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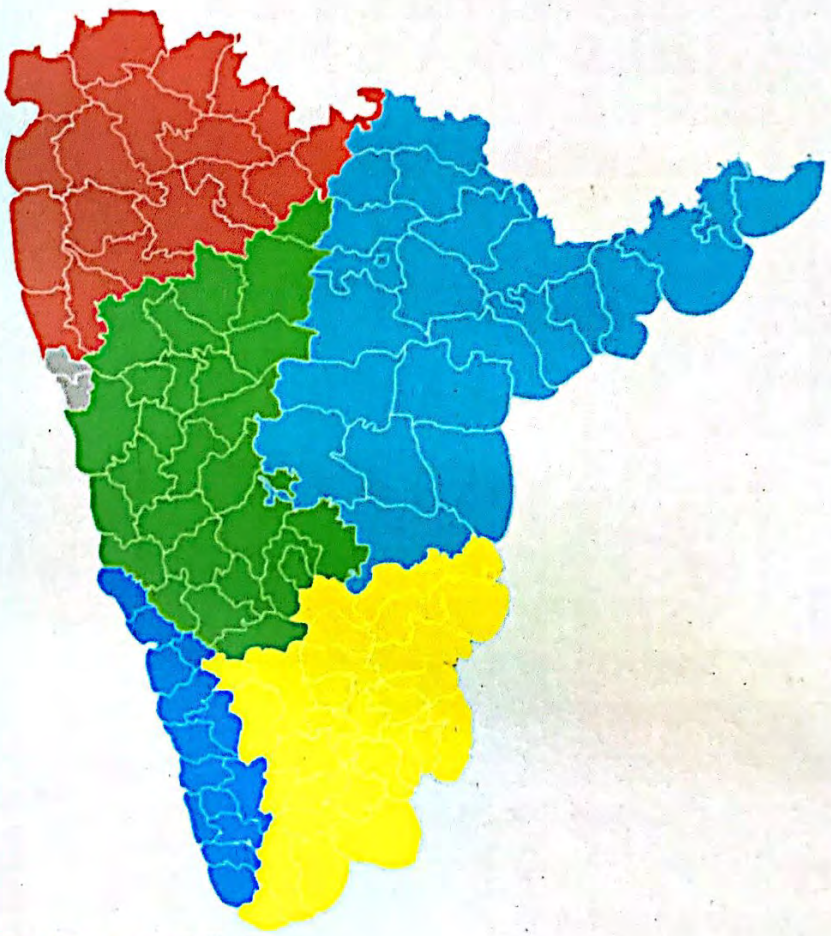

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Special Issue on

Popular Movements in South India During 19th & 20th Centuries

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ROLE OF UNSUNG HEROINES IN FREEDOM MOVEMENTS IN TAMIL NADU

Dr.L.R.Charlet Sharmili
Assistant Professor, J.A College, Periyakulam

Introduction

Women from liberal homes and conservative families, urban centers and rural districts, Queen and average women, single and married, young and old came forward and joined the struggle against the colonial rule. Though their total numbers were small their representations was extremely important. The struggle for the upliftment of women began in South India in the Nineteenth Century. Many political leaders, social reformers, missionary workers virtually all male hegemony were interested in improving the status of Indian women. Mahatma Gandhi always thought of raising the status of women through his utterances and writings in his journals, "Young India" and "Harijan". He invited the women to come forward to participate in his various movements against the British[1]. The women were supported in their struggle by a few emancipated women such as Velu Nachiyar, Kittur Chennamma, Durgabai Deshmukh, Anjalai Ammal, Ambujammal, K.P.Janaki Ammal and they worked together for freedom movement.

Eighteenth Century Freedom Fighters

Velu Nachiar was born to Chellamuthu, the Sethupathi of Ramnad and Muthalha Nachiar in 1749A.D.She was educated and trained in the variety of warfare such as Silambu, Valari, Sword fighting. She was married to Muthu Vaduganathan,the second rajah of Sivaganga.Velu Nachiar, the first women freedom fighter against the colonial rule to establish democracy. Her husband Muthuvaduganathan was killed in the battle against the British in 1772 A.D. Velu Nachiar, her daughter Vellachi Nachiar and her minister Thandavarayapillai got asylum from Hyder Ali. They went to Virupakshi near Dindugal. Later they were joined by Marudthu brothers. She planned to recapture Sivaganga from British. She prepared different groups of army. She trained her army with the art of warfare especially to the "Udayal women Force" under the captainship of Kuyili who an adventurous women of depressed class. She vigorously fought with the British in battles at kochadai and Manamadurai and got victory. She killed Mallarayan. She met the English forces at Sivaganga and fought with Colonial Bonjour courageously and drives out the British from the Sivaganga palace and was crowned as the Queen of Sivaganga in 1780.She ruled Sivaganga for ten years.

