

CHAPTER IV

**THE SELF RESPECT MOVEMENT AND
THE WOMEN'S QUESTION**

In the previous chapters, we have analysed the manner in which the national movement and the autonomous women's organisations addressed the women's question. While the nationalist discourse subordinated the women's question in the name of the nation and tried to contain it within the binaries of 'national'/ 'Western' (or 'colonial'), the autonomous women's organisations did take up a number of important women's issues but were still trapped within the nationalist discourse because of their partial enchantment with nationalism.

In contrast to the nationalists and the autonomous women's organisations, the Self Respect Movement, which came into being as a response to the Brahminical domination in the Tamilnadu Congress, stood opposed to Congress-kind nationalism. Not trapped within or constrained by the discourse of nationalism, the Self Respect Movement was free from the need to look for a past to legitimise the nation as well as to defend tradition as national. This provided the Self Respect Movement with a political space to look at and take up women's issues in an entirely different way compared to the nationalists and the autonomous women's organisations. In this chapter, we shall analyse the Self Respect Movement and the women's question in its discourse.

The chapter is divided into six sections. While the first section introduces in bare elements the Self Respect Movement, the second one

brings together the views of Periyar E.V.Ramasamy Naicker, the founder of the Movement, on women's issues. The third section details the activities of the Self Respect Movement and the nature of women's participation in them. In the fourth section, we analyse the nature of women's consciousness in the Movement. And the fifth section narrates the life story of Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar to illustrate further the role and the consciousness of women activists in the Movement. The final section provides a summary of the conclusions emerging from the previous discussions.

4.1 The Self Respect Movement

Revolting against the Brahminical domination in the Tamilnadu Congress, E.V. Ramasamy Naicker,¹ along with S.Ramanathan, launched the Suyamariathai Iyakkam (Self Respect Movement) in 1926. True to its origins, the Movement outlined its basic principles as: (1) no god, (2) no religion, (3) no Gandhi, (4) no Congress and (5) no Brahmins.² Its actual political agenda, however, did not stop with these five goals, but included in large measure an anti-patriarchal stance too.

1 E.V. Ramasamy Naicker or Periyar, was born in 1879. With very few years of formal education, he started his early life as a merchant and as a temple trustee. Later on, he became the Municipal Council Chairman of Erode. As an ardent Non-Co-operationist, he entered jail in 1921 for picketing toddy shops, and for selling Khadi on the streets of Erode. In 1924, he was elected as the TNCC President, and conducted the famous Vaikom Satyagraha or the temple-entry movement at Vaikom, for which he was twice arrested. In 1925, he started the Tamil weekly Kudi Arasu. After his confrontation with the local Congress leaders at the Conjeevaram Conference, he openly criticised the Congress Party for not evincing interest in the welfare of the non-Brahmins. Finally, in 1927 he left the Congress for good and began the Self Respect Movement. For a detailed life history of Periyar, see Pon. Maran, Dravida Iyakkangalin Varalattru Pinnani, Madurai, 1988; Peraringar Anna, Periyar Oru Sahaptam, Madras, 1987 (10th edition); and A.N. Sattanathan, Tamilnattil Dravida Iyakkamum Adan Parampariyamum, Madras, 1984.

2 Kudi Arasu, 2 May 1925; See also Puratchi, 24 December 1933.

With a world-view inscribed by equality, social justice and human dignity, the Self Respect Movement sought support from the socially and economically backward non-Brahmin communities such as Nadars, Kallars, Agamudayars, Vaniyakula Kshatriyas, Isai Vellalas and Goundars, as well as from the Dalits. Off and on, it also appealed to the religious minorities like the low caste Muslim and Christians for support.³ The mass base of the Movement can be judged, (though we do not have data on membership or mobilisation), from the number of its branches and sub-branches opened in various small villages and towns of Tamil districts. Within a year after the inauguration of the Self Respect Movement, 60 branches were opened in different districts along with several sub-branches in the rural areas around Thanjavur, Coimbatore, Ramnad, Tirunelveli, South Arcot and North Arcot districts.⁴ Within seven years of its inception, the number of branches of the Self Respect Movement expanded to 117 with more than 10,000 members.⁵ In 1928 alone, the three major districts of its support i.e., Thanjavur, Coimbatore and Tirunelveli, together had a membership of 2,500, out a total membership of 4,000.⁶ Apart from this, more than 100 youth organisations, which were affiliated to the Self Respect Movement, sprang up in these areas over the years.

The Movement, as part of its activities, organised annual provincial conferences from which the central committee members and the leadership was elected. Usually these conferences were held like public meetings,

3 E. Sa. Viswanathan, The Political Career of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, Madras, 1983, p. 78.

4 Ibid., p. 91.

5 Kudi Arasu, 9 April 1933.

6 Kudi Arasu, 3 December 1928.

attended by a large number of supporters. For instance, at the Virudunagar Provincial Conference held in 1931, 15,000 people took part in the procession, and it had 5,000 delegates; and also 3,000 women attended the Virudunagar Women's Conference.⁷ In addition to these provincial conferences, there were district and other local level conferences held on similar lines. While conferences were utilised to carry out political campaigns, study circles were organised for members and activists. At Erode, a Suyamariyadai Prachara Bodhanai Koodam (Self Respect Propaganda Study Hall) was organised for such purpose.⁸ Such study circles and other organisational outfits, which carried out propaganda against religion, particularly against Braminical Hinduism, functioned even in small villages and towns like Manapacheri, Paramakudi, Sundarapuram, Kamudi, Ramanayakkampatti, Viralipatti, Pudupatti, Andanar Pettai, Manapparai and so on. As part of its social reform activities, the Movement conducted self respect marriages among various non-Brahmin castes throughout Tamil districts for nearly three decades. As we shall see in detail, self respect marriages denounced Brahmin priests and Brahminical rituals associated with marriages.

The Movement, to propagate its ideas of self respect, launched a weekly, Kudi Arasu (Republic), which was continuously published from 2 May 1925 to 19 November 1933. In 1933, the British Government seized

7 Kudi Arasu, 16 August 1931.

8 Kudi Arasu, 22 July 1928.

Kudi Arasu because of its socialist propaganda and arrested its publishers, E.V.Ramasamy and his sister S.R. Kannammal.⁹

From 26 November 1933, the Movement launched another weekly called Puratchi (Revolution/Revolt) under the editorship of E.V. Krishnaswami (brother of E.V.Ramasamy). Soon Puratchi also had to be discontinued due to harassments by the Government and was substituted by a new daily, Pakutharivu (Rationality), which was started in 1934. Later on, this daily was converted into a weekly and then into a monthly magazine. It was published till 1938. In 1935, Kudi Arasu was revived and once again its publication was terminated in 1940. It was republished from 1943 to 1962. The Movement also ran another weekly called Viduthalai (Liberation), which became a daily newspaper in 1937. Apart from these Tamil newspapers, the Movement also published an English newspaper called Revolt under the editorship of S. Ramanathan. Revolt was published from 1928, for 2 years.

4:2 Periyar E.V.Ramasamy On Women's Issues

After his break with the Congress party in 1925, Periyar began to articulate his views on such institutions of Tamil society like religion, caste hierarchy and patriarchy. Opposing the reformist zeal of his contemporaries

9 S.R. Kannammal, E.V. Ramasamy Naicker's sister, was born in 1891. She took active part in Gandhian Constructive Programmes. In particular, she became the leading activist in the anti-liquor campaign at Erode. At the age of 32, she became the member of Erode Municipality; at the Second Self Respect Conference she was elected as a Provincial Executive Committee Member. She had conducted many widow remarriages. For publishing Kudi Arasu, she was imprisoned for 3 months.

like Gandhi and those of the past like Siddhars and Ramanujan,¹⁰ he called for a total break with the retrograde elements of the Tamil past. Addressing the South Indian Reform Conference in 1928, he said, "...I have gradually lost faith in social reform. For one who believes in radical change, selfrespect, equality and progress, the alternative [to the present situation] is not mere reform; but radical reconstructive work which will destroy the traditional [ancient] structure".¹¹ Here, one may note, Periyar, both in his writings and speeches emphasised the need to give up the past which he characterised as full of obscurantism:

The unnecessary ancient principles of the Tamils... have become useful [only] for deceiving outsiders and to plunge [one self] into foolishness. It has become a duty of the rationalist that such speech [about ancient Tamil principles] should not be evoked for any reform from now on.¹²

He further went on to state, "If several of our 'pandits' do not have rational thinking today, it is because of the obscurantism of the ancient Tamil principles. There is nothing at present to be achieved by the talk of ancient Tamils. Therefore, it is an important duty of the people not to give any place for [such] fraudulent speech".¹³ We can cite several instances of

- 10 Siddhars were iconoclastic mystic poets who represented a movement of revolt against temple worship, casteism and Brahmin priesthood. Their period spanned from 10th to 15 century A.D. Ramanujan was a socio-religious reformer of the 12 century A.D.
- 11 Kudi Arasu, 26 November 1928 (emphasis mine). See also Periyar, Samudaya Seerthirutham, Madras, 1982 (5th edition), p. 4.
- 12 V. Anaimuthu, Periyar E. Ve. Ra Sinthanaigal, Vol II, Trichi, 1974, pp. 1251-52.
- 13 Periyar, Vazkkai Thunai Nalam, Madras, 1977 (4th edition), p.6.

Periyar requesting his comrades to give up the glorification of ancient Tamil society and asking them to think about the present and what has been done in future.¹⁴

This yearning for certain total change marked his position on women's question too. Within the ambience of the Self Respect Movement, he was not content with taking up such conventional themes of women's emancipation like widow-remarriage and women's education, which, even if successful, did not undermine the existing structure of patriarchy; but he questioned basic structures of patriarchy, like the monogamous family and the norms of chastity prescribed for and enforced upon women. Even while advocating women's education, his attempt was to direct it against the structure of patriarchy. He noted, "The quality of education, with the curriculum of cooking, music, tailoring, etc., imparted to women, is to make them efficient wives and mothers. Thus woman's education has been an advertisement to acquire a 'qualified' husband".¹⁵ He argued, women's education should have the aim of providing employment for women and thus making them economically independent.

14 For instance, speaking at a self respect marriage Periyar requested his followers not to cite examples from, evoke the ideology of the ancient Tamil past since they were of no value to the present. See *Ibid.*, p. 5; and Periyar, *Enivarum Ulagam*, Madras, 1987 (10th edition), pp. 3-6. See also Periyar's speech at the marriage between Kantham -Sundaravadivelu; see *Kudi Arasu*, 17 November 1940. During the anti- Hindi agitation when women leaders like Tamaraikanni Ammaiyar glorified the ancient Tamil women, Periyar intervened to remark, "It will be worthwhile if you [women] discuss the present status of women and what can be done about achieving women's liberation, instead of glorifying our grandmothers like Allirani, Kannagi and Madhavi". See *Kudi Arasu*, 27 November 1938.

15 *Kudi Arasu*, 10 January 1948; and 21 September 1946.

