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Gender and Caste: Self-Respect Movement in the Madras Presidency, 1925-1950

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the Self-Respect movement’s program for a radical reform of Hindu society in the Madras presidency in late colonial south India. It argues that gender crucially informed this program of reform enabling the mobilization of a radical politics of caste and gender. Launched in 1925-26, the Movement’s anti-caste emphasis reflected the larger Dravidian movement’s goal for non-Brahmin uplift. It deployed the discourse of Brahmin-non-Brahmin divide in south Indian society and identified the Hindu caste system, created, maintained, and nurtured by the Brahmins, as the root-cause of non-Brahmin backwardness. It cast the Brahmins as the ‘other’ - Aryan, Sanskritic, North as opposed to Dravidian/non-Brahmin, Tamil, South. In its emphasis on gender as a crucial organizing principle of the caste system, it transcended the goals of the Dravidian movement as well as those of the Gandhian nationalist movement and the Indian women’s movement.

This dissertation considers both the discursive and material terrain upon which the Movement mounted its critique of religion, caste, and gender. The controversy unleashed by the publication of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* and the intensive campaigns and debates to raise the ages of marriage and of consent to sexual relations provided ample opportunity for the Movement to propagandize its program of radical reform. Most notably, its advocacy of birth control and divorce for women presented foundational challenges to Hindu social organization by delinking sex from procreation and marriage from religion. The Movement thus demonstrated a radical consciousness about women’s sexual freedom. The dissertation analyzes Self-Respect marriages to demonstrate the transformative potential of marriage reform for women’s autonomy. By transforming the nature of marriage – from sacrament to contract - the Movement invested women with the freedom to choose their partner, to divorce, and to remarry.
The Movement’s participation in the anti-Hindi agitations of the late 1930s had a dual effect on women: while it mobilized women in large numbers to come out into the streets for the first time in the Madras presidency to demonstrate against the imposition of Hindi – a north Indian Sanskritic language - by the Madras government, it also glorified them as mothers in contrast to men who were construed as heroes of the anti-Hindi agitation. The dissertation thus suggests a familiar trajectory for women in the Movement wherein their freedom and choices were constrained as Tamil nationalism became dominant. Using feminist theories of nationalism, it underscores women’s problematic and complex relationship to nationalism that almost always casts them as symbols while men are construed as the subjects and agents of nationhood. The epilogue considers the status of women in Tamilnadu, the major post-independent state carved wholly out of the Madras presidency.
Acknowledgments

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I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother and my father-in-law, the two amateur historians in my family – one who sowed the seeds of my interest in history when I was still a child, and the other who engaged me in countless hours of deep and lively conversation about history. They would have been proud and happy at my accomplishment.

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<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOR</td>
<td>India Office Records</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAI</td>
<td>National Archives of India</td>
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<tr>
<td>NMML</td>
<td>Nehru Memorial Museum and Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>TSA</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu State Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLRC</td>
<td>Periyar Library and Research Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>CWMG</td>
<td>Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi</td>
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<td>NNPR</td>
<td>Native News Paper Reports</td>
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Introduction

Situating the Self-Respect Movement

The emergence of the Self-Respect movement in the Madras presidency in the mid-1920s inaugurated a radical strand in the trajectory of the Dravidian movement. The Dravidian movement had its origins in the non-Brahmin struggle against Brahmins for political power and patronage under British rule. Its formal political phase began with the founding of the Justice Party in 1916. While the Self-Respect movement shared its progenitor’s goal to improve the social, economic, political, and educational status of non-Brahmins, it considered formal political participation and the enactment of legislative measures alone as inadequate to address the deeper malaise that underlay this phenomenon. It therefore eschewed electoral politics to work in the realm of social reform. Under the leadership of its founder and chief ideologue, Periyar E. V.

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1 Generally refers to pre-Aryan peoples of southern India that speak one of the Dravidian languages that include Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The terms ‘Dravidian’ and ‘Non-Brahmin’ are often used interchangeably to refer to all those who are not Brahmins in southern India. Hence, the Dravidian movement is also referred to as the Non-Brahmin movement. In this construction, Brahmins are seen as descendants of Aryans from the North. This construction of Brahmins had particularly strong salience in the Tamil speaking areas of the Madras presidency.


Ramasami (1879-1973)\(^4\), it expanded and intensified the non-Brahmin critique of Brahmin political ascendancy by foregrounding the Hindu religion and its caste system as the primary obstacles to non-Brahmin uplift. With the goal of restoring to the lower castes their self-respect through the realization of their self-worth that the Hindu caste system had denied them, the Movement embarked on a radical reform of Hindu society. It peeled open the veneer of sanctity that religion accorded to the caste system to reveal its human motives and machinations. In doing so, it identified gender as a crucial element that sustained the Hindu caste system. The movement linked women’s lowly status as manifested in servile wifehood, incessant motherhood, enforced chaste widowhood, and the \textit{devadasi}\(^5\) system to Brahminic Hinduism. It discursively identified the category of \textit{‘women’} as uniformly oppressed by caste patriarchy even as it highlighted the differential experience of patriarchy by women of different castes.

\(^4\) \textit{Periyar} meaning ‘respected elder’ is a popular honorific used to refer to E.V. Ramasami. Hence, it is neither his given name nor his surname. In this dissertation, I have chosen to use the honorific ‘Periyar’ to refer to him merely to facilitate immediate identification and recognition. No glorification or deification is intended by this usage. For biographies of Periyar, see Anita Diehl, \textit{Periyar E.V. Ramasami: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India} (New Delhi: B.I. Publications, 1978); E. Sa. Visswanathan, \textit{The Political Career of E.V. Ramasami Naicker: A Study in the Politics of Tamilnadu, 1920-1949} (Madras: Ravi and Vasanth Publishers, 1983); also see Debi Chatterjee, \textit{Up Against Caste: Comparative Study of Ambedkar and Periyar} (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004).

New Trends in Scholarship

Both academic scholarship and popular discourse on the Movement have long focused, either solely or predominantly, on its critique of caste to the exclusion of consideration of gender. More recently, Anandhi S, V. Geetha, Sarah Hodges, Natalie Pickering, and Mytheli Sreenivas have addressed this lacuna by highlighting the Movement’s progressive gender ideology. In her pioneering article on women and the Dravidian movement, Anandhi S. analyzes Self-Respect marriages or unions as attempts to critique gender hierarchies inherent in the structure of the Hindu marriage. In another article, she highlights the Self-Respect movement’s radical departure from the nationalist discourse on the question of birth-control and contraception. Similarly, Sarah Hodges argues that the Self-Respect movement, rejecting nationalist biopolitics, advocated contraception as a means for personal emancipation. Natalie Pickering reads the Movement’s social reform program as being fundamentally committed to liberating the female body from bodily subjugation represented by reproduction and thereby desanctifying motherhood. V. Geetha attests to the centrality of the women’s question for Periyar and his Self-Respect movement. In a seminal work on the non-Brahmin movement, V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai briefly delineate the contributions of women participants to the Self-Respect

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8 Sarah Hodges, Contraception, Colonialism, and Commerce: Birth Control in South India, 1920-1940 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 77-103.


movement. Mytheli Sreenivas focuses on Self-Respect marriages as a crucial component in the enactment of Dravidian nationalism.

This dissertation builds on this foundational scholarship to paint a more nuanced picture of the Movement’s focus on gender through a sustained engagement with the women’s question. It primarily analyzes the issue of gender and caste from the immediate context of late-colonial society and politics in the Madras presidency. Secondarily, it also considers the Movement’s discourse and activities in relation to the nationalist movement, focusing particularly on the extent to which and the ways in which it departed from the later. While acknowledging the existence of other regional articulations of caste patriarchy in colonial India, this dissertation engages with the issue from within the discourse and activities of the Self-Respect movement in order to provide a region-specific focus on activism in the cause of women’s reform and thereby underscore the diversity of experience under colonialism.

Also, in light of M.S.S. Pandian’s contention that the categories of Brahmin and non-Brahmin, rather than being stable, self-evident categories, were historically constructed during the colonial period, it considers how women used and indeed contributed to these constructions to create a space of possibilities for themselves. This study suggests that the category of Dravidian/non-Brahmin women was at least in part a historically contingent construction, and that like all categories socially and culturally constructed, it is eminently amenable to invention.

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14 M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).
and reinvention. The construction of the notion of Tamil women during the anti-Hindi agitations of the late 1930s and its deployment in the interest of electoral politics in Tamil Nadu, the post-independent state carved wholly out of the Madras Presidency, is an example of such an invention/reinvention.

Context and Argument

The Self-Respect movement was neither the first to challenge caste nor was its attack on patriarchy itself novel. But the ways in which the Hindu caste system took shape and materialized in South India lent some unique characteristics to the Movement’s critique of caste and patriarchy. Emerging during the height of the nationalist movement, the Self-Respect movement set itself apart through a radical politics of caste and gender that was rarely if ever the focus of either the nineteenth century reform efforts targeting women or of the nationalist and women’s movement with their predominantly upper-caste members and biases. The nineteenth century reform efforts that outlawed sati (1829) and female infanticide (1856), enabled widow marriage (1856), and raised the age of consent to sexual relations (1891) were essentially born out of the colonial encounter as British officials and Indian male reformers validated their ‘modern’ liberal credentials themselves through reforming women’s status. Not only were women merely the objects of reform but also the reform efforts themselves were predicated

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15 One of the four main Dravidian languages spoken in South India, the others being Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam.

16 Ritual immolation of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her husband.

17 Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” in Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 88-126. Mani argues that though the prohibition of widow burning in 1829 was heralded as a key step forward for women's emancipation in modern India, women themselves were marginal to the debate and that the debate was fundamentally over definitions of Hindu tradition, the civilizing missions of colonialism and evangelism, and the proper role of the colonial state.
upon a certain construction of the past that privileged the high caste Hindu woman whose fall from the heights of glory in the past was seen as deserving of remediation.\textsuperscript{18} In this discourse, both high caste and low caste women were losers: while the former’s agency was erased, the latter’s existence either went unacknowledged or served as the foil that sharply contrasted with the ‘ideal Hindu woman’.

By the early 1920s, the nationalist movement had emerged as a mass movement that witnessed the large-scale participation of women. Women were not only active organizers and contributors in the cause of freedom from British rule but also utilized the opportunity to organize themselves as women to speak for women’s rights.\textsuperscript{19} In the Madras presidency, the Women’s Indian Association (WIA) established in 1917 served as the chief organ of the Indian women’s movement. Along with the All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC) founded in 1927, the WIA sought equal access to education and equal participation in the political process for women. Leaders in the women’s movement also campaigned vigorously for raising the age of marriage for girls that resulted in the passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 prohibiting the marriage of girls under fourteen. However, as demand for self-rule intensified and the attainment of modern nationhood became the most prized goal, the reform goals of the

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women’s movement became imbricated in the nationalist project. The goal now was to create
the ideal female citizen for the modern nation complete with all the ‘trappings’ of the liberal
feminist project of equal rights in education and political participation. As a result, this ideal
female citizen was predicated upon the figure of the upper-caste, middle-class woman – a
construction that all but erased the possibility of a radical politics of caste and gender. This
dissertation argues that the Self-Respect movement’s emphasis on the inextricable link between
the Hindu caste system and patriarchy was the most radical intervention made in the discourse
and practice of women’s reform in colonial India.

**Discourse and Identity**

This study deploys a social constructivist approach to discourse and discourse analysis. It
recognizes that our ways of understanding the world are historically and culturally specific and
contingent. Discourse - defined as a particular way of talking and/or writing about and
understanding the world - is one way we produce this contingent social world with its
knowledge, identities, and social relations. Thus, language, instead of merely communicating
facts about the world, constitutes it by generating meaning. Discourse then forms identity
through a process of creating and fixing meaning and legitimizing certain ways of being and
doing and delegitimizing others. Discourse analysis, in this view, is concerned not with
ascertaining the objective truth or reality behind what is being said but with the origins, forms,

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20 For an analysis of this argument in the context of the response to Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006)

21 Ibid.

In exploring the narratives of identity – both discursive and material – in late colonial Madras presidency, this dissertation considers how categories such as religion, caste, and gender were deployed in the cause of identity construction.

**Caste in South India**

In the Madras presidency, which occupied much of peninsular or South India and which had largely been a political backwater for much of the nineteenth century compared to Bengal and Bombay presidencies, caste began to emerge as an issue of marked political significance in the closing decades of the century. The unique trajectory of the social and political development of the region had its origins in the evolution of the Hindu caste system here. Unlike Northern India, Hindu society in the South was stratified along two major *varnas* – Brahmins and Sudras – and a third group comprising the ‘untouchables’ occupying outcaste status. The *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* varnas had not crystallized here because of their assimilation into the Sudra fold. This situation resulted in a deeper and wider disjunction between the Brahmins and the Sudras who in the classic Hindu varna classification occupied the highest and the lowest rungs respectively. In the absence of the intermediary castes such as the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas to mitigate the severity of the inequalities embedded in the varna system, the exclusivity of the

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24 The four *varnas* are the *Brahmans* or priests; the *Kshatriyas* or warriors and rulers; the *Vaishyas* or the merchants and farmers; and the *Sudras* or the laborers and craft-workers.

Brahmins was acutely accentuated. Moreover, in the classic varna hierarchy, these intermediary castes also shared in some if not all of the privileges the Brahmins enjoyed. Like the Brahmins, they were designated as twice-born\textsuperscript{26} meaning that they could wear the sacred thread and read the \textit{vedas}\textsuperscript{27}. The Sudras were denied a second, spiritual birth and prohibited from reading the \textit{vedas}. These factors exacerbated the distance between the Brahmins and the Sudras in the South.

Moreover, southern India was relatively undisturbed by the socio-economic convulsions resulting from many centuries of political turmoil and alien rule that had eroded the Brahmins’ influence in the North.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, Brahmins in the Madras presidency, particularly Tamil Brahmins, were able to maintain a marked degree of cultural exclusivity and distinctiveness “that enabled them to be portrayed as alien to the Tamil community”.\textsuperscript{29} Andre Beteille, while stopping short of calling Brahmins a separate culture, points to the impressive differences between them and the non-Brahmins based on physical attributes, speech, language, and a tradition of \textit{Sanskritic}\textsuperscript{30} learning. Differences along these axes, according to him, have contributed to Brahmins being labeled a separate race and isolated socially, culturally, and later

\textsuperscript{26} Signifies a second or spiritual birth through the sacrament of initiation called \textit{upanayana} or sacred thread ceremony performed anytime from about the age of seven wherein the upper-caste Hindu male has a ritual bath and is anointed with the sacred thread (a cotton loop worn across the chest and resting on the left shoulder) conferring on him the right to read the \textit{Vedas} and become a full-fledged member of the religious community. While men of some upper-caste non-Brahmin groups wear the sacred thread, it is a religious symbol most closely associated with Brahmins.

\textsuperscript{27} Four collections of hymns dating from about 1500 to 800 B.C.E. that constitute the oldest and most sacred of Hindu religious texts.

\textsuperscript{28} Arooran, \textit{Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism}.

\textsuperscript{29} Subramanian, \textit{Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization}, p. 85

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Sanskrit}, an Indo-Aryan language, is the primary liturgical language of Hinduism.
politically to a greater extent in Tamilnadu and South India as a whole than in the north.\(^{31}\) Jacob Pandian points to the fallacy of applying the classic Hindu varna classification to the society of South India. He argues that while various groups within South India aspired to and were accorded high or pure status vis-à-vis other groups, they did not share any racial or cultural affinity with Kshatriyas or Vaishyas in other parts of India. Occupational endogamy based on the ideology of pollution that characterized these groups, according to him, was pre-Aryan in origin. The varna hierarchy was superimposed on this pre-existing social system. Therefore, it represented not so much a behavioral category as a conceptual model of social and moral order.\(^{32}\)

However, in applying the term ‘Sudra’ or ‘non-Brahmin’ to anyone who was not a Brahmin in the Madras presidency, we must be careful to not let it obfuscate divisions and differences among non-Brahmins. Comprising close to ninety five percent of the Hindus in the Madras presidency,\(^{33}\) non-Brahmins were hierarchically organized into several caste groups based on ritual status. Although its particular manifestations differed among the various regions in the Presidency, the organization of non-Brahmin caste groups generally reflected the purity-pollution principle of classic Hindu varna hierarchy. Therefore, Chettiar who are a trading caste and Mudaliars who were traditionally landlords are ranked high ritually owing to their non-defiling occupation while the Shanars were ranked just above the ‘untouchables’ due to their ritually polluting occupation involving manufacture and sale of toddy. Again, many of these caste groups comprised several sub-castes which were again differentially ranked along the


\(^{32}\) Jacob Pandian, *Caste, Nationalism and Ethnicity: An Interpretation of Tamil Cultural History and Social Order* (Bombay: Popular Prakasham, 1987), Chapter 2.

purity-pollution continuum. Although high ritual status generally corresponded with greater politico-economic power so that ritually lower-ranked groups could improve their status when their politico-economic conditions change, this was not uniformly the case.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, ritual status, although a key factor, was mediated by other factors in determining caste identity. Jacob Pandian points out that:

Caste identity is not a matter of one’s affiliation with his ritually pure or impure endogamous group and the linkage of such a group to the symbols of varna hierarchy. There exists a distinctive aspect of caste identity which is political and not conceptually linked with religion. It is necessary to recognize the distinctive structures of the religious and political domains for a fuller understanding of caste identity.\textsuperscript{35}

Similarly, Brahmins’ universally high ritual status did not translate to universally greater politico-economic power across all regions of the presidency. What made them stand out as an especially successful group - politically and economically - in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the conditions of colonial rule.

While a synchronic exploration of caste identity reveals its varying manifestations across geographical space, a diachronic approach suggests similar variations through historical time. Susan Bayly has asserted that over the centuries changes in political control have resulted in changes in the caste system owing to changes in systems of patronage and allegiance.\textsuperscript{36} Nicholas Dirks argues that the modern caste system is an artifact of colonial rule owing to the British propensity for measurement and administrative control that forced standardized categories onto a


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, p. 197.

Thus, caste, while a key organizing principle of Hindu social life, is not a fixed, static, and unchanging entity in the way it actually manifests on the ground. When we apply this argument about the link between politics and caste and the resultant recasting of caste structures and identities to the late nineteen and early twentieth centuries, it allows us to historicize and contextualize the Brahmin-non-Brahmin identity politics of the period as a product of the imperatives of colonial rule. M.S.S. Pandian makes a compelling case for rethinking the ‘naturalness’ of the categories of Brahmin and non-Brahmin by situating them within the complex processes engendered by colonial rule.

Such identity formations were…closely tied to new forms of ‘speakability’ brought in by colonialism….It is not as if Brahmins were never spoken about in the pre-colonial period. On the contrary, discussions about the Brahmin have a long history in the region. But whereas such discussions were largely confined to the realm of religion during the pre-colonial period, they were now taking place in the modern ‘disenchanted’ public sphere inaugurated by colonialism….In sum, colonialism prepared the grounds for interpretive crises and possibilities. These twin aspects of colonialism…facilitated the making and normalization of non-Brahmin identity in opposition to a resignified Brahmin identity.

As the Brahmin reinvented himself as a ‘hybrid’ figure, at once ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’, ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, in response to the conditions of colonial rule, he became a “highly visible sign of power” that enabled the making of a non-Brahmin identity. In this contestatory

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39 Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*.


41 Ibid, pp. 60-100.
process, the figure of the Brahmin was significantly reconstituted with important and long-term implications for the politics of Tamil Nadu, the post-independent state carved wholly out of the Madras presidency.42

With the growth in educational and professional opportunities that colonial rule afforded, an urbanizing Brahmin middle-class, with a history of literacy and learning, were in the best position to take advantage of them. By the early twentieth century, they dominated professions, especially law and journalism, and were disproportionately represented in the civil services. Brahmins’ control of key administrative positions and their domination of professions such as law and journalism that were crucial in the development of nationalism opened up avenues for acquiring political power and influence that further exacerbated the gulf between Brahmins and non-Brahmins. This phenomenon was most aptly represented by the “Mylapore clique”, a derisive epithet that referred to Brahmin judges and lawyers concentrated in Mylapore in South Madras - an area that was also a bustling center of religious activity owing to a major seventh century temple dedicated to Siva, one of the Hindu Trinity and a chief deity of worship for the Aiyers (also Iyers) – one of two Tamil Brahmin caste groups.43

At the same time, some upwardly mobile Sudra caste groups that recognized the potential of education for political and professional advancement were alarmed by Brahmin preponderance in the higher echelons of the colonial power structure and began to resent and fear their potential hegemony. Prominent among these groups was the Velallas - traditional landed

42 Ibid, pp. 102-178.
43 The other being Aiyangars (also Iyengars) who worshipped Vishnu, another of the Hindu Trinity, as the Supreme Being. Aiyers belong to the Smarta tradition that accepts all major Hindu deities as forms of the one Brahman (the supreme, universal spirit that is the source of all reality) in contrast to Vaishnavism that only accepts Vishnu as the original and sole Supreme Being. Aiyangars belong to this tradition.
gentry. They abrogated to themselves the role of the true custodians of Tamil, Dravidian culture and thereby felt most threatened by Brahmin power. As a Sudra caste group with high ritual status, they had much to gain by usurping Brahmin influence. They wholeheartedly embraced the theory of the Aryan subjugation of Dravidians and the resulting corruption of the original Dravidian religion through the introduction of the caste system.\(^4^4\) In this discourse, Aryans were equated with the North, Sanskrit and the Brahmin varna and the Dravidians were equated with the South, Tamil and non-Brahmin status. Thus, geography, race, and language became conflated to posit a universal Brahmin-non-Brahmin opposition in South India.\(^4^5\) Vellalas sought to reclaim the superiority of Tamil Shaivite philosophy and scriptures over the Sanskritic pan-Indian epic *Ramayana*\(^4^6\) and the Vedas. They claimed *Shaivism*\(^4^7\) as the true and original religion of all Tamil non-Brahmins – one that predated Sanskritic Hinduism by many centuries. As self-declared leaders of Dravidian society, they claimed to be the authentic representatives of

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\(^4^6\) The epic story of Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, the abduction of his wife, Sita by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and her eventual rescue following Rama’s defeat of Ravana in battle.

\(^4^7\) Shaivism is a major devotional sect of Hinduism which reveres Shiva, the destroyer/transformer God of the Hindu Trinity, as the Supreme Being.
its religion and culture.\textsuperscript{48} This position would bring them in conflict with the Self-Respect movement which sought more radical reforms in society than merely supplanting one group over another as socially and ritually preeminent\textsuperscript{49}. Christopher Baker argues that the opposition to Brahmins was from the beginning rife with conundrums: although the Saivite Vellalas were clearly interested in reclaiming what they viewed as their lost preeminence in Tamil society, other Sudra caste groups held the Brahminic model of ritual purity as the ideal and wished to raise their status by adopting Brahmin customs and manners.\textsuperscript{50} While the former, less enamored of the Brahminic model, wished to topple the Brahmins and establish themselves at the apex of society with their way of life as the model to emulate, the latter resented Brahmins but not Brahminism. These differing modes of opposition to Brahmins and Brahminism manifested themselves in the internal tensions within the Justice Party and led to its demise as an effective political party by the early 1940s. It was eventually reconstituted as a social reform organization called \textit{Dravidar Kazhagam} (Dravidian Society) under Periyar in 1944.

