

MAJOR POLITICAL LEADERS OF WOMEN IN TAMILNADU – A STUDY

Dr. Chandrasekar

*Assistant Professor and Head of History, Devanga Arts College
Aruppukkottai*

Educational opportunities and employment avenues which given to women by feminist organizations and government sectors in India excluding Tamilnadu. As a result of the economic status of women was elevated in the society. Such opportunities were created by the continuous effort taken by the several women social activists through women's movements and organisations. Earlier, the women involved in social activity came into political activity through national movement of India. These are the circumstances stimulated the women to enter into politics in Tamilnadu. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Ammu Swaminathan, Rukmani Lakshmi Pathy, Jothi Venkatachalam, Satyavanimuthu, Lourdammal Simon, Subbulakshmi Jagadeesan and Jayalalitha are the women political leaders in Tamilnadu and gave contributions to the society. They are particularly to women are briefly highlighted in this paper.

Muthulakshmi Reddi

Muthulakshmi Reddi, the first women doctor of Madras Medical College. First, she was more interested in social work and political uplift of women in Tamil society. She started her social activity with women India Association (WIA) of Madras in 1917. She was the first woman legislator who nominated as a member of Madras legislative Council in 1926. Her performance as Legislative Council member was remarkable in 1928 - 1930. The Sarada Bill for preventing the child marriage was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindus. Because of the efforts made by Muthulakshmi Reddi, the bill was passed. She recommended to the government that the age for marriage is raised to at least 21 for boys and 16 for girls.¹ Another significant activity of Muthulakshmi Reddi that was the abolishment of Devadasi system in 1929 in Tamilnadu. In 1930, the Act for the suppression of brothels and immoral traffic was piloted by her and passed. Further, she made strong efforts to get seats reserved for women in local bodies. Muthulakshmi Reddi founded "Avvai Home" at Adyar in Madras for the neglected, vagrant and destitute children in 1930. She became the president of the 5th All India Women Conference (AIWC) was held at Lahore in 1930.²

Muthulakshmi Reddi was the secretary and organizer of the Madras Children's Aid Society between 1924 and 1936. She became the first Alderwoman of the Madras Corporation for two years from 1937. She involved herself in the bigger problem, children's education and child welfare.³ She was again selected as a member of Legislative Council between 1952 and 1957. She founded cancer Institute at Adyar in 1954. She was honoured by awarding 'Pamda Bhusan' for the service rendered for the welfare of women and children in

1956 by the Government of India. She wrote more than 10 books in English and some of them are Care for Pregnant Women', 'Infant Feeding, Infant Mortality in India, Cancer and its prevention, My experience as a Legislator. She wrote article in English and Tamil to WIA's monthly journal.⁴

Ammu Swaminathan

Ammu Swaminathan who the founder member of the WIA started in Madras. She joined the Indian Nation Congress in 1934. She was the member of Madras Corporation between 1934 and 1939. She participated in Indian freedom struggle and jailed for two years. She became the member of Central Legislative Assembly in 1945 and a member of Constituent Assembly of India in 1946. She went to Ethiopia, China, USA and USSR as an Ambassador of India. She participated as a representative of India in UNESCO conference held at Geneva in 1949. She became the member of Lok Sabha in 1950. She served as a member of Rajya Sabha from the State of Madras for the period of 1957 and 1960. She served as a president of Bharat Scout and Guides from November 1960 to March 1965. She was a member of Regional and Central Boards of film censors and the Film Award Committee and also was the president of the Madras Film Society.⁵

Rukmini Lakshmpathi

Rukmini Lakshmpathi was the first woman who got the degree in Madras University. She was one of the political leaders who came from social work. She was one of the founder member of WIA and a prominent member of the same. She was the first woman who insisted the western education to Indian children. She worked for the implementation of adult education, female education and extension of elementary education. She actively participated in the freedom struggle and joined as a member of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1924. Her political activities were spread over TamilNadu and considered as an active congress woman. She was an opportunity to attend the 10th International Women's Suffrage Alliance Congress in Paris in 1929 as a delegate from India. She availed this chance to travel all over Europe and propagated for India. She was one of the women who clubbed her social activities with political activities. She was the secretary of 'Bharat Maha Mandal' which was an organization for social work. She worked for the prohibition of liquor through 'Youth League' which was formed by her. She was actively involved in the agitation against Simon Commission and raised the slogan 'Simon go back' in 1929 and Vedaranyam Salt Satyagraha in 1930 under the leadership of Rajaji. She was imprisoned in connection with salt sathyagraha. Again she was arrested and imprisoned for the participation of the Civil Disobedient Movement in 1932. She championed the cause of Harijan welfare and she contributed her whole wealth to Harijan Welfare Fund.⁶

