INTRODUCTION

Thiru Vi Ka defined feminity as encapsulating patience, endurance, sacrifice, selflessness, beauty and love, and essentialised feminity as motherhood. Denying that feminity is a product of history/culture, he argued that these qualities in a woman were ‘as natural as the combination of sand, water, air and light which ultimately produce the environment...’. He was a social reformer and worshipped the divinity in each woman. He saw motherhood as the centrality of femininity. He wrote against oppression of women and wanted women as mothers, to be given a high status in the society. He argued that man had used woman as the object of his lust and as his maid, and that he had no right to take away the birthrights of women for women were procreators. He said that women of our country had a high status in the past and that women's low status came about later. He spoke of the Purananuru mothers, of women poets and Kannagi and explained that these women were courageous and were worshipped for their chastity.

Women in Tamil Nadu are hailed as Penkal veettin kankal which means "women are the eyes of the home." Although the women in Tamil Nadu enjoy an important position in the home, in other social and political institutions they are treated with certain amount of discrimination, which varies from institution to institution. A woman is always viewed as someone’s sister, daughter, wife, or mother and never as a citizen in her own right who needs to live with dignity and self-respect. Over a period of time, sociologically, women in Tamil Nadu were assigned domestic and reproductive roles. According to a poem, ‘men live by action, but women within the precincts of home by their men’.

Caste system was introduced in the post-Sangam age. Rituals turned marriage into a sacrament and chastity of married women became an obsession. The rise of the bhakti movement resulted in the system of devadasis.

British rule diluted some of the cultural norms impeding equitable status of women. In 1821, the first girls’ school was opened in Chennai. Women were allowed to sit for university exams for the first time in 1897, by the Madras University. An attempt was made to recruit women teachers. However, the percentage of girls enrolled in schools and universities remained very low, although Madras Presidency recorded a higher percentage of enrolment of girls in schools than other provinces.

The social reform movement led by the social reformer ‘Periyar’ E.V. Ramasami Naicker played an important role in the Southern part of India in influencing public perception on marriage customs, widow remarriage, child marriage, sati etc. Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi played an important role in the passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 and the Devadasi Abolition Act (introduced in the assembly in 1927 and enacted in 1947). The Women’s Indian Association in Chennai led by Dr Annie Besant also played a key role in the granting of the right of suffrage to women in 1921 by the Madras Legislative Assembly. Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi became the first woman to sit in the Legislative Council.\(^2\) The social reform movement of the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed emergence of women’s organizations in India. As in the case of Brahma Samaj, in the initial stages, the reputed social organizations had women’s wings in those organizations. This was followed by establishment of exclusive women’s organizations organized by women themselves.

Kamala, wife of Sathyanathan, a Christian by faith was encouraged by her husband to start the Indian Ladies’ Magazine in the year 1901, which published the

\(^2\) TN Human Development Report, Delhi, 2003, p. 94.
achievements of Indian women. Veerammal, who established Tamil Nadu Women’s Welfare Association wrote a number of articles in the newspaper ‘Thondu’ on topics such as duties of married men and women, women’s rights, improvement of the Scheduled Caste women, dowry prohibition etc.

During Post-Independence, with a Constitution and plethora of laws which assured equality of women before law, women played important roles in all the important spheres of human activities such as politics, socio-economic sphere, academics, administration, cultural sphere etc. in India and in particular, in Tamil Nadu. Women in the country made their presence felt in all the important areas of human activity. The nation had a woman as the Prime Minister (Mrs. Indira Gandhi); as the President (Mrs. Pratibha Devisingh Patil); as the Speaker of Lok Sabha (Mrs. Meira Kumar); as the Judge of Supreme Court (Ms. Fatima Biwi: she also served as the Governor of Tamil Nadu) etc. Mrs. Kalpana Chawla, the first woman of Indian origin to reach the space and Mrs. Indira Nooyi who heads the global giant Pepsico are examples of Indian women who are acclaimed globally. The hugging sensation, Mata Amrinta Mayee is giving spiritual solace to lakhs and lakhs of her followers globally. Presently three states/UTs in India have powerful women as Chief Ministers (Ms. J. Jayalalitha, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu; Ms. Mamta Banerji, Chief Minister of West Bengal and Mrs. Sheila Dixit, Chief Minister of NCT Delhi). The fact that the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu is a woman speaks volumes about the success women empowerment movement has achieved in Tamil Nadu.

