



Print, Reform, and Resistance: Tamil Women and Political Consciousness in Colonial South India

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Abstract

This study examines the rise of political consciousness among Tamil women in colonial South India (late 19th century–1947). It highlights the role of vernacular print media like Stri Dharma and Kudi Arasu in shaping gender debates and public engagement. Socio-religious reformers such as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Sister Subbalakshmi championed women's education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of oppressive practices. The Self-Respect Movement offered radical spaces for non-Brahmin women's participation. Tamil women also played active roles in the nationalist struggle, notably during the 1930 Salt Satyagraha. Drawing on archives, periodicals, and biographies, the study shows how women negotiated tradition while redefining their identities. This intersection of gender, caste, and colonial modernity forged a distinct South Indian feminist awakening.

Keywords: Kudi Arasu, catalyzed, missionaries, autobiographies, vigorously, hierarchies, unprecedented.

Introduction

The early 20th century was a transformative period for women in colonial South India, particularly in the Tamil region. The emergence of print media such as Tamil-language newspapers, journals, and women's magazines coincided with a broader wave of socio-political awakening fueled by reformist ideologies, anti-colonial resistance, and nationalist politics. The founding of journals like India (1898), Stri Dharma (1918), and Kudi Arasu (1925) offered platforms for women's voices and debates on gender, caste, and nationhood. These publications marked a departure from traditional roles, enabling Tamil women to engage in public discourse through essays, letters, and editorials.

This shift occurred alongside important socio-religious reform movements. The Women's Indian Association (WIA) was founded in Madras in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, and others to promote women's education and suffrage. Reformers like Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first Indian woman legislator (elected in 1927 to the Madras Legislative Council), worked to abolish the devadasi system and expand female education. Meanwhile, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1925, which explicitly addressed women's rights, caste oppression, and patriarchal control, advocating for inter-caste marriage and female autonomy. Tamil women also engaged directly in the Indian freedom struggle. During the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, many



women in coastal Tamil Nadu organized protests and courted arrest. Activists like Ammu Swaminathan and S. Ambujammal emerged as important figures in local and national campaigns. These experiences catalyzed a growing sense of political identity among Tamil women. This paper examines the intersections of print culture, reform movements, and resistance politics to trace the evolution of political consciousness among Tamil women. It investigates how women navigated, negotiated, and at times resisted dominant ideologies of colonialism, caste, and patriarchy thus playing a crucial role in shaping Tamil political modernity from the early 1900s until India's independence in 1947.

Objectives

1. To analyze the role of Tamil-language print media in shaping women's political awareness.
2. To examine the influence of reform movements (e.g., Brahmo Samaj, Self-Respect Movement) on Tamil women's socio-political positioning.
3. To identify prominent women figures and their contributions to the public discourse.
4. To explore the role of caste, class, and religion in framing Tamil women's resistance.
5. To assess the participation of Tamil women in anti-colonial and nationalist movements.

Methodology

This research adopts a historical-analytical methodology, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources to examine the development of political consciousness among Tamil women in colonial South India. Primary sources include archival materials from influential Tamil periodicals such as *Ananda Vikatan*, *India*, *Stri Dharma*, and *Kudi Arasu*, which played a critical role in shaping and reflecting the public discourse on gender and politics. The study also utilizes biographies and personal writings of important women activists such as Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sister Subbalakshmi, and Ammu Swaminathan, whose lives exemplify the intersection of reform, resistance, and public service. Additionally, it engages with records and publications from prominent social and political organizations, including the Women's Indian Association and the Self-Respect Movement, which

were instrumental in advocating for women's rights and socio-political reform. Secondary sources include scholarly literature on colonial feminism, Tamil political modernity, and gender history in South India, providing critical frameworks for analyzing the complex interplay of caste, class, and gender in shaping Tamil women's political agency during the colonial era.