The most important idea he had advanced was about marriage and family which he identified as the key institutions sustaining patriarchy. Since marriage resulted in women being enslaved as the property of men, he insisted that marriage as an institution should be abolished. Here, he cited the example of Soviet Russia, where, according to him, the concepts of marriage and family as institutions had been already replaced by “free love” because of the abolition of private property.¹⁶ Speaking in a women’s meeting at Victoria Hall, Madras, in 1948, Periyar likened marriage to slavery:

The concept of husband-wife relationship has been one of master-slave relationship. The essential philosophy of marriage has been to insist on women’s slavery...Why should human beings alone keep such contract of one-man-one-woman relationship... until women are liberated from such marriages and from men, our country cannot attain independence.¹⁷

Despite his overall disapproval of marriage as an institution, he accepted as a stop-gap arrangement certain kinds of marriage which transcended the traditionally accepted norms for women. He characterised such self respect marriages as Vazkkai Oppandam, a contract between a man and a woman who were compatible and shared equal love and

16 Periyar, Suyamariyadai Thirumanam Yean?, Madras, 1987, 4th edition, p. 8. See also Kudi Arasu, 13 December 1936; 29 September 1940; and 24 November 1945.

17 Viduthalai, 11 October 1948.

companionship.¹⁸ According to him, the central aim of the self respect marriage was to accept and provide equal freedom for women in married life.¹⁹ In this context, he opposed all ritualistic practices associated with marriages, which emphasised woman's subordination, including the tying of tali by the bridegroom which he treated as a symbol of women's subjugation to men. He also opposed arranged marriages and advocated that men and women should choose their partners at their own free will.²⁰

The notion of women's chastity, which sustained monogamous family, was also subjected to trenchant criticism by him. In one of his pamphlets, entitled Penn Yean Adimaiyanal? (Why Did Woman Become Enslaved?) which was initially written as a series of articles in 1928, he noted, "The imposition of pativratha qualities on woman has destroyed their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves [to men] who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity".²¹ He also attacked classical Tamil literary texts such as Silapathikaram and Thirukural for preaching chastity as a necessary quality for women.²² He repeatedly criticised Silapathikaram for being contemptuous of women and

18 Periyar (1987), op. cit., p. 7.

19 Periyar (1977), op. cit., p. 44. See also Puratchi, 17 June 1934; V. Anaimuthu (1974), op. cit., pp. 184- 198. Periyar constantly spoke and wrote about the concept of marriage. For instance, see Pakutharivu, 7 October 1934; Kudi Arasu, 6 June 1935; 21 September 1946; 29 September 1940; 24 November 1940; and 10 January 1948; and Viduthalai, 14 December 1944; 29 February 1948; and 24 October 1948.

20 Periyar had delivered numerous speeches and had written extensively in the party newspapers, expressing the above views. To cite only some of his writings and speeches, Periyar (1977), op. cit., pp 20-28; Periyar (1987), op. cit., pp. 6-9; Periyar, Penn yean Adimaiyanal?, Erode, 1942, pp. 34-38; Kudi Arasu, 22 December 1929; 20 September 1931; 29 September 1940; 17 November 1940; and 24 November 1945; and Pakutharivu, 11 April 1936.

21 Periyar (1942), op. cit., pp. 11-16. See also Periyar (1982), op. cit., p. 19.

22 Periyar (1942), Ibid., pp. 16-25.

characterised it as a text "which began in prostitution, grew in 'chastity' and ended up in foolishness and superstition".²³ He further wrote, "The manner in which women were oppressed in Kovalan Kathai [Silapathikaram] is extremely bad...In it, a separate moral is given for women and [a separate one] for men...[It was] written so badly as to degrade women".²⁴ Similarly, he attacked Thirukural, despite his qualified approval of it, for its emphasis on the slavery of women through the glorification of chastity and posed, "Would Thiruvalluvar have written these...if he were a woman instead of a man?"²⁵

As opposed to norms of chastity and monogamy for women, Periyar suggested polyandry and divorce as solutions for women's oppression. In speeches delivered at various places he argued, "Divorce is a protective instrument in the hands of many oppressed women. Along with Divorce Act, there should be a provision for compulsory registration of all marriages".²⁶

According to Periyar, while marriage and chastity were key patriarchal institutions, patriarchy as such was ubiquitous, pervading spheres such as language, literature and gender based socialisation. In his writings about women's oppression and in his speeches at self respect conferences, he noted with contempt that the Tamil language did not have

23 Periyar, Arivu Virunthu, Madras, 1983 (5th edition), p. 28.

24 Periyar (1977), op. cit., pp. 40-41.

25 Periyar (1942), op. cit., p. 16.

26 Kudi Arasu, 16 July 1935. See also Kudi Arasu, 26 December 1929; and Viduthalai, 24 October 1948.

words for the male counterpart of adultress and widow.²⁷ He invented the neologism Vidavan for widower and Vibacharan for those men who go to prostitutes, and suggested their popular use. He also noted that several words were used in Tamil literature and in daily life in derogation of women, such as Aanmai (masculinity):

Women should not forget that the word aanmai [masculinity] itself is used in derogation to women...As long as aanmai will exist, women's slavery will only grow. It is definite that the emancipation of women will not materialise till women themselves destroy the philosophy of aanmai...Freedom, valour and such qualities are made the right of men. Men have decided that these [qualities] belong only to 'masculinity'.²⁸

The Tamil language, in his opinion was 'barbaric' as it did not have "respectable words for women."²⁹ Delivering a speech at Tiruppattur in 1946, Periyar strongly criticised Tamil literature for describing woman's bodily features at length and ignoring their intellectual faculties. He argued that unless women opposed such a projection of their image in literature, neither literary traditions nor their own status would change.³⁰

In his political campaigns, he insisted that parents should bring up their daughters in the same manner as their sons, not discriminating even in such matters as the names given to them and the dresses worn, and they should be trained in sports such as boxing which are conventionally designated as men's monopoly.³¹

27 Kudi Arasu, 26 October 1930; and 21 September 1930. See also Periyar (1942), op. cit., pp. 46, 16, and 52-53.

28 Periyar (1942), op. cit., p. 84. See also Kudi Arasu, 12 August 1928.

29 Charles Ryerson, Regionalism and Religion, The Tamil Renaissance and Popular Hinduism, Madras, 1988, p. 100.

30 Kudi Arasu, 21 September 1946; See also Periyar (1977), op. cit., p. 34.

31 Periyar (1987), op. cit., pp. 11-12.

Apart from attacking the institutions of patriarchy and condemning its ubiquitous nature, Periyar also underlined its relationship with control of property. In his words,

When people were totally free without landed property, I do not think there were these slavish practices of women's oppression and compulsory marriage contracts. When there was no concept of accumulating private property...there could not have been any compulsion for acquiring heir for family property through child birth. Only when the desire for private property came into practice; the concept of marriage and imprisoning women to protect the family property also came into practice. Once a woman was made the guardian of man's property, she herself became his property to produce heir for the family...Women lost their right [even] to worship their gods but only their husbands. The private property which has been the main reason for women's oppression has to be totally destroyed in order to achieve women's liberation.³²

In the context of Periyar's view that private property with its need to have inheritors gave rise to women's subjection within family, his advocacy of birth control assumes significance. In 1936, the Self Respect Movement brought out a volume containing 35 translated articles on the necessity of contraception with a foreword by Periyar.³³ Arguing that women should have the right to decide whether to have children or not, he differentiated his position from the other advocates of birth control. By focussing attention on women's choice, he argued, "There is a fundamental difference between our insistence on birth control and other's notion of birth-control...They have only thought about family, women's health and the nation's economy through means of contraception. But we say

32 Viduthalai, 11 October 1948 (emphasis mine). See also Kudi Arasu, 22 July 1930.

33 Periyar (ed.), Karpa Aatchi Allathu Pillai Petrai Adaki Alluthal, Madras, 1936.

contraception is essential for women to be free and autonomous".³⁴ He not only disagreed with Muthulakshmi Reddy for her anti-birth control stand, but emphasised the urgency of birth control propaganda as more important than anti-liquor and leprosy eradication campaigns.³⁵ For the propagations of birth control methods, he demanded that the Government must set up an institution or clinics; and during Self Respect Marriages, he requested the couples not to have any child for a minimum of five years from the day of marriage.³⁶

Periyar's trenchant criticism of Hinduism was also largely influenced by its role in legitimising patriarchy.³⁷ While addressing a women's audience, he reminded them that the varnashrama dharma and Hindu religion had treated them only as *dasis* (prostitutes) of gods who, in turn, tested only women's chastity and not that of men. Ridiculing bigamous gods, he said, "Sisters, you should never perform any rituals to Gods who keep two wives and concubines. You must ask the god why he needs two wives and why does he need a marriage every year? How could you worship stones as gods and fall at the feet of Brahmin priests who have legitimised your

34 Kudi Arasu, 14 December 1930. See also Kudi Arasu, 1 March 1931; 6 April 1930; and 12 August 1928.

35 Periyar (1942), op. cit., pp. 77-78.

36 Periyar (1987), op. cit., pp. 15-16. Interestingly, his political ally, the Justice party, strongly opposed his stand on contraception. See Periyar, (1977), op. cit., pp. 48-49; and V. Anaimuthu (1974), op. cit., pp. 106, and 155-159.

37 Kudi Arasu, 22 December 1929. Here one may note that the Justice party leaders vehemently opposed Periyar's views on Hinduism and criticised him for including atheism as part of the programme of the non-Brahmin Movement. For instance, the Raja of Bobbili, speaking at the South Indian Liberal Federation in 1934, claimed that the aim of the non-Brahmin Confederation should be to bring back the ancient glory of Hinduism. And Shanmugam Chetti, another Justice party leader claimed that the Self Respect Movement had been mainly directed towards destroying belief in the existence of God and demolishing the Hindu religion. He further warned that they should not use the non-Brahmin platform of the South Indian Liberal Federation to this end. See Indian Annual Register, July-December 1934; and Jan- June 1945.

slavery through religion and rituals?"³⁸

The same ideological complex informed Periyar's interventions in the debates on social legislations for women. Periyar not only welcomed the marriage legislations, but also condemned orthodox religious leaders and even the Justice party, which was his political ally, for opposing the legislations.³⁹ He condemned and mocked at M.K. Acharya, the religious leader cum Legislative Council member, for declaring women, who supported the post-pubertal marriages as unchaste and loose in their morals. In questioning Acharya, Periyar stated that he would have tolerated these vulgar comments on women if Acharya represented only the Brahmins in the Legislative Council, instead of representing people in general. He further remarked that Acharya's statements against the Sarada Act was reflective of degenerate Brahminism and Hinduism: "Since Hinduism, Vedic and Puranic religious practices, ancient traditions and the varnashrama dharma are based on oppressing and ridiculing women, it was not a surprise to hear the same from the follower of above practices".⁴⁰ While both the supporters and opposers of marriage legislations comfortably quoted Hindu Shastras and ancient customs and rituals, Periyar questioned the authority of these practices and rules which, according to him, were invented by men for their own selfish motives, and against women to legitimise their rule over women. He asked, "How can one consider these partial shastras and rules as authorities in defining one's present day marital

