CHAPTER – I

STATUS OF TAMIL WOMEN
TAMIL NADU PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

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CHAPTER - I

STATUS OF TAMIL WOMEN

The status of women in Tamil Nadu has undergone tremendous changes over the years. A bird’s eye-view of the operation of various factors ensures a better understanding of how the society evolved to create the status of women in society. This historical perspective is revealing in the case of the Tamil society that chronicles a continuous history of women for more than three thousand years.

The ideal women of Tamil mythology have been extolled as paragons of virtues. Sita, Draupadi, Damyanti and Kannaki were the women who had been dutiful, truthful, chaste, self-sacrificing of unswerving wifely devotion whatever the temptation.¹ Sita and Draupadi even went into exile. In the ancient Tamil literature, especially in the great epics, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, women assumed distinguished part in the husband’s work, aiding him with her love and counsel, and accompanying him in all walks of life. Women played key roles in public ceremonies and were accorded the highest rank and dignity.²

Women as Goddess in the Tamil Land

Tamil land is the original home of the mother goddess.³ The values attached to women goddesses of Tamil Nadu are both benignly constructive and aggressively destructive of evil elements. Dual role of goddess is recognized. On the one hand, a woman goddess is regarded fertile, benevolent and bestower of prosperity and on the other, she is considered aggressive, malevolent and

destructive. Woman is counted as Shakti in Tamil mythology. There are dangerous goddesses like Kali, Durga, and Makisasuravarthini, and there are equally benevolent goddesses like Shakhti, Lakshmi, Saraswathi and Mariamman. The Hindus worship these goddesses for their blessing. While Saraswathi bestows on devotees wisdom and intelligence, Lakshmi showers wealth and prosperity on her devotees. It is believed that there is only one goddess and three qualities represent the three sides of her character, namely intelligence, wealth and power. The concept behind the three different attributes of a single goddess for wisdom, wealth and power indicate the powerful potentiality of the female goddess. These female goddesses are even worshipped exclusively without their consorts. But the Hindu goddess is not a political feminist.

According to ancient Hindu scriptures, no religious rite can be performed with perfection by a man without the participation of his wife. Wife's participation is essential to any religious rite. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on the occasion of various important festivals. Wives are thus befittingly called 'ardhangani' (better half). They are given not only important but equal position with men. The concept of ardhanarishwara was propagated. The concept is that of a figure image of half Siva and half Shakti. This image signified the interdependence of men and women. It conveyed the message that separately men and women are incomplete and only jointly they are complete. The figure image depicts masculine and feminine functions of the

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4 Singaravel, A., Popular Culture in Ancient Tamilagam, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, 2006, pp.75-89.
6 Ibid., pp.61-66.
Supreme Being. Men in single, without his wife, have no place in religious and social functions, whatever be their position. This shows the importance given to women.

**Women in Ancient Age**

Even from the time of Adam and Eve, women were considered to be secondary to men. The early civilizations also assigned women with the same secondary status. The status of women and their potentialities were not fully recognized. But in the Indus Valley Civilization, women were given more freedom and treated on equal footing with men. The pre-vedic India also recognised women as equals of men. The worth of a civilization is being judged by the place given to women in the society. One of several factors that justifies the greatness of ancient Tamil culture is the honorable place granted to women.

In ancient Tamil Nadu, women scholars played an effective role. Coming to the Indo-Aryan civilization, the position and the status of women witnessed a considerable change. The Indo-Aryans introduced the caste system in India, as well as in Tamil Nadu. The women of higher caste enjoyed a complete freedom whereas the women of lower caste were treated as slaves. The women of the lower caste were not permitted to get education.

The Indian civilization has produced great women ranging from Brahmavadinis (Lady Rishi) like Rishi Lopamundra, ideal wife and warrior queen. Women in Tamil Nadu enjoyed equal status with men during the Vedic

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period (2500 - 1000 BC). The women’s place in Upanishadic times was also equal, honorable one that stands out as a distinguishing feature of the high degree of real culture attained in those days. In social terms, Rig Vedic society was in many respects almost egalitarian. The women were assigned prestigious position in the social order. The Rig Vedic expression “the wife is the home” shows how domestic life was built around women.

