

Unsung Women Freedom Fighters of Tamil Nadu with Special Reference to Madurai

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INTRODUCTION:

Women freedom fighters in India have played a vital and prominent role in the country's history. For nearly 200 years, India was under British rule. The efforts and sacrifices made by India's freedom fighters led to our independence, which was achieved in 1947. August 15 remains a significant day for all Indians as a tribute to the patriotism and struggles of our freedom fighters. Female freedom fighters in India demonstrated immense bravery and valor as early as the 18th century, proving that women would not be relegated to the sidelines of the independence movement.

Indian women played a crucial role in the struggle for Indian independence from British rule. They engaged in various protests, including civil disobedience, non-violent resistance, and boycotts. Rani Lakshmi Bai, often referred to as Jhansi ki Rani, was one of the earliest and most notable women to champion India's freedom. She bravely fought against the British army, displaying remarkable courage. Some of the prominent Indian women freedom fighters include Rani Laxmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamla Nehru, Vijay Laxmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Madam Bhikaji Cama are the well known Indian Women freedom fighters.

When we recall the Indian Freedom movement, names like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vallabhai Patel, Rajaji, and Subhas Chandra Bose come to mind. However, there are numerous lesser-known freedom fighters who were imprisoned and fought for India's independence. In particular, many women from South India played a significant role in the struggle for Indian freedom.

Rani Velu Nachiyar was the first queen to resist British colonial rule in India. Tamils refer to her as Veeramangai. She was the daughter of Raja Chellamuthu Vijayaragunatha Sethupathy and Rani Sakandhimuthal and hailed from the Ramnad kingdom. Notable freedom fighters from Tamil Nadu include Rani Velu Nachiyar, Rukmini Lakshmipathi, S. Ambujammal, S. N. Sundarambal of Tirupur, Kamala Ramasamy, Govindammal, and Lakshmi Sahgal.

Padmasini Ammal

Padmasini Ammal was a prominent leader in the national movement who operated on the frontlines. Following the influence of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Padmasini founded the Tilak Ashram in Madurai and held evening classes for adults. She also initiated a door-to-door campaign to promote the importance of Khaddar. While she was pregnant, Swami Sivam organized the Cauvery yatra, and Padmasini participated in it to advocate for Khaddar. She spoke at a gathering in Paparapatti, where Subramania Siva was laid to rest. During the yatra, she gave birth to a daughter, but unfortunately, due to the demanding conditions of the journey, the baby passed away a few days later. Padmasini Ammal was present at the Indian National Congress session in Belgaum that took place in December 1924.

She founded the 'Sisters Association'. When the Civil Disobedience Movement began, she expressed her support at a gathering in Jhansi Rani Park. After her arrest, she went on a hunger strike in prison while she was three months pregnant. Due to the strain, she experienced a miscarriage. In 1934, she dedicated 10 acres of land in Munnampattu village for the Bharathi Ashram. In 1935, she established a school for the underprivileged in Manamadurai. Padmasini bid farewell to her husband with a garland and tilak when he was imprisoned for protesting against toddy shops. She delivered numerous speeches to promote unity among the people and took part in various riots that occurred in Tamil Nadu. She died on January 16, 1936.

K.P. Janaki Ammal

K.P. Janaki Ammal, the brave daughter of Madurai, bravely confronted the British and overcame numerous obstacles in her path. Born in 1917 in Madurai, Janaki Ammal was recognized as the first woman in South India to be detained by the British. She never shied away from voicing her opposition to British rule. As a theater performer, freedom fighter, Congress member, and later a communist, Janaki Ammal's contributions are significant. Her first arrest occurred in 1930 while she was performing in Tirunelveli, after which she endured hardship. At the age of eight, she lost her mother and was raised by her grandmother. A dropout after the 8th grade, she enrolled in music classes and later joined the Palaniappapillai Boys company, earning a salary of Rs. 25 per month, eventually rising to the position of lead actress. She married Guru Swamy Naidu, the harmonium player in the troupe.

In 1936, she became a member of the Congress Party and later affiliated with the Congress Socialist Party. When the Congress representatives in Madurai chose not to hold a reception for Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose during his visit, Janaki Ammal participated in the event. She encountered P. Jeevanandam and P. Ramamurthy at Batlagundu. Motivated by Communist ideology, she became a member of the Communist Party in 1940. She was imprisoned for her involvement in anti-war activities under the Defence of India Act. She was elected as the president of the All India Democratic Women's Association and also represented the Madurai South Constituency in the assembly of independent India. In 1947, she became the first woman councilor elected to the Madurai Municipality. She passed away on March 1, 1992.

Sornathammal:

On the night of October 2, 1942, a horrific event awaited Sornathammal. Together with her companion in the freedom struggle, Lakshmi Bai Ammal, she helped organize a women's march in Madurai, chanting the 'Vellaiyane Veliyeru' (Quit India) slogan. The police apprehended the women and subjected them to violence. They were stripped of their clothing and abandoned outside in the frigid night near Alagarkoil. However, Sornathammal possessed a resolute spirit — this incident did not weaken her commitment to the national cause. She engaged in Individual Satyagraha and was imprisoned for three months in 1942.