The Rise of Print Culture and Tamil Women's Visibility

The emergence and expansion of print culture in Tamil Nadu from the late 19th century onward had a profound impact on the visibility and voice of women in the public sphere. Print became an important medium through which social reform, political consciousness, and gender debates were articulated, negotiated, and disseminated. As Tamil society encountered colonial modernity, the vernacular press became a crucial space for contesting traditional norms and imagining new roles for women. The earliest efforts to educate and empower women in colonial Tamil Nadu were supported by reformist publications and missionaries. From the 1870s, Christian missionary journals such as *The Female Education Society's Reports* and *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* (founded by Kamala Sathianadhan in 1901) began to promote women's education and literacy. These early initiatives laid the groundwork for more politicized writings in the early 20th century.

The founding of the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in 1917 in Madras marked a pivotal moment in both women's activism and their engagement with print culture. The WIA began publishing *Stri Dharma* in 1918, a monthly English-language magazine dedicated to women's rights, education, and international feminist solidarity. Edited by Margaret Cousins, it featured articles on legal reforms, the devadasi system, women in politics, and profiles of pioneering women like Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy. *Stri Dharma* served not only as a reformist voice but also as a feminist space where Indian and international perspectives on women's issues were shared. In the 1920s and 1930s, Tamil-language journals such as *Kudi Arasu* (founded in 1925 by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy) began to directly challenge patriarchal



traditions and caste hierarchies. Women contributed essays and letters to the editor, discussing topics like child marriage, widow remarriage, and self-respect marriage. Periyar's platform encouraged women to write boldly, and in doing so, the Tamil press began to reflect a significant shift: from speaking about women to women speaking for themselves.

During the 1930 Salt Satyagraha, print media played an important role in mobilizing female participation. Reports and photographs of women protesting in places like Vedaranyam, Tuticorin, and Madurai were published in papers such as *India* (edited by C. Rajagopalachari), reinforcing their role as political agents. *Ananda Vikatan*, a widely read Tamil weekly founded in 1926, although more literary and humorous in tone, began including features on women writers and serialized stories with strong female protagonists. This gradual inclusion of women's voices and perspectives across genres from political essays to fiction reflected the changing expectations of women's roles in society.

By the 1940s, the convergence of the independence movement and growing feminist awareness had made women's visibility in print both a reflection of and a contributor to political transformation. Tamil women not only consumed literature but also produced it editing journals, writing autobiographies, translating works, and using the medium as a form of resistance. For example, R. Saraswathi Ammal, a lesser-known but influential writer, translated political tracts and reformist literature into Tamil for women's reading circles.

Reform Movements and the Gender Question

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of powerful reform movements in Tamil Nadu that addressed entrenched social inequalities, including those based on caste and gender. The "woman question" became central to the discourse of modernity and reform, with a range of activists and thinkers seeking to redefine the role of women in society. Reformers such as Iyothee Thass, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy played crucial roles in articulating alternative visions of gender justice that directly challenged the orthodox structures of colonial and Brahmanical patriarchy. One of the earliest voices to address both caste and

gender oppression was Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), a pioneering anti-caste intellectual and a Buddhist revivalist. He argued that the caste system, rooted in Hindu orthodoxy, was fundamentally responsible for the subjugation of women, particularly those from marginalized communities. In his Tamil journal *Oru Paisa Tamilan* (founded in 1907), Thass advocated for women's education and opposed child marriage and the exploitation of Dalit women in domestic and temple-based servitude.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973) emerged as one of the most radical social reformers of the 20th century. A former Congress leader, Periyar broke with the mainstream nationalist movement after 1925 and launched the Self-Respect Movement, which became a platform for rationalism, anti-caste ideology, and gender equality. Periyar rejected religious authority, caste hierarchies, and the subordinate status of women enshrined in Hindu scriptures like the *Manusmriti*. He openly supported inter-caste marriage, birth control, and women's right to property and education issues that were considered taboo even among moderate reformers.