Rukmini Lakshmpathi was occupied in several positions and served significantly. She was elected to the Madras Presidency Legislative Assembly in the election of 1937. On 15 July 1937, she was elected Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. She was the first woman Minister for Public Health of the Madras Presidency in the T.Prakasam Cabinet, which was

the one more credit in her career. She was imprisoned in 1930 due to her active participation in Salt Satyagraha at Vedaranyam. She was respectfully called 'Mother' by the Congress people. She made sincere attempt to enact of the social legislation on problems like caste system, child marriage, alcoholism, untouchability and Devadasi system.

Jothi Venkatachalam

Jothi Venkatachalam had the opportunity to serve as Minister in Rajaji and Bakthavatsalam headed Ministries. She was the Minister of Public Health in Rajaji Ministry. It was noteworthy to say that Jothi Venkatachalam introduced a number of bills in the Madras State Assembly. She took immediate steps to prevent the outbreak of epidemics like cholera, small pox, throughout Tamilnadu. She had implemented vocational training for adult women through women's club. she established 12,461 women's clubs for the purposes. These clubs trained the poor and uneducated women with handloom works such as lace making, embroidery making, etc. She allowed extending the prohibition. The primary health centres in South Arcot which established by her in 1962 and established a committee to review medical relief work in the state.⁷

Jothi Venkatachalam became the minister in the Cabinet of Bakthavasalam in October 1962. She was the first women minister who recommended the formation of women police force in Tamilnadu. She ordered to vaccinate all the children in Tamilnadu with triple vaccine in 1965 for the improvement of Children's health. Similarly, he took effective measures to control leprosy. In this connection, she established the leprosy disease control centres in Tamilnadu and extended the new medical procedure to Chennai, Tiruchirappalli and Cuddalore leprosy centres. She contributed a lot for the health of women and children in Tamilnadu.⁸

Sathyavani Muthu

Sathyavani Muthu was a women *dalit* leader and politician. She directly enter into politics. She was the minister in the cabinets headed by C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanithi in 1967 and 1974 respectively. Her political status came to lime light after joining the regional political party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) led by C.N. Annadurai since its inception 1949. She was arrested for leading DMK's protest against the 'Kula Kalvi Thittam' proposed by Rajaji. She was the propaganda Secretary of the DMK party.⁹

Sathyavani Muthu was elected for the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1957 as independent candidate. She served as a minister for Harijan Welfare and Information, in the ministry led by C.N. Annadurai between 1967 and 1969 and she continued with the same portfolio in the ministry led by M. Karunanithi till 1974. As a Harijan Welfare Minister, she granted Rs.15 lakhs for scholarship for SC and ST students in 1969 and started children care centre at 200 places in Tamilnadu in 1969. She motivated the people for small savings in all districts of Tamilnadu.

A high level special committee was formed under the Chairpersonship of Sathyavanimuthu by State Government to analyse the impact and effect of the social welfare

schemes sponsored by the Government. As a result, a social welfare centre was formed in each district in Tamilnadu. Job opportunities and educational facilities were provided to Harijan Women through these centres. She established 508 hostels in Tamilnadu for the improvement of education for SC and ST students in 1973. For the first time she gave Rs. 1,26,000 for 26 fishermen families as death relief fund. The news and Advertising Department of Tamil Nadu under her control started to give prizes to the best films, best heroes and best heroines of Tamil Cinema. This prize scheme was first introduced by Sathyavanimuthu. She resigned her minister post in 1974 and left DMK party due to difference of opinions in policy matters. She started a new political party and named as Thazhthapattor Munnetra Kazhagam (TMK). Later this party was merged with All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1977.¹⁰

Sathyavanimuthu served as a Rajya Sabha Member as an AIADMK representative for 5 years from 1978 to 1984. During this period, she served as a member of the Welfare Committee for SC and ST, Dowry and Prohibition Amendment Act Committees to the Indian Parliament. She was the dalit women leader, best administrator and sincere politician. She died in 1999. Her mighty works empowered the women in Tamilnadu.

