CHAPTER – II

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The conservative Brahmin elite class was the symbol of Hinduism and others could not make their presence very effective. The reasons are historical in nature, which were challenged by the nineteenth century social reformers. This scenario is applicable to Tamil Nadu as well, till the arrival of EVR. The new revivalism was embodied in powerful organizations such as Dayanand Saraswati’s Arya Samaj (1875), Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission (1897) and Annie Besant’s Madras Hindu Association (1904).^1

Barring a few exceptions, modernists and revivalists were not really concerned with gender equality, women’s own desires or their perspectives on dignity and justice. While some regard the reform movement as a failure, Gail Omvedt maintains that it helped to create the basis for women’s movement that emerged in the 1920s. Though men dominated the family and the public life, male reformers and later the nationalists helped to ‘extend the female space’ for action.^.2

Social Reform Movement

The ideology of social reformers had a strong feminist element in it. They definitely connected women’s oppression and exploitation with other forms of social inequality and called rigorously for a fully liberated society. However, in the long run, the reform movements strengthened institutions like dowry and the supremacy of the patriarchal family in women’s lives. Instead of its expected liberating influence, education became a powerful force in strengthening the

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^2 Ibid., pp.35-40.
sanskritisation process, which manifests itself in the mutually supportive relationship between patriarchy and hierarchy.³

The increased participation of women in the national movement was evident through the nineteenth century. A great deal of educated male interest was focused on reforming the position of women through the adoption of an agenda of legislative reform. Snehalata Panda observes that the marked features of women who involved themselves in public activity during this period were:

1. Most of them hailed from families where the male members (father, brother, husband) were active in social, religious and political associations.
2. Very few came from lower middle or lower class.
3. The upper caste women were over-represented.⁴

Tamil women, young and old, rich and poor, sophisticated and highly educated, and simple and illiterate village women joined the freedom movement because it was not dependent on physical strength but on soul force.

The vision for uplifting women was developed through different movements and programmes. The renaissance movement, the formation of socio-religious organizations like Brahma Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, etc., legislations like banning of Sati and child marriage, the introduction of widow remarriage were all aimed at to improve the condition of women.⁵ During the freedom struggle in India, women came out from their hearths and homes in large number to participate in the liberation movement and many of them were in prison. They shared with men blunt blows of the British power.⁶

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³ Ibid.
⁵ Harijan, 22 June, 1935.
The first historical accounts of public participation of Indian women date from the nineteenth century and are a product of the colonial experience. These accounts tell us that in the ancient time women were held in high esteem and subsequently in the long run their status gradually declined. The colonial rulers introduced new ideas about women’s roles and capabilities and these ideas were adopted by enlightened Indians. Colonial histories have narrated women from their own culture and society. The newer challenges to the task of writing of women’s history came from the subaltern school, originating in Calcutta. Thus, the history of western women liberation is different from the development of Indian women.

The founding of the INC is frequently seen as the inaugurating point of the nationalist movement in India, although political protest against British rule began far earlier. The movement for national freedom had grown out of the frustrations, humiliations and injustices of the colonial administration. In India, there were also other injustices and discriminations born out of a social system based on rigid traditions and alien to modern ideas of liberty and equality. The plea was that non-interference in religion and social customs of the people of India, however disagreeable and retrograde, has been guaranteed in the Queen’s Proclamation of 1858, when the British government replaced the East India Company. Therefore, the initiative for social reform should come from the initiatives of the Indian reformers.

In the past, there were a few women rulers, administrators and warriors in India in general and Tamil Nadu in particular. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Annie Besant, Rukumani Lakshmipathi, Anjalaiammal, Ambujammal, Ammu-swaminathan, Captain Lakshmi, Captain Janaki and EVR worked at the Tamil Nadu level. The political struggle was a struggle for not only country’s freedom

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but also for the liberation of women. From the beginning of his political activities, Gandhi associated himself with women and took their help as and when necessary.\(^9\) The entry of women into active politics was considered not only a great asset to the INC but also a real inspiration to the hesitant womanhood of India. The fact that women left home, husbands and children to identify themselves with the movement for freedom, had a tremendous impact on women in determining their future participation in the national movement. The levels of women's involvement in the national movement depended largely on the policies followed by the INC.

**INC and Women's Involvement**

The establishment of the INC in 1885 marked the beginning of the new era in the political history of India. Generally from 1889, every session of the INC included some women delegates and many women observers. Their participation was often token and symbolic but the educated and politically cultured women were seeking new public life with responsibilities. The growth of the national movement coincided with the gradual increase of women's involvement in political activities.