While the social pot of non-Brahmin grievances against Brahmins was simmering from the late nineteenth century, it boiled over when Annie Besant\textsuperscript{51} established the Home Rule

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\textsuperscript{50} Baker, \textit{Politics of South India}; also see M.N.Srinivas, \textit{Religion and Society Amongst the Coorgs of South India} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) p. 32 for the theory of Sanskritization - the process by which castes placed lower in the caste hierarchy seek upward mobility by emulating the rituals and practices of the upper or dominant castes.

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League in Madras in September 1916. Besant’s presidency of the Theosophical Society\textsuperscript{52} where most of her colleagues were Brahmins, and her glorification of Sanskritic Hindu culture made the League and its motives suspect in the eyes of the non-Brahmins.\textsuperscript{53} The non-Brahmins feared that Brahmins alone would enjoy all the benefits if the British granted Home Rule to Indians and that consequently Brahmins would replace the British as political masters of India. Therefore, within three months after the founding of Besant’s Home Rule League, prominent non-Brahman leaders like P. Theogaraya Chetty\textsuperscript{54}, Dr. T. Madhavan Nair\textsuperscript{55}, C. Natesa Mudaliar\textsuperscript{56} and several others met on November 20, 1916 and formed a joint stock company by name, the South Indian People’s Association, with the intention of publishing newspapers for promoting the welfare of non-Brahman communities. A month later, on December 20, 1916, they issued the famous ‘Non-Brahmin Manifesto’\textsuperscript{57} and also founded a political organization called the South Indian

\textsuperscript{52} The Theosophical Society established its headquarters in Adyar, Madras in 1883. On its website (http://www.ts-adyar.org/ accessed on 25 October 2010), the Theosophical Society, International Headquarters, Adyar states: “The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, is a worldwide body whose primary object is Universal Brotherhood without distinction based on the realization that life, and all its diverse forms, human and non-human, is indivisibly One. The Society imposes no belief on its members, who are united by a common search for Truth and desire to learn the meaning and purpose of existence through study, reflection, self-responsibility and loving service. Theosophy is the wisdom underlying all religions when they are stripped of accretions and superstitions. It offers a philosophy which renders life intelligible and demonstrates that justice and love guide the cosmos. Its teachings aid the unfoldment of the latent spiritual nature in the human being, without dependence.” It further states its three declared objects as: “To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour; to encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science; to investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.”


\textsuperscript{54} Chettys or Chettiars are a dominant trading caste in South India. See David West Rudner, \textit{Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiars} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994)


\textsuperscript{56} Mudaliars are a Vellala sub-caste dominant in northern Tamil Nadu.

\textsuperscript{57} See Irschick, \textit{Politics and Social Conflict}, Appendix 1, pp. 358-367
Liberal Federation (SILF), popularly known as the Justice Party, to protect the political interests of the non-Brahman castes. The Manifesto gave a clarion call to all the non-Brahman communities to unite and assert their rights to education and jobs. It warned them that the introduction of Home Rule in India would further entrench Brahmin power and claimed that the British presence in India was necessary to maintain the balance among communities and creeds. It urged the non-Brahmans to combat the agitation for Home Rule.

**Justice Party and Non-Brahmins**

One of the major accomplishments of the Justice Party in its early years was the procurement of reserved seats for non-Brahmins in the Madras Legislative Council in 1919. Although a compromise given that its original demand was for separate electorates, this measure nevertheless leveled the playing field as non-Brahmins sought to seize educational and professional opportunities. In 1919, the Joint Parliamentary Committee, a body appointed to submit recommendations to Parliament on the course of constitutional reform in India, convened in London to hear the arguments of interest groups from India. The Justice delegation led by T.Madhan Nair was hard-pressed to justify its demand for communal representation through separate electorates, given the non-Brahmins’ overwhelming numbers in the population: over 94 percent of the Hindus in the presidency and 83 percent of the entire population in the Presidency. The Justice representation countered these statistics with the argument that

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58 The Muslims as a minority group were the first to gain communal representation through separate electorates under the Indian Councils Act of 1909 popularly known as the Morley-Minto Reforms. Under this scheme, certain constituencies were reserved for Muslims and only Muslims could vote for Muslim candidates contesting those seats. Under the scheme of reserved seats, certain constituencies were delineated as, for example, non-Brahmin but the election of candidates who would be non-Brahmins would be by a joint electorate.

“numbers do not count taking into account the religious, educational, and official influence of Brahmanas.”

Thus, the Brahmins’ “decisive political ascendancy” through law, education, and government service and “their clannish oligarchy” offset their small numbers in the population. Consequently “the ryot and smaller landed gentry can never exercise their vote independently to the detriment of a Brahmana” for they are in effect “a poor helpless, lot who can be driven like sheep by the Brahmana official.” Thus, adequate safeguards were required to ensure a fair representation of non-Brahmins. They contended that the non-Brahmins “are afraid of offending the Brahmanas, partly, because of the worldly results through their predominance in the law and locally, and partly because they are afraid of spiritual results…I would place the first on a higher footing. This religious business is a very small affair.”

The Justice Party delegates’ emphasis on Brahmin political influence over Brahmin ritual superiority suggests two key motivations. One, they were keen to win the political prize of communal representation and that required them to portray the non-Brahmins as the victims of the vile machinations of the politically astute and powerful Brahmins. Two, they were equally keen to maintain their high status among non-Brahmins, for a majority of Justice party leaders belonged to upper-caste non-Brahmin groups. This objective required them to shift the focus away from

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61 Ibid, p. 10.


63 Peasant cultivator.


66 Ibid, p.5.
socio-religious hierarchies and inequalities in the maintenance of which they had a vested interest.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee, which issued its report in November 1919, decided to provide non-Brahmins with special representation by means of reserved seats but left the actual distribution of seats to the decision of Brahmin and non-Brahmins leaders.\textsuperscript{67} This decision led to an intense period of bitter and acrimonious debate during February 1920. Brahmin opponents of the measure emphasized the absurdity of granting reserved seats to a majority community in elected bodies and the danger of communalizing Hindu society as a result.\textsuperscript{68} Subsequent elections would justify the first claim. The history of the last almost hundred years would manifest the second fear. Supporters called for up to seventy five percent seats to be reserved for non-Brahmins in the legislative council.\textsuperscript{69} Finally, unable to break the stalemate, Lord Meston was appointed as an arbitrator to resolve the issue. The Meston Award of March 1920 allotted 28 out of the 68 non-Mohammedan seats to non-Brahmins.\textsuperscript{70} The Justice Party won elections to the Madras Legislative Council in 1919 under the Morley-Minto scheme of 1909 that had no provision for reservation of seat for non-Brahmins. Subsequently, they won elections to the Corporation of Madras in January 1920, and to the Council in 1920 and 1923 under the Montagu-Chelmsford scheme of 1919 that incorporated the Meston Award. In spite of these early successes, by 1925 the Justice Party’s fortunes were at a low ebb owing to internal

\textsuperscript{67} Hardgrave, Dravidian Movement, p. 19; Irschick, Politics and Social Conflict, p. 158; Baker, The Politics of South India, pp. 33-34.

\textsuperscript{68} National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI), Reforms Office (Franchise-Deposit), February 1920, no. 4 and no. 40 and March 1920, no. 1.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Irschick, Politics and Social Conflict, p. 159.
differences among its leaders, poor organization, and ineffective propaganda. Consequently, the Party position as chief articulator of non-Brahmin interests was on the wane.

**Challenges to the Justice Party**

The Justice party’s ability to appeal to a constituency broader than that comprising the elite caste groups that its leaders represented was suspect from its inception. Their usurping of Brahmin political power alone had little if any potential for ameliorating the conditions of the non-Brahmin masses and liberating them from the hold of the caste system, the basis of Brahmin power. Because of the hierarchy that obtained among the non-Brahmin caste groups, the toppling of Brahmins from power meant supplanting them with the more privileged, upwardly mobile non-Brahmin caste groups such as the Vellalas. Moreover, for the most part, the elite non-Brahmins who dominated the Justice party did not challenge the caste system as much as they resented Brahmin power within it.

Both the fact that the Justice Party elites saw themselves as naturally sympathetic toward depressed class interests on account of their mutual suffering at the hands of the Brahmins and the fact that the realm of politics was seen as the most effective venue for uplifting the non-Brahmins came to be challenged during the last two decades of British rule. The first assumption was challenged by the various depressed class groups that petitioned the Indian 'Depressed classes’ refers to a wide range of social groups considered ‘untouchable’ by caste Hindu society. Traditionally, they were those whose occupations and habits of life were considered ritually polluting, such as taking life for a living, a category that included fishermen, killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides for a living, pursuing activities that brought the participant into contact with emissions of the human body as feces, urine, sweat, and spittle, a category that included such occupational groups as sweepers and washermen, and eating the flesh of cattle or of domestic pigs and chickens. As a result, the ‘untouchables’ were subjected to many social restrictions including being segregated in hamlets outside the town or village boundary, forbidden entry to many temples, to most schools, and to wells from which higher castes drew water. Their touch was seen as seriously polluting to people of higher caste, involving much remedial ritual. These restrictions led many untouchables to seek some degree of emancipation through conversion to Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. Other popular labels to refer to these groups are ‘Harijans’ or Children of God, a term coined by M.K. Gandhi and ‘dalits’ or ”ground down”,
Statutory Commission\(^{72}\) (also known as the Simon Commission after its chairman, Sir John Simon) for special representation in the Madras Legislature to compensate for their historically oppressed condition. The second was challenged by the Self-Respect movement that argued that social reform must precede political rights. The widening of the base of the non-Brahmin movement to include the interests of the depressed classes and the shift in its focus from politics to social reform as the first step toward improving the condition of non-Brahmins unfolded in an atmosphere of increasing devolution of powers to Indians in the provincial legislatures.

The British considered themselves the champions of the depressed classes, even establishing a special department - the Madras Labour Department – to ameliorate the condition of the depressed classes. In fact, they took this role so seriously that Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India from 1924-1928 expressed alarm over an article that appeared in *The Times* of 18 July 1927 that claimed that the Labour Department was on a purely temporary basis and asked the assurance of Governor Goschen that this was not the case and that the department was “on a firm footing”.\(^{73}\) The Governor assured Lord Birkenhead that the Labour Department was in no danger of being dismantled and that even S. Satyamurti, a Swarajist,\(^{74}\) was “not at all

\(^{72}\) A group of seven British members of Parliament that was dispatched to India in 1927 to collect evidence and suggest constitutional reforms.

\(^{73}\) British Library, London (BL hereafter), IOR MSS Eur D703, Birkenhead Collection: Correspondence and Papers of Frederick Edwin Smith, 1\(^{st}\) Earl of Birkenhead (1872-1930), as Secretary of State of India 1924-28, Letter dated 29 July 1927.

\(^{74}\) Member of the Swaraj party, a breakaway faction of the Indian National Congress, formed in December 1922, that differed with Gandhi on the issue of contesting elections and entering legislatures following the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922. Swarajists sought to establish control over the legislatures through the electoral process, and then to pressure the colonial government to concede to the demand for self-government. It
anxious for our departure from India, that the problem of the Depressed Classes was especially one in which he hoped we should continue to assist them.”

Not surprisingly, the groups at the very bottom of the socio-religious order aggressively petitioned the Commission to alleviate their grievances in the proposed new constitution for India. As early as in 1921, Governor Willingdon had insisted that the important question in the Madras presidency was:

…the evolution of the noncaste people, of the depressed and backward classes…We have for some years pursued a steady policy of emancipating them from the slavery which they lived under and still do in many cases and the Reforms have made them hope for still further emancipation in the future. This Presidency is the most caste ridden Presidency in India and while the caste people express in the abstract the warmest sympathy with the uplift of the depressed classes, when it comes to practical working they fight against it for all they’re worth. But they can’t have it both ways . . . it may become a sort of civil war until the caste man realizes that the noncaste man is a human being like himself and should have equal opportunities.

The petitions from the depressed classes to the Simon Commission expressed trust in British commitments to justice, equity, and fair-play. M. C. Rajah, the first member of the depressed class community to be elected to the Madras Legislative Council in 1920, President of the All-India Depressed Castes Association, and member of the Imperial Legislative Assembly from 1926 to 1937, articulated this view most forcefully when he asserted that “[t]he British Government in India is the best Government we have ever had. It is the strongest, the most righteous and the best suited to India’s diverse population and diverse interests that this country could ever have. The Indian Penal Code makes no difference between the Adi-Dravida and the

75 BL, IOR MSS D703/10, Private Letters from Lord Goschen, Governor of Madras to Lord Birkenhead, 1927, Letter dated 31 August 1927.

76 BL, IOR MSS Eur F93/5, Willingdon Papers: Correspondence between Lord Willingdon and Lord Peel and Lord Olivier from Oct. 1923-Mar. 1924 and with Lord Reading from April 1921-Feb 1924, Letter dated 3rd July 1921.

77 Original inhabitants of the Dravidian land.
so-called high caste man.”  

Without glossing over the faults of the British including the fact that they were colonial rulers, the depressed class groups were near unanimous in their belief that granting full self-government to Indians would mean rule by the upper-castes and therefore continued oppression for them. The Adi-Dravidas of Tinneveli even accused the British of acting out of pure self-preservation when they ventured to improve the condition of the depressed classes:

The lethargy, indifference and inertia of the British officials in relation to the depressed classes were shaken off only when the advanced Indians clamoured for Swaraj in their own interests and the sympathy which is professed for us in certain quarters either by the British officials of Indian politicians appears to be forced, unreal and timeserving and we have to painfully bring to your notice the fact that the Government would have not done more for us if the Ears of the Government were not gained by the Brahmins and caste Hindus.

Nevertheless, they argued that “if even under the British Raj we have been still subjected to slavery, ignorance, poverty etc., our fate under Swaraj we could hardly dare to think of.”

The depressed class petitioners also reproduced the discourse of the Aryan-Dravidian encounter in ancient times when the former conquered the latter and subjugated them. In this discourse, the Aryans came to be equated with the Brahmins and the Dravidians with the original inhabitants of southern India. M. C. Rajah made a further distinction between the Dravidians and the Adi-Dravidians wherein the former are the descendent of those who succumbed to the Aryans and hence were accepted into the Aryan fold as Sudras and the latter are the descendents of those who refused to succumb to the Aryans and hence were condemned as outcastes and punished with social degradation and made into serfs and slaves, and it is the latter who comprise

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80 Ibid.
the depressed classes in the Madras presidency.\textsuperscript{81} Thus, in the discourse of the Aryan-Dravidian encounter, the Sudras or the caste non-Brahmins are seen as complicit and active collaborators with the Aryans or Brahmins in the oppression of the Adi-Dravidas or depressed classes. Given this, the caste non-Brahmins were seen as no more trustworthy than the Brahmins in improving the lot of the depressed classes. The representatives of the Adi-Dravidas of Trichinopoly argued that:

At this stage, in the evolution of our country, we think that for the British Parliament to grant complete political freedom to the Brahmins and so called High Castes in India will put a premium on caste Arrogance and caste Monopoly and will practically amount to nothing less than giving a free license to our age-long tormentors to continue to torment their ancient victims.\textsuperscript{82}

The petitions constructed the upper-caste non-Brahmins as oppressors along with Brahmins and thus attested to the unrepresentative nature of the Justice Party’s claims to speak for masses in the Madras presidency.

Such appeals to the justness of British rule bore results for the depressed classes not only in gaining special representation in the Madras legislature but also a stronger presence in the realm of electoral politics. In January 1933, Governor George Stanley remarked to Secretary of State Samuel Hoare that the “the Depressed Classes will have very considerable influence at the next general election.”\textsuperscript{83} Governor Erskine echoed this sentiment in 1939. Commenting on the

\textsuperscript{81} Rajah, \textit{Oppressed Hindus}, p. 50.


\textsuperscript{83} BL, IOR MSS Eur 240/10, Part 2, Templewood Collection: Correspondence and Papers of Sir Samuel John Gurney Hoare, Viscount Templewood (1880-1959) as Secretary of State for India 1931-35, with Other Papers on Indian Affairs, Letter dated 26\textsuperscript{th} January 1933.
unanimous vote in favor of the Temple Entry Bill\(^\text{84}\) in the Madras Legislature, he speculated that “The main reason for this is, I think, that all political parties are angling for the Harijan vote and as a result, whatever their private feelings may be, as politicians the members of the Legislature felt that there is no other course open to them than to support the Bill”\(^\text{85}\).

While these groups were seeking alleviation through the political process, Periyar and his Self-Respect movement eschewed politics to work in the realm of social reform. Periyar’s position was that social reform, fundamental to which was the abolition of caste, should be the first step toward improving the condition of non-Brahmins. The fading fortunes of the Justice Party by the late 1920s and the increasing visibility of the depressed classes in the political landscape of Madras set the stage for Periyar and his Self-Respect movement to deploy a radical critique of caste-bound Hindu patriarchy. The Self-Respect movement in the decades leading up to freedom from colonial rule was successful in transforming an elitist non-Brahmin movement into a mass-based one that opened up a space for “problematising a number of inferiorised identities”\(^\text{86}\) including Adi-Dravidas, Sudras, women and the laboring poor.

**Self-Respect Movement: Origins**

The Self-Respect movement recognized the direct link between Brahmins’ high ritual status within Hindu caste society with its concomitants of literacy and learning and the new avenues for education and political influence that colonial rule opened up. It thereby endeavored to attack the cause rather than the symptom as the true source of oppression. The year 1925 proved significant for two reasons: the publication of the first issue of the *Kudi Arasu* from

\(^{84}\) The Madras Government passed The Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Act in 1939 which removed restrictions prohibiting depressed classes from entering Hindu temples.

\(^{85}\) BL, IOR MSS Eur 125/67, Linlithgow Collection: Correspondence with the Governor of Madras and his Secretary, 1939, Letter dated 6\(^{\text{th}}\) August, 1939.

Periyar’s hometown of Erode in western Tamilnadu in May and Periyar’s exit from the Congress in November. While the latter date is generally taken to signify the formal beginning of the Self-Respect movement, the Kudi Arasu, even during the initial months of its publication, introduced novel factor in the Madras presidency. It showed a distinct fervor for social reform that went beyond campaigning for the political prize of communal representation. After his exit from the Congress, Periyar through his Kudi Arasu adopted a ‘no-holds barred’ approach to criticizing the Congress nationalists but most of all Brahmins and Brahminism as representatives of the horrors of the Hindu caste system. Periyar’s efforts also challenged the elitism of the Justice Party and its belief that the realm of politics was the legitimate and most effective venue for uplifting non-Brahmins. Most significantly, his emphasis on religion and caste as the twin oppressors of non-Brahmins opened up spaces for lower caste groups, the depressed classes, and women to articulate their interests. He thus shifted the focus from politics to religion and society as the crucial sites for bringing about more fundamental change. The discourse of Brahmin superiority within caste-based Hindu society as the root cause of non-Brahmin backwardness unsettled the earlier discourse of Brahmin dominance in government service and in the professions as the root cause of non-Brahmin subservience.

Periyar: Challenges to Congress, Gandhi, and Hinduism

As the Movement’s founder and chief ideologue, Periyar’s uncompromising critique of caste and patriarchy provided the framework for Self-Respect discourse and action in the Madras presidency during the 1920s and 1930s. Periyar’s public career began with his association with the Madras Presidency Association in 1917. As one of its vice-presidents, he advocated communal representation in government and reservation of posts in civil service for non-Brahmins and minority communities as necessary to eliminate injustices in society. In 1919, he
joined the Indian National Congress and participated enthusiastically in Gandhi’s program to
propagate the use of *khadi*;\(^8^7\) picketing toddy shops, boycotting shops selling foreign cloth, and
eradicating untouchability. However, the conservative stand of Brahmin members of the
Congress on the issue of communal representation, the resolution to allow Hindus of all castes to
enter and worship in all temples, the discrimination against non-Brahmin students in a Congress
funded school, and the demand to open public roads to untouchables alienated Periyar.\(^8^8\)
Subsequently, he quit the Congress in 1925 and broke with Gandhi in 1927 because he believed
that Gandhi was not willing to denounce the Hindu caste system.\(^8^9\) Convinced that abolishing
the hierarchical, graded, birth-based caste structure was the essential first step toward building a
new social order based on equality and social justice, he eschewed politics to work in the realm
of social reform.

For Periyar, caste was not simply a form of social stratification, which in its benign form
was a division of labor but rather a hegemonic system of oppression. It comprised of
hierarchical social relations as well as those precepts and rules that informed, sustained and
justified this oppression. The oppression and subjugation of women was a crucial element in the
caste framework, as was the oppression and subjugation of the lower castes and the
‘untouchables.’ By thus linking all the elements that sustained caste, Periyar proposed a holistic
understanding of and response to caste oppression. In his dramatic denunciation of the sacred

\(^{8^7}\) Hand-spun, hand-woven cotton cloth.

\(^{8^8}\) Anita Diehl, *Periyar E.V. Ramasami: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India*

\(^{8^9}\) Ibid.
Hindu scriptures such as the *Manu Smriti* and the epic *Ramayana* as the means by which Brahmins propagated and kept alive the notion of their superior status, he claimed that

Manu Dharma Sastra is the weapon of the high caste Brahmins. It has two main motives. First of all, it enables the Brahmins to call themselves high and superior to others and lead a happy life without doing any work. It has made the sons of the soil (sudras) as slaves to them forever. The non-Brahmins are deprived of their self-respect and decency. The second motive is to render injustice to all as stipulated in the Manu law. When such an order is set up permanently the organizations such as the government, courts, constitutional acts etc. would naturally be dominated and monopolized by the Brahmin community. Such an arrangement would render all others as slaves forever. This is the other motive of the Manu’s code.

In his radical and revisionist interpretation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, he argued that it is not a sacred work, and reversed the roles of hero (Rama) and villain (Ravana). He attacked the dominant interpretation of Rama as a hero by highlighting those incidents in the epic that made him less than a hero such as when:

He [Rama] stealthily killed Vali who had done him no harm, from behind, for the sake of Vali’s disloyal brother. This Rama who had not dared himself to fight face to face with Vali is hailed as a hero by the ignorant and greatly praised by ‘Brahmins’ by adding greater emphasis.

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90 Known as the *Laws of Manu* in English, the *Manu-Smriti* prescribes the set of obligations incumbent upon the Hindu as a member of the one of the four varnas and engaged in one of the four stages of life or *ashramas*. It is attributed to the mythical progenitor of mankind and was compiled between 200 and 400 C.E.