38 Kudi Arasu, 5 July 1948.

39 Kudi Arasu, 16 June 1935; and Viduthalaj, 4 September 1946.

40 Kudi Arasu, 23 September 1928.

practices?"⁴¹ According to him the Hindu law itself was based on Manu Smiriti which controlled and oppressed women; unless this Hindu law was totally reversed or changed, women would not attain freedom. In this context, for him, the divorce legislation was a step forward to destroy the Hindu law, since the divorce legislation would reverse the legal position of women.⁴² Countering the conservatives' argument that the divorce right for women would destabilise family and perpetuate polygamy, Periyar argued that because of no provision for divorce within the Hindu law, prostitution and polygamy had become accepted practices. He advised women not to depend on the Legislative Council for the implementation of divorce bill since it was dominated by men, but to launch mass agitations in support of the bill.⁴³ Periyar, who strongly advocated inter-caste marriages and marriages of consent, objected to the two different age limits fixed for sexual intercourse, i.e., one within the marriage and the other outside the marriage. According to him, the inter-caste marriages and marriages of consent were not admitted in society as marriages and thus those who went through these marriages would have to accept the age of consent for sexual intercourse as 18 years, while for others it was 16 years. For him, this was a discrimination against inter-caste marriages. In 1947, when Thakur Das Bhargava brought an amendment to the Age of Consent Bill, Periyar criticised it since it relied on varnashrama dharma practices and shastras.⁴⁴

41 Periyar (1977), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

42 Viduthalai, 4 September 1946.

43 Periyar (1942), *op. cit.*, pp. 34-38.

44 Kudi Arasu, 13 December 1947.

Periyar's strong commitment to the cause of women's emancipation often led him to be critical of his own political comrades. In anguish, he noted, "The self proclaimed liberators of women, the Dravidian intellectuals have kept their daughters, sisters and mothers as mere decorative pieces at home."⁴⁵ He openly condemned the Justice party ministry, despite his general support to it, for its attitude towards women's question and its failure to effectively implement the Child Marriage Restraint Act. Periyar demanded the resignation of A.P. Patro and other Justice party ministers from the party as they failed to enact any legislation to improve the condition of women.⁴⁶

He also expressed his shock over the Justice party's tirade against women who supported the divorce bill. When the Justice, the journal of the Justice party, condemned women and women's organisation for supporting the divorce bill, Periyar declared that Justice party was an anti-women organisation, and that he was embarrassed and ashamed to consider that party as an organisation for the non- Brahmins.⁴⁷

In his personal life too he was self-critical about his inability to practice his preachings and writings on women's freedom. Writing an emotion-laden obituary of his wife Nagammal, in Kudi Arasu, he noted, "I

45 Kudi Arasu, 21 September 1946; See also, Periyar (1942) op. cit., p. 62; and Periyar (1977), op. cit., pp. 35-38.

46 Kudi Arasu, 23 September 1928; and 29 December 1929.

47 Kudi Arasu, 29 December 1929.

am ashamed to state here that I had not practised even one hundredth of what I wrote and preached about women's emancipation, at home with Nagammal".⁴⁸

Periyar's views on women's question found practical expressions in the activities of the Self Respect Movement. The Movement, *inter alia*, practised self respect marriages, organised women's conferences to raise their consciousness and to highlight their problems, and involved women in mass agitations.

4.3: Women and the Activities of the Self Respect Movement

One of the important activities of the Self Respect Movement which challenged the traditional Hindu marriage and introduced radical changes in it was the conducting of self respect marriages. Such marriages were conducted from 1928 onwards among various non-Brahmin castes. These marriages, which took place even in remote villages and were regularly reported in Kudi Arasu, included inter-caste marriages, widow-remarriages and marriages of consent.

The central aim of self respect marriages was to free the institution of marriage from Hindu rituals, which emphasised monogamous familial

48 Kudi Arasu, 14 May 1933.

norms and chastity for women and thus legitimised patriarchy.⁴⁹ Accordingly, these marriages were conducted without Brahmin priests and recitation of religious texts. More significantly, they did away with the tying of the tali. In keeping with the rationalistic content of the Self Respect Movement, often these marriages were arranged in times which were treated as inauspicious by the Hindu calendar (Rahu kalam) and some of the marriages took place at midnight,⁵⁰ which is generally considered to be inauspicious. All these challenged and subverted the religious aura that entrapped the institution of marriage.

We shall give below three such marriages as illustrations to show how the Movement refused to treat marriages as a personal affair and converted them into spectacular political events aimed at breaking the traditional norms of patriarchy.

1) The self respect marriage between Sivagami, a young widow belonging to an orthodox Hindu family from Thanjavur district, and Sami Chidambaranar, a Tamil scholar and a dedicated activist of the Movement, took place in 1930. Though Sivagami had given her full consent to marry Chidambaranar, there was stubborn opposition for the marriage from both the families. This forced Periyar to shift the venue of the marriage from

49 We come across one self respect marriage in which the couple were Muslims. Hajurulla Mohaideen married Kameeja Begum in 1936 without any religious rites and the bride did not wear the customary pardah during the marriage. See Kudi Arasu, 16 February 1936.

50 Sami Chidambaranar, Tamilar Thalaivar, Madras, 1983 (8th edition), pp. 118-119.

Kumbakonam, the town from which Sivagami hailed, to Erode, Periyar's own native town well known for trading activities.⁵¹ The marriage, which was presided over by E.V.R. Nagammal, did not have any of the rituals of traditional Hindu marriages, including the tying of tali. Speaking at the marriage, Nagammal explained how tali and other rituals associated with Hindu marriages symbolised the slavery of women to men. The couple exchanged rings, took an oath which emphasised friendship and equality between them, and addressed each other as comrades and friends instead of the usual 'husband' and 'wife'. And, as if to highlight the political dimension of the marriage, it was arranged in the venue of the second Self Respect Conference itself. In the evening, to propagate the need for widow remarriages and self respect marriages, the married couple were taken out in a procession in the streets of Erode by the Self Respect Movement activists. People indeed gathered in large numbers along the route of the procession to watch the iconoclastic couple.⁵²

2) The marriage between Kamalambal and Nallasivan which took place in the same year at Nagerkoil near Kanyakumari, generated lot of tension among the members of the Saliar caste, who were traditional handloom weavers. It was a marriage between a widow and a widower, each

51 Interview with Sivagami Chidambaranar, Madras, 5 April 1989. Sivagami was born in 1909 and she had formal education upto 8th standard. Her father, a cloth merchant, was also a Magistrate at Kumbakonam. Her first marriage to a mill owner took place when she was barely eleven years old. Within six months after the marriage she became a widow. Her second marriage with Chidambaranar took place when she was 26 years old and it was an inter-caste marriage. In 1929, she became a member of Self Respect Movement and began contributing articles to Kudi Arasu and Pakutharivu.

52 Kudi Arasu, 11 May 1930.

of them having a child from their previous marriages.⁵³ The marriage was conducted by Periyar and Nagai Kaliyappan⁵⁴ in a cinema Hall. In the course of the marriage, the bridegroom transferred Rs.5,000 worth of his property to the bride in consonance with the Self Respect Movement's ideal that women should have equal property right as men. About 2,500 people visited the venue of the marriage to witness the unusual event. While Periyar extolled the virtues of such marriages, A. Ponnambalam and M.Maragadavalli⁵⁵ sang songs of the Self Respect Movement. Pamphlets dealing with the theme of self respect marriage were distributed to the participants.

3.The self respect marriage between two activists of the Movement, S. Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam, took place at Pallathur in Ramanathapuram district in 1930. The marriage was attended by about 2,000 male and 500 women activists of the Movement. In addition, about 100 local people also participated in it.⁵⁶ Interestingly, as part of this wedding, the audience were allowed and encouraged to ask questions about man-woman relation marriage, women's emancipation, etc. One of the participants asked Periyar why the Self Respect Movement allowed a second marriage. Periyar responded that marriages could only be tentative arrangements between men and women and they should not be treated as eternal.

53 Kudi Arasu, 14 September 1930.

54 Nagai Kalliappan was one of the leading propagandists of the Movement who travelled to Burma and Malaysia to propagate the Movement's ideals among the overseas Tamils. He began his early life as a railway worker and was arrested for participating in the Nagapatnam railway strike of 1928. Interview with Nagai Kalliappan, Trichi, 8 January 1989.

55 A. Ponnambalanar was a prominent intellectual who wrote frequently in Kudi Arasu. He himself had a self respect marriage with a divorcee, Sulochana. M. Maragadavalli, a widow who married So. Murugappa, was the editor of the journal Madhar Marumanam (Widow Remarriage).

56 S.A.K.K. Raju, Neelavathi Ramasubramaniam Vazkkai Varalaru, Trichi, 1983, pp. 14-57.

He further said that men and women should have equal right to marry anyone of their preference even after having first marriage, and divorce should be permitted.⁵⁷ To conduct this inter-caste marriage in 1930, the Movement had to organise a protection committee to guard against the possible disruption by the groom's castemen, and, as expected, they turned up in large numbers at the venue of the marriage and created trouble. To protect the couple from their anger, Periyar took them to Erode and kept them as his guests for sometime.⁵⁸

There were many such marriages which were organised by the Self Respect Movement under severe social constraints and opposition. Men and women who underwent these marriages had to encounter a hostile society and relatives. For instance, the marriage between Kuthusi Gurusami, a Thondaimandala Mudaliar (an upper caste) and Kunchidam, who belonged to the much despised Isai Vellala caste, a caste from which devadasis were drawn, was conducted in 1929 at Erode. This inter-caste marriage was bitterly opposed by the groom's family and his relatives performed religious rites to mark him as dead while he was still alive. His outcaste status and different kinds of humiliations at the hands of his relatives and caste people continued for years. Speaking at the marriage, Periyar mentioned, "From the time the news about the inter-caste marriage of Gurusamy came out, the hardships [he had to face] were unmentionable".⁵⁹ Incidentally, few hours before the marriage, Gurusamy was falsely informed by his brother-in-law

57 Kudi Arasu, 12 October 1930.

58 S.A.K.K. Raju, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

59 Kudi Arasu, 15 December 1929.

that his sister was dead, hoping that at least such a play on emotions would stop the marriage. But the marriage did take place.⁶⁰

The above instances, which were among the several marriages reported in the pages of Kudi Arasu, give an idea of how the Self Respect Movement politicised marriages and used them as public events to propagate views on the women's question. That was why marriage venues were decorated with the symbols and slogans of the Movement. For instance, the self respect marriage venue in a small village near Cuddalore in 1928 had welcome arches bearing slogans like "Long live Self Respect Movement" and "Long Live Vaikom Veerar".⁶¹ The walls inside the marriage hall were adorned with large posters explaining the objectives and activities of the Movement. To propagate the idea of these marriages the Movement also brought out calendars and posters carrying the-portraits of self respect couples.⁶²

Invariably, all these marriages, whether they were held at the house of Marimuthu belonging to the lowly cobbler caste⁶³ or a political elite like

60 Kurivikarambai Velu, Kuthoosi Gurusami, Madras, 1975, pp. 70- 79.

61 Kudi Arasu, 22 December 1928. Periyar was called Vaikom Veerar because of his leadership in the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924.

62 Mailai Seeni Venkatasami, 'Sirappurai' in Kurivikarambai Velu, op. cit., p xiv; and Anita Diehl, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy: A Study of the influence of a personality in contemporary South India, Bombay, 1978, p. 22.

63 The self respect marriage between Marimuthu and Thaiyammal took place on 20 April 1930 at Coimbatore. See Kudi Arasu, 27 April 1930.