The later half of the nineteenth century was marked by intense activity for social reform and expansion of western education. With the establishment of the Presidency College and University of Madras in the Madras Presidency, higher education came within the reach of women also. In this region, in the field of political struggle, few women were associated with the INC initially. For a while, participation of women in policy-making political bodies was limited. Even the participation at the lower level was confined to urban women only. The politics of violence pursued by the terrorists attracted a few women into politics.\(^10\) INC-led nationalism, which had already shaped itself in the image of a reinvented patriarchal tradition, found it easier to jettison even the little commitment it had to

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\(^10\) Devaki Jain, (ed.), *op.cit.* p. 23.
social reform. Most nationalist women accepted the social and cultural idiom of "Indianness", values of segregation and male guardianship in which their participation was sought. In other words, nationalist activism did not lay any straight road to feminist consciousness. However in India social reformers questioned the growing inequalities and the major evils of social customs like child marriage, taboo on widow re-marriage, practice of sati etc. During this period, women were placed along with the downtrodden people who suffered for the well-being of society.

**Women at National Level**

In all the revolutions of the modern world starting from the French Revolution down to the ongoing liberation struggles in Asian countries, women played and are playing a significant role. Women have participated in national liberation movements throughout the world. Although they have not been found to be politically very conscious or involved in day-to-day political issues, women have mobilized themselves during the crisis period. Women had participated in the Indian national freedom struggle in adequate number.

The political mobilization of women during the fight for Independence was identified as one of the key factors in determining women’s political participation in contemporary times. Several accounts of women’s movement in India, which accompanied the nationalist struggle for independence from British rule, noted the

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14 Muniruddin Qureshi, *op.cit.*, pp.36-40.

lack of an emancipator role and rather a subservient role in society. Women were welcomed to join the resistance against British colonial rule but their political activity was encouraged without compromising on the traditional gender hierarchy within the Indian society. As long as their political activity supplemented but did not sacrifice their traditional duties as wives, daughters and sisters, their political activism was encouraged. However, several male supporters of reform supported franchise for women.

In early 1850s, a campaign on widow remarriage was launched, resulting in the passage of a bill in 1856 which legally allowed widow remarriage. This bill helped the widows to have the right to their husbands' or their family properties. Prominent women like Pandit Ramabai, Manorama Majumdar and Sarala Debi Goshai started ‘Bharata Sree Mahamandal’ for the education of women. Swarna Kumari Devi started the women’s organization called ‘Shakti Samiti’ in 1886 for widows. These activities of women gave momentum to their participation in public spaces, which paved the way for their entry into the independence struggle. At this phase, re-invention of women’s role was tied with the nationalist movement. The issue of social reform was transformed into a political issue of women’s right to equality. Women’s participation in freedom movement increased with mass mobilization. Swarna Kumar Debi, one of the two delegates elected from Bengal to represent the State at the 1890 INC session, is a case in point. Women were in attendance at annual INC meetings from as early as 1890s, although their roles were primarily decorative.

The nineteenth century reformers who were concerned about women were not taking into consideration the sufferings of lower class women who were

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excluded by men in general and the urban upper middle class people in particular. The rural women, pushed to the background, either organized themselves in the rural society or migrated to the urban society and created a niche for themselves. Gandhi encouraged his wife Kasturba to participate in the political activities in South Africa. With her, a host of women also participated and they were arrested and were sentenced to three months imprisonment.

**Women in Swadeshi Movement**

The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1905-1908) marked the beginning of direct participation of women in nationalist activities. Middle and lower class women contributed jewels, money and even grains.\(^\text{19}\) They took active part in the boycott of foreign goods and in revolutionary activities. Sister Nivedita joined the National Revolutionary Council and organized women for nationalist activities.\(^\text{20}\)

The first major appearance of Tamil women in the public political sphere was during the Swadeshi Movement when a large number of housewives participated in overtly political actions by combining them with popular religious observances.\(^\text{21}\) The skilful tactics of several women leaders contributed to increased participation of women in public life and their attempts at mass mobilization also facilitated this social process.

Thousands of poor and illiterate women who had never ventured beyond the protective confines of their homes participated in the Indian freedom struggle.\(^\text{22}\) After the First World War, Gandhi began urging women to take the swadeshi vow and to engage in spinning, a call to which many middle class women eagerly responded. Thus women largely participated in the Non-

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\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.  
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid.  
Cooperation Movement of 1920-1922. The democratic ideology of the nationalist movement and the need to broaden the political base of the nationalist struggle compelled the leaders to accept the principles of equality of rights, status and opportunities in the process of national development. It was the increased political participation of women in the freedom movement from the 1920s that called for fundamental redefinition of gender roles.\(^\text{23}\)

**Women’s Participation in Satyagraha Movement**

From 1920s, the INC began to forge links with peasants and workers and women’s organizations and mobilised their mass support to achieve freedom. The 1920s marked the turning point for women’s participation in the INC-led nationalist movement in India. The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement initiated the boycott of government institutions, legislatures and law enforcing bodies. Nationwide strikes, *hartals*, *satyagrahas* and breaking of government laws were organized. Women’s participation was limited in these agitations. Gandhi made an appeal in a meeting on 6 April 1919 at Bombay thus: “Just as a man with one half of his body inactive, could not do anything properly, so the Indian body would not be able to do its work properly if one half of it, namely, the women, remained inactive and so I would appeal to my sisters of India to join the satyagraha movement in large numbers”.\(^\text{24}\) Women participated along with their male family members and served jail sentences. It is worth nothing that women, who entered public life, were supported and encouraged by the men in their family. For example Perin Captain was the grand daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, Manibehn Patel, daughter of Vallabhbhai Patel, and Swarup Rani Nehru, wife of Pt. Motilal Nehru.\(^\text{25}\)

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\(^{24}\) CWMG, Vol.XV, p.189; *The Bombay Chronicle*, 7 April 1919.