Women in the Age of Buddha and Mahavira

Buddhism, which appeared in the sixth century BC, came to be the dominant religion. Women gained more religious freedom than they had been permitted back in Vedic times. The Buddha and Mahavira gave a new philosophy to the society. In the Buddhist order, several women led a life of celibacy with the aim of understanding and following the eternal truths of religion and philosophy. Sanghmitra, the daughter of King Ashoka, went even to overseas lands like Sri Lanka and became a historical personage because of her service to the Buddhist cause. Many educated women used to follow the career of teaching out of love or out of necessity. The education for women was also introduced at a later stage in order to help them to acquire the knowledge that would enable them to lead a complete life. But the end of Buddhist era resulted in the end of female education for many generations. The Jaina system of education was universal in nature and applicable to all alike, irrespective of caste, creed or sex.

17 Tandon, P. D. and Roland E. Wolseley, *op.cit.*, p.11.
The spiritually trained Jaina women attained a high degree of academic education and involved themselves in preaching their faith of universal love and brotherhood. They dedicated themselves to social service. Buddhism and Jainism upheld women’s status by providing an alternative position of dignity and those who wished to dissociate themselves from the normal role of women in the family and society joined the Sangha.

Women in Sangam Age

The Sangam literature throws light on the position of women in Sangam period. _Perumpanartupadai_ says that women of Sangam Age enjoyed a great degree of social interaction. The girls of the Sangam Age were given good training in literature, music and drama. The education received by women was different from that of men. In the Sangam period, the women were held in high esteem. There are some instances of women poets in Sangam period such as Kakkai Padiniyar, Nachinarkkiniyar, Avvaiyar and so on. More than fifty women have been ranked among the Sangam poets. Outstanding among the Sangam poetesses were: Aiiji Attai Makal Nakaiyar, Allur Nanmullaiyar, Adi Mandiyar, Uthiyar, Uppttaiyar, Okkur Masattiya, Avvaiyar, Nannakaiyar, Kakkaippatiniyar, Nachellaiyur, Kavarpenu, Kuramakai Ilaveyiniyar, Nakkannaiyar, Nettimaiyar, Netumpalaiyattai, Pari Makalier, Peymakal Ilaveyini, Pottiyyar, Pondaippasalaiyar, Marokkattu Nappasalaiyar, Varumulaiyaritti, Vennikkuyattiyar, Vellividiyar, Veri Patiya Kamakkanniayar. Stories from mythology, folk songs, Tamil works like Manimekalai, Kambarayananam, Tirukkural establish that women in Tamil Nadu were honored and respected. In Tamil society, Avvai’s inner role as woman, poet and her external role in politics are represented in ways that satisfy the

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22 Balasubramaniam, C., _The Status of Women in Tamil Nadu During the Sangam Age_, University of Madras, Madras, 1976, p.5.

23 Ibid., p.8.
requirements of a theatre for feminist resistance.\textsuperscript{24} The author of Silapathigaram expresses through Kaundi Adigal that chastity is an absolute necessity for women and Kannagi is the only woman on earth possessing the mighty virtue of chastity.\textsuperscript{25} Saint Appar realized at Tiruvaiyaaru in his ripe old age that the Supreme God has manifested Shakti-Sivam aspect in all the categories of life on earth. Women scholars did not lag behind in taking active interest in the new movement. Some of the women philosophers like Avvaiyar used to remain unmarried throughout their lives in order to carry on their spiritual experiments unhampered.\textsuperscript{26} Avvaiyar was the advisor to Adhiyaman who ruled Thagadur, which is now known as Dharmapuri. Avvaiyar, Andal, Karaikal Ammaiyyar and Thilagavathiar are examples of women endowed with knowledge and wisdom and were given equal status with men in the sphere of public life.

