participation of women in the anti-Hindi agitation and in the Self-Respect movement as a whole? It is in response to the arguments that the Self-Respect movement frequently invoked the mother-metaphor and that it gendered the Tamil nation and language, that critics sympathetic to the movement have built up a defense of its gender politics. To go over Lakshmi's arguments in detail: her stated objective is "to locate the mother in the functional context of Tamil culture and politics and to understand the multiple ways in which meanings have been loaded on the term mother, literally splitting mothers into mothers and non-mothers, pure mothers and whore mothers, mothers of sons and mothers of daughters" (1990: WS-72). She begins by examining the obsession with the image of the Tamil mother in classical Tamil literature, in the Purananuru and in the Silappadhiyaram and the ways in which it is invoked in these texts and elsewhere to represent the ideals of purity and chastity, of Tamil language and of the Tamil country itself. As if to mark the historical continuity of the mother-metaphor in "Tamil" culture and politics, Lakshmi goes on to look at the "mother-woman of the Self-Respect movement" who, she claims, was erected on the foundation of the nationalist Tamil poet Subramania Bharati's "new woman". Citing the participation of Self-Respect women in the anti-Hindi agitation, she argues that they entered the "battle-field" as "supporters of their men" and went to jail with their children in order to portray themselves as women who were primarily mothers (1990: WS-75). The DMK, she argues, was "like
an extended family ... almost an all-male party with members who thought of themselves as warriors fighting battles" and women, who were by now ensconced in Self-Respect marriages, were "glorified mothers, sending their sons and husbands to battles, feeding them and their friends, bringing up sons with valorous milk with as much ease as Maltova-mothers" (1990: WS-77). Lakshmi also critiques DMK cinema for constructing an opposition between "good" women (mothers, sisters) and "bad" women (vamps). Among her many other scattered and hyperbolic attacks on the Self-Respect movement unfortunately based on ahistorical and unverified claims, Lakshmi mentions that to the female Self-Respecter, "Self-Respect meant supportive actions and acceptance of whatever was meant for them as mother-community' and that many of the Self-Respect marriages, which were considered love-marriages, occurred between two people who had already been married in the conventional fashion, that, in fact, they encouraged a bigamy that was not permitted of women (1990: WS-77). She also cites Periyar's own marriage in 1949 to a woman much younger than him, "much against the reform he himself undertook to stop old men marrying young girls" (1990: WS-76).

One dominant and strategic response to Lakshmi's position has been to invoke Periyar's own agenda for women as "radical" and "progressive". Conceding that what Lakshmi argues may well be true in relation to the politics of the DMK and the AIADMK, both of which, functioning as they do within the limitations of an electoral politics, have a "history of ideological compromises and propagation of socially retrogressive stereotypes, including that of women", M.S.S Pandian, Anandhi.S and A.R Venkatachala-
pathy contend that the Self-Respect movement had a radically different agenda and that this is indexed especially by Periyar's own work, his writing as well as his activism. They contend that Lakshmi "constructs a false history of the Self-Respect movement, which was the early as well as the most progressive phase of the 'Dravidian Movement'" and that she excludes from her discussion the role of the Congress nationalists in the formation of a Tamil culture and politics, thus laying the blame squarely on the Dravidian movement for glorifying the mother metaphor (1991: 1059). In the course of their lengthy and scathing dismantling of Lakshmi's position, a position they rightly characterize as politically irresponsible, biased, and often unsubstantiated, they repeatedly invoke Periyar as representing the most progressive aspects of the Self-Respect movement. They argue, for instance, that Periyar was opposed to the project of reviving a glorious Tamil past, quite unlike the DMK and the AIADMK. They quote Periyar's statement to the effect that such a revival of the past was contrary to the principles of rationalism (1991: 1060). They point out that the Self-Respect movement never glorified ancient Tamil literature and argue that Periyar always attacked the SilappadhiKaram and the Tirukkural for the ways in which they degraded women. Pandian, Anandhi and Venkatachalapathy also cite Periyar's advocacy of contraception as an important sign of his support of a motherhood by choice (1991: 1061). They also argue that in her trivialization of Self-Respect marriages, Lakshmi forgets the difficult socio-political context in which they were performed and the principles of gender equality on which they were based (1991: 1062). The difficulties faced by
Periyar in performing some of these marriages are mentioned (1991: 1062). The authors then proceed with what in many ways, constitutes the best and most promising argument against Lakshmi's reading, that the Self-Respect movement brought women into the public sphere, that it invested women activists with many important political responsibilities. Unfortunately, however, even the presence of women, which should suggest to us other ways of reading the Self-Respect movement, is explained in terms of Periyar's agency. For instance, the authors argue that Periyar attempted to make even inarticulate women articulate:

Significantly, Periyar took special interest in breaking the culture of silence that characterized the women activists of the movement. He insisted that even the most inarticulate woman member should utter at least a few words in the course of women's conferences. Incidentally, when Periyar was arrested in December 1938 for his leading role in the anti-Hindi agitation, the charge against him was inciting women to enter jails. (1991: 1063).

Ironically, they quote M. Singaravelu (a communist, who collaborated with Periyar in the writing of the Erode Socialist Programme) in support of their stance, implying that Periyar's was literally the last word on the issue of gender equality and women's "liberation". In Singaravelu's words:

Women who have been confined to the kitchen are speaking today from public platforms; they are debating about public issues; they are involved in social work as equals of men. The credit for facilitating all these goes to Periyar. (1991: 1063).
Making Agency Invisible

Where, one wonders, is the agency of the Self-Respect woman in all this? If Lakshmi's statement that the Self-Respect woman entered the anti-Hindi agitation as supporters of men and as women who were primarily mothers makes this agency invisible, Pandian, Anandhi and Venkatachalapathiy, in defending the gender politics of the Self-Respect movement as almost entirely represented by Periyar's own agency, his work and thought, effectively obscure woman's agency once again.

Anandhi's article, which I cited at the beginning of this chapter, does not really articulate a radically different position. In fact, the argument in the co-authored article about Periyar's efforts to make the inarticulate Self-Respect women more articulate and Singaravelu's appreciation of his efforts figures in exactly the same fashion in Anandhi's own article published subsequently. Anandhi argues here that Periyar's views on the women's question found practical expression in three major activities of the movement: the performance of Self-Respect marriages, the organizing of women's conferences to "raise [women's] consciousness" and to "highlight their problems" and, thirdly, the involvement of women in mass agitations (1991: 27). The case history that Anandhi provides us of the Self-Respect woman activist, Moovalur Ramamirtham Anunaiyar, in order to "explore how far the movement had succeeded in raising the consciousness of women about their own plight", despite the framework in which it is offered, suggests an exciting and different way both of defending the gender politics of the Self-Respect
movement in terms of the initiatives it enabled, and critiquing the ways in which dominant historiographies of the movement make these initiatives invisible (1991: 33). Unfortunately, however, Anandhi takes up this aspect only as a way of pointing out how the movement "raised the consciousness" of the Self-Respect woman. The woman then is still not perceived as an active agent in the movement. Rather, the movement (often, represented by Periyar) acts on her to raise her consciousness.

In her critique of Lakshmi's article, V.Geetha raises the issue of the Self-Respect woman's agency and argues that this agency is invisible in Lakshmi's reading of the Self-Respect movement's gender politics. Geetha points to the inadequacy of Lakshmi's theoretical framework, its inability to provide a convincing model of motherhood in Tamilnadu, and the confused and fallacious analogy she draws between the Dravidian movement's "essentialization" of motherhood and the propagation of motherhood in Nazi Germany. Geetha argues that Lakshmi refuses to see Self-Respect women as "active historical agents, making and re-making their everyday lives and, hence, history (1991: 388).