93 Hence the ban on the English and Hindi translations of his work by the Uttar Pradesh government – a ban that was overturned by the courts in 1971 and 1976. The area that comprised the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is traditionally seen as the Aryan heartland. Rama’s birthplace – Ayodhya – is located in this state. See Richman, *Many Ramayanas*, p. 193

Similarly, he eulogized Ravana as noble, chivalrous, and good-natured. Unlike Rama who justified and approved Lakshmana’s (Rama’s brother) disfigurement of Soorpanaka (Ravana’s sister), he treated Sita with honor when he could as easily have abused her.\textsuperscript{95} Periyar contended that Ravana has been vilified precisely because he criticized the Brahmin practices of performing sacrifices and drinking \textit{soma}.\textsuperscript{96} Moreover, he attributed Ravana’s defeat at the hands of Rama to the treachery of Vibhishana, Ravana’s bother, who was motivated by the desire to possess and rule Lanka.

Sugriva and Vibhishana whose friendship Rama contacted were treacherous lubbers who had betrayed their brothers to win thereby their respective kingdoms for themselves. The whole company was a gang of rabbles. And yet they are deified!\textsuperscript{97}

As M.S.S. Pandian argues, Periyar’s mobilization of the figure of Ravana as a Dravidian hero sought to restore the pride of the Tamils in their regional culture which was non-Sanskritic, and thus combat mainstream Indian nationalism that priding itself as Aryan often “inferiorised” the South.\textsuperscript{98}

More importantly, Periyar attempted to draw attention to the political subtexts of Dravidian subjugation and women’s oppression in the epic. He pointed to the incident where Rama justifies his killing of Vali from a hidden position by claiming that the laws of \textit{dharma}\textsuperscript{99} do not apply to beasts – the beasts here being Dravidians in Periyar’s interpretation: “If there were kings

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid. \textit{Soma} is an intoxicating drink used in ancient vedic rituals.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, p. 67.


\textsuperscript{99} Law of the cosmos; also, righteous duty based on one’s caste, age, and gender.
like Rama now! Alas, what would be the plight of those who are called “Sudras?” Also, he read Rama’s repudiation of Sita after her long captivity and ordeal by fire as signifying Aryan mistreatment of women. Drawing on the larger Dravidian discourse, Periyar equated Aryans with North-Indians and Brahmins and Dravidians with South-Indians and non-Brahmins.

Periyar’s uncompromising critique of male institutions of power saw marriage as nothing more than a means to enslave women to men. The categorization of marriage as a sacrament was a justification of this enslavement. The valorization of chastity for women had a similar function in society: “I cannot find a more hateful practice in human society than the imposition of chastity in all circumstances on women alone.” He also railed against the injustice involved in the socio-religious custom that allowed old widowers to marry while denying young widows the right to marry again. Social conditioning rather than innate qualities rendered women helpless and dependent in the same way that it rendered men of the lower castes weak owing to their oppression. Equating women with lower castes, Periyar asserted that: “Just as Brahmins extract labor from the lower castes in the name of caste order, women are meted out the same treatment in the name of marriage”. He advocated education for women to free them from this bondage and challenged the popular notion that higher education would be harmful to women’s primary role as wives and mothers and that therefore only religious education need be imparted to women.

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100 Periyar E.V. Ramasami, “The Ramayana: A True Reading,” in Collected Works, p. 27.


102 Ibid, p. 10.

Periyar’s repudiation of motherhood and his advocacy of birth control as a means to endow women with control over their own bodies stood in sharp contrast to the dominant paradigm. He attacked Brahmins for their selfish motives in opposing birth control – he argued that since their priestly occupation was dependent on officiating at rituals, limiting births through contraception would mean fewer ceremonies at which to officiate. This construction of Brahmins as universally opposed to birth control ignores the ongoing support of the Madras Neo-Malthusian League whose membership was predominantly Brahmin, middle-class, and urban for birth control. While Periyar might have generalized from some Brahmin opposition to birth control, the more plausible explanation for this situation is suggested by Hodges. She points to the lack of any intersections or connections between the Self-Respect movement and the Madras Neo-Malthusian League. Finally, Periyar exhorted women to help themselves and not be dependent on men for assistance:

Men’s endeavour for the emancipation of women only perpetuates women’s slavery and hampers their emancipation. The pretence of men that they respect women and that they strive for their freedom is only a ruse to deceive women. Have you ever seen anywhere a jackal freeing the hen or the lamb or the cat freeing the rats, or the capitalists freeing the workers?

104 Veeramani, Periyar on Women’s Rights.

105 See Sanjam Ahluwalia, “Demographic Rhetoric and Sexual Surveillance: Indian Middle-Class Advocates of Birth-Control, 1920s -1940s,” in Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Post-Colonial India, ed. James H. Mills and Satadru Sen (London: Anthem Press, 2004). In this essay, Ahluwalia argues that it was “eugenic patriotism” (p. 184) that dictated early middle-class male advocacy of birth control. Also see Barbara Ramusack, “Embattled Advocates: The Debate Over Birth Control in India, 1920-1940,” Journal of Women’s History, 1989, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 1989, 34-64. Using gender as the focus of analysis, Ramusack argues that while men advocated birth control as a means to ensure a stronger, healthier, and modern nation, women advocated birth control also to lower maternal and infant mortality; for the activities of the Madras Neo-Malthusian League, see Hodges, Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce, pp. 47-76.

106 Hodges, Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce, pp.47-66.

107 Ibid, pp. 77-104.

108 Ibid, p. 117.
Such radical views expressed in an unrestrained manner in candid prose had little hope of reaching the wider public in view of Brahmin domination of the press in the early twentieth century. The need for a “non-Brahmin public sphere”\textsuperscript{109} was apparent. The Self-Respect journals that emerged in response to this need provided an effective public platform for articulating the ideological differences between the nationalist movement and the Dravidian movement, and the Brahmins and non-Brahmins. It is through these journals that women Self-Respecters made themselves visible and propagated their issues and concerns.

**Chapter Organization**

This dissertation is organized as four chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter focuses on the Self-Respect response to the controversy stimulated by the publication of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*. Based on a series of articles published in the Movement’s flagship periodical *Kudi Arasu* and which has received scant, if any, attention in the scholarship produced on the Mayo controversy,\textsuperscript{110} I demonstrate how Mayo and the Self-Respecters became unwitting allies in their crusade against Brahminic Hinduism. Through its unapologetic endorsement of *Mother India*, the Movement underscored its radical program of social reform.

The second chapter analyzes the Movement’s critique of the normative practices of Hindu society as they pertain to the beliefs, taboos, and prescriptions surrounding women’s sexuality. It interrogates the nature of this critique and its role in the Movement’s call for a radical transformation of society. Grounding this discourse in the debates on child marriage,


\textsuperscript{110} A notable exception is Mrinalini Sinha’s scholarship. See “Introduction” in *Mother India: Selections from the Controversial 1927 Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) and *Specters of Mother India*. 
widow remarriage, devadasis, birth control, and divorce, I delineate the extent to which the Movement transcended the colonial-nationalist imaginaries of normative sexuality. In its advocacy of birth control and divorce, the Movement articulated a radical challenge to normative constructions of female sexuality. By divesting sex from procreation, it freed women’s bodies from reproductive labor and legitimized female desire and pleasure. Its advocacy of divorce challenged the indissoluble and sacramental nature of Hindu marriages and sought to invest women with the freedom to sever the ties of marriage on grounds of incompatibility. Again, the personal arena of family life became a site for public debate and the target of social reform.

The third chapter engages with marriage reform - the Movement’s most potent tool for radical transformation of Hindu society. Based on elaborate accounts of Self-Respect marriages published in Movement periodicals such as Kudi Arasu, Revolt, Pagutharivu, Viduthalai, Justice, and Dravidan, this chapter underscores the transformative potential of marriage reform for women’s autonomy. It analyzes how by recasting the nature of marriage – from sacrament to contract – the Movement invested women with the freedom to chose their partner, to divorce, and to remarry. The intensely personal sphere of marriage was redefined as a public-political space with Movement leaders officiating, conducting, and making speeches at these weddings. Self-Respect marriages featuring prominent Movement activists were celebrated as examples of ‘walking the talk’ to demonstrate the close connection between discourse and action. This chapter presents a social history of the Movement that speaks to one important way in which women participated in the Movement and became actors in their own destiny.

The fourth chapter analyzes the Movement’s participation in the anti-Hindi agitations of the late 1930s when for the first time women came out in large numbers in the Presidency to demonstrate against the imposition of Hindi by the Madras government and courted prison. The
anti-Hindi agitations mark the beginning of Tamil nationalism as a mass movement. This chapter considers issues emerging from the shift from caste to language as marker of identity, particularly with regard to women and gender. It posits a familiar trajectory for women wherein their freedom and choices come to be constrained as Tamil nationalism becomes dominant. It documents how recent events have brought into sharp focus the compromises made in the name of a unified and militant Tamil identity. Using feminist theories of nationalism, the chapter underscores women’s problematic and complex relationship to nationalism that almost always casts them as symbols and objects while men are construed as the subjects and agents of nationhood.

Finally, the Epilogue considers the mixed legacy of the Self-Respect movement for women as reflected in state initiatives. While progressive state policies have secured for Tamil Nadu an enviable position (next only to Kerala) when measured on several developmental indices pertaining to women, they also highlight the failure to overcome deep-seated cultural attitudes that continue to disadvantage women. It asks whether the Movement’s radical vision, compromised by Tamil nationalism, has remained just that – radical and therefore removed from the realities of women’s lives.
Chapter 1

Unwitting Allies: Katherine Mayo and the Self-Respect Movement

The publication of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* in 1927 unleashed a storm of controversy for its provocative contention that the Hindu religion sanctioned women’s lowly status within Hindu society and for its graphic description of the alleged sexual habits of Hindus. Mayo scandalously claimed that Hindu husbands routinely raped their sexually immature child-wives and that excessive indulgence in premature sexual activity led to male impotence. These sexual practices, along with high infant mortality, widespread venereal diseases, and prostitution, were ills rooted in Hinduism, especially in its custom of child marriage. Consequently, she asserted daringly, Indians were as yet unfit for self-rule and that the continued civilizing presence of the British was necessary for the uplift of Indians. Mayo’s contention hit a particularly raw nerve in 1927 when nationalist agitation intensified over the all-British composition of the Indian Statutory Commission. Also known as the Simon Commission, the Indian Statutory Commission was authorized by Royal Charter to undertake a tour of India and make recommendations regarding the future constitution of India. The non-inclusion of Indians on the Commission sparked widespread protests and raised doubts about British intentions to grant self rule to Indians. Consequently, Mayo’s book faced a storm of indignant and horrified


protest in India. Nationalists, leaders in the women’s movement, social reformers, missionaries, and Westerners familiar with India condemned Mayo’s book and denounced her as an agent of British imperial interests.

In this maelstrom of Indian reaction to her book, the Self-Respect movement in the Madras presidency published a sustained defense of Mayo’s book and her interpretations of Hindu religion and society in the columns of its flagship Tamil periodical Kudi Arasu. Kovai A. Ayyamuthu wrote a series of articles between October 1928 and March 1929 that were later complied into a book titled Mayo Kuttru Meyya Poyya (Mayo’s Charges: True or False). In their forewords to the book, Periyar and J.S. Kannappar, editor of Dravidan, the Tamil language periodical of the Justice Party, wholeheartedly endorsed Ayyamuthu’s views on Mayo’s book. They extolled the importance of the book for educating the masses on roadblocks to self-respect and ultimately to the nation’s freedom itself. Ayyamuthu’s defense of Mayo was thus representative both of the Self-Respect movement’s position in the Mayo controversy and of its evolving views on religion, caste, and gender. In this chapter, I argue that the Mayo controversy presented a significant opportunity for the Movement to posit crucial links among caste, religion and gender. Ayyamuthu accomplished this task through his daring defense of Mayo’s book. I also demonstrate that Ayyamuthu’s ability to separate the message from the messenger and analyze it on its own terms sharply differed from the nationalists’ inability to do the same. For


3 Kudi Arasu started publication from Erode, Periyar’s hometown in western Tamilnadu in May 1925.

4 Kovai A. Ayyamuttu, Mayo Kuttru Meyya Poyya [Mayo’s Charges: True or False?] With a Preface by E.V. Ramaswami Naicker (Kanchipuram: Kumaran Printing Press, 1929).

5 Started in 1917, Dravidan ceased publication in May 1931. Periyar managed the newspaper in the late 1920s.
the nationalists, the messenger and her motives tainted the message and therefore the message could not (in fact, did not deserve to) be objectively analyzed.

To enable a contextual and nuanced understanding of Ayyamuthu’s writings, this chapter first provides a representative sample of Mayo’s provocative claims and graphic descriptions, followed by an analysis of the nationalist response to them. Then, it surveys the historiography on the Mayo controversy, followed by a detailed analysis of Ayyamuthu’s response to Mayo.

**Mother India and its Claims**

Mayo’s central argument in her book repeated the imperialist narrative of the timeless, unchanging nature of Indian society, and held Indians’ slavish adherence to customs and traditions responsible for this state of affairs. Therefore, she argued, Indians were themselves responsible for changing this condition:

> Inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself – all are traits that truly characterize the Indian not only of today, but of long-past history….His soul and body are indeed chained in slavery. But he himself wields and hugs his chains and with violence defends them. No agency but a new spirit within his own breast can set him free.⁶

Although she held the British administration in India responsible for not forcing more rapid changes, she considered it to be the only agent of change and progress in India. Unfortunately, the pace of change was not proportionate to the enormity of the situation. In her view, the British government, however imperfect, was the only hope for the masses until Indians became internally motivated to improve their situation. Mayo attributed Indians’ sorry plight first and foremost to their sexual habits:

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⁶ Mayo, *Mother India*, p. 16.
The whole pyramid of the Hindu’s woes, material and spiritual – poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness, not forgetting that subconscious conviction of inferiority which he forever bares and advertises by is gnawing and imaginative alertness for social affronts – rests upon a rock-bottom physical base. This base is, simply, his manner of getting into the world and his sex-life thence-forward.7

Mayo laid the ills of Indian society at the altar of the practice of child marriage that perpetuated the ignorance and oppression of girls and women. With no education, taught only to worship and serve their husbands as god and trained only in the rituals of worshipping household gods, and with motherhood thrust upon them at an early age, girl-mothers raised their children in ignorance. In the most graphic terms, she described the connection between child marriage and masculinity:

Take a girl child twelve years old, a pitiful physical specimen in bone and blood, illiterate, ignorant, without any sort of training in habits of health. Force motherhood upon her at the earliest possible moment. Rear her weakling son in intensive vicious practices that drain his small vitality day by day. Give him no outlet in sports. Give him habits that make him, by the time he is thirty years of age, a decrepit and querulous old wreck – and will you ask what has sapped the energy of his manhood?8

Mayo went on to make even more scandalous assertions about the evils resulting from this preoccupation with producing children and from the ignorance of women. She alleged that high-caste wives with impotent husbands were sent to temples to be impregnated by priests:

In case, however, of the continued failure of the wife – any wife – to give him a child, the Hindu husband has a last recourse; he may send his wife on a pilgrimage to a temple, bearing gifts. And, it is affirmed, some cases habitually save time by doing this on the first night after the marriage. At the temple by day, the woman must beseech the god for a son, and at night she must sleep within the sacred precincts. Morning come [sic], she has a tale to tell the priest of what befell her under the veil of darkness.9

7 Ibid, p. 22.
8 Ibid, p. 16.
Similarly, Mayo described in stark terms another situation that in her view was typical across regions, both urban and rural, in India that characterized the pitiable plight of innumerable girl-wives:

Married as a baby, sent to her husband at ten, the shock of incessant use was too much for her brain. It went. After that, beat her as he would, all that she could do was to crouch in the corner, a little twisted heap, panting. Not worth the keep. And so at last, in despair and rage over his bad bargain, he slung her small body over his shoulder, carried her out to the edge of the jungle, cast her in among the scrub thicket, and left her there to die.  

Here, Mayo highlighted the not un-heard of instances of marital rape of sexually immature wives by much older husbands. The most sensational such case was the death of eleven-year-old Phulmonnee Devi in Bengal that provided the much-needed impetus to pass the bill seeking to raise the age of consent to sexual relations within marriage from ten to twelve in 1891.

Mayo alluded to the illegal and immoral consequences of enforced Hindu widowhood wherein some Hindu widows committed sati, outlawed by the British Government in 1829, to escape the terrible plight of widowhood while others took to prostitution unable to adhere to the constraints of chaste Hindu widowhood. However, in the latter case, Mayo again blamed the girl’s exposure from infancy to “the same atmosphere of sexual stimulus that surrounded the boy child, her brother” as the reason for her stronger desire for sex over adherence to social law.

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12 Historians have documented how Indians and British before Mayo had recognized this connection and had made similar arguments. See Ratnabali Chatterjee, “Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Construction of Class and Gender,” Social Scientist, Vol. 21, No. 244-246 (September-November 1993), pp. 159-172; Sumanta Banerjee, Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998); Madhu Kishwar, “The Daughters of Aryavarta,” in Women and Social Reform in Colonial India, ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 201-229
Thus, for Mayo, the Hindu male’s method of socialization into sex/sexual habits was at the root of Indians’ woes and their inability to govern themselves:

Given men who enter the world physical bankrupts out of bankrupt stock, rear them through childhood in influences and practices that devour their vitality; launch them at the dawn of maturity on an unrestrained outpouring of their whole provision of creative energy in one single direction; find them, at the age when the Angle-Saxon is just coming into full glory of manhood, broken-nerved, low-spirited, petulant ancients; and need you, while this remains unchanged, seek for other reasons why they are poor and sick and dying and why their hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or to hold the reins of Government?\textsuperscript{13}

Mayo thus linked premature sexual activity to male impotence and widespread venereal disease, child marriage to high rates of infant mortality, and enforced widowhood to prostitution, all of which, in her view, made Indians unfit for self rule.

While both the British and Indians had acknowledged many of the ‘ills’ plaguing Hindu society that Mayo described – the many reform efforts and legislative acts of the nineteenth century attesting to this,\textsuperscript{14} what distinguished Mayo’s work was its sensationalism backed by an pro-imperialist argument. Also informing the highly-charged reception of Mayo’s book was the new context of “nationalist modernity” that sought to separate itself from the “colonialist modernity” of the nineteenth century. As Mrinalini Sinha argues:

If the abolishing of sati allowed the colonial state to stake the claims of British colonialism as the modernizers of indigenous patriarchy in India, then the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 wrested that claim away from colonialism for modern Indian nationalism. It marks, indeed, an important transitional moment – at the threshold between the de-legitimization of colonialism as the agent of modernity and the advent of a new ‘Indian’ modernity – in late colonial India.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{14} The colonial government criminalized sati and female infanticide in 1829 and 1870 respectively, and legalized widow marriages in 1856.

The sensational appeal of Mayo’s book owed both to her contentions about the sexual habits of Hindus and to her graphic – bordering almost on the pornographic – descriptions of them. She particularly targeted Brahmin/upper-caste Hindu men - the very demographic that dominated the nationalist movement – as the creators, in the case of Brahmins, and perpetrators of conditions that enabled women’s oppression. Not surprisingly, nationalists generally denounced her book as a slander on an entire people and culture. They vilified Mayo as a conscious agent of British imperial interests who during her stay in India focused on only those things that would support her pro-imperialist position that the civilizing influence of British rule was necessary as Indians were as yet undeserving of political independence.

**Nationalist Response to *Mother India***

A flurry of publishing activity marked the nationalist response to Mayo. Books such as *Father India*\(^\text{16}\), *Unhappy India*\(^\text{17}\), *A Son of Mother India Answers*\(^\text{18}\), *Miss Mayo’s ‘Mother India’: A Rejoinder*\(^\text{19}\) declared her account to be highly prejudicial and her motive questionable. M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948) called Mayo’s book “the drain inspector’s report” and chastised her as an “indophobe and Anglophile refusing to see anything good about Indians and anything bad about the British and their rule.”\(^\text{20}\) He questioned the veracity of many of her claims and purported facts, especially where she quoted him in support of her arguments. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-

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\(^{17}\) Lala Lajpat Rai, *Unhappy India* (Calcutta: Banna Publishing Corporation, 1928).


1941), nationalist poet from Bengal and first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913, accused her of “the subtlest method of falsehood, this placing of exaggerated emphasis upon insignificant detail, giving to the exception the appearance of the rule.”

For Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928), the prominent nationalist leader from Punjab who advocated a militant anti-British nationalism in the Indian National Congress, the book was a “hodge-podge of truths, half-truths, partial truths and no truths.”

Prominent women social reformers and nationalists responded to Mayo as well. Aware of the popularity of Mayo’s book in the United States and to counter its negative impact on American perception of the nationalist movement, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), poet, nationalist leader, women’s rights activist, and the first Indian woman president of the Indian National Congress, toured the United States of America in 1928 to 29 where her lectures presented a more positive image of Indians and their aspirations for self-rule. She specifically sought to salvage the prestige of Hindu womanhood by complicating Mayo’s simplistic and one-sided portrayal that saw Hindu women as universally and unequivocally oppressed by the Hindu religion. Muthulakshmi Reddi (1886-1968), first president of the Women’s Indian Association (1917-18), first woman member (1926-1927) and later first woman deputy-president (1928-1929) of the Madras Legislative Council, found Mayo’s wholesale condemnation of the Hindu

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21 Ibid, p. 5


religion unacceptable. She argued that the American author was motivated by the set purpose of bolstering British imperialism and showing Indians to be unfit for self-rule.\textsuperscript{25} In her criticism of Mayo, Annie Besant (1847-1933), Anglo-Irish Theosophist, ardent supporter of home rule for Indians, and first woman president of the Indian National Congress, held the British government equally responsible for prevailing social condition citing its poor record in social reform and attested to the resilience of Hindu civilization as proof of its many redeeming characteristics:

\begin{quote}
The writer seems to have merely sought for filth. Does she imagine that if her presentation were an accurate picture of Hindu civilisation that Hinduism could have produced a civilisation in India dating from the sinking of the Island of Poseidonus some 9,000 years before the Christian era? It would have been smothered in its own putrefication. But India has a future even greater than her marvelous past.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

An ardent believer in the greatness of Hinduism and its defining role in India’s culture and heritage, Besant found Mayo’s claims to be grossly exaggerated and misplaced.

C. S. Ranga Iyer, a Tamil Brahmin Congress member of the Central Legislative Assembly, responded to Mayo’s charges on several levels.\textsuperscript{27} First, he reminded Mayo of the dictum that a pointing finger has three fingers pointing back, citing equally egregious if not similar conditions prevailing in Britain and America.\textsuperscript{28} Suffused with a middle-class Brahmin morality, he argued:

\begin{quote}
Miss Mayo condemns the girl-mothers and their children in India, but these girls were lawfully wedded and their children were born out of lawful wedlock, not like the innumerable illegitimate children born of unmarried mothers in their ‘teens, away in secrecy and given in adoption…who go to swell the ranks of the citizens of the United States of America\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{25} NMML, Mathulakshmi Reddi Papers: Speeches and Writings, Vol. II, part 2.
\textsuperscript{26} Truth about Mother India, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{27} Ranga Iyer, Father India.
\textsuperscript{28} See also The Indian Review, Vol. 31, January-December 1930, pp. 79-80 for a criticism of Mayo on similar lines.
\textsuperscript{29} Iyer, Father India, p. 30.
\end{footnotes}
…If the atmosphere of India is poisoned in the opinion of Miss Mayo with the breath of widows, it will not be unsafe to retort that the breath of America is polluted with the poison of unmarried mothers or maids.  