Political upheavals shook domestic stability and comfort in the lives of many women activists. If a woman went out of homes and took to the streets, then someone had to be at home to look after her family. However, the reconstructed, nationalist interpretation of respectability and symbolic association of the nation as a large family, enabled nuclear households to build the community of neighborhood. Students came out in hundreds, joined the prohibited corps and marched out with khaddar (handloom cloth), seeking imprisonment.

Women in Non-Cooperation Movement

Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement, the first nationwide non-violent campaign, in 1920. The experiences and hardships of the World War I provoked a revolution in Indian consciousness which led to the emergence of Indian nationalism. Indians contributed men, money and material during the war period. Even Gandhi expected some constitutional reforms after the war. Gandhi, the leader of India’s non-violent struggle, played an important role in channelising the energies of the emerging women’s movement into the nationalist movement. Renuka Ray correctly observes: “the most momentous change in the position of women in India was due to the efforts of Gandhi, who in launching his campaign of non-violence, non-co-operation in the struggle for India’s freedom ignored both law and custom of specially calling upon women to participate ... No legislation could have been more sweeping or more effective than the Mahatma’s call, which leveled the barriers of established customs almost overnight.”

Women in Salt Satyagraha

The Civil Disobedience Movement came as a golden opportunity for the women of India. One of the methods Gandhi chose to undermine the authority of the British was to defy the law which made it illegal for Indians to make salt. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi inaugurated the Dandi March to the sea-coast for breaking the Salt Act. No woman had been included by Gandhi in his chosen number of marchers. While he wanted a vanguard role for women in the freedom movement, Gandhi did not encourage women to compete for power.

Rather, he wanted them to enter public life as selfless, devoted social workers to undertake the crucial task of social reconstruction. He wanted women to cleanse politics, to feminize it by bringing in the spirit of selfless sacrifice, rather than compete with men in grabbing power, and thus prove their moral superiority even in the realm of politics. In Gandhi's view, "Women are the embodiment of sacrifice, and their advent to public life should, therefore, result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property". Gandhi, therefore, created a political space for women within the patriarchal system, projecting the concept of women's role being complementary to men's and embodying virtues of sacrifice and suffering. But nationalist women protested and they forced him to allow them to participate. The Women's Indian Association protested thus: "Women ask that no conferences, congress or commissions dealing with the welfare of India should be held without the presence of their women. Similarly, women must ask that no marches, no imprisonment, no demonstration organized for the welfare of India should prohibit women from share in them".

Gandhi had nominated Sarojini Naidu to lead the raid on Dhasana Salt works. She declared that the "time has come when women can no longer seek immunity behind the shelter of their sex, but must face equality with their male

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30 Muthulakshmi Reddy, S., Mrs. Margaret Cousins and Her Work in India, Women's Indian Association, Madras, 1956, p.72.
31 Rajalakshmi, V., op.cit., p.20.
comrades all the pains and sacrifices for the liberation of this country”.32 Sarojini Naidu was 51 years old, but she managed 2000 volunteers under a scorching sun to raid the Dharasana Salt Works while the police chased them half a mile upto the road with lathis.33 The volunteers cheered Sarojini Naidu when she had shaken off the arm of the British official who came to arrest her and marched proudly to the barbed wire stockade where she was interned before being imprisoned.

Women, while being members of the District Congress Committee (DCC) and District Volunteer Boards (DVBs), simultaneously also formed their own political organizations such as the Rashtriya Stree Sabha, an independent women’s organization under the presidency of Sarojini Naidu and vice-presidencies of Goshiben Naoroji and Avantikabai Gokhale. Avantikabai Gokhale along with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya were among the first few women to make salt from sea-water during the 1930 satyagraha.34

Kamaladevi Chatopadhyaya participated in the satyagraha movement of the 1930s. This satyagraha witnessed a significant increase in the participation of women. Aruna Asaf Ali’s first major political involvement was in the salt march at which she was arrested and prosecuted. Thousands of women joined the salt satyagraha, which is generally remembered as the first time ‘masses of Indian women’ got involved in the struggle for Independence. Durgabhai Deshmukh with 100 persons participated in the Swaraj movement under the leadership of Natarajan.35 She delivered a series of inflammatory speeches in the Madras Province with the result that she was convicted and sentenced to one year imprisonment.36 In this regard it is reported thus: “Our heroic Indian Women came forward in large numbers in the course of this war and went to jail. It is

32 Muniruddin Qureshi, op.cit., p.36.
34 Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, op.cit., p.55.
35 Fortnightly Report (FNR) for the Second Half of April 1930, Public (Gen) Department, p.16.
36 FNR for the Second Half of May 1930, Public (Gen) Department, p.21.
only Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi who is a heroic woman like you that is the leader of women. Hence O heroic and independent women! Come forward. Be patriotic and render national service in the interest of the country".  