The Self-Respect Movement's first major conference on women's rights was held in Chengalpattu in 1930, where resolutions were passed promoting widow remarriage, opposing the devadasi system, and advocating for gender parity in education. Periyar's magazine *Kudi Arasu* became an outlet for publishing bold critiques of patriarchy, and many women began to contribute to or subscribe to these ideas, either by attending meetings or by writing letters and essays. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886–1968), a medical doctor, educationist, and the first woman member of the Madras Legislative Council (appointed in 1927), brought a unique blend of liberal and legislative reform to the gender question. She campaigned vigorously against the devadasi system and played a pivotal role in the passage of the Devadasi Abolition Bill in 1947. Her work also focused on improving maternal health, establishing educational institutions for girls, and lobbying for women's legal rights. She founded the *Avvai Home* for destitute girls and orphaned children in Madras, emphasizing not just rescue but also empowerment through education and skill-building. These reform movements frequently intersected with broader



debates about caste, colonialism, and nationalism. While nationalist leaders often portrayed women as symbols of tradition and cultural purity, Tamil reformers pushed for their real empowerment through legal, educational, and marital reform. The Self-Respect Movement in particular insisted that women must have control over their own bodies and choices, thereby linking gender justice to rationalist and anti-caste politics.

Biographical Glimpses of Tamil Women Reformers

The political awakening and reformist energy of early 20th-century Tamil Nadu were not only shaped by male intellectuals and activists but also powerfully influenced by pioneering women who challenged societal norms and expanded the boundaries of women's roles in public life. This section presents brief biographical sketches of three such reformers Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sister Subbalakshmi, and Ammu Swaminathan who made lasting contributions to education, health, women's rights, and political activism.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886–1968)

Born in Pudukkottai in 1886, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy broke multiple social barriers. She was the first Indian woman to be admitted to the Madras Medical College and later became the first woman legislator in India when she was nominated to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. A firm advocate for gender justice, she used her legislative position to campaign against the devadasi system, which she viewed as institutionalized exploitation of women under the guise of religious tradition. In 1930, she played a crucial role in framing and pushing for the Devadasi Abolition Bill, which, though passed after independence in 1947, was strongly influenced by her persistent efforts. Dr. Reddy also worked for women's health reforms, establishing cancer hospitals and maternal health programs. Her founding of the Avvai Home in Madras provided education and shelter to orphaned and destitute girls, representing a model of social welfare grounded in feminist ethics. Her autobiography, *My Experiences*, remains a text in understanding early feminist politics in South India.

Sister Subbalakshmi (1886–1969)

Contemporary to Dr. Reddy, Sister Subbalakshmi was a formidable figure in Tamil Nadu's educational reform landscape. Born in 1886, she became the first Hindu woman graduate of Madras Presidency, an exceptional achievement in a society where girls' education was discouraged. Motivated by a vision of empowering women through education, she joined the Women's Christian College in Madras and later established the Sarada Vidyalaya School in 1929, which focused on the education of poor and orphaned girls. Sister Subbalakshmi also opened hostels and training centers to ensure that girls from marginalized communities could access safe living spaces while attending school. In collaboration with the Madras Presidency Social Reform Association, she pushed for the expansion of female literacy and domestic science education. Her reformist ideas were moderate compared to the radical Self-Respect Movement, but she laid the groundwork for institutional development in women's education during the colonial era.

Ammu Swaminathan (1894–1978)

Born in Palakkad in 1894 and later settling in Madras, Ammu Swaminathan emerged as an important political figure in the Indian freedom struggle and post-independence statecraft. She joined the Indian National Congress and became an active member of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), where she worked for legislative reforms in women's rights, including marriage and inheritance laws. During the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, she organized picketing and public demonstrations in the Tamil region and was frequently arrested for her involvement. Post-independence, Ammu Swaminathan served in the Constituent Assembly of India in 1946, where she contributed to debates on citizenship, gender equality, and minority rights. Her daughters Lakshmi Sehgal, a commander in the Indian National Army, and Mrinalini Sarabhai, a renowned dancer continued her legacy of political and cultural activism.