So overwhelming is the impetus to conflate the Self-Respect movement as well as its progressive gender politics with Periyar that in their recent book Perivar: Suvamariathai Samadharmam, Geetha and Rajadurai briefly raise the notion of the Self-Respect woman's agency, only to revert back to the strategy of citing Periyar as the ultimate and most radical authority on gender issues. They also attribute the problematic "gendering of nation and language" to forces outside of the Self-Respect
movement which acted in unison with the movement during the anti-Hindi agitation:

Not only did Periyar have to unite the various forces which joined hands during the anti-Hindi agitation, he also gave them the opportunity to use the journals and the forums of the Self-Respect movement... Very diverse voices began to make themselves heard, the voices of Tamil nationalism, voices which constructed the language and the nation as a woman, those that pictured women as harmful, cartoons, songs, lovers of ancient Tamil, all became part of the anti-Hindi agitation.
(1996: 651-652)

Geetha and Rajadurai cite examples from Kudi Arasu and other texts to argue that the image of the Tamil mother was being deployed even by activists such as Neelambikai Ammaiayar in order to urge the Tamilian to join the anti-Hindi agitation. They argue:

Such a gendering of the nation and language is being critiqued from a feminist perspective today. The fact that some of the women activists who took part in the anti-Hindi agitation performed "aarathi" for their male companions... is no doubt true... In order to rouse the Tamil people, they did invoke notions of the warrior-like Tamil, of honour and pride (especially in their Tamil ancestors) and so on. They also used the Tamil flag. It is also true that hundreds of women who took part in the agitation and went to jail... did not have any "feminist thoughts" or principles. However, their participation reflected much more than just a love for Tamil. It was a self-conscious, self-stimulated participation. Many among these women were lower caste and believed in fighting casteism, in supporting inter-caste marriages, and remarriages...
(1996: 653)
The authors argue that while there is truth in the criticism of some "Brahmin feminists" (C.S Lakshmi's own position would be seen as representative of a Brahmin feminism) that the gendering of nation and language is dangerous and that there are many shortcomings in the gender consciousness of Self-Respect women, these feminists fail to recognize Brahminism itself and can only think in terms of feminism. Geetha and Rajadurai cite instances of the Self-Respect woman's agency — the passing of two important resolutions at the Tamilnadu Women's conference and at the 14th Justice Party conference. One of these resolutions was in the nature of a condemnation of the Brahmin Congress-affiliated Indian Women's Association's support of Hindi. In response to this, the Self-Respect women who participated in the two conferences challenged the Association to organize a conference in support of Hindi. The second resolution was a response to the disrespectful way in which the "nationalist" newspaper Sudesamitraniyan had referred to the Self-Respect women who participated in the Vellore conference, even as it addressed Sarojini Naidu with respect. A resolution to boycott such newspapers was passed.

Even as they explicitly invoke the agency of the Self-Respect woman in a way that other critics have not, Geetha and Rajadurai finally revert to the familiar strategy of focussing on Periyar's individual contribution to an alternative gender politics:

However, Periyar's presence made itself felt over and above all other voices. While he occasionally invoked concepts of honour and heroism to rouse the Dravidians, he stated clearly that he did not believe in valorizing Tamil (1996: 654).
While defending Periyar is both necessary and strategic in the face of upper-caste misrepresentations of Self-Respect politics, it may not always be productive to do so in the context of gender politics. Granting that Periyar's vision of gender equality was progressive and far ahead of his times, invoking him in such a compulsive fashion may well close off other valuable directions in which debates about gender and the Self-Respect movement could proceed. The Self-Respect woman's agency, which still remains to be theorized, is only one such direction.

**Theorizing the Self-Respect Woman's Agency: Some Suggestions**

Recovering the history of the Self-Respect woman involves reading against the grain of existing historiography which sees her as having been *acted on* by the male Self-Respecter, as having had her consciousness raised, as having provided the necessary support, through her activism, to what was essentially a male cause, the cause of the "larger" movement. It is simply not enough to see her either as the *object* of political education or as the *mobilized* subject. What I propose below is more in the nature of *notes* towards theorizing the Self-Respect woman's agency.