\textbf{Women in Manu Age}

The position of women deteriorated considerably during the period of the Sutras (500 BC). Manu, the law maker (200 BC – AD 100) also brought down the status of women. Manu says, “Women should never be independent. As a daughter she is under the surveillance of her father, as a wife of her husband and widow of her son”.\textsuperscript{27} Manu prepared a mental outlook for the future subordination of women.\textsuperscript{28} Manu Dharma emphasized women’s physical tenderness and mildness in character.\textsuperscript{29} Unfortunately, women were devalued through discriminatory laws. Manu said that “Woman does not deserve liberty”. However, by the time of Manusmriti and Yajnavalkyasmriti, many of the earlier laws

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Balasubramanian, C., \textit{op.cit.}, p.29.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Shanta Bhatt, \textit{op.cit.}, p.17.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Neera Desai, \textit{Women in Modern India}, Vora and Company, Bombay, 1957, p.17.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Subramaniam, P., \textit{Social History of the Tamils (1707-1947)}, D.K. Print World, New Delhi, 1994, p.76.
\end{itemize}
permitting freedom to women became extinct and what remained thereafter was the ascetic rigidity. Women finally settled down to an indoor life made imperative due to the imperatives of joint family. Thus women were denied independence and equality during the post-vedic period. In the famous Hindu philosophy, Bhagvat Gita, women were equated with vaishyas and sudras and described as products of sinful birth. They were completely denied the freedom in education, sports, politics and religious ceremonies. The wife had to pray to her husband for every need. In the later period of Ancient Tamil Nadu, there was gradual deterioration in the position of women. But she retained a large measure of freedom in the disposal of her fortune. But as far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, the impact of Indo-Aryan culture had not created much change in the position of women after their elevated position in Sangam Age. Describing the status of the Indian women, Encyclopedia Britannica states: In India, subjection was a cardinal principle. Day and Night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Manu. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is, descent traced through males to the exclusion of females.

Women in Medieval Age

In the later day Chola period, no woman occupied the throne even in the absence of suitable heir to inherit the throne after the death of the ruler. For

33 Amsam, K., op.cit., p.13.
instance, Cempiyan Mahadevi, the queen of Kandaratitya, was widowed at a very young age. She lived with her husband for about 15 years, and in 958 AD when Kandaratitya died, though she was young, educated and energetic, she was not considered suitable even in the absence of male heir to inherit the throne. Permission was granted to child widows to remarry though the widow remarriage in general was treated as a taboo. This permission came to be gradually withdrawn during the medieval period. From about 1000 AD, no widow in a respectable family was allowed to remarry whatever her age might have been at the time of her husband’s death.37

Tamil Nadu has given higher social status to women compared to other states in India. Normally the kings were fond of marrying many women. There were numerous wives in the court of most of the Tamil rulers. The Venetian traveller Marco Polo says that the Pandiyan king Kulasekara Pandya had 300 wives. There were instances of marrying in different families for political reasons. For instance, the Chola King Parantaka I married a Rastrakuta princess purely for maintaining cordial relationship with other powers and to check the rise of his enemies. Similarly Rajaraja’s matrimonial relationship with Western Chalukyas was no doubt a master stroke of diplomacy. Rajaraja I gave his daughter Kundavai to Vimaladitya, the Eastern Chalukya prince to maintain cordial relations and to curtail the influence of Western Chalukyas. Thus, women were considered as commodities and exchanged for other commodities, without individual rights and duties during the Chola period.

Virarajendra, the Chola king, after defeating the Chalukyan army captured the only daughter of the Chalukyan king named Naglai. He cut off her nose after raping her. The Pandyas also continued such inhuman practices. They forced the defeated queens to do menial services. For instance, Jatavarman Sundara Pandya, after his victory over the Cholas, had captured all women including the chief queen and other royal women of Kulottunga III and made them to parade with

purnagumpha on auspicious days. These instances testify that the medieval Tamil rulers, rather than considering women as their equals, treated them as objects at their disposal. There was no organized body to correct this evil behavior against women because they were performed by kings as a political vendetta. Social disabilities such as slavery were prevalent during the Chola period. Inscriptions and literature of this period testify that women were purchased and sold as animals.