Equity, empowerment, productivity and sustainability are the four components of human development. Development will remain weak and lopsided as long as women

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are excluded from the development process.\textsuperscript{5} The Millennium Development Goals set by the UN General Assembly in 2000, to be achieved by 2015 had eight goals, one of which is promoting gender equality and empowering women. Composite indices, which include Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) are used for comparing levels of development across countries to reflect gender development, empowerment of women etc.

Conscious and concerted efforts have been undertaken by women’s organizations and successive Governments not only during pre-independence period but also after independence, to improve the lot of women. Can we convincingly claim that the prime object of ensuring equality between males and females has been achieved?

According to Tamil Nadu Human Development Report, 2003, Tamil Nadu’s Human Development Index (HDI) in 2001 was 0.657 as compared to 0.571 for India as a whole. Tamil Nadu fares better than South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh with HDI values of 0.508, 0.463, 0.454 and 0.440 respectively. The Gender Development Index (GDI) for Tamil Nadu is 0.654 as against the all-India value of 0.560 (2002). The districts of Chennai, Kanyakumari, Thoothukudi, Kancheepuram and Coimbatore have better GDI.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Objectives of the study}

Due to efforts of women’s and other organizations like the Self Respect Movement of Periyar, changes have been brought in the socio-economic, educational, cultural and political scenario pertaining to women. A number of important women’s

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
associations, which are the off-shoots of social reform movements fought for the emancipation of women in the State and in the Country.

Although some of the pre-independence movements such as struggle for women suffrage came to an end after the Indian Constitution adopted universal suffrage, women had to continue their fight in the independent India for liberating them from certain socio-religious customs which were stumbling blocks in achieving equality and dignity for women. Women, particularly from weaker sections such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, continue to be victims of social disparities in the independent India. They are subjected to humiliation and violence such as rapes and other forms of sexual exploitations.

This study aims at bringing out historical account of women’s movement and to analyse the progress and development of women from the year 1950 to 2008 AD in Tamil Nadu in historical perspective. For the purpose, the various movements have been studied. The legal and administrative measures taken by the Government is an important indicator to measure the impact of the movements. Such legal and legislative measures taken by the Government have been critically analyzed. The study has also assessed the success of women’s movement of achieving their goal of equality on par with men in the important spheres of human activity.

**Scope**

The area covered by the study is women in modern India i.e, after India became a Republic and up to 2008. Most of the material dependent upon is contemporary like newspapers, reports of study groups, books, journals etc. The area of study is present day Tamil Nadu. The period fixed is from the time India became a Republic. The study is restricted to women’s movement in Tamil Nadu after India became a vibrant
democratic republic. Since the movements in Tamil Nadu were and continue to be influenced by the happenings at National level the present study cannot be done in isolation of the events happening at National level. Therefore, an extensive reference has been made to the happenings at National level.

**Methodology**

As in most historical studies, analytical, descriptive and narrative method have been adopted in the study. An array of records, newspaper reports, books etc have been read and the relevant materials analysed in a critical manner.

**Period of study**

The period of the study is from 1951, the year after India became world’s largest democratic republic, to the year 2008. There is no significance attached for selecting the year 2008 as the cut off year of the study. The period 1951-2008 is a glorious period in the annals of the history of the country as India made huge strides economically and politically during the period.