Let us examine what Anandhi, Pandian and Venkatachalapathy have identified as one of the most important means by which the Self-Respect movement fought the gender battle — the Self-Respect marriage. This marriage, as we know, was performed without Brahmin priests. It was marked by the absence of upper-caste, Hindu rituals, the recitation of religious texts and the
tali seen as the symbol of women's oppression. Speaking at the Self-Respect marriage of Karpagam and Kalyanasundaram performed on 8/6/1934 in Madras, Periyar seeks to outline the differences between what he calls the "conservative", "old-fashioned" marriage and the Self-Respect marriage, constructing the latter as a critique of the former (Puratchi. 17/6/1934). He describes the typical, conservative marriage as one in which the bride and the groom have absolutely no say. In fact, argues Periyar, in 99% of conventional marriages, the bride and the groom have never met or spoken with each other. Marriage then is not a personal contract between two individuals but one that is arranged by the parents, the grandparents or the family elders and family friends of these individuals. Periyar then speaks of the irrational basis of these marriages wherein the time of birth of the bride and groom is often the deciding factor in arranging for a match. Also, neither the bride and the groom, nor their families and friends understand the reason behind the various rituals which are an inevitable part of such marriages. Periyar also points out that these marriages are characterized by a great deal of unnecessary waste of financial and other resources. Often, families who can ill-afford it, perform extravagant marriages and end up as permanent debtors. Periyar describes these marriages as both "cruel" and "foolish" and advocates the Self-Respect marriage as a progressive alternative. Periyar critiques the sanctity and the godliness attached to marriage, the burden of which, he argues, is borne by women who have to put up with a great deal of injustice and cruelty within their marriages. Given his generally anti-Hindu, anti-Brahmin stance and given his references to
certain rituals, there is little doubt that in the text of Periyar's speech, the "conservative" marriage is essentially the Hindu marriage. Periyar's critique of Hindu marriage and his posing of women's problem as arising from a Hindu/upper-caste conservatism is grounded in rationalism and a notion of individual rights. The Self-Respect marriage is posed essentially as a "rational" alternative, a marriage which is a contract between two rational, consenting adults, a marriage free of ritual and "superstition". As Sami Chidambaranar tells us, some Self-Respect marriages were deliberately performed at times which were considered "inauspicious" by the Hindu calendar (1983: 118-119). Often, the venue of these marriages became a platform to condemn Hindu scriptures which emphasised women's slavery, insisted on chastity and monogamy on their part, while letting men go scot-free. Anandhi relates the discussion session which formed part of the marriage ceremony of two activists, S.Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam at Pallathur in Ramanathapurain district in 1930 (1991: 29). When one of the participants asked Periyar why the Self-Respect movement allowed second marriages, the latter responded that marriages could only be tentative arrangements between men and women and should not treated as eternal and, further, that men and women should have equal right to marry for the second time and to divorce their partners. Implicit in the very structure of the Self-Respect marriage, is the construction of the "rational", "atheistic", "iconoclastic" and, therefore, "free" individual, male and female. Agency itself, therefore, is constituted in terms of the rational Self. However, given the embeddedness of "rationalism" in structures of
male power, given its predominant gendering as male, it would appear that the Self-Respect woman is oddly positioned within rationalist discourse. The inadequacy of the rationalist framework in dealing with the women's question might well explain what C.S. Lakshmi reads as the "failure" of the movement's gender politics — and what I suggest may be read as its moments of rupture with rationalism itself — the gendering of the Tamil nation and language which occurred especially during the anti-Hindi agitation, the wearing of the Tamil flag-sarees by women, the deployment of the mother-image even by movement activists such as Neelambikai Ammayar, and the ritual "aarathi" which they performed for their male companions. The issue is not whether the Self-Respect woman was truly "progressive". Instead of rescuing her, like V. Geetha does, by arguing that even though she might not have had any "feminist thoughts", her participation in the anti-Hindi agitation was a self-conscious one and that, as a lower-caste woman, her fight was against casteism.