W.P.A. Soundara Pandian,⁶⁴ were attended and addressed by activists of the Movement, especially by women activists. They spoke on these occasions on themes relating to women's emancipation and demanded legislative protection of women's rights.⁶⁵ In an effort to popularise such marriages, Periyar personally attended most of the marriages during the early days of the Movement, even if they took place in remote villages.⁶⁶

During the three decades of its career, the Self Respect Movement organised several thousands self respect marriages in the Tamil speaking areas. At a self respect conference, T.S. Kunchidam, one of the women activists claimed that every year about 2,500 to 3,000 Self Respect marriages were conducted.⁶⁷ Between 1929 and 1932 alone, about 8,000 such marriages took place.⁶⁸

The Movement also supported and organised various associations like the Tamilnadu Priest Boycott Association, Tamilnadu Widow Remarriage Association (Vidhwa Vivaha Sabha), etc., to assist men and women who came forward to have inter-caste marriages, widow-remarriages, and marriage with devadasis.⁶⁹ A close associate of Periyar, Ramanathan claimed that the widow-remarriages conducted by the Movement would run

64 W.P.A. Soundara Pandian, one of the leading activists in the Movement during the 1930s, conducted widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages among the Nadars.

65 For instance, see Kudi Arasu, 25 December 1932.

66 Sami Chidambaranar, op. cit., p. 323.

67 Kudi Arasu, 26 June 1932.

68 E.Sa. Visswanathan, op. cit., p. 99. M. Singaravelu, while appreciating and acknowledging the contribution made by Self Respect Movement for the spread of inter caste marriage, noted, "Even though our Self Respect Movement has been condemning caste system and organising inter-caste marriages for the past five years, all these marriages are taking place only among the petty bourgeois or semi-capitalists, not among the lower or poor classes". See Kudi Arasu, 17 January 1937.

69 Kudi Arasu, 8 February 1931.

into many thousands.⁷⁰

While some of the participants in these marriages viewed women's emancipation as the aim of these marriages, there were others who treated them merely as against Brahmin domination and they used these marriages to dispense with Brahmin priests and Sanskritic scriptures. An exasperated Periyar, addressing a marriage in 1931, objected to calling every anti-priest anti-ritual marriage as self respect marriage, and said that, with time, one of the objectives of the Movement should be to do away with marriages themselves.⁷¹ Then, freeing marriages from rituals themselves was no doubt a step ahead.

Another important aspect of the Self Respect Movement was the numerous conferences it organised. These conferences, which were periodically organised at the provincial, district and taluk levels, were characterised by slogan-chanting processions, long speeches aimed at propagating the ideology of the Movement and passing of resolutions on various social and political themes. The Self Respect Movement used these conferences as a regular political site to take up women's issues and to encourage women's political participation. These conferences were attended by women in large numbers. For instance, as we have mentioned earlier, at the Virudunagar Provincial Self Respect Conference held in 1931 around 3,000 women participated.⁷²

70 E.Sa. Visswanathan, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

71 Kudi Arasu, 21 June 1931; and 5 July 1931.

72 Kudi Arasu, 16 August 1931.

The first Provincial Self Respect Conference was held at Chengelpet, near Madras, in 1929.⁷³ Apart from articulating its views on themes like Simon Commission, caste oppression and religious institutions, the conference dealt specifically with “marriage and other rituals”. One of its resolutions demanded the raising of the marriageable age for women to 16 years and the right to divorce along with equal right for women on property. The second Provincial Self Respect Conference, which was held in 1930 at Erode, demanded a proper divorce legislation. It also demanded the implementation of Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act and opening up of vigilance home for the freed prostitutes.⁷⁴ Within the ambience of this conference, two other conferences were organised: a youth conference and a women’s conference. The fact that there was a separate conference for women did not come in the way of the general conference and the youth conference taking up women’s issues. The Erode Youth Conference, for example, appealed to young men to come forward and marry widows and devadasis who were willing to marry.⁷⁵ In 1931, the Virudunagar Third Self Respect Youth Conference passed resolutions demanding equality for women in all spheres of life. It also requested the government to open birth control clinics to propagate contraception, since child birth had been of great hindrance for women’s freedom and their intellectual activities.⁷⁶ Almost all the general conferences underlined the importance of property rights for women.

73 K. Veeramani, ed., Namadu Kurikkol, Madras, 1982, pp. 5-12. See also Sami Chidambaranar, op. cit., p. 115.

74 K. Veeramani, Ibid., pp. 16-21; and Sami Chidambaranar, Ibid., p. 136.

75 K. Veeramani, Ibid., p. 17.

76 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

The South Indian Social Reform Conference organised by the Movement emphasised equal property right for all women and particularly for widows.⁷⁷ The Movement viewed that property right for women would enable them to struggle for all other rights. The Tuticorin Self Respect Conference held in 1931, passed resolutions demanding birth control and the property right for women.⁷⁸ The Chettinad Self Respect Conference demanded of the government to set up an enquiry committee to probe into the property rights of Hindu women to bring about an effective legislation to provide equal property rights for women.⁷⁹ Similarly, the Tirunelveli District Self Respect Conference promptly welcomed Deshmukh's Hindu Women's Property Right Bill.⁸⁰ Even when the movement became a full-fledged party in 1944, resolutions such as demanding property for women were passed.⁸¹

The Self Respect Movement not only took up women's issues as one of its central concerns, but also provided great impetus for women to participate in all its forums and activities. For instance, as we have noted earlier the movement organised special women's conferences within the ambience of its general conferences. In the context of organising separate women's conferences, one may note that Periyar passionately believed that women's emancipation would be possible only by the efforts of women

77 Periyar (1982), *op. cit.*, p. 45.

78 Kudi Arasu, 12 April 1931

79 Swadesamitran, 15 April 1931.

80 Kudi Arasu, 14 February 1937. The Conference also condemned the select committee's decision (appointed to probe into Deshmukh's property rights bill) to recommend property right only for widows and not for women in general.

81 Kudi Arasu, 19 August 1944.

themselves, and was sceptical of man's advocacy of women's emancipation: "As of now men's struggle for women's liberation has only strengthened women's enslavement".⁸² The proceedings of the women's conferences were fully conducted by women activists themselves. Lakshmi Ammal delivered the inaugural speech at the Erode Self Respect Women's Conference in 1930. The Conference demanded, inter alia, compulsory education for girls upto the age of 16, effective and immediate implementation of Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Divorce Act, equal property right for women, speedy implementation of the Devadasi Abolition Bill, election of women representatives to all public bodies such as legislatures, corporations and municipalities.⁸³

At Virudunagar, during the Second Self Respect Women's Conference, Indrani Balasubramaniam⁸⁴ delivered the much honoured presidential address. In this conference, organised in Virudunagar in 1931, resolutions in support of birth control were passed. It also argued that

82 Sami Chidambaranar, op. cit., p. 218.

83 Kudi Arasu, 4 May 1930.

84 Apart from this conference, Indrani Balasubramaniam also presided over Madras Self Respect Movement Volunteers Conference in 1931; she was sent as the Movement's Propaganda Secretary to Burma in 1932; in 1936, she contested the North Arcot District election against the Congress candidate.

women should not only be recruited for professions like teaching and medicine, but also be inducted into army and police; the conference called for powers to be delegated to the local magistrates to identify those temples which encouraged devadasi system.⁸⁵ Many other women activists like Trichi Neelavathi, Sivagami, Kunchidam Gurusamy, Maragadavalli and Nagammaiyar spoke in support of these resolutions. In the same year, at the Madras Self Respect Women's Conference, while Girija Devi delivered the inaugural address, G.A. Annapurani⁸⁶ presided over it and delivered the presidential address.⁸⁷ In 1932, Trichi Neelavathi⁸⁸ delivered the presidential address at the Salem District Women's Self Respect Conference, and R. Annapurani inaugurated it.⁸⁹ In 1933, C.D.N. Chidambaram Ammal⁹⁰ delivered the presidential address at the Coimbatore District Women's Conference.⁹¹ In 1938, Tamilnadu Women's Conference was convened at Madras, which was inaugurated by V.B. Tamaraianni Ammaiyar.⁹² It was this conference which bestowed the honorific title Periyar (The Great One) on E.V. Ramasamy "for his

85 K. Vecramani, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26; Kudi Arasu, 16 August 1931.

86 G.A. Annapurani, daughter of G. Appadurai the editor of Tamilnadu, had inaugurated the Thiruchengodu Taluk Adi Dravida Conference in 1934 and the Salem District Self Respect Women's Conference held in 1932; she also attended the Self Respect Worker's Meeting in the same year as a member delegate, to form the Samadharma Party.

87 Kudi Arasu, 10 January 1932.

88 Trichi Neelavathi also known as Neelavathi Ramasubramaniam was born in 1913 at Trichi; in 1930 she married Ramasubramaniam in a self respect marriage. From 1925, she constantly wrote in Kudi Arasu on issues related to women. In 1931, at the Virudunagar Third Provincial Conference, she was elected as the woman leader from Trichi. In 1932, she attended the Samadharma Party meeting as a member delegate. In 1933 she inaugurated the Thanjavur District Third Self Respect Conference and the Ramanathapuram District Youth conference.

89 Kudi Arasu, 22 May 1932.

90 C.D.N. Chidambaram Ammal was married to the leading self respect activist C.D. Nayagam.

91 Puratchi, 10 December 1933.

92 V.B. Tamaraianni Ammaiyar was also a novelist and she was arrested for participation in the anti-Hindi agitation.

unparalleled activism to transform the South Indian Society".⁹³ The title became the short-hand for his name all through his life and after.

While special women's conferences provided an exclusive space for women activists of the Self Respect Movement to articulate themselves on women's issues, their participation in general conferences was also substantial. That is women were not 'ghettoised' within the Movement. Often the much honoured role of delivering the inaugural addresses of the general conferences fell on the shoulders of women activists. To cite a few instances; in 1931, Indrani Balasubramaniam inaugurated the Third Self Respect Conference at Virudunagar⁹⁴; in 1932, T.S. Kunchidam inaugurated the Thanjavur district Self Respect Conference⁹⁵; in 1933, Trichi Neelavathi inaugurated the Ramanathapuram District Third Self Respect Youth Conference⁹⁶; in 1934, R. Annapurani inaugurated the Tiruchengodu Taluk Adi Dravida Conference⁹⁷; in 1937, Meenambal Sivaraj presided over the Tirunelveli District Third Adi Dravida Conference⁹⁸; in 1938, the Madurai Self Respect Conference was inaugurated by Rajammal,⁹⁹ and in 1944, Kanagammaiyar Ramasamy inaugurated the Madras Fifth Self Respect Conference.¹⁰⁰ In the course of the inaugural addresses, these

93 Kudi Arasu, 28 December 1938.

94 Kudi Arasu, 16 August 1931.

95 T.S. Kunchidam, who was educated upto B.A and L.T, was a school teacher. She married the Self Respect Movement activist Gurusamy. In her long association with the Movement she presided over the Madurai Ramanathapuram Youth Conference in 1930; inaugurated Ramanathapuram District Third Self Respect Conference in 1934; presided over the Virudunagar Women's Association meeting in 1936; and inaugurated the Kumbakonam Isai Vellalar Sangam's Sixth Annual Meeting in 1944.