In Madras, Durgabai Deshmukh took the lead in breaking the salt law. On 13 April 1930, the first batch of sayagrabis under the leadership of T. Prakasam and K. Nageswara Rao started out in a procession from the Swaraja office and manufactured salt on the seashore and were arrested subsequently. Durgabai conducted second campaign for over a month and ran the ‘Udyavanam Camp’ which sent out eighty to ninety volunteers every day. On 5 May 1930, she led another batch of women volunteers to Santhome Beach, Mylapore at Madras and started manufacturing salt there. At Vedaranyam, Rukumani Lakshmpati, Vice-President of T.N.P.C.C. energetically broke the salt law. She was arrested and was sentenced to one year imprisonment. Thus the women of Tamil Nadu led salt satyagraha successfully. With the increasing number of women in Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement, great success was achieved. Gandhi said, “the part the women of India played will be written in letters of gold”.  

The freedom struggle in India was unique because the INC had a branch of volunteers for political and social work. Women had joined as volunteers in large numbers. They were called Desh Sevak or Swarajya Sangh. Jawaharlal Nehru had called them women soldiers of the Country. There were thousands and thousands of known and unknown women who suffered for the cause of the country during the Gandhian era.

Women’s participation in the nationalist movement took place only after the advent of Gandhi. The forms of political organization and protest adopted by


38 Kiran Devendra, Status and Position of Women in India, Shakti Books, New Delhi, 1985, p.23.
Gandhi such as non-violent protest, civil disobedience, boycott of foreign goods and picketing of liquor shops went along with the non-violent nature of women. Jawaharlal Nehru viewed their participation in satyagraha thus: "Women had always been there but now there was an avalanche of them which shook not only the British Government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper and middle classes leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working class women, rich women, poor women, pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organisational power they showed".

Vijayalakshmi Pandit claimed that the whole movement was strengthened by the heroism of women. Besides Gandhi’s special appeal to women, women’s organizations and women’s entry into legislative councils provided an additional impetus to women’s participation. Lakshmipathy, the president of the Madras League of Youth, attended the Lahore INC session where she expressed her opinion on boycott of legislatures and declaration of complete independence and claimed that independence could only be achieved by organising the masses under the intellectual leadership of youth.

Gandhi said that women should take their proper place beside men but not with a "Votes for Women" campaign that would only detract from the fight for freedom. Women, he argued, should use their energy “helping their men against the common foe”. Gandhi outlined a clear and specific political programme based on women’s special virtues of patience and forbearance in their dealings with the resisting shopkeepers. Inherent in this was the idea that although men

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41 Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, *op.cit.*, p.54.
42 FNR for the Second Half of January 1930, Public (Gen) Department, p.3.
43 Gandhi, M. K., ‘Women and the Vote’, *Young India*, 24 November 1920.
could participate in picketing, they would be less effective because violence was more likely to result. Addressing a women’s conference in Dandi, Gandhi said: “Women are more fitted for the delicate non-violent picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops than men. If the women of Gujarat successfully organised the two boycotts of foreign cloth and liquor, they would spread throughout the length and breadth of the country.” Gandhi, while emphasising women’s important role in the domestic domain, also argued that ‘woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities’.

Electoral Struggle

On 9 September 1930, every arrangement was made for the elections to the Legislative Assembly in Madras but Gandhi announced the boycott of election. Women went out in hundreds to picket the booths which resulted in the postponement of election on that day. In this incident, more than 400 women were arrested. British Government made an attempt to auction liquor license in Madras, but failed because of the obstruction of women. Very soon Muthulakshmi Reddi resigned her membership of the Madras Provincial Legislative Council. At Allahabad, Swarup Rani Nehru, mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, received a severe lathi blow from the hands of the police. Especially Delhi, Bengal and Bihar women’s roles were extreme, and it is proved from the jail records that the Lahore female jail was full of Delhi women. Indira Gandhi at the tender age of 12 had organized 6000 children in Allahabad. Tamil Nadu did not lag behind.

In 1931, the Karachi session of the INC took the historic decision of committing itself to the political equality of women, regardless of their status and qualifications. This proposal met with virtually no opposition. British introduced local democracy in India by constituting municipal councils and the municipal

45 Young India, 26 March, 1918.

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corporations. They also provided a federal structure to the country with the Government of India Act 1935.