Lourdammal Simon

Lourdammal Simon was the first women minister of Local Administration and Fisheries in the ministry of K. Kamaraj in 1957. She was elected to the Madras State Legislative Assembly as an Indian National Congress (INC) candidate from Colachel constituency in Kanyakumari in the election of 1957. During her tenure, she introduced City Municipal (Amendment) Bill in 1958 and 1961, extension of the Term of Office of Municipal Councilors Bill 1958 and Local Authorities Financial Bill in 1961. As a local minister of local administration, she divided Chennai into North and South Chennai for the administrative purpose. As a minister of Fisherish, she made a survey of fishermen and their needs and carried out the rehabilitation work for the affected huts of fishermen by monsoon.¹¹

Lourdammal Simon started a research centre at Gulf of Mannar for deep sea fishing under the Indo-Norway Plan in 1957. Because of this plan, the deep sea fish catching was improved. Further, she established marine biology centres at Thirisadai, Thoothukudi, Yemmoon and in Kanyakumari. She also established the fresh-water biology centres at Chennai, Bhavanisakar, Thoothukudi and Kanyakumari. She introduced a new type of boat for the development of fishermen in Tamilnadu which named as 'Popelo'. It was a high speed boat which helped the fishermen to go into deep sea to capture more fishes. In her tenure, the local administration department and fisheries were developed significantly.¹²

Subbulakshmi Jagadeesan

Subbulakshmi Jagadeesan was the first women Minister for Handloom and Textile Department of Government of Tamilnadu for 1978 - 1980. She also had another portfolio in the cabinet such as minister for social welfare department for the period of 1989 - 1991. In the Handloom and Textile she did a remarkable contribution. She introduced fashion

designing centres in many parts of Tamilnadu. The fashion designing centre in Madurai was controlled by co-optex industry. Five more similar centres were started in Tamilnadu. As a result the rapidly increased sales and production.¹³

Another mile stone of her contribution was the introduced of 'Jantha Dress' producing plan in Tamilnadu for providing free *sarees* and *dhoties* to poor people. To successfully implement the plan Subbulakshmi Jegadeesan arranged 15,000 weaving equipments. She also introduced the 'Saving and Caring plan', which was welcomed by weavers. According to this plan 6% of their salary was deducted every month and another 3% was contributed by government. The amount accrued was given 7% interest. Further she increased the life insurance of weavers from Rs. 500/- to Rs. 3000/-. She had introduced a novel technique for dying in Textile industry. She started 20 big dying industries in which 200 big bungles were carried out instead of normal usage of 60 big bundles. She took steps for the welfare measurements. She increased Moovalur Ramaamirtham Ammaiyan Memory marriage assistance to poor women from Rs. 1000/- to Rs. 5000/-. Similarly, Tharumanibai Widow Remarriage plan assistance of Rs. 5000/- was given to widows who were remarried in 1989.¹⁴

The Chief Ministers Children's Vitamin Food Plan was introduced in 1953 which renamed by Subbulakshmi Jagadeesan as Tamil Nadu Government Vitamin Food Plan (in Tamil it is called *Sathumavu*). In this plan egg was the first accessory dish in addition to vitamin food to children. She introduced measures to help visually challenged. She started an audio library at Chennai with a view to helping the blinds. She opened the eye of the blind ones by the 'Braille' procedure. In this way Subbulakshmi Jegadeesan did a wonderful and recognizable service for the welfare of the women and others.¹⁵

J. Jayalalitha

J.Jayalalitha started her career as actress in the cinema field. She entered as a basic member of AIADMK which was headed by M.G. Ramachandran and later she was became the propaganda secretary of AIADMK party in 1982. Then she was elected as the member of Rajya Sabha for the period of 1984 - 1989. Jayalalitha became the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu at the age of 43 and continued as Chief Minister upto May 1996. She was the only woman who reached the highest position of Chief Minister within the two years in the political field. During her tenure, she implemented the total prohibition by appointing state level committee under the chairmanship of Chief Minister. She revived the prohibition enforcement using the 1800 police men. It was highly appreciated by women of Tamilnadu.¹⁶

As a Chief Minister, she introduced some novel schemes with a view to developing Tamil Nadu State. She established Tamil Nadu Corporation for industrial Infrastructural Development, Tamilnadu guidance and Export Promotion Bureau, Foreign Investment Promotion, Coordination Cell, Export Promotion Cell, Standing Advisory Committee, Policy Planning Group, Sale Tax Reform Committee, Labour Rehabilitation Fund, Technology Development Fund, Empowered Committee and Minorities Committee. There were 58

public sector undertakings by Tamilnadu State Government with a total capital of Rs. 470.71 crores as on 31.03.1991.¹⁷