He went on to justify or at least explain the logic and efficacy of the caste system as it originated in ancient India, claiming that the Aryan Brahmin in his subjugation of the original natives of India was at least not pretending “to be a democrat” like the “white Brahmins of the twentieth century”. Moreover, he contended that the Aryan Brahmins as inherently spiritual beings opted to rule over the “primitive” and “savage” natives not by force but by adopting “a saintly way of life” and thereby “became the spiritual leaders of the original natives of India”.  

Although this argument lent credence to the theory of Aryan subjugation of the Dravidians so central to Self-Respect discourse, it challenged it by suggesting that the Aryan Brahmins led by example not by force. Iyer employed the familiar cultural-nationalist invocation of a glorious past degenerating over time into a degenerate present thus: “In India, in primitive times, the system of marriage which prevailed was more like the modern one which obtains in the civilized world and less like the one that prevails there to-day.” Interestingly, while Iyer’s acknowledgement of the current prevalence of child marriage and the need for reform reflected a dominant strand in mainstream response to Mayo even as it criticized her imperialist agenda, his equation of the system of marriage in ancient India with that of the modern, civilized world drew

31 Ibid, pp. 91-92.
32 Ibid, p. 93.
33 Ibid, p. 25.
upon nineteenth century reformist discourse that used Western civilization as the referent against which to measure India and Hinduism.\(^{34}\)

Challenging Mayo’s depiction of child marriage and chaste widowhood as universally applicable to all Hindus, Iyer contended that they prevailed only among the Brahmins who were but a very small percentage of India’s population. In doing so, he on the one hand was able to salvage for the Hindu religion some credibility in this matter but on the other was at pains to explain the existence of these practices within the Brahmin community – the supposedly ‘spiritual’ and ‘saintly’ one. Such a state of affairs was the “result of a violent reaction [on the part of Brahmins] from the excess of liberty in the matter of marriages which once prevailed in India” resulting in a rigidity that was as unbalanced and unchecked as the earlier laxity in matters of marriage.\(^{35}\) However, this assertion again lent credence to the Self-Respect contention that Brahminism and women’s oppression were inseparable, since child marriage and chaste widowhood were both the source and condition of women’s lowly status within Hinduism.

K. Natarajan, the Tamil Iyer Brahmin editor of the *Indian Social Reformer* published from Bombay, responded to Mayo through a series of articles that were later compiled into a book.\(^{36}\) G.A. Natesan (1873-1948), a Tamil Brahmin Iyer nationalist,\(^{37}\) who wrote the introduction to the


\(^{35}\)Ibid, p. 25.

\(^{36}\)Natarajan, *Mayo’s ‘Mother India’*.

\(^{37}\)A writer and journalist from the Madras presidency, Natesan was the founder and proprietor of G. A. Natesan & Co. which published nationalist books and journals. The most prominent was *The Indian Review*, a monthly publication that focused mostly on nationalist themes.
book, endorsed Natarajan’s response to Mayo as necessary for undoing the “misrepresentation” that “India, her people and her religion have” suffered “at the hands of many interested aliens on many an occasion in the past” of which Mayo’s book is the most egregious example.\textsuperscript{38} He cited Natarajan’s long record of social reform endeavors as lending him the authority to do so, especially given that he was a high caste South Indian Brahmin. Natesan’s pointed reference to Natarajan’s caste added an extra credential to his fitness to rebut Mayo strongly, for he was not just a social reformer but a Brahmin social reformer, implying that Brahmins have the most to lose from any change in women’s status. In a very subtle manner, this endorsement of Natarajan’s credentials as a suitable critic of Mayo acknowledges the crucial link between caste and women’s oppression. Periyar and Kannapar would later make a similar case for Ayyamuthu’s credentials as a defender of Mayo’s claims.

Branding Mayo a racist and an imperialist, Natarajan found \textit{Mother India} replete with inconsistencies, falsehoods, exaggerations, and over-simplified generalizations that could at best be described as “the product of a fanatic frenzy for the superiority and supremacy of the whites.”\textsuperscript{39} Much like Ranga Iyer, he refuted Mayo’s characterization of child marriage as universally prevalent among Hindus. Claiming that he was no defender of child marriage and citing vigorous reform efforts to raise the age of marriage both in British India and the princely states,\textsuperscript{40} he nevertheless objected to Mayo’s assertion that “a race among which such marriages

\textsuperscript{38} Natarajan, \textit{Mayo’s ‘Mother India’}, p. viii.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 12.

prevail, is doomed to perpetual servility.” Quoting from history about the prevalence of child marriage among Romans, Greeks, and Hebrews, and in England at the time of the Pilgrim Fathers, and citing contemporary sources that did not see a necessary connection between early marriage and physical weakness, Natarajan attempted to counter Mayo in two ways. First, he made a material distinction between betrothal and consummation to show that Mayo’s use of the term ‘marriage’ was disingenuous that resulted in a skewed portrayal of the evils of child marriage in India. The two-stage process of Hindu marriages comprising of the betrothal ceremony and the consummation ritual ensured that while girls might undergo the former early, the latter generally occurred only after the onset of puberty. Mayo’s use of the term ‘marriage,’ in his view, conflated the two stages and therefore gave a distorted and exaggerated picture of the prevalence of child marriage in India. Second, he pointed to efforts such as Harbilas Sarda Bill to raise the age of marriage as proof against Mayo’s contention that Indians are oblivious to ills plaguing their society.

Natarjan was particularly outraged by Mayo’s attempts to discredit the mothers of India. Challenging her claim that Hindu mothers routinely masturbated their sons, he responded:

Miss Katherine Mayo is not able to quote any specific authority for this monstrous and degrading accusation against the mothers of India. . . . Any one who knows the high honour in which motherhood and mothers are held in India will not have hesitation in describing Miss. Mayo’s statement as a frigid, calculated lie. India may forgive Miss. Mayo many things, but this cowardly assault on the honour of her mothers, never. This single statement alone brands Miss. Katherine Mayo as – but it is needless to say more.

Like most nationalists who responded to Mayo, Natarajan deftly negotiated the pull from opposite directions - one that required unraveling Mayo’s imperialistic motives without being too defensive and the other that necessitated confronting the ills of Hindu society without providing

42 Ibid, pp. 77-79.
more fodder for critics such as Mayo. He abrogated to himself and other nationalists the right and duty to defend Indians against the malicious propaganda of imperial apologist such as Mayo while admitting the evils of Hindu society and working to reform them. Liberal Brahmin nationalists such as Iyer, Natesan and Natarajan, much like the nineteenth century reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Keshub Chandra Sen (1838-1884), and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), saw no contradiction between maintaining and manifesting their caste status and propagating reform in practices and customs pertaining to women. These nineteenth century reform efforts had, no doubt, resulted in the legal prohibition of customs such as sati and female infanticide and the legalization of Hindu widow remarriage. But the endemic and entrenched beliefs and attitudes that sanctioned practices such as child marriage and enforced chaste widowhood had resisted legal interventions and continued to perpetuate women’s lowly status. The Self-Respect movement made a radical intervention in this reformist discourse and action by positing that a thorough examination of these beliefs and practices was a necessary prerequisite to eradicating the socio-religious constraints under which women lived and functioned. Positing the inextricable link between caste and patriarchy, it argued that maintenance of the caste system was antithetical to improvement in women’s status.


44 For a critique of the beliefs and structures that sanction enforced Hindu widowhood, see Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill, Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001).
Historiography on the *Mother India* Controversy

The divisive trajectory of the Mayo controversy that naturally - ‘naturally’ given the explosive nature of her book – which sorted people into the dichotomous nationalist vs. imperialist camps has informed historical writing into the 1980s. In the 1970s, Manoranjan Jha and Mary Daly represented this dichotomy. While Jha characterizes Mayo’s book to be a calculated imperialist attack on India and her aspirations for self-rule, Mary Daly endorses Mayo’s feminist credentials and seeks to reclaim her as a true feminist ‘sister’. In its radical feminist focus on unraveling patriarchy as the universal cause of women’s oppression everywhere unmediated by other factors, Daly’s analysis in some ways reproduces Mayo’s imperialist bias albeit in a new setting. Writing in the 1980s, William Emilsen and Athiyaman and A. R. Venkatachalapathy continued this divisive discourse. Emilsen found the Indian response to Mayo too shrill, one-sided, and defensive - one that gave no room for the possibility that she could have had a social reform motive behind her expose. He cited her record of crusade for social reform as a pointer in that direction, and called for a historical reappraisal of Mayo’s work. Responding to this critique, Athiyaman and A. R. Venkatachalapathy, following Manoranjan Jha’s work, saw no reason why Mayo needed a more sympathetic hearing given her unquestionable imperialist motive.

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45 Jha, *Katherine Mayo and India*.


Writing in the postcolonial feminist context of the 1990s,49 Liz Wilson presents an account of Mayo’s *Mother India* that sounds a cautionary note about the potential complicity between feminist research and colonial discourse.50 Wilson argues that the still-prevalent feminist “assumption of universal sisterhood”, although a far cry from the imperial feminism of Mayo, runs the risk of “perpetuating the categories and prejudices of colonialism in a postcolonial era.”51 Joanna Liddle and Shirin Rai argue that Daly, for all her admirable attempts to proclaim a unity of all women through an attack on all forms of patriarchy, firmly operates within an imperialist feminist framework that “inhibits[s] the very unity that the author affirms.”52 They challenge the aura of feminism and impartiality accorded to *Mother India* because of its author’s status as a woman and as an American. In reproducing and extending orientalist discourses, it is “a deeply racist book”53 wherein gender and race are conflated. More recently, Mrinalini Sinha has suggested a more complicated trajectory that moves beyond the discourse of Mayo as feminist social reformer vs. imperialist apologist dichotomy.54

Sinha argues that the controversy surrounding Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* opened up the possibility, however briefly, for a radical gender and caste politics. As it revitalized support


53 Ibid, p. 505.

for the passage of the Sarda Bill, women’s and anti-caste movements came together to challenge Brahminical Hindu patriarchy as epitomized in the custom of early marriage. But as the passage of the Bill as the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 served to blunt the major impact of Mayo’s book, it came to be seen as the most fitting reply to Mayo. Simultaneously, the figure of the Indian woman was being rearticulated using the language of citizens and nation-states moving away from the late-nineteenth century conceptualization of her as representing the inner-spiritual sphere of the nation as opposed to and superior to the west. As this new formulation like its nineteenth century counterpart was premised on the figure of the middle-class woman – upper-caste and Hindu, it closed the space that was momentarily opened up for the articulation of a radical gender cum caste politics.

In Sinha’s analysis, the response to Mayo’s book circumscribed the choices of the women’s movement. First, the “dismal choices” it offered – that between women as separate from, and untouched and unaffected by, other social relations, and women as religious collectivities such as Hindu and Muslim – forced the women’s movement to a choice that made any useful, far-ranging, far-reaching critique of Brahminical Hindu patriarchy an impossibility. Second, the choice the women’s movement made to separate itself from the social made it complicit in an exclusivist nationalist imaginary of India as implicitly male, Hindu, and upper-caste. In this groundbreaking work, Sinha shines the floodlight on the Mayo controversy and explores its various contours across three continents. Her canvas is wide and she places the controversy at the center of an “important historical transformation in the period between the two

55 Named after Harbilas Sarda, the mover of the Bill in the Indian Legislature, it sought to raise the age of marriage for girls to 14. It was eventually passed as the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 penalizing the marriage of girls under 14.

56 Ibid, p. 245.
This chapter shines the spotlight on a particular response to Mayo’s book in a particular region in India, namely the Self-Respect movement in the Madras presidency, which, as Sinha herself demonstrates, while sharing some of the parameters of the debate with nationalists, defended Mayo unequivocally in her claims about Hindu society, particularly its treatment of women and the ‘untouchables’.

**Self-Respect Movement and *Mother India***

The Self-Respect movement’s position in the Mayo controversy reflected its commitment to social reform as a prerequisite for political independence. Contrary to the dominant nationalist narrative that privileged political independence over social reform, it argued that political freedom before the attainment of social equality would only perpetuate Brahmin hegemony. Through its flagship periodical *Kudi Arasu*, the Movement began to challenge Brahmin dominance in the social and religious life of the non-Brahmins in south India. Pointed criticisms of the social behavior of the Brahmins appeared frequently in *Kudi Arasu*. For example, it criticized the Brahmins’ practice of wearing the sacred thread to distinguish their high-born status. It argued that self-respect was more important than self-rule. In order to achieve self-respect, non-Brahmins should first free themselves from the yoke of Brahminism.

In late 1926, the Movement declared its intention to shift its primary focus of attention from politics to social issues, abandoning its intensive efforts to turn the Justice Party into an effective alternative to the Congress in Tamil Nadu. In addition, Periyar toured the Tamil

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58 *Kudi Arasu*, 27 December 1925.

59 Ibid, 15 August 1926
districts of the presidency during November and December 1926 to popularize the Movement and recruit new members. To raise awareness among the non-Brahmins of the lowly status assigned to them by the Hindu caste system, Movement leaders began the propaganda for ‘desanskritising’ Tamil society. They condemned Brahmin priesthood as nothing but a means to maintain Brahmin hegemony and oppress the non-Brahmins, and the vedas, *shastras*, and *puranas* as tools of Brahmins to promote their self-interest at the cost of the self-respect of the non-Brahmins. When the Mayo controversy erupted in mid-1927, the Movement was well-placed, given its daring criticism of caste and Brahmins, to defend her claims about them.

A key incident that raised the stakes for the Movement and motivated Self-Respecters to launch a frontal attack on the caste system was Gandhi’s public support for *varnashrama dharma* during his tour of South India between June and October of 1927. In July, Periyar and S. Ramanathan, Self-Respect activist and editor of *Revolt*, the English language newspaper of the Movement, met with Gandhi in response to his queries about the Cheraṇamadevi

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60 *Shastras* are treatises written to explain some idea or concept, especially in matters involving religion.

61 *Puranas* are religious texts dating from about 400 CE to 1400 CE that consist of narratives of the history of the universe from creation to destruction, genealogies of kings, heroes, sages, and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy, and geography.

62 *Kudi Arasu*, 3 April 1927

63 *Varnashrama* is a system of social division within Hindu society. It delineates the four *varnas* (orders) and the four *ashramas* (stages of life). The four *varnas* are the *Brahmans* or priests; the *Kshatriyas* or warriors and rulers; the *Vaishyas* or the merchants and farmers; and the *Sudras* or the laborers and craft-workers. The four *ashramas* are *brahmachari* or celibate student; *grihastha* or householder; *vanaprastha* or retired person living in the forest; and the *sanyasi* or wandering ascetic.

Gurukulam. In that meeting, they had placed before him their proposals for the “attainment of true progress and freedom for India” which included getting rid of the Congress, the Hindu religion and varnashrama, and Brahmin dominance. Gandhi made a distinction between varnashrama’s true nature which he valued and its current practice which he abhorred. Periyar made no such distinction. Claiming that the concept of varnashrama, sanctified in Hinduism, formed the bedrock of caste inequalities, Periyar advocated its wholesale condemnation. In an editorial entitled “The Mahatma and Varnashrama”, he accused Gandhi of a lack of commitment to the eradication of untouchability. Although Gandhi openly condemned the practice of untouchability, he was not opposed to the principle of caste distinction by birth elaborated in the law of varnashrama as a way of organizing society; he was opposed merely to the inequalities that were perpetrated and justified in its name. Periyar dismissed Gandhi’s idealized version of varnashrama as irrelevant to the issue of eradication of untouchability, for its social effects manifested as caste-based inequalities needed to be addressed. To achieve the goal of eradication of untouchability, no amount of pontification on the ideal of varnashrama would help. In fact, its justification, however well-intentioned, meant the perpetuation of the evil of untouchability. The only solution was to condemn it unequivocally. Given Gandhi’s popularity

65 “Letter to S. Ramanathan,” CWMG, Vol. 39, 4 June 1927- 1 September 1927, p. 215. In 1925, a controversy erupted over the provision of separate dining facilities for Brahmin and non-Brahmin students in the Cheranmadevi Gurukulam, a residential school, in Tirunelveli district of Madras presidency. The Gurukulam was started by V.V.S. Iyer with financial support from the Tamilnadu Congress Committee. Periyar along with prominent non-Brahmin Congress leaders such as Varadarajulu Naidu, V.Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, and, S. Ramanathan condemned the school’s discriminatory practice. Iyer responded saying that the school was merely being sensitive to the feelings of some Brahmin parents who had requested such an arrangement. The matter was even brought to the attention of Gandhi who advocated non-coercion in the matter of religious feelings of people. Periyar resigned as secretary of the Tamilnadu Congress Committee over the issue. See Dirks, Castes of Mind, p. 258; Pandian, Brahmin and Non-Brahmin, p. 190.

66 Kudi Arasu, 27 August 1927.


68 Kudi Arasu, 7 August 1927.
and his venerated status among the masses, his propagation of varnashrama, idealized as it may be, would prove a detriment to the eradication of untouchability. In fact, his stature made it imperative that Gandhi refrain from publicly endorsing varnashrama. To promote self-respect, Periyar condemned Gandhi and his stand on varnashrama. He also strongly objected to Gandhi’s public endorsement of Brahminic Hinduism and his use of stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in his speeches. Responding to readers’ reactions who questioned the wisdom of opposing the Mahatma and who wondered whether the Self-Respect movement would survive a revolt against Gandhi, Periyar replied that such criticism did not bother him because he and Kudi Arasu undertook public service neither to earn a livelihood nor to gain popularity through a blind following of Gandhi. By late 1927 Periyar’s break with Gandhi was complete and final. The slogan ‘Long Live Mahatma’ was dropped from its crest. Gandhi was addressed as ‘M.K. Gandhi’ or ‘Shri Gandhi’ without the usual saintly honorific ‘Mahatma’.

Continuing its attack on the caste system that accorded high ritual status to the Brahmins, the Kudi Arasu called for reforms of the social and religious customs of the non-Brahmins and suggested ways to purge the non-Brahmin community of Brahminic influences. One was to

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69 A. Ramasami Mudaliar (1887-1976), editor of Justice from 1926-1935, member of the Madras Legislative Council from 1920-1926 and the Madras Legislative Assembly from 1931 to 1934, mayor of Madras from 1928 to 1930 and member of the Viceroy’s executive council from 1939-1942, argued along similar lines in editorials he wrote in Justice in September 1927. See NMML, A.S. Venu Papers, List 190 (XXI) S. No. 28: Sir A. Ramasamy Mudaliar’s editorials on social problems in ‘Justice’ 1927.

70 Sanskrit epic poem, composed in its present form c. 400 CE, that depicts the dynastic struggle culminating in a major war between two sets of cousins - the Pandavas and the Kauravas. It contains the text of the Bhagavad-Gītā (a dialogue between the Pandava prince Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna), an incarnation of Vishnu, numerous subplots, and interpolations on theology, morals, and statecraft.

71 Kudi Arasu, 28 August 1927

72 Although Periyar had quit the Congress in 1925 over the issue of communal representation for non-Brahmins, he retained a healthy respect for Gandhi and reiterated it in his editorial even while criticizing Gandhi for his stand on varnashrama. See Ibid.

73 Ibid, 6 and 20 November 1927.
employ non-Brahmin priests instead of Brahmins for conducting worship and ceremonies in the home and the temples, and another was to chant Tamil mantras and sing Tamil devotional hymns like the Thevaram in place of Sanskrit on these occasions.\textsuperscript{74} Social segregation and allocation of rooms exclusive to the Brahmans at public choultries\textsuperscript{75} and railway stations should end. Untouchables were enjoined to challenge the Hindu caste system and establish their rights.\textsuperscript{76}

By the time the Mayo controversy erupted, the Self-Respect movement had articulated a well-grounded and lucid understanding of the negative discriminatory impact of the caste system for non-Brahmins and a firm commitment to build a new social order based on equality and social justice. Mayo’s relentless focus on women’s miserable plight in \textit{Mother India} that replayed, in a new context, the early nineteenth century imperialist narrative that linked civilization status with the treatment of women\textsuperscript{77} pushed the issue of women’s status to the forefront of national and international attention. Just as the establishment of British rule in India found justification in the lowly status of women, the growing demand for self-rule necessitated a re-emphasis of British civilizing credentials through a reiteration of women’s continued lowly status. While the early nineteenth century colonial ‘gaze’ resulted most famously in the legal prohibition of sati in 1829\textsuperscript{78}, the early twentieth century imperial ‘gaze’ which came in the sensational form of Mayo’s \textit{Mother India} provided the much needed impetus for the passage of

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 17 October 1927. Thevaram is a collection of Tamil Saivite devotional poetry. Saivites revere Shiva, one of the Hindu Trinity, as the supreme being.

\textsuperscript{75} Rest houses where accommodation and food are provided by a charitable institution for nominal rates or sometimes free of charge.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 17 October 1927.

\textsuperscript{77} A position first articulated by James Mill (1773-1836), Scottish political theorist and proponent of classical liberalism, in \textit{The History of British India}, 5\textsuperscript{th} ed., vol. 1 (1858; reprint, New York: Chelsea House, 1968), pp. 309, 311, 313 .

\textsuperscript{78} See Mani, \textit{Contentious Traditions}. 
the Child Marriage Restraint Act exactly a century later. Consequently, responses to Mayo’s book had to contend with the issue of women’s status. Critics of Mayo did this by citing ongoing reform efforts to improve women’s condition and/or by claiming that her account grossly and disingenuously exaggerated the actual condition of women. As defenders of Mayo’s claims, the Self-Respect movement seized the opportunity to posit gender inequality as a crucial aspect of the Hindu caste system. Mayo thus became an unintended ally of the Self-Respect movement.

**Ayyamuthu and Mother India**

In a series of articles published in the *Kudi Arasu* between October 1928 and March 1929, Kovai Ayyamuttu, a Self-Respecter, systematically defended Mayo and answered the specific criticisms of her book from nationalists and the Hindu orthodoxy. In their forewords to Ayyamuthu’s collection of articles, Periyar and Kannappar considered it an important, relevant, and useful endeavor. They pointed to Ayyamuthu’s credentials to write such a book citing his passion for social reform which he had demonstrated not merely through words but also through concrete action as exemplified by his participation in the Vaikkom\(^{80}\) agitation. This invoking of social reform credentials on behalf of Ayyamuthu is reminiscent of Natesan’s invoking of the same on behalf of Natarajan. Both defenders and critics of Mayo would deploy the discourse of social reform to justify their interpretation of Mayo’s book.

