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# By the Women, for the Women -Pre-Independence Press in Tamil Nadu.

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It would be more appropriate to say that women have no rights than to say that women have no equality in India at the beginning of the twentieth century. The female community had not reached any criteria for claiming to be Female Emancipation. Women were neglected from birth to death. The birth of a girl child was considered as an unfortunate event.

Gender discrimination was more prevalent in child rearing. The male child was considered the wealth of the family and the female child the burden of the family. The best foods offered to boys were denied to girls. The education available to boys was denied to girls. Women's literacy was very low as it was considered unnecessary for women to get an education. Women were deprived of their right to employment due to inadequate education. The family property was given entirely to the men.

The laws of the time did not support women to claim ownership of family property. The false notion that it is better for women to depend on a man or men from their birth to their death was in practice. As a result of the spread of western education, some broad-minded men began to talk about women's rights. Over time, men took the initiative to liberate women. At the same time some educated women were also involved in the search for their rights. They carried out movements for it.

The Press in Tamilnadu before independence did their part for women's rights. Many of the magazines that spoke for women were run mostly by men. Some magazines were also run by women. Some educated women saw men's voice for women's rights as a remnant of male domination. *The Indian Ladies Magazine* opined that the initiative undertaken by the men for the women to be interested in politics was too

unwomanly.<sup>1</sup> This article is about the female editors of the day who volunteered to give voice, write and fight for themselves and the magazines they ran in Madras.

Annie Besant, a foreign woman, took part in political movements and ran magazines in Madras. These magazines were based on his political movement and his Theosophical Society. They are not exclusive magazines for women.

### Reception for Female Writers

The prestige of the nation, the wellbeing, grievances and the mental strength of the public could be measured only through the press. From time immemorial, the women were the only affected section in the country. Through an inspiring article, the *Giruhalakshmi* called the potential women to write articles in the journals. It gave chance to the affected women to register their grievances through their articles. The article criticised the orthodox thought that women were lacking in creativity, and it viewed that they were the leaders in creativity. The journal suggested profundity reading of literature and history would make them as good creators. Even though they had to face failures in the early stages, they were potential enough to overcome them. The article ended with a captivating sentence that they should not be terrified of failures and the success would succeed.<sup>2</sup>

### Vai.Mu. Kothainayagi and the *Jaganmohini*

Among the leading women writers in Tamilnadu, Vai.Mu. Kothainayagi played an important role in writing novels. Apart from writing novels, she performed as a successful editor of a monthly called *Jaganmohini* for thirty-five years from 1925. The monthly journal was purchased by her mainly for publishing her novels. She wrote most of her novels for women's cause.<sup>3</sup> She wrote 115 Tamil novels in her days. In her writings she targeted conservative superstitions, the real obstacles of women's liberation. She insisted women;s education, widow re-marriage and the abolition of devadasi system in her novels. She pointed out that chastity was not only women oriented but human oriented. She insisted property right to women as that of men. She utilised her journal with the fullest extent to clash against the women slavery.<sup>4</sup> Although she was not highly educated, her writings witnessed matured style. *The Hindu* praised her writings that the approach was elegant and easy flowing and especially womenfolk would find the novels as proper companion in their spare hours.<sup>5</sup>

## V. Balammal and the *Chinthamani*

Another famous women editor was Sister V. Balammal. She edited the journal called *Chinthamani*. The front page of the magazine carried the message that the journal was a high-class Tamil monthly and dedicated mainly to the cause of Indian women.<sup>6</sup> The press backed her up for the splendid service for the women community.

The press enacted a powerful campaign to realize the necessity of education for women. For that they sought the help of the government. The *Chinthamani* recommended the compulsory education of women<sup>7</sup> and that too should be a free education.<sup>8</sup> Unless the education of women should be made in the form of legislation, the attainment could be impossible. It pleaded the various organisations to give pressure to the government so that the education of women could be a great success.<sup>9</sup>

*The Hindu* wrote “Sister V. Balammal has done a service to the cause of the women of this presidency by her starting ‘*Chinthamani*’, a Tamil monthly intended to raise the present status of women both politically and socially. *Chinthamani* promises to fulfil the function under the able editorship of the scholarly lady. The current number of the journal which is before us opens with an editorial which emphasises the need of convincing the opponents of women-emancipation by explaining to there what the new movements really means, and by clearing certain very common misconceptions regarding it. A special feature of the journal is that moral, national and domestic ideas are brought before the readers in a quiet unobstructive way, through the medium of stories and dialogues. This number contains contributions on a variety of subject including one on the baby-welfare movement in the western countries.”<sup>10</sup> Thus the most important journal witnessed its involvement in the evolution of women in the field of press.