Saraladevi, Muthulakshmi Reddi, Annie Besant and others who were committed to Gandhi and his non-cooperation and civil disobedience, did not abandon the struggle for civil rights. Women leaders remained active in their demand for social reform and for franchise. In 1931, Saraladevi, a veteran leader, led a move for a separate women’s wing in INC. Saraladevi said, “assigned to women the position of law-breakers only and not law-makers”, and had to be forced to address women’s demands. Her initiative was frittered away.

Gandhi emphasized the moral and traditional qualities of women. Nehru emphasized the economic content of women’s rights and obligations and his approach was based on more of ‘realistic and practical considerations’. Nehru’s earliest political awareness came from his engagement with the socialist philosophy of Fabians in England. This early contact encouraged Nehru to take a critical view of Indian society rather than indulge in moral exhortation. His speeches reiterated his faith that for women without economic freedom and mental freedom through education, other aspects of gender equality would prove superficial. Family responsibilities were much less important than the economic independence of women. In a speech to women of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapith, Nehru stated: “If a woman is not economically independent and does not earn money herself, she will have to be dependent on her husband or some other man. I realize that your Vidyapith stresses that women should be accomplished in housework and undertake the responsibilities of one’s marriage. However, women should be given the highest education to enable them to undertake other occupations”.

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49 Shukla, 1934 : 22.
Although the decision to participate was made within individual households, facilitating women’s participation without compromising on the traditional concept of respectability was part of a much wider process of the domestication of the public sphere. There were also households in which the father was a member of a political party and supported the activities of his daughters, but not those of his wife, or where all the male members in the household were supporters of the INC but did not encourage political activities by women in the family.\(^{50}\)

Nationalist leaders understood the importance of family dynamics in encouraging women’s involvement in public activities. Their dual stress on women fulfilling their duties as mothers within their homes as well as serving the nation was important because it enabled women to participate in the public sphere without dismantling the existing family structure and threatening the prevalent domestic ideology. Particularly the personal and political beliefs of the two INC leaders, Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, posited different aspects of domestic ideology and women’s public participation. Though the two leaders understood women’s roles in different ways, their anticipation of the important contribution of women (from both their own and their families) to the nationalist movement carved distinct negotiable spaces for women’s political contribution.\(^{51}\)

In the 1940s, against the backdrop of World War II, the British government, through emergency ordinances, was determined to crush any political activities of the INC, particularly a mass movement. For a while, women’s participation took the shape of individual satyagraha, anti-war speeches and underground activities.\(^{52}\)

\(^{50}\) Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, *op.cit.*, p.4.


Gandhi claimed that a woman is completely equal to a man and practised it in a strict sense. Thousands and millions of women, educated and illiterate, housewives and widows, students and elderly, participated in the India’s freedom movement because of Gandhi’s influence. For Gandhi, the freedom struggle was not political alone but it was also an economic and social reform of a national proportion.

**Women’s Role in the Madras Province**

The role of women in freedom struggle at national and regional level was a significant one. In Tamil Nadu also, many social reformers advocated the cause of women. The reform activities in Madras Presidency began with the birth of Indian National Social Conference, which was first held in 1887. The Third Session of this Social Conference which met in Madras in 1889, passed certain resolutions preventing early marriage which impaired the physical and mental health of boy husband and girl wife.

The Justice Party and the Dravidian Movement emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century and they were fully opposed to Brahminical and Hindu customs which restricted the freedom and rights of women. The landscape of Madras Province in geographical area covered most of the places of South India. Madras Province was also a notable place where women actively participated in the freedom struggle. The visit of Gandhi in 1894 created more interest among the people of Madras. The interest showed by men and women in the province was commented by Gandhi as, “It was a scene never to be forgotten”. In the beginning, the National Movement in Madras Presidency experienced a slow start but it progressed steadily. The National Movement in Madras Presidency first developed from various regional associations which had to work together on an all India basis. The women’s role in public life was

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inhibited by social customs like infanticide, child marriage and offering girls to deity. In such a dark gloomy condition, Annie Besant came to India on 10 November 1893. She dedicated her life to the uplift of women in India. She founded an organization called WIA (Women Indian Association) with Margaret Cousins in 1917 at Adyar in the Madras Presidency. With Annie Besant and Dorothy Jina Rajadasa, the WIA tried to generate political consciousness among women. The service done by Margaret Cousins and other women leaders, influence of western education system, the native spirit spread through various newspapers and magazines, and the songs of Bharathi, the bold activities undertaken by a rationalist group, V.O.Chidambaram, Vanchinathan, Thirupur Kumaran, Subramaniya Siva, combined to encourage women to enter public life. Only two per cent women actively participated in the freedom struggle. The political life of Tamil Nadu underwent a massive transformation.

Subramania Bharathi was not only a poet of Tamil Nadu but also a radical and progressive thinker who expounded a unique social philosophy. The Chakravartini newspaper edited by Bharathi was devoted mainly to the elevation of Indian women. Bharathi, being an innovative writer, adopted various techniques to convey effectively his ideas on the emancipation of women. He advanced the view that women too can play a role in the liberation of the country. In one of the essays, Maather, Bharathi asserted that women were treated like slaves in the Tamil areas. Bharathi became a forerunner in the emancipation of women and attained a unique place not only in political history but also in the social history of Tamil Nadu.