**Limitation of the study**

Well researched studies and details of records of women and their movement in Tamil Nadu are lacking. Elaborate reports by newspapers of the contribution of the women and the women’s movement in the state are not available. The study is state and gender specific.

**Hypothesis**

During the period of study the women in Tamil Nadu strived hard to liberate themselves from the age old customs which were derogatory to the dignity of women and against the active participation of women in socio-cultural and political institutions. Female foeticide and female infanticide manifest the patriarchal nature of Tamil Nadu
society and its strong preference for male child. With women consequently being given a low status there is a preference of males over females in the society. The women of Scheduled Castes and other Backward classes are subjected to atrocities from men of forward communities. Against all odds, women in Tamil Nadu achieved great heights in politics, public administration, cultural sphere, commerce and industry and in academics. While in areas such as academics women in Tamil Nadu achieved parity in numbers and quality, in certain other areas they are neck in neck with the opposite sex. This is possible because of the movement for the right of women.

**Sources of information**

Primary as well as secondary sources shed light on the women’s movement in Tamil Nadu. Official records, private papers, newspapers and the government records constitute the primary source of information. Next in importance are the official reports on the proceedings of the government of India, the proceedings of the Madras legislature, press statements, the Acts and proclamations of the state and central governments and the gazettes. The administrative reports, state manuals, handbooks, directories and publications prepared by the public and private agencies and journals and souvenirs form the secondary source.

The present study is based upon the records kept preserved in the Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai, Connemara public library Chennai and National Archives, New Delhi. Apart from these, the data found in private papers and information collected through interviewing women participants form a good deal of primary source.

The newspapers furnish variety of information but usually from the view point of reporters. These source collectively yield relevant material for a comprehensive study of the different trends. The published works of different authors also furnish
much information. But many of them are not free from bias as they are not based on historical objectivity, for they were written to advocate one claim or the other or to serve the purpose of propaganda. Caution has been applied for an assessment of distorted statements, interested accusations, false charges and aggregated accounts. However, through the application of criticism of evidences and corroboration of facts, it has been found possible to reconstruct the history of the women’s movement in Tamil Nadu.

**Review of Literature**

Drude Dah Rerup (2007), *Women, Quotas and Politics* Routledge, London. This book deals about the concept of quotas that was applicable to women in politics. Again it refers about the platform for action agreed upon at the Fourth U.N.world conference on women in Beijing in 1995. This platform is influential and women’s movements all over the world have attempted to give women quotas and politics. Beijing platform talks about discriminatory attitudes and practices, and unequal power relations that lead to the under representation of women in arenas of political decision making and discourse of exclusion.

Previously the focus was on women’s lack of resources, or lack of will to participate in politics. Attention is now directed towards those institutional and cultural mechanism of exclusion that prevent women from obtaining equal share of political positions in most political institutions, in the world. Importantly, in this new discourse, the responsibility for promoting change is shifted from the individual woman to those institutions, that are consequently expected to act, to identify and correct the causes of women’s under representation.
This book mentions that minimum level of representation is being challenged by a new discourse of equal representation. Thus, the goal is no longer described as more women in politics, but as equal participation and equitable distribution of power and decision making at all levels. The concept of tokenism, or in India proxy women is often used. The quota women are dependent on their husbands and families and or on their political party, or an autocratic leader both before and after their election.