Kittur Chennamma the Queen of Kittur, a princely state in Karnataka was the first Indian female ruler to lead an armed rebellion against the British East India Company. After fighting fiercely for many months, her resistance ended with her arrest. She was ultimately captured and imprisoned where she died under captivity.

Durgabai Deshmukh

Durgabai Deshmukh (1909-1981), married to first Marathi finance minister. C.D.Deswhmukh was a prominent female social worker in South India .After hearing Gandhiji's sermons, she joined the freedom struggle, took to wearing Khadi clothes and selling them in the streets in Kakinada and Rajamundry. She was actively involved in the Swadeshi Movement.Born in a middle class family in Kakinada, she founded the Andra Mahila Sabha in Madras (now in Chennai) in 1937.Today the Sabha runes two hospitals, two Colleges , and three high schools . As a Member of Parliament she worked to set up a social welfare board in August 1953 to carry out programmes of educating, training and rehabilitating needy women, children, and the disabled. She was the recipient of a number of awards including the Padma Buushan and the UNESCO award for outstanding work in the field of literacy[2].

Anjalai Ammal

Anjalai Ammal was a prominent freedom fighter in South India. She was born in 1890 in a town called Mudhunagar which is located in Kadalur. She was born in a simple family. She started her political life by joining the Non - Cooperation movement of Gandiji[3]. She participated in a lot of struggles and also suffered many years in the prison. She was pregnant when she was arrested and sent to Vellore jail. Due to this reason she was released and

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after childbirth she was sent to Vellore jail again. She sold her family lands, her house and spent the money for India's struggle for freedom. She also made her nine year old child to participate in the freedom struggle and went to jail along with her daughter. Once Gandhi came to Kadalur, but the British government prohibited him to visit Anjali Ammal. But Anjalai Ammal came in a horse cart wearing burga and visited him. Due to her courage, Gandhi called her as South India's Jhansi Rani[4].

Ambujammal

Ambujammal was a social and political reformer. Ambujammal was the only daughter born on 8 January, 1899 for Smt.Rangnakiammal and S.Srinivasa Iyengar,a prominent lawyer and reputed congress leader of Madras. She was educated by an Anglo-Indian teacher at home. She was married to Desikachari,an advocate of Kumbakonam. Very early in life, she was very much influenced by Gandhiji. She was influenced by sister Subbulakshmi and Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddi who were mainly responsible in getting her interested in social service. Prior to her entry into national service in 1990, she had obtained teachers' training and was working in the Sarada Vidyalaya as a part time teacher. From 1929 to 1936 as a committee Member of Saradas ladies Union, she worked under sister Subbulakshmi. In 1929 she became Treasure of Women's Swadeshi League, Madras and continued in this office till the abolition of the League. The League was a non –political organization but was a wing of the congress, implementing only Gandiji's social and economical programme. In 1930 she joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and courted arrest. In 1932 nominated by the Congress as "Third Dictator" ,she led the Satyagrahis in the foreign cloth boycott and was arrested and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment.

From 1939 to 1942 she was the secretary and from 1939 to 1947 the Treasure of Women's Indian Association. During this time she actively worked for the abolitition of child marriage, polygamy, devadasi system and for bringing about legislation for protecting women's policy rights. From 1948 she participated in the Padayatra of Tamilnadu along with Vinobha Bhave to popularize the Bhoodan Movement[5].

K.P.Janaki Ammal

Born as the only child to Padmanabhan and Lakshmi in 1917, Janaki's early life was spent in penury. She lost her mother when she was eight and was brought up by her grandmother. As an eighth-grade school drop out, she joined music class. A skilled singer that she was, Janaki Ammal joined Palaniappa Pillai Boys Company for a salary of Rs.25 per month. Later, she went on to become the lead actress and earned over Rs. 300 per performance. Janaki Ammal married Gurusamy Naidu, a harmonium player in the troupe.

As a theatre artiste, freedom fighter, congress worker and later a communist – the contributions of Janaki Ammal cannot be undermined. Her rising interest in politics and the freedom movement restricted her acting as she began to dedicate her time and money to social service. Janaki spent her fortunes accumulated from theatre earnings for the people. She joined the congress party in 1936 and served as the office bearer of Madurai Congress Committee and always sang patriotic songs in party meetings. Slowly she grew in stature becoming an important speaker and moved to the Congress Socialist party. Inspired by the Communist philosophy, she joined the Communist Party in 1940.In 1967, Janaki was elected to the State Legislative Assembly from the Madurai East constituency[6].

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