In 1917, the first Indian women’s deputation to demand political rights and their natural role in the contemplated reformed political set up, waited on E.S.Mantagu, the Secretary of State for India, at Madras, when he visited to assess

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India’s claim to Home Rule. The deputation was led by Sarojini Naidu as leader and Margaret Cousins, who initiated the move, acted as the Secretary. The following are the significant parts of the Memorandum submitted by this organization: “The women of India understand and support the broad claims of their people for self-government with the empire and they press for its bestowal as urgently as do their brothers. They have in large numbers signed the petition organized by Mr. Gandhi in favour of scheme of reforms drawn up by the National Congress and Muslim League. .... We pray that, when such a franchise is being drawn up, women may be recognized as, ‘people’ and that it may be worded as such in such terms as will not disqualify our sex, but allow our women the same opportunities of representation as our men”.^58

Kamala Damodaran as Member of the Standing Committee, Rahmath Unissa Begum as Educational Secretary, Visalakshi Ammal as Secretary of Social Section, Balasundaram Naidu as treasurer of AIWA branch of Madras, combined together and stood for the cause of women. The association meeting was held in the third week of February 1935 under the presidency of Ammu Swaminathan. A resolution was passed urging the appointment of a Commission to enquire into the level of disabilities of women and also that the said commission must be strongly represented by women. Letters were also sent to all the Assembly Members of the Madras Presidency to strongly support Deshmukh’s bill when it comes up in the Assembly.^^59

The Madras Women’s Conference was held in 19 October 1935 at National Girls High School, Madras, under the presidency of Margaret Cousins. Visalakshmi Ammal, Alamelu Jayarama Aiyar, Muthulakshmi Reddi, Sarojini Naidu participated in the conference. Cousins in her presidential address said, “We women who have extended our mothering influence beyond the realm of the four walls of our homes to public affairs have done so because we find that the great subjects of health, education, the status of women, economic, political,

^58 Giri Raj Shah, op.cit., pp.11-12.
religious and legal and the freedom of the country, interpenetrate our lives in the
home, help or hinder us in our great vocation of mothering the race and living out
our own individual lives happily and valuably."

Most of the great freedom fighters had enlightened views about women
and encouraged them to take part in public life. The notable women fighters in
Tamil Nadu were M.I.Reddi, Rukumani Lakhmipathi, Ambujammal,
Manjubashini, Ammu Swaminathan and Margaret Cousins. Muthulakshmi Reddi
focused her work on the welfare of women community. She was responsible for
bringing about the enforcement of ‘Child Marriage (Restraint) Act’ for the
suppression of traffic in women and children in Tamil Nadu. Besides, her most
important achievement was the abolition of devadasi system in the Hindu
temples. Rukumani Lakshmipathi belonged to a family of social reform and she
was deeply interested in women’s education. She participated in the Salt
Satyagraha in 1930 at Vedaranyam and became the first woman to be arrested
and imprisoned for one year. During the Civil Disobedience Movement also, she
was arrested and was in prison for six months. Another woman, Ambujammal, the
daughter of the great national leader Srinivasa Iyer, joined the freedom movement
in 1930 and actively took part in foreign cloth boycott in 1932. She was arrested
and sentenced to six months in state jail for women. She worked as secretary and
later as treasurer of WIA. Manjubashini, the daughter of Narasimha Iyer, one of
the leading lawyers of Madras, was arrested in Quit India Movement in 1942 and
kept as a prisoner for one year in Vellore Jail. Ammu Swaminathan, another
pioneer social worker and wife of Swaminathan, a leading advocate in Madras,
took part in the Quit India Movement and she was imprisoned in jail for women at
Vellore. She was the founder member of the All India Women’s Conference

60 Anjana Maitra-Sinka, Women in a Changing Society, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993,
p.57.
62 Padmalaya Mohapatra and Bijoyini Mohanty, op.cit., p.75.
63 After independence, she has started a home for destitute and deserted children and whole-heartedly
committed her life to disabled children welfare.
(AIWC) in Madras. Thus many women in Tamil Nadu worked for the upliftment of women and they were actively involved in the political struggle. The women freedom fighters had also rendered a significant role in social work, especially in the uplift of womenfolk in the society. Subulakshmi was educated by her father to become the first Brahmin woman graduate in the Madras Presidency. More women were being trained for the role of leadership in various capacities under the Subulakshmi’s team. Thus emerged a picture of indistinct faces of women in the crowd and they slowly assumed the leadership of their group, building capabilities of many more in the process of setting the next stage for the fight for empowerment of women in the post independent era.