Similarly Jayalalitha contributed significant to education in Tamilnadu. She introduced 'Arivoli Iyakkam' in 1995. For this a committee headed by District Collector of districts was formed in the first phase in 1991 - 1992. It was carried out in 10 districts in 1992 - 1993 in second phase and 5 more districts in 1993 - 1994 in the third phase.¹⁸ This scheme gave priority to Pudukkottai and Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar District. She introduced MGR Sathumavu Thittam, free text books, uniforms, and bus pass schemes to school boys and girls for improvement of their education. For the upliftment of female students from 1st to 5th standard, Jayalalitha ordered to appoint only lady teachers.¹⁹ On 31 March 1992, she upgraded 27 primary schools to middle schools. During 1991 - 1992, she upgraded 21 high schools to higher secondary schools and 20 middle schools to high schools. Seven high schools were newly started in Dharmapuri.²⁰

Some more novel schemes were introduced by Jayalalitha in her tenure as Chief Minister. 'Thottil Kulanthai' (Cradle Baby) was introduced by her to stop the infanticide. A separate all women police station was formed for protecting women. The first women police station formed in Ayiramvilakku, Chennai and functioned well. After knowing the good performance of these women police station, Jayalalitha started many more women police stations in the whole of Tamilnadu. She also introduced women commando force in Tamil Nadu. She created many opportunities to women for their empowerment through SHGs. She struggled for 33% place to women and she appointed women in high positions in her government. Rain water harvesting scheme, banning lottery tickets, completion of new Veeranam Water Supply Scheme were some of the schemes worth mentioning.²¹

Honoured with the Award 'Kalaimamani' by the Tamil Nadu Government in 1972. The University of Madras on 19th December 1991 has honoured her by conferring on her the Degree of Doctor of Literature (D.Lit). Honoured with the Golden Star of Honour and Dignity Award by the International Human Rights Defence Committee, Ukraine. Honoured with the Paul Harris Fellow Recognition and Life-time achievement Award by the Rotary International. Because of her revolutionary activities and achievements, she was affectionately called 'Puratchi Thalaivi' (Revolutionary Leader) and 'Amma' (mother) by the People of Tamil Nadu.²²

However the status and position of women in political participation and their representation in the State Legislative Assembly is myth and dream. State Legislative Assembly is the highest body for making political decisions in which women's contribution is insignificant. In this respect, we are wasting women's talent and efficiency which are necessary for all development of the country. In order to ensure empowerment of women in political arena, the issue of 33% reservation of seats for women in grass root levels of the organizations is to be taken up women's organizations and social thinkers.

End Notes

1. S.P. Sen, *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol.14, Punjab, Publication Bureau, 1985 p.524.
2. Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council, Vol.XXIX, 1928, p.1254.
3. Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council, Vol.XXIX, 1928, p.1212.
4. Kudi Arasu, Tamil Daily, 15 August 1937, p.3.
5. S.P.Sen, *op.cit.*, P.524.
6. Kudi Arasu., *op.cit.*, 1930, p.3.
7. Tamil Nadu Legislative Council Debates, Vol.XLVII, 1962, p.597.
8. Ibid., p.204.
9. www.Online educational resource collections.
10. Tamil Nadu State Administrative Report, Chapter, XVIII, 1973-1974, p.351.
11. Tamil Nadu Legislative assembly Review, chapter-IV, 19571966, p.16.
12. Tamil Nadu State Administrative Report, Chapter, XV, 1973-1974, p.280.
13. Tamil Nadu State Assembly Quadrennial Review, Chapter, IV, 1970-1980, p.59.
14. Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol.XXV, 1990, p.611.
15. K.M.Mathew, *Manorama Year Book*, Kottayam, M.M publications, 1990, p.819.
16. Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Debates, Official Report Vol.IV, No.1, September 1991, p.15.
17. Indian Express, English Daily, 1 April 1991, p.10.
18. Indian Express, English Daily, 5 April 1995, p.12.
19. P.C.Ganesan, *Daughter of South India*, New Delhi, Sage publications, 1996, p.25.
20. The Hindu, English Daily, 30 April 1992, p.12.
21. Thina Thanthi, Tamil Daily, 16, June 2008, p.18.
22. Thina Thanthi, Tamil Daily, 13, March 2010, p.7.