96 Kudi Arasu, 26 June 1932; and 9 April 1933.

97 Kudi Arasu, 10 December 1934; and 27 May 1934.

98 Kudi Arasu, 7 February 1937.

99 Kudi Arasu, 20 March 1938.

100 Kudi Arasu, 12 August 1934.

women speakers discussed various aspects of the women's question.

Some leading women activists were elected to the Central Council of the Organising Committee, through the conference every year. For instance, at the Third Provincial Conference in Virudunagar in 1931, Indrani Balasubramaniam was elected as council member. When the Samadharma Party (The Socialist Party, started by Periyar along with M. Singaravelu Chettiyar in 1932) conference was held at Erode in 1933, S. Neelavathi and K. Kunchidam were elected as propaganda secretaries to establish the Self Respect League in villages. Few other women activists like R. Annapurani and Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal were chosen as district and inter-district samadharma propagandists.¹⁰¹ In 1945, Ramamirtham Ammal and Dr. S. Dharmambal were nominated as members of the Central Executive Committees of Thanjavur and Madras district units of the Dravidar Kazhagam, respectively.¹⁰² This participation was in a sense the result of Periyar's effort to break the culture of silence which characterised the women activists of the Movement. He insisted that even the most inarticulate women activists should utter at least a few words in the women's conferences.¹⁰³ The success of these self respect conferences in

101 Under Secretary's Safe Secret File, 16 October 1934, Appendix B, H, pp. 20, 45-48. The Samadharma party's main objectives were to liberate people from religious, caste and economic oppression; To obtain security of service and minimum wage to all workers in private utility services, such as Factories, Workshops, Railways and Shipping; to get for the landless agricultural labourers a reasonable share in the produce; to obtain adult suffrage for election of members of legislative, municipal, taluk, and district boards; to obtain the removal of all caste distinctions among all castes, sects, and classes of the Indian Community; and to obtain sanction for utilising funds and incomes of religious institutions for the educations of people. In short, the principles of Samadharma was explained as "common ownership; common distribution; common use of profit; democratic control and worker's rule". To explain the Samadharma ideals and programmes Samadharma Leagues and Propaganda Committees were organised in provincial and district levels.

102 Kudi Arasu, 20 October 1945.

103 Interview with Rajammal Vasudevan, Darasuram, 21 November 1988.

politicising women can be summarised in the following words of Singaravelu Chettiar:¹⁰⁴

Women who have been confined to the kitchen are speaking today from public platforms; they are debating public issues; they are involved in social work as equals of men; the credit for facilitating all these goes to Periyar. It is rare to find women in other movements who are as skilled in public oratory as they are in this movement. During the last fifty years, the Indian National Congress could produce only one Sarojini Naidu. ... what an ability women belonging to the Self Respect Movement have in organising their own conferences independently and with true equality. In other movements, women figure only as adjuncts to men's activities; but in our movement, they function as an independent group and involve in the movement's activities demonstrating equality with men.¹⁰⁵

Apart from conducting conferences, many women activists conducted self respect marriages at local levels and delivered speeches on social reforms at the marriage venues. For instance, a self respect marriage was conducted by E.V. Nagammaiyar in Erode in 1932, and Annapurani delivered a speech during this marriage on the need to transform marriage as an institution. At Trichi, Visalakshi Subbaiah presided over a widow remarriage and various issues related to widow remarriage, and Brahminical rituals in marriages were discussed at the marriage venue.¹⁰⁶ In 1935, at Devakottai, a widow inter-caste marriage was conducted under the initiative of Dhanalakshmi Ammaiyyar. In 1937, Selvathayammal presided over a self respect marriage at Salem.¹⁰⁷ One can indeed multiply these instances.

104 Singaravelu Chettiar, later known as the first Communist of Tamilnadu, was a leading activist of the Self Respect Movement. He started the Samadharna Party along with Periyar.

105 Singaravelu Chettiar quoted by C.V.K. Amirthavalliar in her speech made at Kuala Lumpur. See Kudi Arasu, 20 October 1940.

106 Kudi Arasu, 18 September 1932; and 11 December 1932.

107 Kudi Arasu, 15 September 1935; and 4 July 1937.

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106 Kudi Arasu, 18 September 1932; and 11 December 1932.

107 Kudi Arasu, 15 September 1935; and 4 July 1937.

Women activists' initiative did not stop merely with conducting these self respect marriages. At Karaikudi in Ramnad district, M. Maragadavalli, along with So. Murugappa (whom she married as a widow), started a Widow Remarriage Association (Madhar Marumana Sahaya Sangam) in 1933. This Sangam propagated the message of widow remarriage in remote villages and in small towns through lectures on the conditions of women, particularly widows. In 1934, the first meeting of the Sangam was organised in a small town called Kandavarayanpatti, and only 20 people attended this meeting. In the course of the year, four similar meetings were organised in four different villages. In 1935 nine such propaganda meetings were organised and by 1937, the association covered 28 villages with 29 propaganda meetings. This was all carried out amidst strong opposition from the Chettiar community. Apart from collecting about 2,000 signatures in support of widow remarriage, the Sangam also demonstrated the problems of widowhood through 'Magic Lantern' shows, and distributed 45,000 printed pamphlets on widow remarriage. For the benefit of literate widows, the Association printed four handbooks about the nature of widowhood, the essence of widow remarriage and about alternatives for widows.¹⁰⁸

The most important activity of the Association was the publication of a Tamil monthly called Madhar Marumanam (Women's Remarriage) under the editorship of Maragadavalli, in 1936.¹⁰⁹ The magazine carried details about widow remarriages that were conducted all over India, photographs of such couples, their brief history etc. A major contribution of articles for

108 Madhar Marumanam, Vol. III, No. 1, September-October 1938.

109 Lokopakari, Vol. I, No. 2, 13 September 1936.

the journal came from women activists such as R.S. Rajalakshmi, S. Neelavathi, T.S. Kunchidam, S. Rangammal, S. Sivagami, L. Parvathi Devi and P.N.S. Visalakshi Ammal.¹¹⁰ As part of its widow remarriage campaign, the Association conducted the first widow remarriages among the Nattukotai Chettiars. For instance, remarriage of Valliammaiachi, a widow, with Palaniappa Chettiar was conducted by the Association at a small town, Amaravathipudur. Muthulakshmi Reddy presided over the marriage. Around 300 Chettiar women attended the wedding. The venue was decorated with slogans like “Only Widow Remarriage Brings Independence”, “Women’s Liberation Is True Independence”, etc. During this marriage ‘Widow Remarriage Songs’ prepared by the Sangam were sung along with Bharathi’s songs. M. Maragadavalli and Visalakshi Subbaiah were important speakers at the marriage.¹¹¹

The women members of the Self Respect Movement not only

110 Madhar Marumanam, Vol.I, No. 3, October - November 1937.

111 Madhar Marumanam, Vol. II, No. 2, September-October 1937. The Association had started a home for widows, Magalir Illam, at Amaravathipudur. The widows at this home were taught handicrafts, spinning and tailoring.

participated in the non-agitational programmes of the Movement, such as conferences, marriages and propaganda meetings,¹¹² but also quite actively in mass agitations. The most significant mass agitation launched by the Movement during the period of our study was the anti-Hindi agitation which continued for over two years from late 1937 to early 1940. The agitation forced the Congress ministry headed by C. Rajagopalachari to reverse its decision to introduce Hindi as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum.¹¹³

During the initial phase of the agitation,¹¹⁴ women members of the Movement actively participated in processions and public meetings. Women clad in sarees printed with the Tamil flag¹¹⁵ on them and chanting anti-Hindi and pro-Tamil slogans were a distinct feature of these

112 Apart from conducting and participating in conferences and marriages women members of the Movement entered public institutions and contested elections. S.R. Kannammal, Periyar's sister, was a Erode Municipal Councillor in 1930s. In the council, Kannammal demanded reservation of employment for women in all public institutions and women to be employed as teachers including in boys schools. At Karaikudi, Thirunellai Ammaiyar, another activist, functioned as a Magistrate. Indrani Balasubramaniam contested the North Arcot District election in 1936. Maragadavalli contested the Municipal election at Karaikudi in 1934.

113 Fortnightly Reports, Fortnight ending 2 March 1940.

114 The anti-Hindi agitation was indeed a mass agitation. Initially supporters of the agitation, numbering around 5,000, attended meetings at Madras, Salem and few other places. They participated in black flag demonstrations and in picketing schools which taught Hindi. With the agitation gaining strength the Congress government used the notorious Criminal Law Amendment Act to curb the agitation. Following Periyar's arrest in December 1938, around 350 men and 1,000 women were convicted for picketing schools. See Fortnightly reports, 24 June 1938; 20 July 1938; 19 August 1938; and 2 December 1938.

115 The Tamil flag carried the symbols of the three ancient Tamil Kingdoms i.e., Chera, Chola and Pandia. In her interview, Pattammal Balasundaram, one who played an active role in the anti-Hindi agitation remarked that she wore these sarees with Tamil flag even at home, for a long time, as a mark of respect and love for the Tamil language. Interview with Pattammal Balasundaram, Trichi, 8 January 1989.

processions and public meetings.¹¹⁶ The meetings were also addressed by women activists. For instance a huge public meeting organised at the Triplicane beach in Madras on 11 September 1938 to receive a symbolic Tamil army, which marched by foot from Trichinopoly to Madras propagating anti-Hindi message, was addressed by no less than four women activists: Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Narayaniammaiyar, Va. Ba. Tamaraianni Ammaiyar¹¹⁷ and Munagar Azhagiyar.¹¹⁸ Also women activists organised farewell committees to see off their male comrades to prison.¹¹⁹

With the agitation gaining strength over time, batches of women activists courted arrest. The first batch of five women consisting of Dr. Dharmambal,¹²⁰ Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, Malar Mugathammaiyar, Pattammal Balasundaram¹²¹ and Seethaiammal were arrested on 14

116 Sami Chidambaranar, *op. cit.*, p 179. On the 5th October 1938, the Congress government raided Viduthalai office (newspaper cum party office) and confiscated the back numbers of the paper and all its correspondence pertaining to the anti-Hindi agitation. The British government too refused an interview with Periyar since the then Governor Erskine was very disenchanted with Periyar's anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin activities.

117 Va. Ba. Tamaraianni, a Tamil poet and a story writer, expressed through her stories her love for Tamil language. One of her story revolves around a woman who loves Tamil and her husband who could get only the job of a Hindi teacher. Despite her husband's objections, she leads a picketing group to picket the same school where her husband teaches Hindi: "She does it as a matter of duty to the language she loves as against the wishes of her husband." See C.S. Lakshmi, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

118 Ma. Illancheliyan, Tamilar Thodutha Por (The War Waged by the Tamils), Madras 1986, (2nd edition), pp. 118- 19.

119 Kudi Arasu, 18 September 1938.

120 Dr. Dharmambal was born in 1890 at a village, Karuthatangudi, in Thanjavur district. An Ayurvedic doctor, Dharmambal started her early political career as a Justice party activist and started the Tamil Women's Association on her own. Proficient in four languages, i.e. Tamil, English, Telugu and Malayalam, she became an active participant in the anti-Hindi agitation in 1938 and was jailed for six months. She also organised the Tamil Women's Conference at Madras which passed resolutions against compulsory Hindi. The Chennai Manavar Manram (Madras Student's Association) was organised and led by her for a long time. See Muraso li, 22 May 1959; and, Chennai Manavar Manram, Veeerath Tamil Annai Dr. S. Dharmambal Ammaiyar Irangal Malar., Madras 1959. pp. 4-15.