Although Ayyamuthu was quick to point out that Mayo’s account was driven by imperialistic motives, he refused to dismiss it as one of pure exaggeration and imagination.

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\(^{79}\) See Sinha, *Specters of ‘Mother India’*.  

\(^{80}\) Vaikkom in Travancore state (now part of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala) was the site of a movement against untouchability in 1924-25 that sought to allow ‘untouchables’ access to roads surrounding the main temple in the town. Periyar was one of the leaders of this movement.
Regardless of the motivation that propelled the book’s contentions, he remained open to the possibly unintended positive outcome of Mayo’s book. He found this useful in and of itself as it balanced its imperialist and racist bias. Writing between 1928 and 1929, Ayyamuthu articulated a coherent understanding of the nexus among religion, caste, and gender. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai argue that the year 1928-1929 “marked a new beginning” in the Movement’s attention to gender concerns in terms of the frequency, urgency, and intensity with which it appealed to people to pay attention to them.\(^{81}\)

While Ayyamuthu’s articles in the *Kudi Arasu* comprised “one of the most elaborate and extended defenses of Mother India produced in India,”\(^{82}\) Kannappar’s editorials in the *Dravidan* also unequivocally defended Mayo. Between October 1928 and April 1929 Ayyamuthu wrote thirty-three articles during, of which nine were specifically on women, five on Brahmins, and four on ‘untouchables’. These eighteen articles addressed issues that comprised the core of the Self-Respect critique of Hindu society with the remaining articles addressing Mayo’s arguments and the nationalists’ response more generally. The following discussion first addresses Ayyamuthu’s general response as well as *Dravidan* editorials. It then analyzes his articles as they specifically pertain to gender, caste and religion.

Ayyamuthu’s critique functions at three levels. At the broadest level, it is embedded in the larger Aryan-Dravidian discourse that posited a pre-Aryan egalitarian society among Dravidians.\(^{83}\) This discourse posited an originary, pure indigenous Dravidian culture based on region, language, race and ethnicity separate and distinct from Aryan culture. At the second

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\(^{81}\) V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*, p. 380.

\(^{82}\) Sinha, *Specters of ‘Mother India’*, p. 127

\(^{83}\) See for example M. C. Rajah, *The Oppressed Hindus* (Madras: Huxley Press, 1925).
level, Ayyamuthu’s response is situated within the discourse on caste that fundamentally divided the people of south India into Brahmins and non-Brahmins wherein the former were equated with Aryans and the latter with Dravidians. At the third and most specific level, it uses gender as a category of analysis to posit women’s lowly status as a defining feature of the caste system. In doing so, it departs from and deepens the Dravidian critique of Aryans, Brahmins, Sanskrit and the North which was until then gender-blind. Much like the famous articulation by African-American feminists about gender-blindness when talking about race, the Dravidian discourse about Aryan domination and oppression was inimical even to the possibility of the differences between Dravidian women and men in their experience of the caste system. Self-Respect critique of caste patriarchy - embodied here in Ayyamuthu’s response to Mayo - was a radical intervention in this discourse.

As already discussed, nationalist reaction to Mayo dwelt on her imperialistic agenda that sought to portray India as unfit for self-rule. From this characterization of Mayo, three discursive moves emerged. One, most famously and succinctly articulated by Gandhi, was to label her a “garbage collector” meaning that Mayo deliberately looked only for the wrongs in Indian society and then gave undue weight to them. Two, in the glare of Mayo’s blatant attack in which she minced no words, many nationalists took recourse in a defensive cultural nationalist argument. While admitting to the existence of ills within Indian society and the need to remedy them, they either reminded Mayo of the dictum that “a pointing finger has three fingers pointing back” and listed the ills of American/Western society or accused her of a lack of knowledge and understanding about the practices she attacked in her book. Three, acutely aware of the possible

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84 For the argument that Black women found themselves left out of both the category “women” and from the category “Black”, see Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, ed., All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982).
negative impact of Mayo’s account on American perceptions of and support for India’s quest for self-rule, Sarojini Naidu, a pre-eminent woman nationalist leader, was sent to America to offer a more balanced perspective.

Challenging the first of these discursive moves, both Ayyamuthu and Kannappar found nationalist characterization of Mayo as garbage collector to be the most suitable title for the service she had rendered. While nationalists meant it as a criticism of her one-sided account of Hindu religion and society, Ayyamuthu and Kannappar used it to praise her efforts. In an editorial titled “Mayo! What Can We Give You in Return” that endorsed Mayo’s second book *Slaves of the Gods* even before its Indian edition was published, Kannappar applauded her for once again seeking to render yeoman service to the cause of social reform in India – an act so valuable that it could scarcely be repaid. He subverted Gandhi’s negative characterization of Mayo as a garbage collector by turning it into a label of praise. For him, it was a label most befitting her for, he claimed, Mayo collected “our garbage when we refused to or could not.” Regardless of her intentions, Indians must be grateful to her for exposing their garbage. He argued that for a society that branded anyone including Self-Respecters who exposed its ills as atheists and thereby dismissed them a “whiplash” such as Mayo’s book was absolutely necessary to arouse people out of their stupor. Similarly, Ayyamuthu contended that Indians should be grateful that Mayo, like a dutiful garbage collector, had accumulated in one place all the negatives of India and Indians such as laziness, superstition, illiteracy, disease, and lack of hygiene. Ayyamuthu appealed to the “heroes” who attacked Mayo for piling up India’s problems to instead thank her for giving them the opportunity to understand the ills that plagued Indian

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85 In this book, Mayo provided an account of the Devadasi system.

86 *Dravidan*, 9 April 1929, p. 6.
society and work towards eliminating them, lest, Ayyamuttu warned, “you and your nation will
go the way of this garbage!”\textsuperscript{87}

The Self-Respect emphasis on rationalism had no sympathy for cultural nationalist
arguments. Consequently, Ayyamuthu and Kannappar attacked the nationalists for harping on
the notion of a glorious past to camouflage societal ills. Kannappar maintained that this
tendency among Indians to take refuge in their antiquity every time a fault was exposed blinded
them to the truth. Attachment to tradition embedded in caste and puranas was not conducive to
rational thinking which alone would allow a person to discover truths. Alluding to the ways in
which ideas about religion and God were inculcated in the young, he asserted:

Soon after a child attains some understanding of the world around him, he is shown a
stone and told that it is God, therefore knock on your head. This practice of our country
is not conducive to a child developing his own intellect. Why can’t the false ‘theists’
who say that belief in God is an unshakeable pillar of Indian society wait until the child
has developed his own intellect before telling him about God?\textsuperscript{88}

Religion and its associated beliefs and practices were, for Kannapar, stumbling blocks to the
development of the skills of reasoned judgment and analysis. Ayyamuthu found the constant
reference to India’s great cultural traditions, religious thought, and its art and architecture to be a
mere ploy to deflect attention from what needed to be done to improve society. For him, reason
demanded that Mayo’s claims be examined carefully for their veracity or lack thereof and then
acted upon rather than be categorically dismissed as the rants of a rabid imperialist. To validate
more fully Mayo’s critique, Ayyamuttu pointed to anecdotes about strange superstitious practices

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, April 9, 1929, p. 6.
of those who wear the Hindu religion as a “crown on their heads!” For the people to be pure in their minds, “Shouldn’t these idols and temples be blown apart by German Cannons?” Religion and its concrete manifestations in the form of temples, idols and irrational practices had stalled the development of rational thinking. Consequently, for Ayyamuthu, nationalists’ attempts to bury the possible truths contained in Mayo’s claims under the blanket of an imperialist bias reeked of a denial syndrome.

Self-Respect critique of Hindu religion was embedded in the observable social and material effects resulting from religious injunctions and beliefs. Self-Respecters’ iconoclastic interpretation of sacred Hindu literature, particularly the popular epic Ramayana, exposed it to be artifacts of Aryan, Brahmin, Sanskritic, North Indian hegemonic aspirations that contained the seeds of caste and gender inequalities. Consequently, seeking recourse in textual sources to deny Mayo’s claims was not a choice, for Self-Respecters found them to be originally culpable in the oppression of women and lower castes. Moreover, their focus on the material effects of religious injunctions, as in their critique of varnashrama dharma, neither idealistic interpretations based on ancient texts nor their possibly original positive intentions mattered. The social basis of the Self-respect critique of religion thus had radically different implications for social reform and therefore manifested in a radically different response to Mayo. Consequently, Ayyamuthu and Kannappar ridiculed nationalist efforts to counter the alleged misinformation in Mayo’s

89 Ayyamuthu, Mayo’s Charges, p. 6. Here, he mentions strange superstitious practices in Karamadai in Coimbatore district involving women swallowing whole a banana spat out by their menfolks, obscene practices involving women and stone idols and on occasion live-idols in Salem, and sacrifices of animals made in Salem with the belief that they will thwart the impending death of a person.

90 Ibid.

book with positive images of India by deputing Sarojini Naidu on a tour of the United States. Deeming such propaganda to be worthless, Ayyamuthu appealed to the nationalist leaders to instead send their ‘devis’ to all corners of India to chase away the ghosts of superstition, caste, idolatry, and temples. The true and final test of religion was not what was written in journals and magazines extolling its virtues but everyday living. The voluminous debate surrounding the abolition of child marriage had not produced a single useful law; in the name of protecting religion, necessary reforms were stalled.\footnote{Ayyamuthu, \textit{Mayo’s Charges}, p. 9.} Ayyamuthu pointedly condemned the approach of the orthodox and the nationalists to social reform wherein instead of addressing material realities as they clearly existed, they resorted to analysis and interpretations of textual evidence of customs and traditions to obfuscate material reality and stall legislative action. Such an approach to reform was self-defeating as there could be as many versions and interpretations of what was right, wrong, sanctioned, and prohibited in the scriptures as there were people.

Kannappar similarly criticized Sarojini Naidu whom he labeled Sarojini Devi for wasting her time defending the indefensible in America when she could more usefully work for social reform in India. Her efforts to convince the ignorant American public that Mayo’s book was a lie was bound to backfire since, he claimed, her efforts cannot salvage India’s prestige when few, if any, of Mayo’s claims could be challenged. Naidu would not be able to escape the brickbats of the crowds, he asserted, if she dared to do this in India. Kannappar addressed every custom Mayo catalogued in her book and asked “Can we deny this?”\footnote{\textit{Dravidan}, 30 October 1928, p. 4.} In another editorial, Kannappar called it shameful that Sarojini Devi undertook propaganda against Mayo when ‘orthodox waste’
such as Mr. M. K. Acharya and the Swaraj Party politicians stalled the Sarda Bill by claiming that religion would die if child marriage was abolished. The editorial queried, “Shouldn’t waste such as Mr. Acharya be got rid of before she goes to America?” He also held the Government of India responsible for such a state of affairs as it was supporting the claims of the orthodoxy and preventing social reform laws from coming into force. Given this situation, he asked, “why won’t a Mayo write a book such as ‘Mother India’?” Written during the height of the acrimonious debate pertaining to the Sarda Bill, Kannapar’s critique underscored Self-Respecters’ anger and frustration at government inaction and orthodox stonewalling as well as nationalist obfuscation of the fundamental issue of women’s lowly status that Mayo underscored in her book.

What separated Ayyamuthu’s and less so Kannappar’s response from those of nationalists was their willingness to look beyond Mayo’s motives and to assess the validity of her claims. The nationalists neither intended to - because they were furious over her ridicule of their aspirations for self rule - nor were able to - because for them her imperialistic agenda nullified her credibility as a disinterested chronicler of India - separate her motive from her arguments. Even when they acknowledged some of Mayo’s claims about the ills of Hindu society, as did Iyer and Natarajan, their responses were reluctant, superficial, and dismissive, emanating from the starkly defensive position into which Mayo had pushed them. Any more fundamental acknowledgement of Mayo’s claims would mean endorsing a rabid imperialist, which to them was unthinkable given their aspirations for self-rule. For the Self-Respecters, self-rule was a distant goal as their first priority was to overthrow Hindu religion and its caste

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system. Since Mayo held these institutions culpable in the oppression of women, they could more easily examine her claims unhindered by her imperialistic agenda.

In his articles addressing women’s status, Ayyamuthu examined the ways in which women have been/ were being oppressed and the beliefs that justified their oppression. He found Mayo justified in all her claims –about Hindu wives and widows, about motherhood, about the Devadasi system, and about Brahmins.

**Women as Wives**

Validating Mayo’s claim that the Hindu religion sanctioned women’s lowly status, Ayyamuthu condemned the “[m]any Tilaks\(^95\)” who dared to accuse Mayo of humiliating Indian women.\(^96\) He pointed out that the “puranas and other texts humiliated women to the greatest extent possible, and that there was nothing anywhere in the world that was more deplorable than this humiliation of women.”\(^97\) Women’s lowly status was thus not a consequence of later corruptions of original good intent but written into the Hindu religion. He cited Mayo’s quotations from the Padma Purana\(^98\) delineating the wife’s duties toward the husband that ensured her subservient status vis-à-vis her husband. Among them, Ayyamuthu declared, were


\(^{96}\) Ibid, pp. 22-24.

\(^{97}\) Ibid, p. 22.

\(^{98}\) Padma Purana, one of the eighteen Great Puranas or Mahapuranas, was compiled somewhere between 400 CE and 1000 CE. See Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), Chapter 4.
total and unquestioning submission to her husband, service and devotion to him regardless of what kind of a man he was and how he treated her, eating only after the husband does, fasting along with him, mounting the funeral pyre with him, ignoring his infidelities, putting up with physical abuse from him in a stoic manner, and considering him God no matter what, so that the world would praise her as a dutiful and chaste wife.\textsuperscript{99} Thus delineating the conditions that perpetuated women’s slavery, Ayyamuthu wondered how Indians could expect any foreigner who had read the Padma Purana to think highly of their culture, for India was a land of punitive laws for women.\textsuperscript{100} “For is this not what our women are taught, without skipping a word, from the time they are children! Is this not what is soaked into the blood of our women! Indian husbands treat women as child-bearing vessels and servants.” Ayyamuthu contended that lack of education was the root cause of this situation and that Mayo had clearly, aptly, and succinctly described this situation in her book. There was neither time, since they were still very young, nor inclination, since the focus was on teaching them their duties toward their husbands and how to perform devotion to the various gods and goddesses, to give girls a proper education before they went their husbands’ house. Ayyamuthu agreed that this summarized the nature of women’s lives in India resulting from a lack of education.

Another instance of oppression that women, particularly wives, faced on a daily basis in their husbands’ homes, particularly at the hands of their mothers-in-law, ranged from being treated as servants to being ill-treated if they not bear children, particularly male children. Claiming that Mayo’s description of this situation as factual, Ayyamuthu asked:

\textsuperscript{99} Ayyamuthu Mayo’s Charges, pp. 23-24.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, pp. 24-25.
Who can deny this? What are you going to do to get rid of this state of affairs? Your daughters are living life like the blind leading the blind. Where are the schools to educate them? Don’t you think it is necessary to establish schools in villages? .... Convert your temples into schools for girls at once. Sell the temples’ treasures and use the money to support girls’ education. Stop your poojas and festivals and use the money for the education of girls. Burn the villages that have no schools. That will be the day women will attain liberation! .... That will be the day foreign women such as Mayo will respect our women.  

Ayyamuthu thus underscored the essentially oppressive nature of Hindu sacramental marriages that while endowing upon women an ‘honorable’ status as wives simultaneously constituted them as subservient to men.

**Women as Mothers**

The Self-Respect critique of patriarchy also challenged motherhood - arguably the most sanctified site of Hindu conjugality. In August 1928, Periyar articulated his radical position on birth control wherein he saw it as a means to secure women’s freedom from their biological destiny. Ayyamuthu provided justification for this radical position by delineating the travails of motherhood. The Indian ‘craze’ for children, particularly male children, reduced women to being mere containers for bearing children. These, mostly young, women were then mired in the rituals and rites of passage that accompanied and followed the birth of a child. Although men were affected by this constant yearning for children, for “the first question that an ‘accursed’ such as me who does not have children invites from people is ‘Hey man! Don’t you have any children yet?’,” women bore the major consequences of this societal/cultural expectation.

Both early marriage and early and incessant motherhood emanate from the belief that legitimate reproduction through and within marriage channelizes women’s excessive sexual energy and

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101 Ibid, p. 27.

102 Ayyamuthu, Mayo’s Charges, pp. 13-14.
thus maintains social order.

Ayyamuthu proposed raising the age of marriage as the necessary first step toward changing the condition of women’s suffering that resulted from the constant demands of child-bearinng and child-rearing. For, “[e]ven an old man about to die wishes to marry a young girl so that he may have a child”. Granting women equal share in property inheritance and widows the right to inherit their childless husbands’ property, he claimed, would reduce this ‘craze’ for children, for no man would then seek to have more than one wife.

In his analysis of Hindu motherhood, Ayyamuthu crucially departs from the nationalist rhetoric. Instead of focusing on Mayo’s highly provocative claims about Hindu mothers which the nationalists found scandalous and in their state of horrified shock were unable to respond meaningfully, Ayyamuthu directly responded to her basic assertion about the negative effects of constant childbearing, childbirth, and child-rearing on women. While nationalists idealized Hindu motherhood, Ayyamuthu, paying scant regard to any such notion, provided evidence for Mayo’s claims in the daily experiences of women as mothers and potential mothers. Ignorance, absolute lack of freedom, and blind adherence to rituals and superstitions were the lot of women. Women’s travails associated with the pressure to conceive and then produce a male child were limitless. Weighed down by the expectation of pregnancy soon after marriage and dreading the label ‘barren’, women resorted to irrational practices such as fasts, pilgrimages, and devotional activities in the hope that these practices would cause pregnancy. In case of continued non-pregnancy, they had to face the prospect of their husband remarrying to beget children, particularly sons, for sons were necessary for “avoiding hell” and “for ensuring the continuance

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of the family line and inheriting property.” Ayyamuthu underscored both the economic and religious basis of women’s lowly status. Describing certain rural customs and practices to ‘treat’ women who were childless, Ayyamuthu asserted that had Mayo had witnessed such practices and customs, “the stink of our drains would have increased.” Ironically, pregnancy and childbirth did not bestow on women an easier life. Apart from bearing the sole responsibility of caring for children, they were now mired in a different set of rituals and superstitions. Lauding Mayo for her keen and apt observations of the sufferings of women following pregnancy and childbirth, Ayyamuthu held that there should be no surprise if Mayo’s revelations led foreigners to think of Indians as “superstitious, uncivilized people.”

Women as Widows

The Hindu widow had for long stood as the epitome of the lowly status of women. The success of the nineteenth century debates surrounding women’s status was most forcefully reflected in the legislative enactments prohibiting sati in 1829 and validating widow marriages in 1856. The central figure here was the Hindu widow, especially the upper-caste Hindu widow, whose pitiable condition was among the first targets of colonial reform efforts. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 notwithstanding, widow marriages remained an exception rather than the rule. One key reason for this was the deeply entrenched social and cultural attitudes toward widows and their marriages. Unsurprisingly, the condition of widows was central to Mayo’s critique of Hindu society. Ayyamuthu concurred with Mayo that the pitiable condition of widows was the most apt and heartrending testament to the oppression of women. For him,

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104 Ayyamuthu, Mayo’s Charges, p. 37.
105 Ibid, p. 38.
the condition of girl-widows was especially heart-rending. Upon widowhood, they became inauspicious and society deprived them of joy, laughter, and happiness in their lives in many ways: they were not allowed to participate in any celebrations, they were made to shave their heads in some communities, they could not wear nice clothes, jewelry or flowers, they had no proper food nor did they have proper sleep due to the heavy load of household work, they were always attired as if they were *sanyasis*, and they fasted daily. He exclaimed, “How many crores of emaciated human bodies deprived of happiness lie imprisoned in the darkness! Alas!” Ayyamuthu’s lament underscored the prevalence of child marriages that exacerbated the oppression of widows, for girls as young as five were doomed to live a life of enforced chastity upon the death of their husbands.

A recurring reformist argument against the orthodox had been to accuse the latter of a self-serving, selective appropriation of customs and traditions to thwart reform. Railing at the cruel injustice of confining young girls to a life wherein they were denied life’s simple pleasures while old men, irrespective of their marital status, could marry young girls, Ayyamuthu attacked

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106 Hindu renunciates.

107 For the argument that traditionally the Hindu widow is conceived of as the structural counterpart of the Hindu wife having no social or sexual identity, see Chakravarti, “Gender, Caste and Labour,” in Chen, *Widows in India*, pp. 63-92.

108 Ibid, p. 28.


110 See S. Mitter, *The Protected Age Bill*, Reprinted from the *Indian Mirror* (Calcutta: R.D. Mitter, 1891); B.K. Majumdar, *Our Shastras and The Age of Consent Bill* (Calcutta: Anglo-Sanskrit Press, 1891); also, see Sarkar, “Rhetoric Against Age of Consent” for the argument that the emergence of a resurgent revivalist, nationalist Hindu identity in the late nineteenth century was posited upon the upper-caste Hindu home and conjugal life as a sanctified and pure space untouched and untouchable, and uncorrupted and incorruptible by the realities of colonial life.
the hypocrisy of the Brahmins for their selective adherence to the smritis and shastras.\textsuperscript{111}

While Brahmin men flouted the commandments laid down in the smritis as regards the proper sphere of work enjoined for them without any fear of sinning, they became concerned about it when the question of raising the age of marriage for girls arose. They claimed that if they did not marry their girls before the ages of ten to twelve as the smritis enjoined, they would become grievous sinners. Here, Ayyamuthu was alluding to the argument put forth by S. Satyamurti, a Brahmin nationalist and leader of the Swaraj party, before the Age of Consent Committee. Satyamurthi had raised the familiar cry of ‘religion in danger’ and argued that if the age of marriage for girls was statutorily raised, it would leave the orthodoxy in the difficult position of choosing between religious sin and legal punishment.\textsuperscript{113} Ayyamuthu found nothing more heinous than Brahmins expecting complete adherence to the smritis from women but less rigor in applying rules contained in them to Brahmin men. Embedded in Ayyamuthu’s argument here was a different interpretation of Partha Chatterjee’s influential formulation of the theory of ‘separate spheres’ theory to explain both the point at which anti-colonial nationalisms differ from European nationalisms and the disappearance of the women’s question from the reform agenda in the late nineteenth century. While Chatterjee finds in the notion of ‘separate spheres’ the originary moment for an anti-colonial nationalism that announced its difference from the

\textsuperscript{111} Smriti, literally ‘that which is remembered’, refers to a body of Hindu sacred literature that includes the puranas, and is contrasted with Shruti, literally ‘that which is heard’, believed to be of divine origin and includes the vedas and the upanishads. The upanishads, also known as vedanta, constitute the concluding portions of the vedas and speculate on the ontological connection between humanity and the cosmos. The earliest extant upanishads date from roughly around the first millennium BCE.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, pp. 29-30.