## Revu Thayarammal and *Penkalvi*

Another journal *Penkalvi* worked for the promotion of women’s education. The very meaning of the title is women’s education. It was edited by a women namely Revu Thayarammal. This monthly journal started in 1911. She reserved first fourteen pages for advertisement purpose. Then she utilised the subsequent pages for the betterment of the women community.<sup>11</sup> It wrote that even to work as a coolie, the women should have minimum education.<sup>12</sup> Other journals like *Gunabodhini* supported her mission. It gave extensive exposure about the journal *Penkalvi* and recommended its own readers to support the women editor for her genial cause.<sup>13</sup>

## Maragathavalli and the *Madhar Marumanam*

Another important journal published for and by the women was *Madhar Marumanam*. The title itself revealed the meaning women's re-marriage. The editor of the journal was M. Maragathavalli. Influenced by the ideas of E.V. Ramasamy, she joined the self-respect movement. After sometime, she left the movement, but not the revolutionary ideas taught by the movement. With the effect of these ideas, she started the journal exclusively for the cause of widow's re-marriage from Karaikudi in the year 1936. The title itself challenged the ideas of orthodox people. Initially the editor was a widow. Then she got re-married with Murugappa, the editor of the journal *Kumaran* in the presence of E.V. Ramasamy.<sup>14</sup> The *Kudiyarasu* welcomed their marriage with the observation "Maragathavalli's marriage – mixture of re-marriage and inter caste marriage."<sup>15</sup>

*Madhar Marumanam* was a journal published from Karaikudi from 1936. The Tamil heading itself means widow re-marriage. Each and every part of the journal voiced for widow re-marriage. It replicated the views of Gandhi for the proliferation of widow re-marriage that enforcing widowhood on thousands of women was equivalent to sit on the mines of bombs, and we could not forecast the accurate time of the danger.<sup>16</sup> With the intention of re-marriage propagation, the journal published an advertisement for a pencil, in which the wordings "widow re-marriage will offer liberty" was printed. It witnessed that the journal followed the technique of contemporary days even in 1940s.<sup>17</sup>

In support of the widow re-marriage it published thought provoking quotations regularly. They were, "The tears of widow will submerge the home"<sup>18</sup>, "The snivel of women will shatter the rock"<sup>19</sup> "Marrying widow is a blessed"<sup>20</sup>, "Where there is mercy there is now widow"<sup>21</sup>, "The lovers of tradition must use their rationality"<sup>22</sup> "The requirement of widows is re-marriage alone"<sup>23</sup> and "If the wife passed away, marry a widow"<sup>24</sup>. The journal utilized even a small space in the pages for the proliferation of widow re-marriage.

Knowing very well that unless and otherwise the men were ready to marry a widow, it was hard to end the sufferings, it called the liberal young men to arise and abolish the title 'widow'.<sup>25</sup> It frequently used the census report of 1931 for its noble cause. It told that there were 18 crores unmarried men in India whereas there were only 14.5 crores unmarried women and to keep away from the scarcity of the brides, the grooms should prefer widows as their brides.<sup>26</sup> Generally, there was a belief that the *puranas* and the *sastras* were against widow re-marriage. But the periodical selected some favoured *sulohas* and through that it attempted to establish the stipulation of re-marriages.<sup>27</sup>

The periodical observed that the laws of the society didn't deny the re-marriage of the males, irrespective of their age because they were the law makers. The widow re-marriage was the livelihood right for women. If widow re-marriage was denied, their survival was deemed to be denied. The lovers of prostitution alone opposed widow re-marriage. Apart from that, there was no reason for their opposition.<sup>28</sup> It expressed its discontent over the male prejudiced attitude that the terminology 'widow re-marriage' was believed even by the babies only female oriented.<sup>29</sup> Above all it asked the young widows to revolt against the old customs and to leave the dithers in demanding re-marriage for them.<sup>30</sup>

### **The *Stri-dharma***

The *Stri-dharma* is a Magazine run by women for women. Madras-based women activists like Annie Besant, Margrate Cousins, and Dorathy Jinarajadhasa formed *Stri-dharma* in 1918 in conjunction with the Women's Indian Association. Women were encouraged to take up the fight for female reform and national freedom in this anticolonial, pro-nationalist publication promoted by Indian male reformers of the late nineteenth century. The *Stri-Dharma* plan scared many local and global audiences in nearly twenty years due to the work of privileged Indian and British women.