121 Pattammal Balasundaram was born in 1905, and was educated upto the 6th standard. Her early political career started in the Congress party. For three years, she wore khadi and imprisoned for her involvement in Gandhian Constructive Programmes. In 1926, she became the supporter of Self Respect Movement along with her husband Balasundaram. She was imprisoned for eight and half months for her involvement in the anti-Hindi agitation.

November 1938, in Madras.¹²² Wearing sarees printed with the Tamil flag and singing Bharathidasan's evocative song calling for a Tamil army to save the language, they were led in a procession from Kasi Viswanathan Temple in Pethunayakkanpettai to Hindu Theological School. On the route of the procession, they were stopped at various points and garlanded. For picketing the school, they were arrested and imprisoned for six weeks.¹²³ After the arrest of Periyar, who was interestingly arrested on the charge of inciting women to fill the prisons, around 1,000 women were convicted and 73 of them were arrested for participating in anti-Hindi agitation.¹²⁴ Though the judge offered them the option of paying a fine of Rs 50 or undergoing six weeks imprisonment, many of them chose the latter.

From then onwards women activists of the Movement courted arrest at different intervals, till September 1939, when the last batch of five women were arrested. In all, 73 women were arrested and jailed for their involvement in the anti-Hindi agitation. Significantly, several of them went to jail with their children: to be precise, thirty two children accompanied their mothers to jail.¹²⁵ An exasperated member of the Congress ministry, T.S.S. Rajan, the Minister for Public Health, commented that women were getting arrested to get milk for their children in the jail! The Madras Provincial Women's Conference held at Vellore in 1938, demanded that

122 Kudi Arasu, 20 November 1938.

123 Ma. Illanchelian, op. cit., pp. 148-149; and Fortnightly Reports, 5 July 1939.

124 Saroja Sundararajan, March to Freedom in Madras Presidency, 1916-1947, Madras, 1989 pp. 544.

125 Ma. Illanchelian, op. cit., pp. 148-50. The term of imprisonment for picketing in front of the Prime Minister's house was three to six months rigorous imprisonment. For making speeches in connection with the Anti-Hindi agitation, the activists were imprisoned from nine months to one year. See MLCP Vol IV, No. 4, 19 August 1938, p. 160, Appendix - II.

T.S.S. Rajan should take back his comment and offer an unconditional apology.¹²⁶ The Self Respect Movement's newspaper Kudi Arasu prominently reported the women's involvement in the agitation and published transcript of the arguments they offered in the court and their photographs. The Anti-Hindi Agitation Committee at Erode promptly brought out 10,000 calendars with the photographs of the women who went to jail during the agitation.¹²⁷

Women activists, apart from taking part in the prolonged anti-Hindi agitation, also expressed their consciousness about language, nation and women's role in the public through their writings and speeches. Narayani Ammal, who was arrested for her participation in anti-Hindi agitation, for instance, narrated her prison experiences in detail in Kudi Arasu.¹²⁸ Tamaraikanni Ammaiya wrote two novels on women's role in the anti-Hindi agitation. She portrayed strong women characters who loved Tamil language and Tamil nation more than their family and husbands.

In concluding this section, we shall cite an exchange that took place between a woman activist of the Self Respect Movement, who was arrested for participating in the anti-Hindi agitation, and a Prosecuting Inspector in a Madras court:

Prosecuting Inspector: You are with your small children; prison is painful and your husband will suffer. If you promise you will not do similar things in future [i.e. participating in such agitations] we shall pardon you.

126 Kudi Arasu, 28 December 1938.

127 Kudi Arasu, 5 February 1939.

128 Kudi Arasu, 8 October 1939.

Women activist: ... we are willing to bear any suffering for the progress of our language, our nation. Our husbands, have no right to interfere in this. They are not the ones to do so.¹²⁹

4.4 Women Activists and Their Consciousness

We have seen so far how women's question was central in the agenda of the Self Respect Movement and how women participated in all the activities of the Movement. To evaluate how far the Movement was successful in imparting an anti-patriarchal consciousness among the women activists, we shall provide here some analysis of women activists' speeches and writings.

Women activists of the Movement intermittently wrote in Kudi Arasu, Puratchi and Viduthalai, expressing their opinions about the meaning of self respect for women, caste system, temple entry and the problem of religion and several other social issues. They also attempted to link up these issues with specific problems related to women like widowhood, birth-control, child marriage, education, women's political participation, the problem of male domination and so on.

At the outset it is important to note the social location of women activists who expressed themselves through writings and speeches. Many of these women came from lower middle classes and did not have formal education, except a few such as T.S. Kunchidam, who was a B.A. and also a school teacher. Otherwise most of them were self educated; some of them

129 Kudi Arasu, 20 November 1938 (emphasis mine).

imbibed the Movement's ideology through male members of their family who were already activists in the Movement. Some others regularly read the party newspapers and attended meetings addressed by Periyar and other leaders.

In 1930, Lakshmi Ammal, in her welcome address to the Erode Second Self Respect Conference, noted that aanmai or masculinity as reflected in religion and shastras had been the greatest obstacle for women's emancipation. Hence, according to her, all those religious texts, which were written by selfish men, as well as their domination had to be challenged to attain women's freedom.¹³⁰ S. Neelavathi was also a staunch critic of religious rituals and Brahminism. She drew an analogy between the Braminical oppression of lower castes and the oppression of women by men: just as Brahmins oppressed lower castes, men enslaved women and legitimised it by quoting shastras and rituals which legitimised caste oppression too. She contended that if these Hindu religious texts were destroyed, three fourths of women's emancipation could be achieved.¹³¹ In this context, women activists attempted to elaborate how Hindu religion legitimised the practice of polygamy, infanticide, widowhood and child marriage.¹³² Hinduism, they argued, had perpetuated the devadasi system, and reinforced patriarchy.¹³³ However, some women activists refused to identify themselves as atheists, and denied the role of Self Respect Movement in spreading atheism. For instance, Kanagammaiyar, in her

130 Kudi Arasu, 4 May 1930.

131 Kudi Arasu, 9 May 1930; 26 October 1930; 8 November 1931; 15 May 1932; and 9 April 1933.

132 Kudi Arasu, 5 June 1932; 29 May 1932; 20 March 1938; 22 May 1932; and 10 January 1932.

133 Puratchi, 28 January 1934.

speech at the Madras Self Respect Conference, claimed that the Movement was not opposed to selfless worship of one God. She continued that she herself believed in worshipping God and was also simultaneously active in the Movement.¹³⁴

While emphasising the need for compulsory education for women,¹³⁵ R. Annapurani argued that women's education should not train women to be housewives or teach only about stories of chaste women of ancient Tamilnadu, but it should be scientific.¹³⁶ She further noted that only such an education could make women conscious of the problems of male domination.¹³⁷ T.S. Kunchidam insisted that women must strive for total literacy among all classes of women and education should be compulsory upto tenth standard.¹³⁸ Along with education, they also emphasised women's employment as a necessary step towards women's emancipation.¹³⁹ Women activists like Jeyasekari argued that women's struggle for socialism could ensure women's work outside their home and directly link them with the country's production process. Moreover, she argued, the very concept of women's work must change in order to recognise the truth that women had been central to a large contingent of workforce, both at home and outside.¹⁴⁰ Following similar line of argument, Neelavathi wrote that the employment opportunity and equality at work for women with

134 Kudi Arasu, 12 August 1944.

135 For women activists' speeches in favour of compulsory education, see Kudi Arasu 10 January 1932; and 7 July 1940.

136 Kudi Arasu, 14 August 1932.

137 Kudi Arasu, 6 April 1930.

138 Kudi Arasu, 6 May 1944.

139 Puratchi, 10 December 1933.

140 Puratchi, 29 April 1934.

men would abolish the concept of women's slavery. In this context, she referred to situations of women in Europe and condemned the role of Hitler in forcefully confining women to household work in Germany. She also elaborated on the importance of women's participation in May Day celebrations to highlight the contributions made by women as workers all over the world.¹⁴¹

It is important to note here how women activists of the Self Respect Movement viewed other movements, especially the National Movement, as well as the ideology of the Congress party. S. Visalakshi Ammal, speaking at the Nagapatnam Self Respect Conference, declared that they, the self respectors, were enemies of nationalism because nationalism "only protects the obscurantist tradition, leads people back into barbaric life, preaches varnashrama dharma, differentiates people as Brahmins and Sudras, male and female, protects the capitalists and landlords ... This kind of nationalism and the Congress party have to be totally destroyed".¹⁴² S. Neelavathi, in one of her presidential addresses, criticised the nationalists as protectors of "venomous shastras and religion". She warned them that 'swaraj' would be an unrealisable dream as long as they treat women as slaves and as long as they encourage child marriages.¹⁴³ R. Annapurani, in her presidential address to the Tiruchengodu Taluk Adi Dravida Conference, criticised Gandhi for not showing interest in Adi Dravida's education, economic conditions, employment or any other social legislation in favour

141 Ibid., 29 April 1934.

142 Kudi Arasu, 4 October 1931.

143 Kudi Arasu, 12 July 1931.

of them. According to her, Gandhi's worries were that the untouchables might convert to Christianity or Islam. Thus, it was only a superficial concern that he showed towards the untouchables.¹⁴⁴ Mrs. Meenakshi, another activist, while countering the Congress party activities noted that for social liberation, which she considered as a primary condition for women's liberation, satyagraha in front of public institutions or picketing liquor shops, etc., would be of no use. Only picketing and dharnas in front of those families where women had been harassed would help change the condition of women's lives.¹⁴⁵

In the case of autonomous women's organisations, while some women activists of the Self Respect Movement agreed that the formation of women's organisations would help organise women around issues related to women, they were pessimistic about the role of All India Women's Conference, which, according to them, did not question the basic structures of women's oppression such as patriarchy, Hindu religion, Hindu laws and varnashrama dharma.¹⁴⁶ Despite such criticism, women activists of the movement like Indrani Balasubramaniam attended All India Women's Conference and voiced the opinions of the Self Respect Movement on women's issues.¹⁴⁷

Women activists of the Self Respect Movement were critical of the Self Respect Movement itself. They argued that the Movement must

144 Puratchi, 27 May 1934. Similar views were expressed by T.S. Kunchidam at Ramnad District and Salem District Self Respect Conferences.