\textsuperscript{113} Following the passage of the Sarda Bill as the Child Marriage Restraint Act in October 1929, Satyamurti appealed to the British to amend the law in accordance with the religious sentiments of the orthodox. He proposed one of two alternatives for achieving the objective – either orthodox Brahmins and other Hindus must be exempted from the provisions of the Act or the age of marriage should be lowered from 14 to 12. See K.V. Ramanathan, ed., \textit{The Satyamurti Letters: The Indian Freedom Struggle Through the Eyes of a Parliamentarian}, Volume 1 (New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2008), pp. 116-117.
European experience by locating women firmly in the inviolable inner, spiritual sphere, Ayyamuthu found in it a manifestation of a self-serving Brahminical patriarchy.\textsuperscript{114} As Tanika Sarkar notes, to consider all forms of anti-colonial posturing as inherently liberating is to ignore the workings of indigenous structures of power through them.\textsuperscript{115} Ayyamuthu’s contentions about orthodox opposition to raising the age of marriage unraveled the operation of Brahminic patriarchy in the guise of resisting colonial interference in religious matters.

Continuing his tirade against the cruelty perpetrated against Hindu widows, Ayyamuthu contended that the unnatural expectation of chastity from widows led to terrible sufferings. Referring to stories in newspapers about “unfortunate” widows who resorted to extreme measures such as abandoning their babies or contracting diseases as a result of ingesting ‘medicines’ to abort their babies in order to save themselves from being outcasted, Ayyamuthu blamed child marriage as the root cause for the sufferings of women. Lack of financial autonomy wherein widows were denied even a small share in their husbands’ property reduced them to leading a slavish existence even in their natal homes. If a widow dared to go to court to claim her share, she was made a laughing stock by her family and community and accused of violating her duty toward her husband. The decay and stink stalking Hindu religion and society were the direct result of the suppression of women through enforced chaste widowhood. Ayyamuthu was appalled at the tolerance shown toward orthodox opinion opposing marriage reform. The British government was to blame for this state of affairs as well. Writing during the period when the Sarda Bill was on the legislative anvil and the Central Legislative Assembly was


\textsuperscript{115} Sarkar, “Rhetoric Against the Age of Consent,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, pp. 1869-78. Here, Sarkar cautions against the uncritical application of Edward Said’s ‘orientalism’ that results in a gender-blind romanticization of any and all anti-colonial positions.
hearing arguments from reformers and the orthodox, Ayyamuthu showed little patience for the legislative process. For him, a bill that had the potential to, at the very least, reduce the number of widows, particularly child widows, deserved to be passed with little, if any, debate or delay. The elapse of over a year since the introduction of the Bill in the Assembly and the decision to postpone further consideration of the Bill till such time when the Age of Consent Committee, submitted its report was, for Ayyamuthu, an attempt to delay this much-needed social reform that signified the Government’s capitulation to orthodox pressure. Given this, the abolition of sati could only be seen as a mistake:

If Sati was not abolished, today the country’s 2,68,34,838 widows would not be suffering. At least they would have died .... British Government that abolished Sati! What did you do about the orthodox who wailed when you abolished Sati! What did you do about the Sathyamurthis of these days who said, “Do not interfere in religion?” Is there one orthodox person in India who breaking your law committed Sati and bravely went to prison? Then why this intoxication? Why won’t you make a law to make the lives of the crores and crores of Hindi widows happy? Or else, your abolition of Sati will be like killing a man not in one stroke but like killing him slowly by decapitating his body little by little part by part on a daily basis.

Here, Ayyamuthu alluded to the possibility that sati could have been motivated by the desire to escape from the miserable life of a Hindu widow.

With his acceptance of Mayo’s description of the plight of Hindu widows as factual, Ayyamuthu articulated the crucial link between caste and gender. He argued that widow marriages would not become commonplace as long as people believed that remarriage for

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116 The Government of India appointed the Age of Consent Committee in June 1928 to undertake a broad examination of the question of age of consent and to ascertain opinions on the operation of the existing laws on age of consent with a view to amending them if necessary. The Committee submitted its report the Government in July 1929.


118 Ayyamuthu, Mayo’s Charges, pp. 32-33.
widows was dishonorable. This link between honor and widowhood was inextricably tied to caste superiority wherein communities that practiced widow marriages were considered lower in stature and were called more demeaning names than even ‘sudras’. Therefore, even communities that practiced widow marriages were abandoning this practice. Women’s freedom was, according to Ayyamuthu, thus contingent upon getting rid of caste hierarchy and the shastras and religion that sanctioned it. Education and property rights would increase women’s chances of remarriage, for men would find widows with property, education and intellect attractive as potential spouses. “Your caste laws and religious laws will then be burnt with the flame of true intellect. Women will then have attained the intellect and ability to break away from superstitions and irrational beliefs such as fate.”\textsuperscript{119} Development of rational thinking which education will foster and the possession of economic resources that property rights will allow were both necessary for women’s freedom, the denial of which relegated women to lives of subservience and superstition.

**Devadasis**

The period between October 1928 and April 1929 when Ayyamuthu wrote his articles endorsing Mayo’s book was marked not only by the debates on the child marriage prevention bill but also by the debates pertaining to the devadasi prevention bill\textsuperscript{120} in the Madras presidency. While the former prompted Ayyamuthu to launch a stinging critique of child marriage and its concomitants of servile wifehood, incessant motherhood, and enforced chaste widowhood, the latter opened up a legitimate space for an unequivocal condemnation of the devadasi system.

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\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, p. 36.
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\textsuperscript{120} The Bill was introduced in the Madras Legislative Council by its deputy-president, Muthulakshmi Reddi in November 1927.
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Equating devadasis with prostitutes\textsuperscript{121}, Ayyamuthu lauded Mayo for her exposure of the devadasi system. He applauded the Bill as a welcome measure to liberate “our sisters” from sexual exploitation in the name of god and religion. He once again pointed to the hypocrisy and the misguided/misplaced criticism of the nationalists who while slandering Mayo overlooked the devious attempts of Brahmin priests and Mylapore Brahmin Congress leaders\textsuperscript{122} to thwart this much-needed reform. While the Brahmin priests uttered their familiar cry of ‘religion in danger’, the Mylapore Brahmin Congress leaders used devadasis themselves to attack Muthulakshmi Reddi’s bill to prevent the custom of dedicating girls to the temples. Quoting “a brave hero of our country” who claimed “Is there more prostitution here than in America! Are there excrements here that are not there in Piccadeli Park? We engage in prostitution in a restrained manner inside our homes, we don’t wander on the streets, at street-corners and parks,” Ayyamuthu pointed to the utter illogic of their claims as they sought to retain an institution that was merely another name for prostitution by according it the sanctity of religion. He found it appalling that newspapers claimed in bold headlines that this was a fitting reply to Mayo. For him and the Self-Respecters, the devadasi system was another means by which the Brahmins degraded and oppressed non-Brahmins and women.

Ayyamuthu also endorsed, at least in so far as Kerala was concerned, Mayo’s contention that there was in some regions in India another kind of prostitution not found anywhere else in

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 14-16. Devadasis were usually lower-caste or ‘untouchable’ women..

\textsuperscript{122} During the early 20th century, a group of Brahmans from Mylapore, a suburb in south Madras, emerged influential in the politics of Madras presidency. The British, while aware of the usefulness of these men, were also wary of their potential power and resorted to appointing non-Brahmins to several Government posts. Irshick,\textit{Politics and Social Conflict}, pp. 231-232; A. Ganesan,\textit{The Press in Tamilnadu and the Struggle for Freedom, 1917-1937} (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), p. 59, fn. 7.
the world wherein young boys were made to copulate with young men.\textsuperscript{123} According to him, Mayo could have written another tome on this alone, if only he had an opportunity to meet her and show her the workings of this custom. Disputing some Indians’ assertion that such a thing did not exist in India, he challenged them to go to Kerala and see for themselves not only the practice of young boys performing oral sex on their masters but also the custom of several men sharing one wife for reasons of frugality such as single marriage expense, little family growth, and very little family expense. Referring to the practice of polyandry among certain castes in Kerala,\textsuperscript{124} he contended that “there are innumerable five pandavas living with a wife like Draupadi.”\textsuperscript{125} In discussing polyandry under the title “Prostitution Not found Anywhere Else”, Ayyamuthu equated it with prostitution and considered economic factors as a poor excuse for the

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\item\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, pp. 16-19. Ayyamuthu claimed to have been utterly shocked upon witnessing men using young boys for oral sex in Kerala because of the non-existence of the same in the Tamil-speaking areas, further contending, “It would have seemed quite normal to me if I had been born and brought up in Kerala.”


\item\textsuperscript{125} Draupadi, the heroine of the Sanskrit epic \textit{The Mahabharata}, is the joint wife of the five Pandava brothers. Wendy Doniger points to three oft-cited reasons for Draupadi’s polyandry. The first has to do with Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, asking the brothers to share their possession/spoils equally among themselves resulting in the all the five brothers marrying Draupadi. The second claims that all the five Pandavas are the incarnations of Indra and Draupadi the incarnation of Shri, the goddess of prosperity and the wife of Indra. The third tells the story of the daughter of a great sage (Draupadi in a previous incarnation) who when offered a boon by the god Shiva repeated her request for a virtuous husband five times and was therefore granted five virtuous husbands. See \textit{The Hindus: An Alternative History} (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), Chapter 11. Although economic factors, as evidenced by the above stories, are not the source of polyandry in \textit{The Mahabharata}, scholars have attested to socio-economic necessity as a key consideration in the practice of polyandry historically. See K. Mann, “Changing Status of Women among Himalayan Tribes,” in \textit{Tribes of India: Ongoing Challenges}, ed. Rann Singh Mann (New Delhi: MD Publications, 1996), pp. 249-260; George P. Monger, \textit{Marriage Customs of the World: From Henna to Honeymoons} (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004), pp. 215-216; Chetan Singh, “Polyandry and Customary Rights of Landownership in the Western Himalaya,” \textit{XIV International Economic History Congress}, Helsinki 2006, Session 26. Available at http://www.helsinki.fi/iehc2006/papers1/Singh.pdf - Accessed on 25 February 2011. Doniger attributes the religio-mythical explanations for Draupadi’s polyandry to Hindu (read Brahmin male) discomfort with it.
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continuance of this practice, suggesting that they merely camouflaged the religious exploitation of women. However, as Wendy Doniger suggests, since Draupadi’s polyandry was a source of embarrassment to Hindus, they resorted to non-socio-economic justifications for the practice. The historical fact of economics as a key consideration in the practice of polyandry notwithstanding, both the Hindus who sought to sanctify Draupadi’s polyandrous situation and Ayyamuthu who equated polyandry with prostitution and ridiculed its economic motivations were in consonance about its undesirability. Given this, it was rather disingenuous of Ayyamuthu to blame Hinduism and its puranas for the propagation of this practice. Its existence in some parts of Kerala owed more to socio-economic factors rather than religion. Also, considering his arguments about the oppressed condition of Hindu wives, mothers, and widows which attest to the control of women’s sexuality through sacramental, monogamous (for women) marriages, Brahmin/upper-caste Hindu men would more likely find polyandry to threaten the condition of female monogamy in marriage, notwithstanding the fact that polyandry did not translate to higher status or power for women. In fact, herein lay the difference between Ayyamuthu and upper-caste/Brahmin men in the reasons they claimed for disapproving this practice. For Ayyamuthu, it signified exploitation of women under the guise of economic necessity while Hindus saw in it a violation of the mandated sexual fidelity to a single man.

In keeping with the Self-Respect position on the inextricable link between the Hindu religion and women’s lowly status, Ayyamuthu attacked the *Laws of Manu*, the puranas, and the epics for propagating prostitution. According to Manu, he claimed, women were naturally endowed with the blemish of prostitution so that men should assume that even their mothers had prostituted themselves - in thought if not in deed. Women should therefore repent and do
pence.. According to Ayyamuthu, Indians should be grateful that Mayo did not stir up the garbage that was the Vedas, shastras, and puranas, for that would reveal that the person who divined the Vedas – Veda Vyas – was himself born of prostitution. Born of the union between Parasara and Satyavati, Shantanu’s wife, Veda Vyas, according to Ayyamuthu, was a product of prostitution who wrote the Vedas with the help of Vinayaka. Ayyamuthu’s reference to this incident as an act of prostitution suggests two interpretations. One, that Ayyamuthu considered sex outside the confines of marital unions as prostitution. Two, considering the value placed on women’s chastity - a value that was directly tied to child marriage and enforced chaste widowhood - Ayyamuthu pointed to the unchaste ways by which some of the most revered figures in the Hindu tradition were conceived. Given Ayyamuthu’s passionate defense of many of Mayo’s claims, the latter interpretation is the most plausible. On another level, Ayyamuthu’s analysis was intended to expose the hypocrisy of holding women to a standard of chastity while revering figures such as Vyasa whose method of conception flouted this very standard.

To reiterate this hypocrisy, Ayyamuthu pointed to the even more scandalous method by which Agasthya, one of the saptarishis or seven sages extolled in the Vedas, was conceived:

If this was the state of the northern diviner of the Vedas, he argued, the plight of his southern counterpart - the bestower of grammar to Tamil – Agasthyan - was no different.

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127 Vyasa was born to Satyavati and the sage Parasara (who seduced her as she was ferrying him across the river) before she married Shantanu, the king of Hastinapura. See Doniger, The Hindus, p. 293. Vinayaka, also known as Ganesha or Ganapati, is the elephant-headed god in the Hindu pantheon and son of Shiva, and is worshipped as the Remover of Obstacles.
in fact was even more scandalous, for he was born out of a pot consisting of the organs of two men – Mithiran and Varunan – who lusted after Urvasi.  

In keeping with the general tone, approach, and attitude of the Self-Respect movement toward Hinduism, such scandalous portrayals of Hinduism’s most revered works and figures were intended to shock readers out of their stupor of blind beliefs, superstitions, and meaningless practices. Contending that it would take a thousand pages to write about all such instances that “populate the garbage that is your vedas, ithihasas, and puranas”, Ayyamuthu pointed to the irony of it all:

Is prostitution the property of women alone? Is there any instance where women have engaged in prostitution all by themselves? Doesn’t prostitution arise only when both men and women are involved? Is it man or woman who is the reason for prostitution? Do women become pregnant without the help of men? . . . how is it fitting to say that women have been born with the curse of prostitution? Aren’t men mixed up in this curse? Isn’t it men who are arguing for prostitution in our legislatures? Isn’t it the damned men who are seeking the court’s permission to continue prostitution? Given this, your shastras and shastris make shameful statements about women alone being born with the blemish of prostitution. This has been created solely to denote women as blemished. Alas, Mayo was not aware of this.

In highlighting the differential standards of sexual behavior to which women and men were held, Ayyamuthu’s analysis pointed to the explanation and justification behind patriarchal control over women so much so that even as mothers women should be under the control of their sons.

Ayyamuthu appealed to his readers to consider Mayo as a friend and ally who pointed them in the direction of reform and to work toward alleviating the sufferings of women. With the right education, women’s intelligence would flower and then “the faults listed in ‘Mother India’ would

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129 History, particularly the legends, myths, poems associated with the puranas and the epics.

130 Ibid, pp. 21-22.
dissipate like the fog encountering the sun.”\textsuperscript{131} If, instead of this, Indians merely enacted the story of Savithri\textsuperscript{132} and praised the intelligence of Gargi and Maithreyi,\textsuperscript{133} women would not become knowledgeable and intelligent. Lack of education for girls had important consequences for society, for when ignorant women raised children, they used scare tactics instead of reason and logic, thereby raising fools and cowards. Education and property rights would endow women with the freedom and intellect to challenge superstitions and blind obedience to husbands, to enable rational thinking and to distinguish right from wrong. Oblivious to women’s suffering, many lustful husbands behaved in an animal-like manner ensuring that not a year passed by without their wives producing a child. Pregnant with child and with one child in hand and one on the waist, women, frail and weak, fearing their husbands’ wrath, toiled away at domestic chores. Such suffering could be avoided by giving women freedom, property, rights and education.\textsuperscript{134}

**Religion**

Launching a broader attack on religion, Ayyamuthu, addressing Mayo, pointed out that while the Hindus were mired in caste divisions, beliefs about birth-based superiority and inferiority, and superstitious practices, Americans were not completely devoid of them either:

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{132} The story of Savitri is one of the more celebrated supplementary stories in *The Mahabharata* for its portrayal of a devoted wife who knowingly marries a man who is destined to die young and by her perseverance wins him back from the dead. See Johannes A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata: The Book of the Assembly, The Book of the Forest* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 214-215.


\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 39-41.
Even among your countrymen, such behavior can be seen to a certain extent. You also waste your time and intelligence by praying to cure a disease. You also have instituted intermediaries in the form of priests and you also pay obeisance to them. You also have tonsured your women and left them in female monasteries to assist those priests. No matter what the religion, anyone who lives amidst the constraints of religion does to a certain extent mortgage his intelligence and freedom.\footnote{Ibid, pp. 42-43.}

Religion, to the Self-Respecters, was like the opium that stupefied the mind and destroyed the physical body. Only in such a state of ill-health can they (referring to Indians, particularly Brahmins) deny, in fact be unable to recognize, the service that Mayo rendered and take recourse in religion to thwart much needed reforms.\footnote{\textit{Revolt}, 6 March 1929.}

The Self-Respect movement, according to Ayyamuthu, had been founded to get rid of this slavery to religion. Moreover, its principles and benefits were bound to touch America in the future as well. People’s freedom was possible only through the abolition of religion, and the country’s freedom was possible only through the freedom of the people. Self-rule, as the Movement envisaged, was thus dependent upon freedom from irrational beliefs and superstitions that religion promoted.

**Brahmins and Brahminism**

Ayyamuthu then addressed British rule, Brahmins, the plight of the ‘untouchables’, the reasons why India had been ruled by foreigners for most of its history, and how Indians could free themselves. He drew an analogy between British rule and Brahmin rule first to establish that Brahmins were ruling over the non-Brahmins just as the British ruling over Indians. Then he delineated the differences between the two - differences that he believed were crucial to understanding the nature of Brahmin rule which was insidious, devious, and cunning – the very
qualities that made its true character difficult to recognize and therefore extremely difficult to prove and challenge. In contrast, British rule, for all its injustices, was open, concrete, and direct. Because it was foreign and external, it was easy to identify and recognize as an enemy and therefore natural and understandable to oppose it and fight for freedom from its domination.\textsuperscript{137} According to Ayyamuthu, freedom was neither necessary nor desirable for, given the current situation, Indians were unworthy of self-rule. In fact they, particularly the non-Brahmins, could not survive without the protection of British rule. Political freedom could and should come only after freedom from Brahmin rule. In order to free themselves from Brahminic stranglehold on their lives, Indians had to discard their belief in God, religion, and shastras – the weapons of the Brahmins much as the weapons of the British were bombs and guns.\textsuperscript{138} Validating Mayo’s claims\textsuperscript{139} about the Brahmins of the Madras presidency as religious, social, political, and economic oppressors of the non-Brahmins, Ayyamuthu challenged the Brahmins to refute them.\textsuperscript{140}

Ayyamuthu also laid blame directly on the non-Brahmins/Dravidians themselves for their condition vis-à-vis the Brahmins because they gave room, however forced it might have been, for Brahminism by being caught in its web of gods, rituals, temples, priests, festivals, devadasis etc. and by treating the panchamas\textsuperscript{141} despicably.\textsuperscript{142} India’s enslavement through the centuries

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, pp. 46-49.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid, pp. 49-52.

\textsuperscript{139} Here, in support of her claims, Mayo quoted at length from her interview with the Raja of Panagal (who she referred to as a “rich, respected and politically powerful” lower-caste man) about his impressions of the Brahmins in the Madras presidency. The Raja of Panagal (1866-1928) was a founder-leader of the Justice party and chief-minister of Madras Presidency from 1921 to 1926. See Mayo, \textit{Mother India}, pp. 146-149.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid, pp. 52-58.

\textsuperscript{141} Panchama, meaning fifth varna, denotes the group of people who were denied membership in the four-fold Hindu caste-system comprising the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudra. This gourp has been variously referred to as
itself was a direct result of this blind adherence to Aryan Brahminic Hinduism that had divided the people through religious injunctions and weakened their unity. In order to get rid of this enslavement, Brahimnism should be eliminated for only then will and should British rule leave India. ¹⁴³ He urged people to follow the principles of the Self-Respect movement, for it would give them the courage, intelligence, discipline, and honesty to be the true heroes of self-rule.

While agreeing wholeheartedly with the mainstream opinion that Mayo was committed to strengthening white people’s rule over the world, that she wrote this book solely to strengthen British rule in India, and sternly rebuking Mayo for this imperialistic attitude, Ayyamuthu was nevertheless open to and accepting of the truth of her critique. For him, her motivations or intentions were secondary or even immaterial to the validity of her claims:

I hope my friend¹⁴⁴ will agree that when someone with the intention of insulting me accuses me of being a complete alcoholic in front of a large gathering, it is my first duty to address my alcoholism at once, regardless of his intention, and without wasting time arguing about whether I am a half alcoholic or a full alcoholic. I am also duty-bound to bless the person who insulted me for the opportunity he gave me to get rid of my alcoholism so that no one thereafter insults me in this way. ¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Ibid, pp. 58-60. Panchama, meaning fifth varna, is another term used to refer to the ‘untouchables’.

¹⁴³ Ibid, pp. 82-84.

¹⁴⁴ Here, Ayyamuthu referred to P. Varadarajulu Naidu (1887-1957), a non-Brahmin Congress leader in the Madras presidency, who, while admitting that there were faults and defects in Hindu society that needed to be addressed, challenged Mayo’s contention that they were proof enough of India’s unfitness for self-rule since faults were present in all countries and among all peoples. He had expressed his views in his foreword to Inthiya Matha (1928), the Tamil translation of Mother India. See Sinha, Specters, p. 126.

¹⁴⁵ Ayyamuthu, Mayo’s Charges, p. 75.
Thus, Ayyamuthu ‘dutifully’ saluted Mayo for “exposing our faults and thereby opening our
eyes to our humanity and inculcating in us the courage to stand up and fight for our freedom.”

**Conclusion**

Although Ayyamuthu’s defense of Mayo’s contentions about Indians certainly does not
endorse her book as a work motivated by feminist social reform, and thereby lies within the
broad contours of the mainstream nationalist position that adduced to her work imperialist
motives, he nevertheless deemed her message valuable for exposing inequalities and injustices in
Hindu society and furthering social reform. His position was in contrast to that of the
nationalists who were unable for the most part to extricate the message from the messenger. For
them the messenger and her motives were crucial, while Self-Respecters laid emphasis on the
message and not the motive of the messenger. This difference can be attributed to their opposing
stands on the issue of self-rule. Since it was Indian self-rule that Mayo intended to oppose, her
book had very different implications, insinuations, and meaning for the nationalists and the Self-
Respecters. Ayyamuthu’s book can be seen as a more balanced review of Mayo – one that
transcends the extreme dichotomous positions that either viewed the defense of her book as an
apology for imperialism or the criticism of it as nationalist pride manifesting a ‘denial
syndrome’. Self-Respecters were able to speak from this position because they acknowledged
and recognized the greater obstacle to self-rule – caste-bound Hindu patriarchy that enslaved
women, lower castes, and outcastes. The next chapter will engage with the Self-Respect
movement’s critique of normative expectations of women’s sexual behavior to underscore its
radical vision for women’s freedom.