The population of men and women of India from 1901 were almost equal. But the percentage of women freedom fighters was only 0.0008. Women’s role in the Madras Province was in no way inferior to men in the National Movement. The social backwardness of women and very poor percentage of literacy did not encourage women to enter politics. About 60% of women freedom fighters went to jail as per the Indian Penal Code under various sections. Women received no special consideration when they underwent the punishment. The sacrifice by women triggered a movement to fight for franchise.64

The women education brought a number of women leaders to public life. Notable among them are Muthulakshmi Reddi, Rukmani Lakshmipathi, Rukmani Arundale, Ramamirtham Ammaiayar and Durga Bai Deshmuk. Ramamirtham Ammaiayar, the grand old lady of Dravidian movement, took part in the non-cooperation movement along with EVR in all programmes, including Vaikom Satyagraha. In Madras Province, many women leaders came from caste Hindus because their males encouraged women’s education who in turn participated in the social service. After meeting Gandhi at Mayavaram in 1921, Ramamirtham Ammaiayar became an INC propagandist in Thanjavur and campaigned for non-

cooperation movement. It is said that she came out of the tiled house in which she was living, which displayed the message “No entry for non-khadhar people” through a board. Ramamirtham Ammaiyyar was the first lady of the south to defy the government prohibitory orders for picketing liquor shops and to court arrest. The majority of non-Brahmins were culturally, politically, and economically subdued by minority masters, the Brahmins and the British.

In 1930, Rukumani Lakshmipathi and Padmavathy joined the Salt Satyagraha under the presidentship of Rajaji at Vedaranyam. K.B.Janakiammal participated in the freedom struggle in Madurai. K.B.Sundarambal contributed for the success of Indian freedom struggle through her songs. Through tireless effort, they showed their patriotism and national feelings to achieve freedom for India. Captain Lakshmi participated with Nethaji in the Indian National Army as a famous medical practitioner in Singapore. She was the head of Jhansi Rani section of Indian National Army and she fought against the British military in Burma. In 1938, Radhabai Subbarayan became the first Indian woman member of the Council of States and she was elected unopposed from a general constituency. Rukmani Lakshmipathi obtained the high honour of being the first lady to be arrested in connection with Salt Satyagraha.

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66 Viswanathan, E. Sa., op.cit., p.40.
67 Barnett M. Rose, The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976, p.52; Due to this reason, Justice Party was formed in 1916 and it demonstrated anti-Brahmin activity only. The Dravidian ideology, based on non-Brahmin upliftment, had become a formidable component in the politics of Tamil Nadu right from 1916 to 1924 when Self-Respect Movement was formed by EVR. Radicalization of the Dravidian ideology occurred mainly during this period.
Stand of Justice Party

“Dravidian parties’ ethnic notion generated widespread support primarily because they were articulated within a populist discourse, including women issues” says Narendren Subramaniam.\(^6^9\) The principles of anti-Brahmin and racial identity gradually disappeared from the main agenda of the movement due to political exigencies but women liberation and women related issues have been functioning as the prominent guiding and mobilizing force right from the inception of the movement in 1916.\(^7^0\) Justice Party government earned the unique distinction as the first ministry in India extending franchise to women in 1921.\(^7^1\) But participation and contribution of women in Justice Party was practically nil.\(^7^2\) Justice Party not at all recognized the political right of women since the Party was constituted by caste Hindu non-Brahmins who strictly adhered to caste norms. But the liberation of women from the thralldom of cruel customs and traditions was one of the declared principles of the Justice Party. When Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a bill in the Madras Legislative Council on 2 February 1929 for the abolition of devadasi system by seeking an amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowments Act, the Justice Party, sitting in the opposition, rendered wholehearted support and co-operation.

EVR – The Father of Tamil Nadu

Born in a middle class family in 1879 at Erode, EVR married Nagammai at the age of 19. He was elected Chairman of Erode Municipality. He attended a political meeting at Tiruchirappalli in 1916 when Annie Besant discussed her


political activities in Madras city and her involvement in the Home Rule Movement. The Home Rule agitation during 1914 and 1917 awakened many women to a realization of their exclusion from political movement. Annie Besant’s attitude towards the emancipation of women was quite unequivocal. EVR joined INC in 1919. In 1921 he led the restraint campaign in which he picketed liquor shops. When the campaign was intensified, his wife Nagammai and sister Kannammal were also drawn into it. In 1925 EVR left the INC and started Self Respect Movement(SRM). EVR became a militant critic of the caste system. SRM developed a mass, popular base but remained primarily a social reform movement and aimed at women upliftment. The Justice Party was instrumental in propagating and facilitating EVR’s thoughts on women rights. In his presidential address to the South Indian Social Conference in 1928, he said, ‘I have lost faith in social reform. For one who believes in radical change, self-respect, equality and progress, the alternative is not mere reforms but radical reconstructive works which would destroy the traditional structure’.