145 Kudi Arasu, 6 March 1932; 20 October 1945.

146 Kudi Arasu, 6 March 1948; 12 June 1948.

147 Kudi Arasu, 16 August 1931.

distinguish the liberation of women from all other kinds of liberation. For instance, Rajapushpam wrote, "Generally our country is colonised by the British; the north Indians have colonised our economy; the Brahmins have hegemonised our society; But the most important of all these, men have colonised and oppressed women".¹⁴⁸ Following similar argument, Savithri highlighted that the demand for separate Dravidanadu was only one aspect of the larger demand for liberation, since, for women, the struggle for liberation from male domination was a vital issue.¹⁴⁹ Since they considered women's liberation as a primary concern, they openly criticised the male activists of the Movement for exhibiting patriarchal consciousness. Savithiri noted that many social reformers never even attempted to imbibe the concept of women's freedom and hence failed to create an anti-patriarchal consciousness among the women in their own family.¹⁵⁰ Kamalam pointed out the failure of male comrades within the Movement to reform their own family and women.¹⁵¹

Some of them like Duraiyur S. Dhanabakyam were disappointed that the Self Respect Movement which built up women's hope about liberation did not carry forward the same. She also accused the women leaders of the Movement for they underplayed the importance of women's freedom as an issue.¹⁵² Similarly, S. Neelavathi pointed out how even the so-called progressive self respectors, confined women in the kitchen while valorously

148 Kudi Arasu, 29 November 1947 (emphasis mine).

149 Kudi Arasu, 21 February 1948.

150 Ibid., 21 February 1948.

151 Kudi Arasu, 14 February 1948.

152 Kudi Arasu, 22 April 1937.

speaking in the public about women's emancipation.¹⁵³ Mangaiyarkarasi reflected the same sentiment when she wrote, "Even those men who unleash those rhetorics about women's freedom in public plat forms, have never thought of practising the same at home ... women must struggle on their own to become like Abraham Lincoln, Lenin, Karl Marx and Periyar in order to demonstrate their intellectual and leadership capacities."¹⁵⁴ In 1944, when the Self Respect Movement was consolidated as Dravida Kazhagam, a full fledged party, the primacy given to women's issues was replaced with the issue of separate Dravida Nadu. Remarking on this change, S.N. Rajapushpam criticised the party for not encouraging equal participation of women in the party as well as for ignoring women's issues. She called women activists to struggle for women's emancipation as the first step.¹⁵⁵ One Lakshmi wrote that only when women's slavery was abolished and only when women's liberation was given priority, Dravidian Movement would be successful. Towards this end, she suggested, that the party must concentrate on forming a separate Dravidian Women's Association.¹⁵⁶

In illustrating the autonomous character of women's consciousness in the movement, let us cite here an event which took place during a self respect marriage. The event in question is the self respect marriage of Vai. Su. Shanmugam Chettiar's daughter which took place at Karaikudi. The marriage was conducted by the Justice party Minister P.T. Rajan. Periyar and many other leaders of the Movement were present during the occasion.

153 Kumaran, Vol.6, No.1, July-August 1930.

154 Kudi Arasu, 24 April 1948.

155 Kudi Arasu, 29 November 1947.

156 Kudi Arasu, 27 March 1948.

During the marriage, the bridegroom insisted on tying a tali to the bride, which was opposed to the ideals of Self Respect Movement. Neither Periyar nor other leaders opposed the bridegroom and did not stop the tali tying ceremony. Much to the surprise of everyone, the bride got up and vehemently refused to undergo the ceremony and also addressed the relatives and leaders, as follows:

Aiyya! [Periyar] you and my father [Shanmugam Chettiar] in many marriages advocated that tying a tali is a symbol of women's oppression and it is equivalent to tying a licence around the neck of a dog. Despite all those propaganda, you silently accepted the degrading manners of this bridegroom who insists on tying a tali to me. I will not wear one.¹⁵⁷

However, we should remember here that this sort of radical consciousness was never complete among the women activists of the Movement. Women often exhibited contrary tendencies especially when they evoked the Tamil past and the "glorious tradition of Tamil women". They too occasionally valorised chaste women and reinforced the motherhood ideology. Such patriarchal tendencies resurfaced within the Movement particularly during the anti-Hindi agitation and later. This was a phase in the history of the Movement when it began searching for a past to impart legitimacy to Tamil language and the Dravidian nation. And the invocation of the past constrained the voices of the women activists too. A clear illustration of this is Tamaraikanni's speech during the anti-Hindi agitation in 1938. She likened the Tamil language to Kannagi who is the heroine as well as the sign of chastity in the classical Tamil text.

157 This event has been narrated by Pulavar Ko. Imayavaramban in his article "Aiyya Vazvile...!" in Thanthai Periyar 87th Andu Piranthanal Viza Malar Viduthalaj, Madras, 1965.

Silapatikaram, and called for women's participation in the agitation, to protect the chastity of Tamil language.¹⁵⁸ During the agitation too women activists were introduced in terms of the achievements of their fathers and husbands.

4.5: Life History of Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar:

The Self Respect Movement, as we have seen, had provided space for, and encouraged political activism among women. We have also seen, how women activists through their writings and speeches articulated their consciousness about issues of concern to women as well as issues which were taken up by the Movement. To further explore how far the Movement had succeeded in raising the consciousness of women about their own plight, we will analyse here the life story of Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, who began her life as a devadasi but transformed herself over the years to become a front ranking participant in the Self Respect Movement.¹⁵⁹

Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar was born in 1883 in the Isai Vellalar caste, one of the castes from which devadasis were drawn. She was brought up in a devadasi family in Moovalur village in Thanjavur district, and was initiated into the devadasi customs at a young age. Writing in Kudi

158 Kudi Arasu, 29 November 1947 (emphasis mine).

159 With the formation of the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944 such patriarchal tendencies became even more acute. For instance, while in the early phase of the Movement both men and women were addressed by a single word Thozhar (comrade), during 1944 and after women activists were rechristened as mothers and sisters; and the Dravida Kazhagam's aims and objectives stated in the Trichinopoly Conference in 1945 did not have any specific reference to women's issues, but for calling them to participate in the party activities. See K. Verramani (ed.), op cit., pp. 51- 64.

Arasu in 1925, she reminisced,

I was born in a traditional non-devadasi family... my uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution, through the devadasi custom. They also advised not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount for the family through the profession, given my talents in music and dance ... So my parents forced me into this custom. It was during this time, I deeply thought about this custom as evil and read those religious texts which advocated it. I felt that men have forced certain women into this degrading profession to pursue their indiscreet pleasures and for selfish reasons.¹⁶⁰

This awareness led her to walk out of the devadasi life and marry a musician Suyambu Pillai on her own accord. This marriage created furore in her community and resulted in her ostracisation.¹⁶¹

Ramamirtham Ammaiyar began her political career in the Tamilnadu Congress party as an activist. After meeting Gandhi in 1921, she became a Congress propagandist campaigning for Non-Co-operation in the villages of Thanjavur district.¹⁶² Within the Congress, she allied herself with Periyar, Varadarajulu Naidu, and other non-Brahmin leaders, who were keen on launching social reform activities from the Congress platform. She organised the 'National School' at her house in Moovalur to educate the members and sympathisers of the Congress about various issues related to party activities.¹⁶³ Along with this, she carried out devadasi abolition campaigns through the formation of devadasi associations in local areas around Thanjavur. In her campaigns against the devadasi system, she

160 Kudi Arasu, 13 December 1925.

161 Interview with Mr. C. Selvaraj (the grandson of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar), Madras, 13 July 1989.

162 Swadesamitran, 14 November 1922.

163 Swadesamitran, 27 November 1922.

supported Muthulakshmi Reddy's efforts to end the system through legislation. However, she did not join Women's India Association or All India Women's Conference either as a member or as an activist. Her main objective was to mobilise the devadasis and make them conscious about the ills of the system and motivate them to break away from it.¹⁶⁴

Apart from supporting and campaigning for devadasi abolition, she also organised inter-caste marriages and marriages of consent for the dasis to free them from their so-called service to Hindu temples. In 1927, she seemed to have organised many such marriages in villages of Ramnad, Trichi and Thanjavur districts.¹⁶⁵ In her words,

I have been struggling for the past seven or eight years to abolish this [devadasi] custom. I have also organised a conference to reform our women and break the devadasi system. Without invitation, I barged into houses where marriages were held, to advocate simple marriages and to expose the evils of devadasi system. I have forced women to keep the promise of discouraging their fellow women from becoming devadasis. Some men have been constantly campaigning against my battle against the system ... They are threatening ... that they would smash my head if I preach against devadasi system during marriages.¹⁶⁶

It is probable that she left the Congress because of the local Congress leaders' attitude towards the devadasis and other problems related to women. Though it is not clear from her writings why she left the Congress and joined the Self Respect Movement, it is evident that the campaign

164 Ramamirtham Ammaiyar's letter to Muthulakshmi Reddy dated 15 December 1927 in M.R. Papers, subject file no: 11, part II, p. 320.

165 Ramamirtham Ammaiyar's letter to Reddy, dated 14 July 1929, in M.R. Papers, subject file no: 11, p. 76. She stated in this letter, how difficult was the task of organising marriages for the dasis in villages since she was strongly opposed by the village panchayats and the dasis were afraid of social boycott.

166 Kudi Arasu, 13 December 1925.

against the devadasi system launched by a section of the progressive rebel Congress leaders like E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, attracted her to the Self Respect Movement. By mid 1920s, her break with the Congress was sharp and complete. In 1956, while remembering her involvement in the Self Respect Movement, she wrote, "Once Gandhi had written to me a letter appreciating my efforts towards devadasi abolition. I used to worship that letter . After I left the Congress, not only that letter, even Gandhi had got erased from my mind".¹⁶⁷

In the course of her political career in the Self Respect Movement, she acted as a relentless campaigner against women's subordination. As a full-time activist of the Movement, she addressed various conferences and elaborated how Hinduism and upper caste men were legitimising women's subordination.¹⁶⁸ She arranged, conducted and addressed several self respect marriages in different places, and one such significant marriage arranged by her was the widow-remarriage of Sivagami and Chidambaranar, which we have earlier described in some detail.¹⁶⁹ During the anti-Hindi agitation in 1938, she propagated the anti-Hindi message through a padayatra from Trichi to Madras and was arrested. This padayatra started on 1 August 1938 from Uraiyur in Trichi, covered around 577 miles and reached Madras after 42 days. During the padayatra, about 87 public meetings were addressed by the group.¹⁷⁰

167 Murasoli, Pongal Malar, January 1956, p. 52.

168 For instance, see Kudi Arasu, 10 September 1933.

169 Interview with Sivagami Chidambaranar, Madras, 5 April 1989.

170 Irayanar, Suyamariyadai Chudoroligal, Madras, p. 60. See also Illancheliyan, op. cit., pp. 116-120.

Significantly, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar authored essays regularly in Kudi Arasu on the condition of women. Here one may note that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar had no formal education and she was only self-educated to read and write in Tamil. In 1936, she published a voluminous novel in Tamil running into 303 pages, with the title Tasikalin Mosavalai Allathu Matipetra Mainer (The Treacherous Net of the Dasis or A Playboy Grown Wise).¹⁷¹ This novel is a product of her position as a rebel within the devadasi system and as an indefatigable campaigner for women's rights in the wider terrain of politics. In the early twentieth century, women's entry into the intellectual arena as writers and as journalists, representing their freedom to express their views, did not find much support from men. Very few middle class women could write full length novels and get them published. What is significant here is the fact that most of these writings by women valorised the traditional 'womanly virtues' such as chastity.¹⁷² In this context, an ex-devadasi, who was considered a prostitute in the middle class social milieu, writing about devadasis could only face strong resistance. Ramamirtham Ammaiyar indeed faced enormous difficulties in getting her novel published. Many rich men in Madras city refused to finance the publication of the novel and finally a Zamindarini from Pudukottai state, Vellai Duraichi Nachiyar, who was concerned about the status of the devadasis, financed its publication.¹⁷³

171 Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal, Dasikal Mosavalai Allathu Mati Petra Mainer, Madras, 1936. For a detailed analysis of this novel, see Anandhi.S., 'Representing Devadasis: Dasikal Mosavalai as Radical Text', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XXVI, Nos.11 and 12, March 1991. See also Kamil V.Zvelebil, 'A Devadasi as the Author of Tamil Novel', Journal of the Institute of Asian Studies, September 1987, p. 155.