Kanla Bhasin *Challenges for Women’s Empowerment and Education in South Asia*, deals with empowerment of Human values. Manjeet Bhalia, Deepal, Bhanot Nirmalaya Samanto (2008) *Gender concerns in South Asia, Some perspectives*, Rawat publications, Satyan Apts, Sector 3, Jawhar nagar, Jaipur. This book deals about the gender concerns prevailed in Tamil Nadu as follows: Tamil Nadu is the most patriarchal of communities, as far as the birth of girls is considered. The worst misfortune is that it has matrilineal and matrilocal communities where girls and women are held in very high esteem. It had and has Jayalalitha a woman as the head of state, the overall participation of women in legislative bodies, and in political parties had been and continues to be abysmally low. Women belong to different classes, castes, religions and communities. They have very different roles, status, position and condition. But they all suffer from patriarchal structures and ideologies. Women lag behind their men in all indicators of social and human development. Life expectancy for women is lower than that of men. Women’s health, nutritional and educational levels are significantly lower than that of men. Women are concentrated in low skilled and low paid roles. They get lower wages and income than men and they hardly own and control. A daughter (i.e. woman) is forever homeless. Father’s home is not her’s nor is the husband’s home. She is a home maker but not an owner of homes. She is a farmer, but does not own any land, she grows food, but she has no control over it.
There are some positive changes. But the research done by feminist scholars and activists during the last two decades has shown anti women biases, and effects of the programmes and policies which have almost exclusively been formulated by (elite) men.


The post – Fordist era started in the mid 1950’s and by the early 1960’s it appeared as the dominant paradigm of production relation. In this period, the state becomes as a welfare oriented manage factory / office as the work place, man as the worker / bread winner and woman as the house wife / home maker. The post second world war period is known as house – wifeisation of the female labour – In the post Fordist era, the production extended from big factories to homes and women were recognised as flexible and responsible workers, while male workers were labelled as machos. Historical contexts encouraged transnational feminist networks and their NGO partners to organise women workers and mobilize them for initiating a quiet revolution. Female headed unionists played a crucial role in raising the issues of women workers at national and global forums.

Uma Chakravarti (2008) ‘*Persisting Structures, Ideological Manoeuvres and Every Day Challenges*’. It reflects on Women’s Movement in South Asia. Manjeet Bhatia, Deepal Bhanot, Nirmalaya Samanta *General concerns in South Asia*, Rawat Publications, New Delhi. Uma Chakravarti, the feminist scholar has categorised the women’s movement in the following way:
The women’s movement in India like other movements for transformation of social relations is perforce a movement that has to react to events or social pressures rather than work things out at its own pace. Here the state is only for police and military. Perhaps the women’s movement is uniquely placed to address the complexities of the current economic and social contradictions. It is the only movement today that encompasses and links, such issues as work, wages, environment, ecology, civil rights, sexual oppression, violence, political representation, caste, class, unequal allocations of basic resources, health, militarism and individual and social relationship.

The real challenge before the women’s movement in India today is that it should not only take up gender inequalities in the family, in the community, and in the state, but also inequalities along other lines.

**Chapterization:**

The main objective of the study is to highlight women’s movement in Tamil Nadu. The work is divided into seven chapters, excluding Introduction and Conclusion. In the first chapter, an attempt is made to analyse the historical background of the women’s movement in Tamil Nadu. The nature of the movement, women’s association and their fight for the rights of women are discussed.

The second chapter presents the position of women in the society, condition of the women workers, women’s literacy, public health and women’s participation in politics.

The third chapter is an attempt to highlight the gender specific discrimination and social reforms. It also deals with the position of women in civil services, child marriages, Devadasi system and prostitution, violence against women, female foeticide and property rights. This chapter also discusses about transgender activism.
The fourth chapter is concerned with the individual women’s participation in politics and social institutions. They are Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Anne Besant, Margaret Cousins, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Rukmini Lakshmipathy, Ambujammal, Ammu Swaminathan, Soundram Ramachandran, Sarojini Varadappan, Jayalalitha and other important leaders.

The fifth chapter deals with women’s rights and protection under the law and constitution. This chapter highlights the various laws enacted to protect women’s rights like law related to marriage, and law for reservation of seats in panchayats and municipalities.

Chapter six explains the initiatives of the government for the upliftment of women and various government schemes.

Chapter seven speaks about the movement of scheduled caste women in Tamil Nadu and both the central and state government’s tireless services for their upliftment and to achieving the equality and dignity of life.

In the conclusion all chapters are summarised.