What we might do is to pose other questions as a way out of the critical impasse. What was the Self-Respect woman's relationship with rationalism? What resonances did the construction of the "progressive", "rational", Dravidian Self have for the women's question? Is this Self essentially male? How does the issue of women's emancipation tie up with notions of the "free", rational individual? The women's question is used centrally to critique Hinduism and Brahminism. As we have seen, Hinduism itself is described as "conservative" especially regarding women. I would like to suggest that the Dravidian "Self-Respect" Self (and Periyar is paradigmatic of
this Self) is essentially that of the male (reformer) constituted as naturally "progressive and "pro-women". The terrain on which this "progressiveness" is played out is the critique of Brahmin-ism and Hinduism. The inadequacy of an approach that assumes the radicalness of all non-Brahmin or non-Hindu cultures vis a vis women and theorizes the women's question in terms of a critique of Hinduism alone is addressed by a Muslim woman activist of the Self-Respect movement, Alhaj Subako in an essay in the journal Puratchi;

Subako's argument, which is essentially clarificatory in nature, forces the issue of the non-Hindu woman, a woman who, by Periyar's own definition is also Dravidian, on the Self-Respect movement.

We see that such attempts to define the terrain of the women's struggle is frequently made by Self-Respect women. In an
essay titled "Mariyal Cheyyum Idam" ("The Place to Agitate"), the Self-Respect leader Meenakshi writes:

The places where we women should agitate are not the arrack shop, the foreign cloth or the foreign goods store ... Until laws are passed which ensure women's rights, freedom and progress, you should agitate against the Brahmin who opposes such laws and prevents your young widowed sister from remarrying; you should fight to protect your devadasi sister from the pottu kattu forced on her by her parents; agitate in the house of your upper-caste sister who refuses to give your non-Brahmin sister a pot of water... conduct a satyagraha to reform those men who have literally imprisoned women in their homes so that they never see the sun. If you do all this, you will get your rights and your freedom. You will be praised for your intelligence, intellect, sacrifice and patriotism. ("Mariyal Cheyyum Idam", Kudi Arasu. 6/3/1932)

Not only does Meenakshi specifically proscribe Congress style agitations for women (anti-arrack and anti-foreign goods), she constructs the non-Brahmin woman as different from both her "upper-caste sister" and from the "devadasi" who it is her duty to protect from pottu kattu (a ritual marriage to God which would entitle her to be the mistress of any upper-caste man).

If rationalism was one ideological weapon used to address the women's question, the vision of a socialist society based, in principle, on equality was also seen as potentially liberating for women. As we shall see, this socialism too was linked to rationalism. In fact, Jayasekari invokes the promise of socialism in terms of its implications for women. She argues eloquently for the recognition of women as workers in the new socialist world. In a critique of the gendering of "work" as essentially male, Jayasekari tells us that even socialists tend to see
workers as male and are confused when you suggest to them that women are workers as well. She writes of the different kinds of "work" which women perform, both in the public sphere as well as in the private sphere, and argues that women and work are intimately linked. She points out the importance of women's work in a socialist society and envisions this society as a world where all work is shared and there is no artificial division of work as "men's work" or "women's work":

You cannot chain the women of the future to the home.... What we will have is not a separate "women's work" but the work of the human race. In the future socialist world, the entire community will share in house work and women will not have to bear the burden for this all by themselves.... To believe that women will only do certain kinds of work is a misreading of socialist principles.

The women of today will continue to perform the work that women in the past did. But they will also take on what has been understood as men's work. Their work will be such that they will derive happiness out of it; it will be in keeping with rationalist principles. Our lives revolve around work. This is why work becomes the basis of socialism. A socialist society will provide everyone with work, irrespective of gender.