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146 Ibid, p. 84.
Chapter 2

Recasting Conjugality, Legitimizing Desire

Kovai Ayyamuthu’s Mayo Kuttru Meyya Poyya (Mayo’s Charges: True or False) was an early yet representative example of Self-Respect deployment of gender as a category of analysis in its critique of the Hindu caste system. It signified a key departure from the nationalist response to Mayo’s Mother India, and thus functions as a window into alternative conceptions of gender, identity, community, and nation during the high period of nationalism. It used the space opened up by the Mayo controversy to rupture the hegemonic appropriation of a pan-Indian identity predicated on an upper-class/caste nexus. For the Self-Respect movement, Ayyamuthu’s response to Mayo was but one specific rhetorical demonstration of its larger and more fundamental crusade against the social inequalities and injustices embedded in caste-based Hindu society. This chapter unravels this more fundamental critique as it pertains to sexuality - a key axis that determines women’s social and cultural roles and behaviors. Sexuality may be defined as the ways in which humans understand, experience, and express themselves as sexual beings.

The chapter takes as its starting point the feminist position that sexuality is socio-culturally determined, and therefore is experienced primarily as a manifestation of the mores, morals, and norms of a specific community.¹ As such, sexuality is not “just . . . an autonomous realm of the senses” but is “embedded in a social world structured and saturated by relations of

power”\(^2\). Therefore, to speak of ‘natural’ sexuality attributable to males and females is to look for the ‘needle in the haystack’, meaning that either it does not exist at all or if it does it is mediated by socio-cultural factors to such an extent that it can never be discovered. Consequently, it is fair to contend that no one, since every person lives and functions in a specific socio-cultural context, can experience or has experienced this ‘natural’ sexuality. Any analysis of sexuality is inherently an analysis of societal mores and therefore relative and contextually specific. As such, different sexualities are attributed to males and females within a specific culture-as in, for example, expectations of men’s vs. women’s sexual behavior in American culture, and different sexualities attributed to women across cultures—as in expectations of women’s sexual behavior in the United States vs. India. This chapter argues that the Self-Respect movement identified women’s lowly status within Hindu society as primarily a manifestation of the rules and regulations devised to control their sexuality. Sacramental arranged marriage, child marriage, servile wifehood, incessant motherhood, enforced chaste widowhood, and the devadasi system were the means, the Movement argued, by which Hindu caste patriarchy exercised its control over women.

**Colonialism, Nationalism, and Narratives of Sexuality**

In their pioneering edited volume, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argue that caste, class, and patriarchy colluded in controlling female sexuality among Hindus, thereby maintaining and reproducing social inequality.\(^3\) This aspect of Hindu society came into sharp focus and high visibility and possibly was even reified during the colonial period when colonists


and natives with varying motivations sought to subject the practices and institutions of Hindu India such as sati, child marriage, enforced chaste widowhood and the devadasi system among others to reform. In her study of middle-class Hindus and Sikhs in colonial Punjab, Anshu Malhotra demonstrates how caste practices involving rules and regulations for monitoring women’s lives and sexualities shaped the construction of middle-class identity.\textsuperscript{4} Charu Gupta points to a similar connection between caste and women’s roles in the United Provinces as intermediate and lower castes imposed restrictions on women to improve their social status\textsuperscript{5}.

Extending Michel Foucault’s theory to the colonial context in India, Mary E. John and Janaki Nair suggest that in place of the “confessional couch [and] the hystericalised woman that generated knowledge and anxieties about sexuality” in the West, the courts and the various reform movements were the sites for the production of discourse on sexuality in colonial India.\textsuperscript{6} Foucault posits that since the eighteenth century there has been a proliferation of discourse on sex. This discourse was embedded in a variety of sites such as demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and politics that produced a range of mechanisms “for speaking about it, for having it to be spoken about, for inducing it to speak for itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it.”\textsuperscript{7} This endless discourse about sex in effect belied its status as a secret, private matter. In colonial India, the

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\textsuperscript{6} Mary E. John and Janaki Nair, ed., \textit{A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India} (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), Introduction, p. 18-19.

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courts and the discourse and activities of reformers, both colonial and native, gainsaid the belief that sex was a private, secret matter.

If the sexual explicitness of the *Kamasutra*\(^8\) has come to signify a time in India’s past when attitudes to sex and sexuality were more liberal, at least among certain classes,\(^9\) postcolonial feminist engagement with sexuality attests to relations of power embedded in the regulation of sexual desire and behavior. The debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while lacking both the sexual openness and freedom of an earlier time as exemplified by the *Kamasutra* and the explicit feminist concern with sexuality as an issue of power,\(^10\) were nevertheless implicitly about the beliefs, practices, rules and regulations surrounding sexual behavior. The debate on sati in the early nineteenth century and the subsequent passage of arguably the most famous law directly affecting women – the legal prohibition of sati by the colonial government in 1829 - that is considered to have heralded India’s engagement with modernity was only the first intervention aimed at supposedly improving the status of women.\(^11\) The Act’s progressive credentials belied the erasure of women’s agency and subjecthood from the debates in which it was embedded. Lata Mani contends that this debate was first and last a

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\(^8\) Composed in Sanskrit sometime during the third century C.E., the *Kamasutra* is the oldest extant work on erotic love.

\(^9\) See Kumkum Roy, “Unravelling the *Kamasutra,*” in John and Nair, *Question of Silence,* pp. 52-76. Interpreting the text in the context of modernity, Roy argues that while the Sanskrit original was not entirely free of normative expectations of male and female sexuality, it nevertheless left much to interpretation and possibly even contestation, and that modern translations of the text, privileging a heterosexual norm, foreclose any such possibilities.

\(^10\) See Nivedita Menon, ed., *Sexualities* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2007) for essays that focus on transgressive sexualities and on sexual desire. This collection of essays, while acknowledging the importance of the framework of ‘control’ that has dominated feminist scholarship on modern India - whether analyzing the legal and social interventions of the colonial period that homogenized a variety of non-normative sexualities and family arrangements or the range of patriarchal violence inflicted on women in contemporary India, adopts the framework of ‘desire’ to engage with the margins of normative sexual expression, thus implicitly underscoring the legitimacy of discussing sexuality on its own terms.

contention between two patriarchal elites – the one colonial and the other native - to reform women’s status. This feature – a collusion of colonialism and patriarchy that worked to erase or at least undermine women’s agency - inaugurated a trend that was to be a recurring feature of social reform efforts in colonial India.

The production of the ideal modern citizen-subject of the nation in a distinctly upper-caste/upper-class, gendered idiom was embedded in the complicitous relationship among patriarchy, caste, and class. The paradox of anti-colonial Indian nationalism lay in merely supplanting authority from the British colonials to Indian nationalists without altering the hierarchies on which colonialism stood. Franz Fanon proposed the notion of the “nationalist bourgeoisie” – a group that seeks to defeat the prevailing colonial rule only to replicate its systems of power and domination, and that therefore liberation from colonial rule implicitly reified the structures of colonialism. This seeming paradox on further analysis reveals its logic, implicated as it was in the project of modernity, however unfinished, engendered by colonialism. Modernity provided the means – language and institutions – to envisage the nation - a conception that was primarily available only to the elites through their access to the language and institutions of modernity. This collusion between colonial officials and indigenous elites - predominantly male, upper-caste, and upper-caste - was a natural corollary of the (unfinished) project of modernity and ultimately determined the casting of the nation itself in gendered, classist, and casteist terms.


Anxieties surrounding gender, class, and race that animated the European colonial enterprise were dependent “on presumptions about the desirability of a white middle-class heterosexual model for public order and government.”¹⁴ Scholars have explored the ways in which race, class, and gender have intersected in producing “institutions of containment, technologies of surveillance, or laws of prohibition.”¹⁵ They have traced, for example, the strong and direct linkages between regulation of lower class sexuality and emerging labor regimes,¹⁶ between regulated commercialized sex work and making safe and assured sex available to troops stationed in the colonies,¹⁷ between sanitary legislation and construction of normative sexuality,¹⁸ between colonial and nationalist idealization of the patrilineal, monogamous family and the criminalization of the devadasi,¹⁹ between Anglo-Saxon white concern about Indian men’s sexuality – “effeminate” yet predatory – and the reconfiguration of colonial ideologies of


¹⁵ John and Nair, Question of Silence, p. 9.


¹⁷ Kenneth Ballhatchet, Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), Chapters 2 and 3.


gender and race, and between British administrative policies and the congealing of patriarchal attitudes toward women in colonial Haryana.

This scholarship highlights not so much a linear process by which colonialism imposed radically new sexual moralities but a significant reconfiguration of traditional institutions and practices as it ushered in a process of an uneven and as yet unfinished Indian modernity. To emphasize that colonial modernity foreclosed possibilities for or criminalized alternate ways of being in the interests of forging a heterosexual, monogamous, patrilineal family norm is not to suggest the absence of patriarchal, class, and caste based normative practices in the period prior to it. Similarly, to argue that colonialism entailed profound changes in the institutions and practices of colonized societies is not to suggest their unchanging nature earlier. Both continuity and change have been characteristic of Indian society. Colonialism intensified this historical process in significantly new ways and through entirely new means. The questions to ask, then, are: What normative traditions and practices of Hindu society as they pertain to beliefs, practices, taboos, and prescriptions around sexuality did the Self-Respect movement challenge? What was the nature of this challenge? What role did it play in the Movement’s call for a radical transformation of society? To what extent was the Movement able to move beyond the colonial-nationalist imaginaries of normative sexuality? To what extent was it complicit, intentional or otherwise, with it?


22 See Uma Chakravarti, Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), Chapter 1. Citing the case of the Peshwa state in pre-colonial India, Chakravarti argues that the state played a supportive role to the husband, aiding the community’s control over female sexuality, and therefore, as far as women’s sexual behavior was concerned, powerful and ordered forms of governance predated the colonial period.
Chastity

A brief discussion of chastity is in order here, for it will reveal how the Movement’s foregrounding of chastity as a fundamental building block of patriarchy signifies a break not only with Dravidian Tamil notions regarding women’s conduct but also with contemporary mainstream discourse - Indian nationalist and feminist – about women’s place in an emerging nation.

The Tamil word for chastity – karpu - has historically been amenable to multiple interpretations that render the tracing of its etymology and fixing its meaning across time periods or even within a specific time period difficult. Some Tamil literary scholars argue that in the context of classical Tamil love poetry,\textsuperscript{23} karpu simply denoted married life or relations between husband and wife.\textsuperscript{24} V. S. Rajam’s analysis of the structure of Tamil in classical Tamil poetry attests to both the synchronic and diachronic variations in the meaning of the word. Using karpu as a key example of how socio-cultural change has caused semantic shifts in understanding classical Tamil poetry, V. S. Rajam notes: “The word karpu is understood today as meaning ‘chastity/marital fidelity (of a woman).’ It need not be, perhaps should not be, interpreted to mean ‘chastity of a woman’ in classical Tamil poems. The word is derived from kal ‘to learn by experience, to have maturity’ + pu verbal noun suffix, and is used in these poems, in connection

\textsuperscript{23} Classical Tamil literature generally refers to Tamil writing before the advent of Bhakti or devotional poetry from about 600 AD, and is divided into the Sangam corpus of the akam (erotic/interior) and puram (exterior/heroic) genres dating from about 150 B.C.E to 250 C.E. and the post-Sangam corpus of didactic poetry and the early epics dating from about 250 A.D. to 600 A.D. See Kamil Zvelebil, \textit{Tamil Literature} (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 32-33.

with male, female, and even neuter things . . . .”

She further points out that “at some point in time, ‘male profundity/learning’ (man’s karpu) was separated from the overall semantic realm of ‘profundity/learning’ (karpu) to be equated with acquiring traditional skills or education (kalvi), whereas ‘female profundity/learning’ (woman’s karpu) was restricted to mean ‘chastity.’” Thus, by the early twentieth century, karpu came to be divested of its larger meaning to refer solely to women’s sexual chastity and therefore to apply exclusively to women. Kannagi, the heroine of Silappadhikaram, the much-glorified Tamil classical epic, who stoically bore her husband’s philandering ways, has served as the golden example of the powers that accrue to chaste Tamil women.

Periyar was scathing in his attack on the concept of chastity and even castigated Tamil literary tradition and its most iconic poet Thiruvalluvar for their glorification of female chastity. His rationalist ideology and uncompromising commitment to equality for everyone entailed the rejection of aspects of Tamil culture that were complicit in preserving and nurturing patriarchy. This was a deviance from the mainstream Dravidian discourse that, in its desire to unseat Brahmins (who were equated with the Aryans) from their position of authority within Hindu caste society, tended to glorify Dravidian Tamil culture. P. R. Paramasiva Mudaliar, an

25 P. 7
26 P. 9.
28 Kudi Arasu, 8 January 1928. Thiruvalluvar is the author of Thirukkural, a didactic poem comprising 1330 couplets organized in 133 chapters, belongs to the post-Sangam corpus dating from 250-600 C.E. Kamil Zvelebil suggests the fifth century C.E., probably sometime between 450 and 550 C.E. as the most probable date for the Thirukkural. See The Smile of Murugan on Tamil Literature of South India (Leiden, Netherlands, E. J. Brill, 1973), p. 156.
upper-caste non-Brahmin, was one who objected to Periyar’s criticism of Thiruvalluvar. In his response, Periyar argued that Thiruvalluvar’s treatment of the issue of women’s freedom left much to be desired and therefore could not be unequivocally held up as an icon of pre-Aryan egalitarianism. In his critique, he addressed both the morphing of the meaning of chastity over time as well as variations in its semantics within roughly contemporaneous texts. He also held Sanskritic influence as culpable in the reduction of the meaning of karpu to refer to female sexual chastity alone. Periyar contended that karpu originally denoted such ideals as integrity, honesty, and purity and was equally applicable to both men and women even when used in the context of human sexual behavior. This changed when karpu came to be equated with the Sanskrit pativrata which Periyar argued was infused with slavish connotations. In her analysis, Rajam also points to the influence of non-Tamil traditions on later interpretations of classical Tamil poetry. Periyar attributed the modern reductive meaning of karpu to male hegemony, and denounced female chastity as one of the most hateful practices in human society. Periyar thus identified control of women’s sexuality through notions of female chastity as central to their subordination and held women’s real and complete freedom to be fundamentally dependent on the abandonment of this most patriarchal of all expectations of women.

Others such as Sami Chidambaranar, an erudite Tamil scholar and committed activist of the Self-Respect movement, presented a more complex picture of the evolution of the notion of karpu within Tamil cultural traditions. Without either glorifying pre-Aryan Tamil culture as egalitarian or wholly rejecting it as fundamentally and originally culpable in the patriarchal control of women’s sexuality, he argued that the contemporary usage of karpu to mean only

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29 Ibid, 22 January 1928. 
30 Kudi Arasu, 12 February 1928 and 20 January 1929.
female sexual chastity was unjust, oppressive, and therefore unacceptable. He justified Thiruvalluvar’s proclamations on karpu that cast women as subservient to men as a concession to the Brahmin priests of the day, and argued that they should not be taken to represent his beliefs about women. Since Thiruvalluvar also laid down behavioral expectations for men, many of which replicated those for women, he could not be accused of over-emphasis on one particular aspect for women alone – an aspect that propagated women’s slavery. Underscoring the necessity for both men and women to practice karpu which was understood and explicated by ancient Tamils to mean the gaining of knowledge pertaining to everything that is required to lead a happy worldly life, he urged men to discard their double standards and abide by the code of behavior they expected of women. Chidambaranar’s analysis of karpu thus acknowledged the existence of gendered notions of karpu in Thiruvalluvar’s work but attributed them directly to Sanskritic influence. Although it concurred with Periyar’s contention about the equation of karpu with pativrata and its negative consequences for women’s freedom, Chidambaranar’s criticism of Thiruvalluvar was more reserved, and his stance on karpu or at least his expression of it was less radical than Periyar’s.

By focusing on chastity and its centrality in the patriarchal construction of womanhood, Self-Respecters probed deeper than any of their contemporaries into the beliefs that upheld women’s lowly status. They recognized that it is from the seed of chastity that the institutions of child marriage, sacramental marriage and enforced widowhood germinated. Self-Respecters’ relentless focus on the seed rather than the plant alone allowed them to articulate a foundational critique of gender relations within Hindu society. Their contemporaries did not venture such a bold challenge.

31 Ibid, 8 December 1929, pp. 8-9.
Self-Respect Movement and The Women’s Question

The intense focus on woman in the context of marriage in social reform legislation in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – as in the prohibition of sati in 1829, the enabling of widow remarriage in 1856, the raising of the age of consent for sexual relations in 1892, and the prohibition of child marriage in 1929 – resulted in two key transformations. One, it reinforced marriage as the normative and legitimate site for sexual relations. Two, in doing so, it delineated a middle-class, desexualized femininity as the norm. Similarly, social reform movements, whether they directly supported legislative intervention or not, sought reform in women’s status along similar lines that served to further entrench marriage as the legitimate institution and wifehood and motherhood as the only contexts within which female sexual ‘desire’ could be realized. The campaign to abolish the devadasi system was a corollary of this trend as the devadasis represented an alternate sexuality – one that existed outside of the patrilineal conjugal family unit. By the mid-1920s, both discourse and legislative action on widow remarriage and child marriage (as tied to the age of consent) had a history, although direct legal intervention in the practice of child marriage did not occur until 1929. Much of this debate and action had long coalesced around the figure of the Hindu widow. If sati invited attention for its starkly horrific nature, the presence of young widows who not only had no hope of remarriage but were also required to live an austere life wearing physical markers of widowhood called attention to the practice of child marriage. Indian reformers, under the glare of British scrutiny, could not justify, let alone ignore, these practices – a situation that set in motion a century of social reform initiatives.

For the Self-Respect movement, coming as it did at the end of this ‘famed’ century of reform with its clarion call to fundamentally transform society, supporting efforts to raise the age
of marriage and to enable widow remarriage were easy. As feminist analysis has shown, these efforts did not so much challenge the fundamental gender hierarchies as much as they sought ‘band-aid’ remedies to cover up glaring inequalities, targeting the symptoms rather than the cause. The passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 in the glare of the Mayo controversy, as Mrinalini Sinha points out, attests to the inability and/or unwillingness on the part of reformers to engage with more fundamental issues. These efforts tended to be cosmetic rather than foundational, piecemeal rather than holistic, and therefore had little lasting value. Self-Respecters supported these efforts even as they unraveled the values and beliefs that made child marriage and enforced chaste widowhood possible in the first place and sought to eradicate them. These reforms were thus not an end in themselves but merely the beginning. Child marriages and enforced chaste widowhood would become natural casualties of Self-Respect marriages for, as Mytheli Sreenivas argues, “their marriage reforms went much further in developing new wedding styles, new structures of endogamy, and new modes of challenging patriarchy.”

Similarly, Self-Respecters’ denunciation of the devadasi system and active support of Muthulakshmi Reddy’s efforts, as a member of the Madras Legislative Council, to abolish it were embedded in their anti-caste crusade that saw the institution of the devadasis as another instance of Brahmin/upper-caste exploitation of the lower castes. However this position made them complicit with colonial-nationalist interventions to discipline the devadasis and co-opt them into the patrilineal conjugal family unit. Even though these women possessed some agency

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33 Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*.

and rights that were not available to the majority of their sisters such as matrilineal inheritance, right of adoption, and ownership of land, Self-Respecters argued that the devadasis functioned within an overall system of oppression and exploitation by upper-caste Hindu men. As radical feminists argue, given that marriage is first and last a patriarchal institution, women cannot be truly liberated as long as they remain within its confines. The Self-Respecters thus arrayed themselves on the side of the nationalists in writing the devadasis out of existence. However, from the Self-Respect perspective, the cooption of the devadasis into the normative family unit was an unintended consequence, for society offered few, if any, alternatives for women.

Following a similar logic, it might be argued that given the fundamentally patriarchal nature of the institution of marriage which the Self-Respecters attested to, they could have called for the abolition of the institution itself. But given its near universal prevalence and its central place in society, the Self-Respecters used marriage as a key avenue for challenging tradition by enacting radical reforms within its confines. Calling for its abolition would have relegated them to the fringes of society from where they could have made little if any impact. Deploying a traditional, normative institution in the service of social transformation through radical alteration of its basic tenets and practices had more subversive potential. I will address the Movement’s efforts toward marriage reform in the next chapter.

Child Marriage

Between February 1927 when Harbilas Sarda introduced the Child Marriage Restraint Bill in the Central Legislative Assembly and September 1929 when the Bill was passed, the

fervent debates and relentless campaigns pertaining to it saturated the Indian socio-political scene. Mayo’s scathing expose of the custom of child marriage wherein she castigated Indians for their treatment of women intensified efforts to prevail on the government to pass the Bill. It was enacted as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 penalizing marriages of girls below 14 and boys below 16 with the provisions of the Act scheduled to come into effect on 1 April 1930. However the provisions proved so “toothless” that a corrective legislation was passed in 1938 to reinforce them. Consequently, the debate on child marriage continued for the next several years stimulated both by the anxiety regarding the Act’s ‘toothless’ provisions that made flouting them easy and the fear that some orthodox were attempting to have the Act repealed or at least amend the provisions to suit their needs.

Once again the figure of the woman, this time the child-woman, was the center of intense focus as reformers were pitted against the orthodox. A range of opinions existed within this broad classification. Self-Respecters, arrayed on one end of this spectrum, unequivocally supported legal intervention in religious matters. They once again used the opportunity to label Brahmins as the dominant oppressors of women to further their patriarchal, classist, and casteist

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38 The report of the Age of Consent Committee - submitted to the Government in July 1929 - attested to the existence of these variations in the testimony they received. The Committee’s work stimulated the greatest response in the Madras Presidency both in intensity and in numbers. Out of the 1200 written statements that the Committee received, 300 were from Madras, with a large number of them from orthodox Brahmins. The Committee also noted that many Brahmins and almost all non-Brahmins supported raising the ages of consent and marriage. The Government had postponed the consideration of the Sarda Bill until after the Committee submitted its report. See Report of the Age of Consent Committee, pp. 1-15 and 53-60.
ends.\textsuperscript{39} For the Self-Respecters, orthodox opposition to the bill was rooted in the drive to control women’s sexuality through pre-pubertal marriage and therefore the strong arm of the law was necessary to eradicate the practice.\textsuperscript{40} On the other end of this spectrum were the orthodox Hindus who claimed that pre-pubertal marriage was the only valid marital system and extolled the virtues of and religious justification for the custom. Arrayed between these two extreme positions were the reformers comprising, among others, nationalist leaders and those of the Indian women’s movement. This group clearly supported the Bill to raise the age of marriage, and in that sense shared the views of the Self-Respect movement. But they sought to accomplish this without the iconoclasm of the Self-Respecters that denigrated Brahminical norms and Hindu epics and scriptures – what Narendra Subramanian calls a “politics of heresy.”\textsuperscript{41}

Put on the defensive by Mayo’s criticism of women’s lowly status in Hindu society, nationalist reformers campaigned vigorously for the passage of the Bill to legitimate their claim to self-rule in the eyes of the world.\textsuperscript{42} Given the politically expedient nature of this move and the largely upper-caste, upper-class composition of the nationalist and women’s movements, the Bill’s impact on a fundamental reordering of society and women’s status within it remained minimal. Both the biases of the leaders and the political context in which they functioned proved limiting factors in acknowledging the fundamental connection between caste and women’s oppression.\textsuperscript{43} But, as Mrinalini Sinha argues, the generally reformist consensus on the Bill,

\textsuperscript{39} Kudi Arasu, 23 September 1928, Dravidan, 17 August 1929; 10 October 1930; Revolt, 6 February 1929.