These three women represent the diversity of feminist engagement in colonial Tamil society from education and health reform to legislative activism and nationalist politics. Their contributions were not confined to advocacy; they institutionalized



reform through schools, homes, bills, and public organizations. In challenging caste and gender oppression, they reshaped the landscape of Tamil women's political consciousness and paved the way for future generations of women leaders in independent India.

Political Mobilization and Resistance

The period from the early 1900s to 1947 saw an unprecedented rise in the political mobilization of Tamil women as part of the broader Indian freedom struggle. Tamil women from diverse social backgrounds ranging from urban elites to rural subaltern communities actively participated in protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience campaigns that challenged British colonial rule. Their involvement not only marked a significant departure from traditional gender roles but also helped reshape nationalist politics in the Tamil region. A landmark moment in this political awakening was the Salt Satyagraha of 1930, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's call for nonviolent resistance. Tamil Nadu became the site of protest, with women taking prominent roles in marches, picketing, and salt manufacturing activities in defiance of the salt tax. For instance, women in Vedaranyam and Tuticorin organized local satyagraha movements, led by figures like Ammu Swaminathan and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (who had connections with the Tamil region). Many women courted arrest, demonstrating their willingness to confront colonial authority despite social constraints.

Parallel to elite nationalist circles, subaltern women also engaged in resistance, albeit in ways shaped by their immediate socio-economic contexts. Women in rural areas of Madurai, Trichy, and other districts organized grassroots campaigns to promote the Swadeshi movement, boycotting foreign cloth and encouraging the use of khadi. Women weavers and spinners, traditionally involved in textile production, played a crucial role in this economic boycott, linking their livelihoods to the nationalist cause. The Madurai Mahila Sangam, founded in the 1920s, was one such local organization that mobilized women around issues of self-reliance, education, and political awareness.

In urban centers like Chennai (Madras), women's political activity became more visible through organized groups such as the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and the Indian National Congress Women's Committees. These groups coordinated public meetings, fundraisers, and literacy campaigns, fostering a culture of female political engagement. Prominent women like S. Ambujammal and Kamaladevi Narasimhan addressed mass gatherings and wrote extensively on women's rights and independence, linking feminist demands to the larger anti-colonial struggle. The intersection of caste and class influenced women's modes of participation. While elite women often had access to formal political platforms and could lobby legislators, women from marginalized castes faced additional barriers but also forged autonomous spaces within their communities for political education and activism. The Self-Respect Movement encouraged Dalit and non-Brahmin women to question social hierarchies and join public political debates, thereby democratizing the nationalist movement.

Women's participation during the Quit India Movement of 1942 further intensified this trend. Despite repression, women organized underground networks for communication, distributed pamphlets, and sustained protests in Tamil districts. Their sacrifices, including imprisonment and police brutality, received recognition in nationalist narratives, inspiring a new generation of women activists. By the time India achieved independence in 1947, Tamil women had transformed from largely peripheral figures into active agents of political resistance. Their engagement helped to broaden the nationalist movement's social base and infused it with a critical feminist consciousness that questioned not only colonial domination but also internal patriarchal structures.

Caste, Class, and Religion in Shaping Resistance

The political mobilization and resistance of Tamil women during the colonial period cannot be fully understood without considering the critical roles played by caste, class, and religion. These intersecting identities profoundly influenced women's access to education, political platforms, and reformist movements, resulting in diverse



trajectories of empowerment and struggle. In Tamil society, caste hierarchies shaped the nature and extent of women's political participation. Upper-caste women, particularly from Brahmin and Vellalar communities, were among the first to gain access to formal education during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This was facilitated by missionary schools and elite reformers who saw women's education as a marker of social progress. For example, Brahmin women like Sister Subbalakshmi (b. 1886) and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (b. 1886) benefited from these opportunities, enabling them to become pioneering reformers and legislators.