Lack of education, foreigner’s invasion, political instability and the emergence of caste system compelled women to accept many undesirable dictates to women in order to preserve their chastity. Hindu thinkers lacked rationalism in the last one thousand years. This was the reason why women were treated badly. The medieval Tamil society, dominated by religion and feudal setup, never recognized women as human beings. The position and status of women changed or deteriorated with the advent of Muslims in the eighth century. Before the advent of Muslims, the status of Hindu women was certainly better. There were many factors like Purdah, Sati, Devadasi system etc. which directly and indirectly, were responsible for the continuous deterioration in the status of women in medieval times.

In the seventh century, a queen of the Pallava King Rangapathaka inspired the building of the famous Kailashnath temple at Kanchi in Tamil Nadu, which is considered to be the most beautiful specimen of architecture of that period. Thilakavati and Mangaiyarkarashi were the two women mentioned in the Tiruttondar Puranam or Periya Puranam, whose life of dedication to religion inspired their dear ones and changed their spiritual outlook. Women were involved in music and dance. The political instability, consequent migration of

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38 Ibid., p.359.
population and economic depression extending over a period of about three centuries affected the women adversely. Kodhai (Andal), who lived in the ninth century, was the authoress of the Tirumoli and Tiruppavai, the devotional songs dedicated to Lord Krishna, which are considered among the most remarkable lyrics in Tamil literature. Avvai, a poetess of great merit, wrote beautiful works depicting contemporary Tamil life in the eleventh century.

Another liberal current which to some extent widened the horizon of women was the Bhakti movement. The saints emphasized salvation through devotion to a deity wherein no intermediary such as a pandit or a purohit was required. Not surprisingly it was the Bhakti Movement which produced women saints like Andal, and Karaikal Ammaiyan in Tamil Nadu. As the movement did not basically challenge the unequal social structure and it was confined to only individual salvation, it could not fundamentally affect gender subordination.

In Tamil society, women enjoyed a higher status because of the prevalence of the matriarchal system. There had been a stream of social consciousness, urging and encouraging the liberalization attitudes towards women from the eleventh century onwards. An early expression of Shakti in the teaching of the Alwars, the Vaishnavas and Nayanmars, the Saivites stressed the personal devotion of the individual to the deity of one’s choice. The women participated in the public life and won distinctions. Some of the outstanding women of that

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44 She was born in Srivilliputhur. She loved Lord Krishna and got married to him spiritually. A temple was constructed in the name of Andal in Srivilliputhur. The people venerate Andal as Goddess.


period were Kannaki, Madhavi, Kavundi Adigal and Manimekalai. Women continued to enjoy the same position more or less until the Muslim invasions from the northwest in the twelfth century. A slow and steady but imperceptible decline in the position of women had begun with the advent of Muslims.\textsuperscript{47}

From the thirteenth century, the traditional position of women witnessed change. Widows could not remarry. The education of women decreased.\textsuperscript{48} Still worse was the condition of women under the Muslim invaders.\textsuperscript{49} Various encroachments were made by the Muslim invaders on the traditional Hindu culture which resulted in the imposition of many restrictions on women's movement. The economic dependence of women became more rigid in the medieval period. Nevertheless, Muslim rule in India produced many distinguished women.\textsuperscript{*}

Priyaketaladevi, a queen of Chaluka Vikramaditya VI, ruled three villages. According to an inscription of 1148 AD, Lakkadevi was a village headwoman. Jakkiabbe ably administered seventy villages after the premature death of her husband. Mailladevi, a senior queen of Someshwara-I ruled the important province of Banavasi comprising 12000 villages. Mangammal, the Queen of Madurai, was the greatest Nayak ruler. Mangammal's regency lasted for eighteen years (1788-1806).