("Samadharma Ulagil Penngal" ("Women in the World of Socialism"), Puratchi. 29/4/1934; See Appendix II for a complete translation).

Even as Jayasekari critiques the male-ness of the socialist world, she sees a socialism (again based on rationalist principles) as holding out the promise of equality, an equality which she hopes will encompass women as well. Jayasekari's reading of socialism is complicated by her understanding of women's traditional lack of access to "work", seen as occurring only in the public sphere and performed solely by men. What this essay, like Subako's essay, demonstrates for us is the fact that the Self-
Respect woman's own position on the gender question did not necessarily reflect Periyar's position. The agendas of the Self-Respect woman and that of the movement (that of the male Self-Respecter) might not seem vastly different. Perhaps it is not quite necessary to look for heroic narratives of challenges to male authority by Self-Respect women. It is more productive to take small departures from mainstream narratives seriously, departures which, in different ways, both Subako and Jayasekari have achieved.
Notes


4 Christopher King quotes from a late nineteenth century Hindi play by Pandit Gauri Datta which stages a debate between Urdu (personified as Begum Urdu) and Hindi (personified as Queen Nagari). In the short one-act play written in the svanq tradition, Begum Urdu, dressed as a courtesan, addresses Queen Devanagari attired as a proper Hindu wife. The action takes place in a courtroom presided over by Maharaja Righteous-Rule. Babu Moral Law Singh represents Queen Devanagari, while Mirza Cunning Ali Khan argues the case for Begum Urdu. Queen Devanagari belongs to Kashi and embodies the moral and religious values of the Hindu merchant class, especially that of credit-worthiness. She is righteous and guarantees the continuing credit of business and government records. On the other hand, Begum Urdu is corrupt and threatens to destroy the economic well-being of the country. Each claims that India is her birthplace. Begum Urdu argues that although her mother, Begum Persian, was a foreigner, her own birth took place in India, and therefore she has a right to stay. Her lawyer points to the British recognition of Urdu and its use in courts and offices. Maharaja Righteous-Rule's judgment however, is a foregone conclusion. Invoking the sacred law of the Hindus, he orders that Urdu be cast out and Nagari take her place.


6 See Sumathy Ramaswamy, op.cit.


8 Anandhi S, op.cit: 26-41. The article she co-authored with Pandian and Venkatachalapathy draws heavily upon this.


11 In the essay "Penngallum Thozhilum, Penngal Thozhilaligalle" which appeared in Puratchi. April 29, 1934, Neelavathi (a well-known leader, hailing from Trichy, and who was elected as a propaganda secretary at the Samadharma Party conference held at Erode in 1933 and given the responsibility of inaugurating Self Respect Leagues in villages) explains the concept of May Day and, like Jayasekari, draws the reader's attention to the range of tasks performed by women. What is interesting is that even as Self-Respect women fought for greater gender equity, they were not isolated from other aspects of the Self-respect struggle. He find therefore that Neelavathi inaugurates the Ramanathapuram District Third Self-Respect youth convention held at Sivagangai and delivers the welcome address (Puratchi, 10/12/1933). Other Self-Respect women leaders such as A.R Sivanandam Valliammal delivered fiery speeches at large gatherings and conventions. For instance, at a speech that Sivanandam Valliammal gave at the Kovai women's conference in 1933, she says:

As women, we are considered slaves in a Hindu society, slaves to those in power, slaves to men. To add to this, we have internalized the notion that we are slaves to men. Comrades, today there are no limits to the freedom envisaged by men. They can aim for any status, any job and can actually hope to acquire it. As women however, we are bound by the dictates of religion, the vedas, the Shastras and social customs. Even our demands for freedom are voiced from within these boundaries, these fences. These boundaries put us in the situation of a man who is told that he can attend any exam but that he cannot study for it. (Puratchi November 26, 1933)