The magazine was designed to reach literate and non-literate audiences by writing articles that were geared toward Hindu and Muslim women living in northern and southern India. The role played by this multilingual international publication in terms of integrating feminism and nationalism and giving women a voice during the freedom movement in India in the 1920s and 1930s is illustrated by all the relationships that developed during that time period. Publications in English, Tamil, Telugu, and Hindi were distributed throughout India and the world. The paper appealed to women interested in the role of women in social reform movements in India, particularly in relation to marriage reform, education for women, and women's suffrage. The women editors of this journal asked women to do their duty for 'Mother India' by supporting women's political causes within the context of the anti-colonial struggle against Britain.<sup>31</sup>

The journal served as the official publication of the Women's Indian Association. As a political magazine, the magazine's creators were inspired by British women's political journalism, as well as the strong Western influences of feminist internationalism. Women's activities were highlighted and public opinions in support of feminist agendas like women's suffrage and equal rights were published in the magazine's columns. The editors attracted attention by presenting a feminist internationalist discourse presenting a global feminist subject without denying the pure indigenous Canadian or British character of the status quo. During the

interwar period, these women repeatedly negotiated the boundaries of this position to combine nationalist and feminist programs. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Malathi Butwardhan were among the two women general editors of *Stri-Dharma* who played a significant role in guiding the direction of the magazine by including Indian readers and writers. Indian writers contributed Hindi sections and a large percentage of English articles to more than half of the content of the press.<sup>32</sup> Due to the contributions made by its editors and writers, the magazine became the champion of women suffrage in India.

A Committee was appointed by the British Government to consider the issue of women having the right to vote in the elections after women and political parties in India constantly demanded the matter. Since the committee was appointed to examine the issue of women's franchise, it was known as the "Franchise Committee". Since the committee was chaired by Lord Southborough, it came to be known as the Southborough Committee. Once the committee reached India, the Indian women leaders carried out a propaganda campaign and agitated for the committee to be reformed in their favour. *Stri-Dharma*, which was their official magazine, unified all these branches.

The developing framework of the Women's Indian Association, with 72 branches and more than 4000 individuals by 1935 all through India, given the main space where ladies went to hear the news. The editors put forth an uncommon attempt to arrive at *Stri-Dharma's* native language crowd. For instance, they interpreted and distributed holy wedding writings into three dialects to communicate customary resistance to youngster marriage. They toiled in distributing the accompanying flyers for nothing, for example, 'education leaflets in the vernacular', 'Our Appeal to our Sisters,' 'The Value of the Women's Vote,' and 'Wrongs of Child Marriage and of Untouchability.'

The Tamil editor of *Stri-Dharma*, G. Visalakshi also sponsored talks on issues such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act. As part of its efforts to develop this multilingual community to support the rights of women, *Stri-Dharma* made information easier to understand. English words were used rather than Sanskrit words, which was common practice among many nationalist publications of this era. In order to maintain its role as an advocate for women, the *Stri-Dharma* needed to reach a large audience. All sections of the periodical were thus designed to be readable. Such programs opened up *Stri-Dharma's* audience beyond the elite South Indian community. A publication primarily for and by educated women, readers personalized the periodical through the methods they developed, enabling the periodical to reach a much larger audience than would have been otherwise possible.<sup>33</sup>



*The Indian Ladies Magazine* was founded in 1901 in Madras by Kamala Sattiiyanandhan, wife of a Christian social reformer.<sup>34</sup> She frequently took up the theme of women and education. She utilized the journal to organize the activities of the educated women, facilitated them to understand the public affairs and supplemented those of men. She observed through her journal that if among women with men worked hard in getting educational benefits and participated in the national movement, the demands of the people could be more vigorous and their aspirations would be quickly realised.<sup>35</sup> She often insisted physical exercises for the healthy life of Indian women through the journal.<sup>36</sup>

Some other journals worked for the cause of women's liberation but run by the male editors. The important journals of this kind were the *Chakkaravarthini* edited by Subramaiya Bharathi and *Giruhalakshmi* edited by S.Krishnan.