In contrast, Dalit women (historically referred to as 'Scheduled Castes') faced multiple layers of marginalization. Denied access to education and public spaces, their political consciousness often developed in parallel reformist movements that sought to challenge caste oppression alongside patriarchy. Leaders like Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) and organizations such as the Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha worked to awaken Dalit communities, including women, emphasizing education and social dignity. Yet, for many Dalit women, participation in nationalist politics remained constrained by systemic discrimination. Similarly, women from economically disadvantaged classes, including agricultural laborers and artisans, had limited resources and opportunities for formal political engagement. Their resistance often took the form of localized activism, such as boycotts of colonial goods or participation in village-level self-help groups, rather than involvement in elite political organizations.

Religion and Reform: Tamil Muslim Women's Emerging Voices

Religion was another significant axis shaping women's political and social roles in colonial Tamil Nadu. Tamil Muslim women experienced specific challenges due to the combined pressures of religious orthodoxy and colonial modernity. However, from the early 20th century, a wave of Islamic reformism swept through Tamil Muslim communities, encouraging women's education and engagement with modern ideas while retaining religious identity. Muslim reformers in Tamil Nadu founded journals such as *Muslim Nesan* (established in 1883) and *Al*

Islam that began publishing articles on women's education, rights within marriage, and public morality. By the 1920s and 1930s, Tamil Muslim women were increasingly participating in community debates and reformist circles, demanding greater autonomy and public voice. These developments paralleled, and sometimes intersected with, broader nationalist and feminist discourses. An important figure during this period was Sultan Jamal-un-Nisa, a Tamil Muslim woman writer and activist who contributed to reformist journals and advocated for education and social upliftment of Muslim women. Although their political participation was more circumscribed than their Hindu counterparts due to communal norms, Tamil Muslim women nonetheless carved out spaces for reform and political consciousness, highlighting the religious diversity within Tamil women's political awakening.

Intersectionality: Gender, Caste, and Colonial Power

The interplay of gender, caste, and religion within the colonial context created a complex terrain for Tamil women's resistance. Colonial power structures themselves were embedded in caste hierarchies and religious categorization, which sometimes shaped how reformist and nationalist movements unfolded. The British administration's census and legal classifications reinforced caste identities, often privileging upper-caste concerns in policy-making. This intersectionality meant that Tamil women's political participation was uneven and contested. Upper-caste women could engage in legislative councils or elite reform groups, while Dalit and Muslim women frequently organized grassroots movements and local advocacy, often with fewer resources and recognition. The Self-Respect Movement (1925 onwards), for instance, explicitly sought to dismantle caste-based discrimination alongside gender inequality, encouraging non-Brahmin women to assert their rights and challenge orthodoxy. The complexity of these overlapping identities was evident in nationalist politics as well. While the Indian National Congress promoted a unified anti-colonial front, internal debates about caste and gender representation sometimes marginalized marginalized women's issues. Consequently, many



Dalit and Muslim women also engaged with separate or complementary movements that addressed their specific social realities.

Conclusion

The period between 1900 and 1947 marked a transformative era in the political and social awakening of Tamil women. The rapid growth of print media and reformist journals enabled women to voice opinions, challenge patriarchy, and engage in public debates. Socio-religious reformers promoted education, widow remarriage, and health reforms, dismantling entrenched orthodoxies. Simultaneously, women participated in nationalist struggles like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Salt Satyagraha, and Quit India Movement, emerging as active agents of resistance. Women from varied caste and class backgrounds mobilized through grassroots networks and cultural activism. Despite colonial surveillance and patriarchal barriers, they redefined their roles with resilience and vision. Re-examining their contributions highlights the roots of feminist thought and inclusive nation-building in South India.

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