EVR critically examined the stigmas attached to women from birth to death by religion and tradition. The vibrant movement of social reform in nineteenth and twentieth century sought to construct a ‘New Feminity’ without dismantling the traditional virtues, images and role of women as devoted wives, competent house makers and benevolent mothers. At this time, EVR’s ideas were slowly turning towards socialism. A group of individuals were attracted

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75 Viswanathan, E. Sa., *op.cit.*, p.40.
towards his socialist ideas. The socialist goals of the movement attracted the attention of the government. Self Respect meetings were increasingly attended by reformers. Short-hand versions of the speeches were filed for security proceedings and leaders came under surveillance. EVR was asked to provide security for the *Kudi Arasu* on 19 November 1933. When he refused, it temporarily ceased publication. In June 1933, EVR was imprisoned for a month because he would not pay Rs.1100 stationery bill to a Madras firm. In the place of *Kudi Arasu*, EVR’s sister, S.R. Kannammal, became the publisher of a new journal, *Puratchi* (Revolution). In December 1933, both Kannammal and EVR were arrested for an editorial which advocated the destruction of the government. In 1938, in the Anti-Hindi agitation, launched under the leadership of EVR, many women participated and eight of them were arrested in Madras. The women leaders such as Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Narayani Ammaiyar, Thamaraikanni Ammaiyar and Munnagra Azhagiyar addressed meetings and organized conventions as part of Anti-Hindi agitation. A Self Respect women’s convention was held in Madras City in November 1938. Many women were arrested and sent to prison. Later, he started a new party known as Dravida Kazhagam in 1944 at the Salem Conference. EVR as a social reformer played a commendable role in the move towards emancipation of women. The South Indian Reformer, EVR, suggested that “*Women should be given scientific and rational education and they should get the knowledge of world affairs and should have more access to literature and scriptures that remove superstition and fear in their mind*”.  

EVR preached self-respect for the upliftment of women. He lamented that women’s role in family, society and public life is always enjoyed by men but not adequately recognized by men. He went on to say: “*Her image and position in Indian society are linked with patriarchal norms, age old customs and unending traditions. Women are never pictured, treated and respected as an individual in*”

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EVR advocated the widow remarriage which was considered a part of *Suya Mariyathai Thirumanam* (Self-Respect Marriage). He personally solemnized thousands of widow remarriages. He also performed a lot of intercaste marriage, which he thought would help the creation of a casteless society. EVR wrote articles in his newspapers “Kudiarasu” and “Viduthalai”. He made a lot of speeches in favour of widow-remarriage. He stressed the elevation of the status of suppressed section of the society, including women. Among all the different interests which occupied EVR’s attention, very few can be compared with his earnest support to women’s movement. He had organized a number of public meetings through which he spoke for the advancement of women. He viewed that every custom, which affects women, has the silent blessing of religion and any change or reform is considered anti-religious. He was of the view that only education will liberate womenfolk from the clutches of male domination, blind Hindu tradition and customs. His contribution and efforts for the betterment of women were so important that women in Tamil Nadu gave the title “Periyar” in a conference held in Madras. EVR believed that women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society in Tamil Nadu and that the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice.

The prohibition movement was very active in Tamil Nadu and it was especially more prominent in big cities like Madras, Salem, and Madurai. Along with EVR, thousands of women also picketed the liquor shops. Nagammai, Kannammal, V.T.Kamalambal, Rajalakshmi, Rajamani Ammal and many other women in Tamil Nadu were arrested and put in jail for months together. Because of the impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement, women’s participation in the picketing of liquor shops increased its effectiveness. Among the picketeers, Rakal Ammal of Kovilpatti, Ramalakshmi of Tirunelveli, Kamaladevi of Madurai, Janaki Ammal of Udumalpet, Kamalammal of Coimbatore and Anjali Ammal of

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82 Elizabeth Bumiler, *op.cit.*, p.6.
83 Narendra Subramaniam, *op.cit.*, p.102.
Cuddalore were notable. This kind of protest encouraged women to take active part in public life. C.N. Annadurai, one of the favourite disciples of EVR, propagated the thoughts of EVR on women. He himself spoke on the cause of women.

Stand of Dravidian Movement

The reason for taking up the cause of women by Dravidians was their opposition to Brahminism. They believed that Brahmins advocated *varnashrama dharma* and therefore were responsible for the backwardness and deplorable condition of women in Tamil Nadu. They fully opposed the age old Hindu customs which degraded women. In all Self-Respect conferences, an agenda on women issues was included in the proceedings. In 1931, Second Self-Respect Women’s Conference was held in Erode, in which a resolution was passed demanding the appointment of women in police and military departments. Justice Party and Self-Respect League merged and Dravida Kazhagam was formed in 1944 at the Salem conference. The Dravidian Movement entered its third phase in 1949 when some members of this group under the leadership of Annadurai, broke away to pursue a more moderate philosophy and compete for political representation. The birth of DMK in 1949 under the leadership of Annadurai was also the result of the unsuitable marriage of EVR with Maniammai. The DMK blamed that even though many women conferences were conducted by EVR, he married a much younger girl called Maniammai, which went against his own philosophy. Thus the Dravidian Movement has also conceded space for the women activists.

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88 Barneet M. Rose, *op.cit.*, p.76.