### **Press on Chellammal Bharathi's Efforts**

Chellammal was the wife of a famed Tamil poet Subramaniya Bharathi. After the early demise of Bharathi in September 1921, she suffered a lot for the survival of her family. She tried to bring together and publish her husband's nationalist poems, which was the dream of Bharathi. She made this effort for her livelihood also. The press came forward to support her.<sup>37</sup> The *Navasakthi* published her requisition letter regarding the publication of the poems on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1921. In her letter she told that the poems of Subramaniya Bharathi were the only property left with her. And she was trying to print and publish them. She requested the readers to help monetarily to do the work.<sup>38</sup> In support of her requisition, the above journal published the views and requisitions of the renowned Tamil scholars. V.Kalyanasundaram, the editor of the paper, published his statement in supporting the efforts of Chellmmal on the same day.<sup>39</sup> Because of the support rendered by the journal, she could receive some sort of monetary assistance from the public and she published two volumes of Bharathi's poems in the name of *Swadesa Geethangal*. But she could not carry on her work in publishing all his poems due to financial constraints. In 1940s the press, particularly the *Kalki* tried to collect Bharathi Memorial Fund for the livelihood of Chellammal, the wife of the creator of the everlasting national songs, Subramaniya Bharathi.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, Vol. III, Madras, September- October 1935, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Giruhalakshmi*, Madras, April 1940, pp.226-230.

<sup>3</sup> *Jaganmohini*, 21<sup>st</sup> year Souvenir, Madras, 1 January 1944, *Dinamani*, 18 July 2010, p.8.

- 4 Prema.R, *V.M.Kothainayaki Ammal*New Delhi, 2001, pp.32-35.
- 5 *The Hindu*, Madras, 11 October 1926.
- 6 *Chinthamani*, Madras, November 1925.
- 7 *Chinthamani*, Madras, August 1924, pp.3-6; August 1927, pp.29-31.
- 8 *Ibid.*, August 1924, pp.3-6.
- 9 *Ibid.*, August 1927, pp.29-31
- 10 *The Hindu*, Madras, 11 April 1925.
- 11 *Penkalvi*, Madras, March 1914.
- 12 *Pennkalvi*, Madras, March 1914, pp.149-150.
- 13 *Gunabodhini*, Madras, September 1919, p.75.
- 14 *Dravida Iyakka Idhazhkal* Madras, 1975, p.197.
- 15 ஃரகதவல்லி மணம். மறுமணமும் கலப்பு மணமும் கலந்த காதல் மணம்  
- *Kudiyarasu*, Erode, 7 July 1929
- 16 *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, March 1937, pp.30-34.
- 17 விதவை மணம் விடுதலை அழிக்கும்  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, 16 October 1943, p.12.
- 18 விதவைக் கண்ணீர் வீட்டை அழிக்கும்  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, February 1937, p.34.
- 19 பெண்களின் கண்ணீர் பாறையையும் தகர்க்கும்  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, April 1937, p.41.
- 20 “துணையிழந்தோரை மணப்பது புண்ணியம்”  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, May 1937, p.36.
- 21 “கருணை உள்ள இடத்தில் விதவை இல்லை”  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, March 1937, p.15.
- 22 “பழமையை விரும்புவோர் பகுத்தறிவைச் செலுத்துங்கள்”  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, March 1937, p.16.
- 23, “விதவைகள் விரும்புவது விவாகமே”  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, March 1937, p.28
- 24 “மனைவி இறந்தால் விதவையைக் கொள்”  
- *Madhar Marumanam*, Karaikudi, July- August 1938, p.42.
- 25 *Ibid.*, March 1937, pp.28-29.
- 26 *Ibid.*, April 1937, pp.29-30.
- 27 *Ibid.*, May 1937, pp.17-24.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp.37-41.
- 29 *Ibid.*, August 1936, pp.11-15.
- 30 *Ibid.*, October - November 1936, pp.27-29.
- 31 Tusan, Michelle Elizabeth, 'Writing stri dharma: international feminism, nationalist politics, and women's press advocacy in late colonial India' in *Women's History Review*, 12: 4, 2003, pp.623 — 649.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp.647-649.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Patricia Chaplin, *Class and Gender in India, Women and Their Organisations in a South Indian City*, London, 1985, p.109.
- 35 Naidu. Ch.M., *Nationalism in India, Its Economical and Social Background, 1885-1918*, New Delhi, 1988, p.120.
- 36 *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, 1901, Vol. I, and Eunice de-Souza, *The Sattianandhan Family Album*, New Delhi, 2005, p.151.
- 37 Venkatraman.V., *Burmavil Bharathiyin Desabakthikku Thadai*, 1928-1929, Rajapalyam, 2005, p.31-34.
- 38 *Navasakthi*, Madras, 30 September 1921.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Kalki*, Madras, 29 April 1945, p.17.