The wives of the Nayaks were highly respected. Tirumalai Nayak and Ragunatha Nayak are praised along with their queens. There are the statues of Tirumalai and two of his wives in the Garuda Mantapa of Sreenganathaswami

\textsuperscript{47} Manmohan Kaur, \textit{op.cit.}, p.1.
\textsuperscript{48} Tandon, P. D. and Roland E. Wolseley, \textit{op.cit.}, p.12.
\textsuperscript{49} Pitam Singh, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.26-28.
* Razia Begum was prudent and capable daughter of Iltutmish Sultan of Delhi. Rani Durgawati was famous for her heroic resistance to expansionist drives of Akbar, the Great Mughal. Rani Durgawati fell while fighting against the Akbar's forces in 1564. Tara Bai emerged as a prudent woman when Marathas were constantly fighting against the Mughals. Tara Bai, a lady of masterly spirit, guided the destiny of the Maratha Nation as regent for her minor son Shivaji III.
temple, Srirangam, in the Maha Mantapa of Sri Andal temple, Srivilliputhur and Pudu Mantapa at Madurai. Sati was confined to royal women and brahmin widows. When Tirumalai Nayak died, his two hundred wives performed sati.

The women were totally at the mercy of men and this is evident from the fact that they did not possess any proprietary status. During the Muslim period, women were deprived of their equality with men. They were compelled to keep themselves within the four walls of their houses with a long veil on their faces. This was definitely due to the Islamic influence. Their position deteriorated further due to more seclusion and a closed life by the custom of purdah. Women lost all their liberal activities.

**Devadasi System**

The devadasi system prevailed with the noble purpose of enriching the culture of the Cholas. But in practice it functioned as a center of cultural degradation. In the eleventh century, a stone inscription records that a woman gifted herself (adimaikal) to a temple near Tirukoilyur, a small village in north Tamil Nadu, as devadasi. The devadasi system was widespread during the medieval age. The Vijayanagar Empire, which ruled the South India in the sixteenth century, continued this system. This devadasi system later on paved the way for prostitution within the premises of temples. Every Tamil temple of repute in Southern India had these sacred women. Among the weavers of

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53 *Young India*, 16 April, 1925.


Tirukullikundram village, the eldest daughter of every family was devoted to the temple.\footnote{Akbar was very much against this practice and brought about praise-worthy steps to check prostitution. Sharma, S. R., and Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, \textit{Mugal Empire in India}, Educational Publishers, Agra, 1981, p.469.}

There was a gradual decline in female education and they were denied the right to own property. As a result, women lost their separate identity and were subjected to male superiority, physically and intellectually.\footnote{Letha Kumari, R., \textit{Women in Politics Participation and Governance}, Authors Press, Delhi, 2006, p.vii.} Because of social, political and economic changes, women lost their status and were relegated to the background. Many evil customs and traditions enslaved women and tied them to the house.\footnote{Aruna Goel, \textit{Violence and Protective Measures for Women Development and Empowerment}, Deep & Deep Publications Private Limited, New Delhi, 2004, pp.3-4.}

**Women in Modern Period**

British conquered India and brought with them a different economic system and a culture, which made a profound impact upon the status of women in Tamil Nadu. As a result, women gained more rights and began to take part in activities outside the house.

Historically two important movements characterized the modern period in Tamil Nadu. One was the political movement of challenge and resistance to British colonialism, and the other was the social movement to reform traditional structures which placed women and the depressed class people at the bottom of the society.

The dawn of modern era opened a new chapter for women. It recognized the potentials of women and their importance. Because of the role of politicians, leaders, freedom fighters and decision makers, women were allowed to get the benefit of education. The social reform movements emerged due to the
introduction of western education, which developed a new scientific thinking, rationalism and humanistic approach.

The British were not the first outsiders with a radically different cultural tradition to conquer the Tamil regions. Centuries earlier, Muslim dynasties had entered the Tamil land and brought new religion and culture. When the British conquered Tamil region and formed the Madras Presidency in the eighteenth century, they brought with them a different culture. The eighteenth century was the darkest period so far as women were concerned. Women lost their separate identity and their very existence was merely an appendage to the male population. At the time of the advent of the British rule, the position of women in India was at its lowest ebb. Feminine literacy was considered as a source of moral danger. In 1901, female population was 117.4 millions and male population was 120.8 millions. But the female population increased in 1941 to 154.7 millions and the male, 163.7 millions. This was one of the reasons for women’s participation in the public life, and it helped them to break cultural barriers against women.