With Gandhi's influence, initiatives such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Khilafat Movement, boycotting foreign goods, the Salt Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience Movement, Individual Satyagraha, anti-war campaigns, and the Quit India Movement inspired countless men and women across India to join the fight for freedom. Under Gandhi's Constructive Programme, women participated every Friday by spinning for two hours at the Madurai Sahotharigal Sangam (The Sisters Association) established by Padasini Ammal.

Ambujammal:

As the daughter of advocate Srinivasa Iyengar, Ambujammal led a life of privilege. However, she renounced all material luxuries for the sake of one man, Gandhiji. Born in 1898, she became his follower after meeting him during his visit to Madras in the 1920s. "She donated her diamonds and silks for the Harijan welfare fund when she was at Sewagram," recalls Sarojini Varadappan, who regarded Ambujammal as a 'mentor.' Now over 90 years old, the ailing social worker reminisces about how she and Ambujammal offered free Hindi lessons in a small room. Ambujammal actively engaged for six months on two occasions in 1932. She devoted her life to the pursuit of India's independence and encouraged many women to follow suit. Women's welfare was her primary focus. In 1948, she established the Srinivasa Gandhiji Nilayam in Teynampet, where free milk, medicine, and Kanji (gruel) were provided to those in need. Ambujammal was recognized for her simplicity. Affectionately known as Akkammal, she wore khadi and adorned herself with merely a strand of beads around her neck.

Manjubhashini:

From a young age, Manjubhashini was inspired by Gandhi's principles. She chose to leave her affluent lifestyle behind to partake in his struggle for freedom. Alongside Durgabai Deshmukh, she burned foreign goods on Thambu Chetty Street in the city and helped rehabilitate Indians displaced from Burma at a camp in Madras during the early 1940s. "Being arrested for the country was not unfamiliar to her," recalls N. Gandhimathi, who had known her since she was

eight years old. "To me, 'Manjuma' embodied Gandhi," she adds. Manjubhashini was responsible for organizing the prayer meetings for Gandhiji held at the Hindi Prachar Sabha between 1942 and 1943. She diligently worked to establish a home for abandoned children in the city, named Balamandir, which she got registered with the support of K. Kamaraj in 1949.

Even today, the home continues to thrive in T. Nagar. A bust of Manjubhashini can be found on the grounds of Bala Mandir. Her unwavering love and devotion to Gandhi inspired her to adopt a lifestyle aligned with his principles, leading her to forsake a life of comfort in favor of socialism. She made significant contributions to society by establishing organizations to aid lower-class and other backward communities. Thus, she became an unforgettable female activist in Madurai.

Mrs. Lakshmi Sundaram:

Mrs. Lakshmi Sundaram, the spouse of T.V.S. Sundaram Iyyengar, established the Hindu Mathar Sangam and taught spinning to other women from various sections of society, including Kathoon Beevi, a Muslim woman from Periyakulam. R. Naraniammal from Thevaram, Meenammal and Sinnathangammal from Koodalore, and R. Kangavalli from Kuchanur were involved in the toddy shop picketing in 1930. Rakkammal and Samandiammal from Thandikudi, along with J.S.R.R. Ponnuthai of Ammapatty and Venkatammal from Chinnamanoor, participated in the Quit India movement and Individual Satyagraha in 1942. Numerous women from B. Renganathapuram, including T. Janakiammal, Gomathiammal, T. Viveka Chinthamani, N. Pavun Thai, S. Suruliammal, K. Virumallammal, M. Lahumuthai, and S. Bangajam from Bodinayakkanur, provided food for the freedom fighters who went underground. Pappammal from Cholvandan took part in the Salt Satyagraha and was imprisoned for over two years starting from 1932. A significant portion of the financial support for the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, led by V.O.C., came from women, particularly those from Tirunelveli, Madurai, and Ramnad.

Krishnammal Jagannathan:

Krishnammal Jagannathan was a key figure advocating against social injustice in Tamil Nadu. She dedicated herself to improving the lives of the landless and impoverished individuals in the southernmost state of India. She is also the founder of the Land for Tillers' Freedom (LAFTI) initiative. Krishnammal Jagannathan was a woman and activist who brought about significant change in South India through the application of Gandhian principles.

S.R. Kannammal (1891 - 1971: Erode):

The younger sister of Periyar, she served as the publisher of 'Kudiarasu' magazine in the 1930s. Both Kannammal, as the publisher, and Periyar, as the editor, were sentenced for an editorial penned by Periyar entitled 'Why this regime should be thrown out', earning him six months in prison and her three months. Following Periyar since 1925, she became a councilor in Erode Municipality in 1932.

Meena Krishnaswamy (1922 - 2012: Madurai):

She was imprisoned at the age of 13 and joined the Wardha Ashram of Gandhi Adigal in 1939, where she pursued basic education for three years. During the Quit India movement in 1942, she campaigned in nearby villages. Ultimately, she served a year in prison in Nagpur that same year, totaling six years of incarceration.