172 C.S. Lakshmi, op. cit.

173 M. Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, op. cit., p. 5.

It is very difficult to classify this novel as mere fiction. For instance, the novel ends with the proceedings and resolutions of a Self Respect Movement conference, as if it were an exercise in contemporary journalism. The novel deals with the life of devadasis who were exploited by the male-dominated society and how two of them walked out of the system to organise a Devadasigal Munnetra Sangam (Devadasis' Upliftment Association). This semi-autobiographical novel carried a poignant and political preface, in which she wrote:

My strong opinion is that from the ancient times the temple priests, the kings and the landlords..., in the name of art, had encouraged particular communities to indulge in prostitution. ... These days more than the Kumbakonam Shastris, Satyamurthi Shastri [alluding to the Congress leader S. Satyanmurti] have been making noise about preserving the Devadasi custom... Our women have been suppressed in all spheres. The legitimisation of this suppression through religion and shastras is evident in the manner in which women have been assigned the role of prostitutes. Through 'potarrupu sangam', I propagated the anti-devadasi message for which among the devadasi community itself there was opposition. Prominent religious heads, devadasi agents, reform leaders, everybody openly opposed my stand... Then I decided that it is easy to oppose Imperialism and Brahminism but not the devadasi system.¹⁷⁴

Another fictional serial that Ramamirtham Ammaiyar wrote was Damayanthi, which was published in Dravida Nadu in 1945. It also deals with the question of devadasis. The woman protagonist in the novel breaks out of the devadasi system and becomes a teacher and accuses religious texts of imposing the practice of prostitution on a section of women, and questions the rationale of God's carnal desires to have women as dasis.

174 Moovalur Ramamirtham, op. cit., pp. 2-4. S. Satyamurthi was then a Legislative Member of the Congress Party who strongly opposed the Devadasi Abolition Bill, as we have seen earlier.

Through the narrative, she also attacked untouchability and the economic exploitation of the poor by the rich.¹⁷⁵

An irrepressible activist and a writer, Ramamirtham Ammaiyar finally quit the Dravidar kazhagam (which was the new name the Self Respect Movement acquired in 1944) in 1949 to join the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam founded by C.N. Annadurai with others. The reason for her quitting the Dravidar Kazhagam was significant; she did not approve of and openly criticised Periyar's decision to marry a 26 year old young woman when he was in his early 70s.¹⁷⁶

The life history of Ramamirtham Ammaiyar was indeed extraordinary. From being a devadasi, she became a foremost champion of women's cause in the Tamil districts. Her commitment to the cause of women made her disagree with and break away from Periyar despite two decades of comradeship with him. Ramamirtham Ammaiyar does not represent an 'average' women activist of the Self Respect Movement, but one who marked the outer limit to which a woman activist of the Movement could reach out.

4.6 Conclusion

To sum up the conclusions emerging from the foregoing discussions:
 (i) In sharp contrast to the nationalists and the autonomous women's organisations, the Self Respect Movement addressed women's issues in a

175 Dravida Nadu, 22 and 29 April 1945; and 13 May 1945.

176 Interview with Mr. C. Selvaraj, op. cit..

radically different fashion. When the former took up issues affecting women in isolation from one another and treated them as discrete, the latter viewed them as interconnected, having a common basis in patriarchy. The ideological thrust of the Movement led it to question Brahminism and Hinduism as legitimising forces of patriarchy in Tamil society. Given this, the Self Respect Movement developed a trenchant criticism of the key categories of patriarchy such as marriage, monogamous family and chastity. We may recall here that these categories remained valorised in the discourse of the nationalists and the autonomous women's organisations.

(ii) It was not only that women's issues occupied a position of great importance in the agenda of the Self Respect Movement; but women's involvement in the Movement was also extensive. The Movement provided space for women activists to involve in all its activities as equals to male activists. The women activists of the Self Respect Movement exhibited strong anti-patriarchal consciousness and discounted traditions which were sanctified by religion, as enslaving women; they also off and on came out with open criticisms attacking the Movement for not being sufficiently radical in taking up women's issues.

(iii) One may seek the reasons for the Self Respect Movement's radical approach to women's question in its specific location in Tamil politics as a movement opposed to upper caste Hindu nationalism of the Congress party. Freed from the need to imagine and defend a national past (and hence the traditions of that past) as a means to constitute the emerging 'nation', the Self Respect Movement was able to launch a thorough-going critic of the pre-existing traditions, including religiously endowed

patriarchy. This was the source for the Movement's radicalism in addressing the women's question, while others subordinated women's issues to the cause of the 'nation' and sought a solution to the women's question within the needs of marking out the 'nation' from the 'colonial'/the 'Western'.

CONCLUSION

In this study about the middle class women and their consciousness in late colonial Tamilnadu, we began by analysing the manner in which the early social reform activities took up women's issues such as child marriage, women's education and widow remarriage, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These social reform activities were sporadic, uncoordinated and hence inscribed with divergent ideological tendencies. These divergent ideological tendencies evolved in the course of time into three broad ideological formations in addressing the women's question in colonial Tamilnadu. These ideological formations found their organisational frameworks in the national movement, the autonomous women's organisations and the Self Respect Movement.

Turning to the question of how the male Brahmin leadership of the national movement in Tamilnadu addressed the women's question, it has been found that it systematically reconstituted patriarchy in an effort to validate its project of self rule. The nationalists' urgency and in a sense the historical necessity, in the face of colonial onslaught, to imagine a composite glorious past and an indigenous/ national tradition as opposed to and distinct from the western /colonial acted as a constraint in looking for solutions to the women's question. In this process, the nationalists not only tropised women for the nation, but more important women became the site to contest colonialism. Only within this framework of distinguishing the traditional/national from the western /colonial, women were mobilized in large numbers to take part in the public activities of the national movement. The participation of women in the public sphere was legitimized by

representing them as chaste wives and loving mothers, and thus the nationalists valorised monogamous familial norms.

Given this nationalist agenda, S. Sathyamurthi's arguments against the Sarada Act, the Divorce Bill and the Devadasi Abolition Bill were premised on the understanding that the practice of child marriage, devadasi system and so on were parts of ancient Hindu (more precisely, ancient Brahminical Hindu) traditions, and those practices had to be preserved as indigenous/national culture in the fight against colonialism. Similarly, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, a prominent non-Brahmin leader of the national movement in Tamilnadu, glorified motherhood and the chastity of women as part of national tradition. In their discourse, nation was constituted by affirming tradition as national traditions. In order to reconstitute traditions and women became the carriers of such national culture they created a series of binary opposites such as male vs. female, private vs. public, nation vs. colonizers, indigenous vs. western and spiritual vs. material. Women's question was addressed only within these binary opposites.

The ideological sway of such nationalist constructions was so effective that the women participants in the national movement in Tamilnadu perceived themselves as ideal Hindu women and accepted their traditional roles both in the public and the private spheres. For example, as we have seen, the middle class / upper caste women participants took efforts to differentiate themselves from the much despised devadasis and prostitutes; and thus validated the politics of respectability that the male nationalists flaunted in the public sphere. It was indeed the sisterhood of

the 'respectable' women, respectability being defined in the most traditional patriarchal terms, which marked their participation in politics. It would be appropriate here to quote Sarojini Naidu's speech at the Madras Women's Conference held in 1935. Denouncing 'feminism' and the demand for separate women's movement, she noted, "Women at any rate, in India, should realise that they were not working towards any new ideal. They were working towards the remembrance of an ancient ideal that was the fundamental virtue of Indian civilization... That the whole idea that we must fight for our rights, that there must be a battle and a militant organisation to secure our rights is a very obsolete idea to my mind."

Proceeding from the national movement, we have discussed how the autonomous women's organisations like the AIWC and the WIA took up such issues as women's education, marriage-related legislations and voting rights for women. In the early phase of their activities, they had an expansive agenda on women's issues (compared to the nationalist) and their autonomous status gave them enough space to debate and take up positions in favour of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, abolition of the devadasi system, and property and voting rights for women. However, their ideological stance on the women's question was also premised on traditional patriarchal norms. Thus, they affirmed women's legitimate roles as chaste wives and as dutiful mothers. The primary reason for the valorisation of such tradition can be attributed to their partial involvement in the national movement and their consequent concern about the self - identity of the nation. Their enchantment with the very same nationalist binary opposites of western/ national comes out rather sharply in their debates on issues like the divorce right to women and contraception. In short, the contradictions

which characterised the activities and the ideology of the women's organisations is a product of their ambiguous existence as partly autonomous and as partly nationalistic.

The last of the movements which we took up for analysis is the Self Respect Movement which occupied the other end of the political spectrum in colonial Tamilnadu and carried the label of being 'anti-national'. The Self Respect Movement identified Brahminism, Hinduism and ancient traditions as the legitimizing forces of patriarchy in Tamil society. Their trenchant criticism of this patriarchy enabled women to participate in the Movement as equals to men and develop a counter-patriarchal consciousness. In fact, the women activists of the Self Respect Movement were even critical of their own Movement for not being radical enough in taking up women's issues.

What were the reasons for the Self Respect Movement expressing and propagating such a radical approach to women's question in colonial Tamilnadu? The explanation has to be sought in its specific location in Tamil politics as a movement opposed to the upper caste Hindu nationalism of the Congress party. Freed from the need to imagine and defend a national past (and hence the traditions of that past) as a means to constitute the emerging 'nation' the Self Respect Movement was able to launch a thorough going critique of the pre-existing traditions, including the religiously endowed patriarchy. The binary opposites of the national and colonial did not constrain the Movement in addressing the women's question and its career was a career of critiquing the retrograde trends within Indian nationalism. Interestingly, the movement exhibited such

retrograde tendencies as the Indian nationalism with the regard to women's question, when it took up the issue of Tamil nationalism through the anti-Hindi agitation of the late 1930s. Then it was faced with the problem of searching for a glorious Tamil past!

In short, the specific nature of Indian nationalism acted as an important constraint to any progressive resolution of the women's question in colonial Tamilnadu. In constituting the Indian nation as an 'imagined community' in opposition to the colonial project, women's freedom was subordinated to the ideal of the nation and patriarchy was reconstituted and reaffirmed. It was the distancing from the ideal of 'freedom' propagated by the nationalists which provided room for the Self Respect Movement (and the autonomous women's organisations to a lesser extent) to address the women's question in radical terms. In conclusion, it may not be out of place to quote Aijaz Ahmad's poignant essay on nationalism:

...nationalism per se is neither progressive nor retrogressive, nor does it have a distinct class content prior to its incorporation in the discourse of a particular class or a particular power bloc which arises in particular and determinate historical circumstances. The real issue is: Whose nationalism?...

Whose nationalism? The question, as this thesis finds' is pertinent and needs more explorations not merely from the point of view of women, but also from that of other subordinate social groups such as minor ethnic groups and sub-nationalities.