The British administration in Tamil land started in the nineteenth century. Christian missionaries developed the education system which stressed the social equality among the various sections of Tamil society. Particularly, Tamil women slowly turned from tradition to the new foreign culture and educational system. The social reformers attempted to change the society and to secure constitutional protection for women. The Father of the Indian Renaissance, Raja Ram Mohan

Razia Parvin, op.cit., p.15.
Roy (1774-1833) pleaded that it was erroneous to consider women as weak intellectually and deficient in resolution and lack control over passion. He opposed the custom of sati and polygamy and encouraged widow remarriage. He founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 and insisted on English education to transform the existing social system which was responsible for the misery of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy started a movement against the prevailing inequality and subjugation and he was followed by Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1871), Dayanantha Saraswathi (1827-1883), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) and a host of others. The contact of Tamil culture with the British also brought improvement in the status of women.

Annie Besant, an Irish woman, loved the Indian women and sacrificed her life for the welfare of Indian women. The active participation of women in the Home Rule Movement calls for specific reference. Women did not enter politics as silent spectators but as active participants in the non-violent struggle for freedom.65

Another factor in the revival of women's position was the influence of Gandhi who induced women to participate in the Freedom Movement. Gandhi's principle of national movement based on ahimsha, non-violence and passive resistance, attracted Tamil women to take part in large numbers in public life and it paved the way for their social awareness also. As a result of this freedom movement, women in Tamil Nadu have distinguished themselves as teachers, nurses, air-hostesses, booking clerks, receptionists, and doctors. They are also participating in politics and administration. But in spite of this improvement in the

* India is a land of many women worthy of mention. Queen Didda of Kashmir, fought against Moghul invaders. Another was Sultana Raziya (1236-1240), who ruled the empire of Delhi and was the only woman to hold the throne. Three centuries later there was Chand Bibi, wife of Sultan of Ahmadnagar. In nineteenth century, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi was the popular heroine of the early freedom fighters of India. Panditha Rama Bai (1858-1922), Ranade (1862-1922) and Madam Gama (1861-1936) were some notable freedom fighters.

65 Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (hereafter it is referred as CWMG), Vol.XLVIII, p.424; Young India, 14 January, 1932.
status of women, the evils of illiteracy, dowry, ignorance, and economic slavery are yet to be fully removed in order to give them their rightful place in the society.

The Tamil woman’s life has two parts, one spent in her family, which is known as ‘Amma Veedu’ (mother’s house) before marriage and the other spent in her family of new orientations, which is known as ‘Mammiyar Veedu’ (husband’s house), after marriage. The initial awakening of unmarried women towards political issues was in the parental home. In a joint household, the ideas of grandparents and other family relations such as paternal uncles and aunts were influential. Sometimes the politically involved father encouraged all the members of his family to participate in the movement, irrespective of their age and sex. Households, which were fully immersed in nationalist activities, positively encouraged the participation of women and individual family members. Sometimes the initiative came from women, but there were differences between households, which determined the ease with which women could publicly participate. Further there were households, which prevented participation of women in any form of political activity. Women in Tamil Nadu always had a pride of place within the household and the society.

Many influential women in Tamil Nadu became prominent during the twentieth century. Until the nineteenth century, there had been little freedom for women either to realize themselves or to contribute to the society. Fundamental factor for the exclusion of women from the political field is a political culture,
which does not offer women any positive model of female power in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{71}

The status and position of women in public life varies from place to place and region to region and even period to period. A historical analysis of the position of women in Tamil Nadu reveals that there were distinct stages of degradation in their position and status.\textsuperscript{72} The normative structure of Tamil society, its cultural ethos, social taboos and prevailing stereotype habits prevented women from taking equal part in social and economic life.\textsuperscript{73} However poets like Kavimani Desika Vinayakam Pillai asserted that one should have performed severe penance in the previous births to be gifted to be born as a woman on earth.\textsuperscript{74}

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\textsuperscript{73} Kumud Rajan, ‘Hindu Nationalism and Women’, \textit{The Hindu}, 27 April, 2000, p.12.
\textsuperscript{74} Balasubramanian, C., \textit{op.cit.}, p.3.