Leelavathi (1957 - 1997: Madurai)

The daughter of Cuddalore Anjalai Ammal, she took part in the Neil statue agitation at the age of nine in 1927, alongside her mother. After being arrested with her mother, she spent four years in a juvenile prison due to her age. Upon her release, she was called to Wardha Ashram by Gandhi Adigal, who changed her name from Ammakannu, given by her parents, to Leelavathi. She later married freedom fighter E.R. Jamadagni.

Mayakkaal (1920: Perungamanallur)

A revolt occurred in Perungamanallur on 03.04.1920 in opposition to the Criminal Tribes Act. The police killed 16 individuals, including a woman named Mayakkal, who was shot while attempting to provide water to an injured person fighting for life.

V.M. Kothainayaki (1901 - 1960: Chengalpattu)

Initially adorned in silk garments and gold jewelry, she adopted Khadi after embracing Gandhian ideals. She took part in the picketing of toddy shops in 1931 and protested against the Lothian Commission in 1932. She was imprisoned multiple times and was also a distinguished author.

PKR Lakshmi Kanthan:

A number of women including S. Thaammal, R. Lakshimkantham, V. Akilandeswari, NMR S. Parvatha Vardhini, MKS Parvatha Vardhini, K. Lakshmi Bharathi and Dr. Pitchai Muthu Ammal and Minakshi Ammal visited the 'cheries in Madurai and offered their services to the Harijans and their children. The Harijan children were taken to the residences of Thayammal, R. Lakshmikantham and P.V. Somasundara Nadar. They were given neat bath and offered good dress to be put on. They were taken around the Chittai Streets, singing devotional songs. Lakshmikantham met Mahatma Gandhi at the Sabarmathi Ashram, Ahmedabad and presented her gold bangles to him towards Harijan Fund.

S.Thayammal:

A woman member of the congress in Madurai was an admirable worker for Harijan upliftment. As a member the Municipal Council, she successfully passed a resolution on 7th June 1933 which provided funds for the amelioration of the Harijans living in the Cheries (slums) in Madurai, She took Harijan children to her home (in Vidwan Ponnusamy Pilla street, near Meenakshi Temple) gave them a good bath and offered them neat dress.

In the Civil Disobedience Movement that was organised in the Madras Province from January to March 1932 a total of 42 women were arrested and convicted. Of all the 23 towns in Tamil Nadu, Madurai stood first in the Women's participation of the 42 convicted women, 16 women belonged to Macurai city alone. These women took part in the picketing of shops selling foreign cloth in the Amman Sannathi area near the Sri Mcenakshi Temple and they were arrested and convicted.

Madurai women secured a lasting name in Tamil Nadu by their heroic participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The names of the 16 convicted women in the picketing operations held in 1932 are listed below

1. Baghyalakshmi Ammal
2. Muthammal
3. Chinmakonda Somammal
4. Padmasani Ammal
5. Janaki Ammal
6. Parvatha Vardhini NMRS
7. Kamalambal,
8. Parvatha Vardhini MKS
9. S. Kamalabhai
10. Dr. Pitchaimuthu Ammal
11. Lakshmi Ammal
12. Silakari Ammal
13. Lakshmibai
14. Sitalakshmi Ammal
15. Minakshi Ammal
16. S. Thayammal

Other Women Freedom Fighters in Madurai District

1. Akilandathammal : Joined Freedom Movement and Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932 and Individual Satyagraha in 1941.
2. Alamelu Ammal : Joined Freedom Movement and Individual Satyagraha in 1941.
3. V.Bagyalakshmi : Joined Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932.
4. Bhargaviamma : Quit India Movement in 1943.
5. Chella Kani:Joined Freedom movement in 1940 and Individual in 1941
6. Dhanambal : Took part in Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932.
7. Jayalakshmi Ammal : Joined Freedom Movement and foreign cloth boycott movement in 1943.
8. Lakshmi Ammal : Joined foreign cloth boycott movement in 1932.
9. Meenakshiammal : Joined Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932.

Conclusion:

The story of India's independence is incomplete without acknowledging the immense sacrifices and indomitable spirit of countless women who fought silently yet bravely against colonial oppression. In Tamil Nadu, and particularly in Madurai, several courageous women contributed significantly to the freedom movement, often at great personal cost, yet their stories remain largely unrecognized. These unsung heroines from local revolutionaries and grassroots organizers to fearless leaders played a pivotal role in mobilizing public sentiment, challenging colonial authority, and inspiring future generations

By shedding light on their lives and contributions, we not only honor their legacy but also challenge the gendered narratives of history that have marginalized their voices. Remembering these women is not merely a matter of historical accuracy; it is a tribute to the power of resilience, courage, and the enduring spirit of justice. It is imperative that we continue to research, document, and celebrate the roles of these forgotten warriors so their stories become an integral part of our collective national memory.

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