\textsuperscript{40} Kudi Arasu, 23 September 1928.

\textsuperscript{41} Narendra Subramanian, Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 83.

\textsuperscript{42} New India, 20 April 1928, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{43} Sinha, Specters of Mother India.
however limited its goals, made orthodox appeal to religion alone unpopular.\textsuperscript{44} Orthodox men such as M.K. Acharya, a Brahmin Congress member of the Central Legislative Assembly and a vocal opponent of the Bill in the Assembly, claimed scientific validity for early marriage.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, U.P. Krishnamacharya, a Tamil Brahmin from Benares, cited religion, morality, science, practicality, health, citizenship, and nationhood to claim that pre-pubertal marriage custom was not only necessary for “individual perfection…but also for the prosperity of the Crown and the Country and for the glorification of God.”\textsuperscript{46} He urged the government to support and defend early marriage rather than penalize it. These arguments were buttressed by reminding the colonial government of its 1858 pledge of neutrality in matters of religion.

Some orthodox Hindus opposed the Bill only in as far as it affected the Brahmin community. Sesha Iyengar and K.V. Rangaswami Iyengar, orthodox Brahmin members of the Central Legislative Assembly, argued that Brahmins were strictly bound by their shastras to have their girls married before they attained puberty.\textsuperscript{47} Sesha Iyengar contended that the Bill’s provisions flagrantly violated the shastras and asked if the Government should be party to such an act by approving the Bill. He wanted the age of marriage to be fixed at 11. Rangaswamy


\textsuperscript{45} M.K. Acharya, \textit{Indian Marriage Systems or Siva-Shakti Unity in the Light of Western Science} (Madras: Al-India Brahmana Maha Sabha, 1929), cited in Sinha, ibid, p. 643. Also, see U.P. Krishnamacharya, “Brahmanhood and Marriage: Mr. Krishnamachari’s Lecture,” \textit{The Hindu}, 19 February 1929. Krishnamachari, addressing a gathering in Kumbakonam during his visit to that town, pointed to “manifold evils like ever-increasing illegitimate births, increase in divorces, the breaking up of homes and general deterioration in morals” resulting from “the system of progressively late marriages and no marriages for women of recent growth in Modern Europe” and maintained that no social revolution “could touch or really make obsolete the Brahminical ideal”.


Iyengar rejected the proposition that pre-pubertal marriage was an evil and appealed to the
Government to accede to the religious sentiments of the orthodox who were bound by their
shastras to marry their daughters before they turned 14 by protecting them from the provisions of
the Bill. Some orthodox, citing verses from the shastras, claimed that post-pubertal marriage
was never sanctioned by religious custom as some Brahmin supporters of the bill argued. In
fact, the shastras forbade post-pubertal marriage and therefore anyone who argued otherwise was
ignorant of the shastras. Citing Queen Victoria’s Proclamation of 1858 of non-intervention in
religious affairs, they attributed this “irreligious act” to the vile agenda of some Assembly
members who wanted to wipe out Sanatana Dharma from the land. Invoking the nationalist
slogan of swaraj, they argued that true swaraj involved the protection of “our cherished dharma
and the maintenance of our varnashrama dharma.” Praising the efforts of Brahmin opponents
of the Bill in the legislatures, they advocated at best the repeal of the bill itself and at worst an
exemption for the Brahmin community from the Sarda Act.

For some orthodox, legislative intervention in religious custom had a place but could not
be applied indiscriminately. C. Duraiswami Iyengar, a Tamil Brahmin member of the Central
Legislative Assembly argued that legislative intervention could be justified only when force was
involved in the practice of a religious custom where choice was the original custom, as in the
case of the abolition of sati. Therefore if pre-pubertal marriage was mandated by a

48 “Sanathana Dharma Conference,” The Hindu, 6 December, 1929, p. 15; also, see “Child Marriage Bill: A Protest
Memorial to the Viceroy,” The Hindu 10 February 1928, p. 8; “Sarda’s Child Marriage Prevention Bill:
Kumbakonam Orthodox Brahmins’ Views,” The Hindu, 5 October 1928, p. 11 and “Hindu Ladies Sanadhana
Dharma Sabha: Protest against Mr. Sarda’s Bill,” The Hindu, 28 March 1929 for orthodox opposition to the Bill on
grounds that it would destroy Hindu religion by striking at its very heart.

49 Literally ‘eternal law’ often used to refer to Hinduism to stress its eternal foundation.

50 “Sanathana Dharma Conference,” The Hindu, 6 December 1929, p. 15

51 “Sarda Act Agitation: Limits of Legislative Interference,” The Hindu, 7 December 1929, p. 18.
community’s religious injunctions, then no government had the right to interfere with it. While concurring with the reformers that “child marriage is a social evil and it is the duty of everyone interested in nation-building to eradicate it,” he argued that legislation on religious matters required impartiality and fairness of the kind that was not practiced either in the government’s manner of collecting evidence and opinions on the issue nor in the manner the final bill was passed with fundamental alterations to the original bill. The governor-general’s sanction which was applicable only to the original Bill was used to pass the Bill in its altered state. Thus, he claimed that the orthodox were entirely within their moral rights to break the law on the issue of child marriage and face imprisonment on ethical grounds.

Self-Respecters dismissed as ridiculous, baseless, and selfish the orthodox claims to legal immunity for social practices mandated by religion and the appeal to Queen Victoria’s proclamation of non-interference in religious matters as a weak attempt to camouflage the perpetuation of caste patriarchy. Censuring Acharya for his arguments in defense of child marriage in the Central Legislative assembly, Periyar contended:

> It is no surprise to hear such arguments from our [Brahmin] representatives in the Central Legislature given that Hindu religion and its vedas, puranas, priesthood and varnashrama are built on the foundation of women’s slavery and denigration.

Child marriage, according to Periyar, was endemic to Brahminical Hinduism and its corrupting influence spawned the recent increase in child marriages among non-Brahmins who practiced it to gain upper-caste status. Furthermore, Congress leaders, nationalists, and so-called social

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid; also see “Protest against Sarda Act: Madras Sanatanist Youth Conference,” *The Hindu*, 3 March 1930, p. 17.


55 *Kudi Arasu*, 23 September 1928.
reformers who campaigned to send men like Acharya to the Central Legislative Assembly were stumbling blocks to the true progress of humankind. Their hypocracy had to be exposed. He considered it his responsibility and the responsibility of Self-Respecters to censure Acharya As a member of the Central Legislature he was not merely representing the Brahmins but the entire community, and therefore had to be held responsible for his views.\textsuperscript{56}

Women activists of the Self-Respect movement were equally scathing in their critique of orthodox views. S. Neelavathi, a committed and outspoken activist of the Movement, blamed orthodox Brahmins for being the sole obstacles to the progress of women. She condemned the selfishness of such Brahmins who, fearing that women’s progress would mean relinquishing their control over them, were attempting to derail the Child Marriage Restraint Act. She wondered at the hypocrisy of such men who on the one hand insisted on child marriage as a sign of the greatness of Hindu religion and on the other hand gave grand speeches from podiums across the country instigating people to fight for the nation’s freedom. If the Hindu religion required the marriage of young children, was it not necessary then, she asked, to destroy such a religion rather than let it prosper? Although it was extremely disheartening to realize that a case had to be made against child marriage even after the Act had come into effect, she considered it her duty to do so from the point of view of women’s progress since early marriage affected women most negatively.\textsuperscript{57}

Writing in \textit{Kumaran} in 1930, Kamalakshi, a Brahmin woman who made common cause with the Self-Respecters on the issue of child marriage, pointed to the utter ridiculousness of the orthodox Brahmin stance on the issue as well as their tendency to exploit any situation to enrich

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 10 August 1930, p. 3, 18.
themselves in the name of rituals. She attacked brahminic rituals and the devious foundations of the Brahmin profession - as officiators at ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death itself. After quoting the two oft-cited reasons for Brahmin opposition to the Act, she described a wedding ritual involving the uncles of the bride and groom wherein the uncle hoists the bride on his shoulders as the “bigger reason for the Brahmin community’s opposition to the Sarda Act which many remain unaware of.” Sarcastically calling the ritual *garuda sevai* to underscore its ludicrousness, she pointed out that a grown-up girl made this ritual difficult to perform, thus depriving the uncles of the material and monetary compensation they received for their role in the ritual. The vested interests of the uncles and ultimately the Brahmins who profited from these rituals were at stake, something that the Brahmin community was loath to admit due to its “shameful” nature. “What is to be done? Will the conflict that we see today between the Sarda Act and the *garuda sevai* ritual be resolved? It is too early perhaps to tell.” By attributing to the ritual such importance in Brahmin weddings, Kamalakshi in fact ridiculed all Brahminic rituals and underscored the utter illogic of Brahmin opposition to the Sarda act. From her social location as a Brahmin woman, she lent an insider perspective on Brahminic rituals that served little purpose other than to enrich the Brahmins that lent an authenticity and credibility to the Movement’s stance on the issue of child marriage.

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59 Ibid, p. 70.

60 Garuda, an eagle-like bird, is the vehicle of Vishnu, the preserver God of the Hindu Trinity. Garuda Sevai is an annual festival celebrated in many Vaishnavite temples to honor Garuda.

In their support of the Bill, Self-Respecters concurred with the nationalist reformers in identifying child marriage as an evil and calling for legislative intervention to prevent it. They differed from them in the strident, no-holds-barred and irreverent manner in which they made their favorite punching bag - the Brahmins- the focus of attack as representatives of caste-bound Hindu patriarchy. This difference emanated from their differing motivations for supporting the Bill. For the nationalist reformers, it became a litmus test of India’s fitness for self-rule. For the Self-Respecters, it was necessary for improving women’s condition – one that was valuable in itself and required no other justification.

Widow Remarriage

Along with its opposition to child marriage, the Movement also identified enforced chaste widowhood as a powerful patriarchal tool to control women’s sexuality. Activists highlighted the terrible hardships that widows endured and probed the underlying beliefs that demanded absolute chastity from widows and that desensitized people to their suffering. Once again, Neelavathi sought to demystify the sanctity attached to enforced chaste widowhood and expose its exploitative underpinnings. Pointing to people’s use of the notion of fate to refer to widowhood as evidence of their desensitization toward widows’ sufferings – one that camouflaged patriarchy, Neelavathi asked if fate was gendered. Given that it was not, for widows could and some did remarry, enforced chaste widowhood was an artifact of society – “a conspiracy hatched by selfish men!” Clearly, Neelavati deployed rationalism – an ideology

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63 Srilata, Women Writing Self-Respect History, pp. 64-68.
that Self-Respecters highly valued - to debunk the aura of religiosity that was attached to a patriarchal device to control women.

As Self-Respecters argued and feminist scholarship has shown, caste and women’s status were intricately connected, for enforced chaste widowhood, as also child marriage, were more prevalent among the upper-castes, particularly Brahmins. They became markers of religious honor and high caste status. Women’s sexual behavior was a key indicator of caste status so much so that lower caste groups aspiring to climb the caste ladder tended to restrict women’s sexual freedom. These restrictions meant that despite the legal sanction accorded to widow marriages early in India’s colonial history, widow marriages remained anomalies rather than routine. Consequently, they were newsworthy and cause for celebration within the Self-Respect community when they did occur. Periyar underscored this situation at a meeting of the Widow-Marriage Assistance Society held in Madras in October 1929. He lamented the plight of a country where even in the twentieth century people had to convene meetings to respond to orthodox objections to widow marriage. According to him, such meetings could be justified if

64 Chakravarti, “Gender, Caste and Labour,” in Chen, Widows in India, pp. 63-92. Chakravarti argues that traditionally the Hindu widow is conceived of as the structural counterpart of the Hindu wife having no social or sexual identity. Enforced chaste widowhood, emanating from the strict control of female sexuality, is a key marker of high-caste status. Therefore, the Brahmanization/Sanskritization of upwardly mobile caste groups resulted in greater restrictions on women’s sexual and social freedom.

65 At a public meeting held in Madras in March, 1927 under the auspices of the Widow Re-Marriage Society of Lahore whose Secretary was on propaganda tour in South India, Dr. P. Subbaroyan, the non-Brahmin chief minister of Madras Presidency, regretted the socio-religious restrictions placed on remarriage of widows and cited statistics to show that Madras was particularly backward in this matter – only nine widow marriages in the past year as compared to 2013 widow marriages in Punjab, Delhi and the North West Frontier Province. See The Hindu, 9 March 1927, p. 3. Writing in 1930, T. S. S. Rajan (1881-1953), Brahmin physician and Congress member, railed at the custom of enforced chaste widowhood wherein even child widows were prevented from remarrying and hailed the Sarda Act as reducing the number of child widows. See “The Sarda Act: The Evil of Child Widowhood,” The Hindu, 11 January 1930, p. 17. In 1927, orthodox members of the Hindu community in Kumbakonam in Tanjore District severely condemned Gandhi’s advocacy of widow marriage to college students during his tour of South India. See “Widow Marriage Reform: Protest against Gandhi’s Advice: Public Meeting at Kumbakonam,” The Hindu, 16 September 1927, p. 9. This was in spite of the fact that Gandhi advocated widow marriage only for young girls while holding up an ideal of widowhood for older widows. See “Speech at Pachiyappa’s College, Madras, September 7, 1927,” CWMG, Vol. 40, 2 September 1927-1 December 1927, pp. 46-48.
their purpose was to determine how to perform widow marriages. But the fact that they were convened to merely explain and justify the necessity of widow marriages was unpardonable. Further attesting to the pitiable condition of widows, Periyar asked if sati were not better than “the life-long, moment by moment, part by part, torture that widows endure” and advocated mandating remarriage for widows until such a time when attitudes toward widowhood changed.66

While Self-Respecters were committed to the larger goal of a fundamental societal transformation which when achieved would make the practice of enforced chaste widowhood obsolete, they worked to provide succor to the suffering widows even as they sought to treat the underlying causes. Apart from speaking and writing on the necessity for widow marriage and supporting the efforts of organizations such as the Widow-Marriage Assistance Society,67 the Movement also offered Self-Respect marriages, conceived as rational, free-choice unions, as avenues for widow marriage.

Devadasi Abolition

In the Madras presidency, the period between 1927 and 1929 proved significant for another reason – the debate surrounding the first concerted efforts to outlaw the devadasi institution. Less permeated with the contestation and passion that accompanied the debate on child marriage, efforts to abolish the devadasi system evoked wider consent among reformers.

66 Kudi Arasu, 27 October 1929, pp. 11-12.
67 The Society published its matrimonial advertisements through the Kudi Arasu calling for men willing to marry widows who ranged in ages from 14 to 34 and came from a variety of castes including Brahmins, Naidus, and Vellalas. See Kudi Arasu, 3 November 1929. The Society welcomed “widows of all castes desirous of remarriage... to join the Home and remain there till they find suitable husbands with the help of the Sabha.” See Justice, 26 May 1931, p. 9.
Muthulakshmi Reddi, the Deputy Speaker and prime mover of the Bill to outlaw the custom of women serving in temples in the Madras Legislative Council observed that, “While legislation for the prevention of child marriage met with much opposition throughout the country, my attempt to abolish the devadasi service in the temples had the cordial support of all sections of the people.” Objections raised during this debate in the Council immediately following Reddi’s introduction of the Bill addressed its wording rather than its substantive content. P. Anjaneyulu, a Telugu Brahmin member, moved a resolution to substitute the words “for immoral purposes” with “which has generally resulted in exposing them to an immoral life.” He moved this amendment to dispel the potential interpretation that dedication of girls as originally conceived and practiced was for an immoral purpose. He claimed that the original intent of dedication was to enable girls to lead a life of piety. The proposed amendment, he argued, would speak to this truth and thereby not offend the religious sentiments of the orthodox members of the Council. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, Law Member of the Governor’s Executive Council, in his support of the Bill, reiterated the original noble intent of dedication and its consequent corruption. The debate further underscored Mayo’s impact on reformist sensibilities. For several members the Bill represented a fitting reply to critics such as Mayo.

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70 Ibid, pp. 523-525. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer was the Advocate-General of Madras presidency from 1920 to 1923, Law Member of the Executive Council of the Governor of Madras from 1923 to 1928, Law Member of the Executive Council of the Governor-General of India from 1931 to 1936 and the Diwan of Travancore from 1936 to 1947.

71 Ibid, pp. 519, 522-523.
The Self-Respecters and other social reformers\textsuperscript{72} extended more than just cordial support to this Bill introduced in the Council on November 4, 1927, to prevent the dedication of young girls to temples. Passed as Madras Act No. V of 1929, it discouraged “the dedication of girls as Devadasis for service in Hindu temples by freeing the lands, if any, held by them for such service from the condition of service and making them the owners thereof.”\textsuperscript{73} This act did not outlaw the system - that occurred in 1947- but enabled the existing devadasis to refrain from temple service and yet retain their economic assets. It also disallowed future devadasis from being remunerated in land for temple service.

But the Bill was not without its opponents. In October and November 1927, deputations of devadasis submitted memoranda to the Government protesting the Bill and contesting the connection that Muthulakshmi Reddi and others made between dedication to temples and prostitution.\textsuperscript{74} They claimed that outlawing their profession would not aid in the abolition of prostitution. While noting that prostitution needed to be addressed, they refused to be equated with prostitutes. They considered themselves the custodians of music and dance - arts that symbolized civilization and were necessary in the education of all civilized people.\textsuperscript{75} The

\textsuperscript{72} Indian Social Reformer, 22 September, 1928, pp. 55-57.


\textsuperscript{74} See Muthulakshmi Reddi’s article in The Hindu dated 22 June 1927 titled “Dedication of Girls to Temple: An Appeal for its Abolition: Pathetic End of a Dasi Girl,” p. 5 in which Reddi made no distinction between prostitution and the devadasi profession; also see Reddi’s article in The Hindu dated 9 February 1929 titled “The Devadasi Bill: History of the Legislation.”

Madras Presidency Devadasi Association held meetings protesting the passage of the Bill in February 1929 and even urged Governor Goschen to veto the Bill. In a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission that was considering the question of women’s franchise and representation of minorities in the future legislatures of India, T. M. Krishnaveni Ammal, assistant secretary of the Madras Presidency Devadasi Association and a devadasi, argued for special representation for devadasis in light of the enormous injustice done to them by this Act. Underscoring their unique position as women within Hindu society wherein they possessed rights not available to other women such as property rights, special laws of inheritance, and rights and privileges in temples with generous endowments, she sought protection for these rights from “the step-motherly treatment of the selfish political parties now existing who most high-handedly brushed aside their objections. However, by this time, the trajectory of opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of abolishing the practice of dedication of girls.

Hemmed in from all sides – by the discourse of middle-class morality and national honor represented by Reddi, the discourse of Brahmin mistreatment and exploitation of the lower castes represented by the Self-Respect movement and discourse of community honor that male members of the devadasi castes deployed to camouflage their desire to improve their status vis-à-vis the women in their community, the devadasis found themselves and their profession marginalized and criminalized. For middle-class nationalists, they were the convenient ‘other’ of the ideal citizen-subject. For the Self-Respect movement, they most starkly represented Brahmin exploitation of lower caste women. For the Sengunthars and Isai Vellalas, communities from

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76 The Hindu, 16 February 1929, p. 21.

which devadasis were largely drawn, they were dishonorable and stumbling blocks to the progress of their communities.\textsuperscript{78}

Many devadasis along with the men of their community joined the Self-Respect movement in large numbers attracted by its goal to restore the self-respect of lower castes.\textsuperscript{79} T. C. Masilamani Pillai, an Isai Vellala, made a passionate appeal to his ‘sisters’ to give up their demeaning profession – a profession that robbed them of their femininity, and to purify and feminize themselves by choosing to wear the ‘blessed’ \textit{thali}.\textsuperscript{80} Wives and devadasis were thus constructed as the polar opposites – pure vs. impure and honored vs. demeaned. As a result, those devadasis who protested were characterized as women who were choosing a life of vice over a life of virtue or as pawns in the Brahmins’ vile agenda to further their selfish casteist ends.\textsuperscript{81} Although the former characterization appeared to grant some agency to the devadasis, it was immediately erased or dismissed by representing their choice as debased and degrading. The latter argument refused them subjecthood, for no woman, from the vantage point of middle-class morality, would willfully choose to be a devadasi. The devadasis therefore had to be under


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 17 June 1928. Among Tamil speaking peoples of the Madras presidency, the thali is a thick yellow thread with a usually gold pendant that the bridegroom ties around the bride’s neck that signifies a women’s married status. Known as \textit{mangalsutra} in North India, its design varies depending on the region, caste, and community of the bride and the groom.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Dravidan}, 4 February 1929, p. 4, 12 April 1929, p. 6 and 11 May 1929, p. 4; see also NMML, \textit{Muthulakshmi Papers, Speeches and Writings}, Volume II (Part I) S. Nos: 78-115. In an undated letter to the editor of a newspaper that expressed surprise at Reddi’s criticism of high-caste Hindus in a letter to Gandhi, Reddi explained that her statements arose out of her frustration with Brahmin Congress members of the MLC such as C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, K.R.V. Iyer and S. Satyamurti and the Non-Brahmin Congress leader, Venkatachalla Chettiar who were stalling her efforts, first, to introduce the bill for the suppression of brothels and immoral traffic in the MLC and, second, to get it passed.
the influence of more powerful and insidious elements in society, namely the Brahmins.\textsuperscript{82} Once again, as in many struggles – class, nationalist, caste - women’s behaviors became signifiers of community honor/dishonor.

The debate about devadasis did not end with the passage of the Act of 1929. A few months later in January 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced another bill in the Madras Legislative Council to criminalize the practice of pottukattu or dedication. While the Act of 1929 freed the inam-holding devadasis from the stipulation of temple service and disallowed future devadasis from being remunerated in land for temple service, it did not outlaw the practice of pottukattu or dedication. Reddi sought to accomplish this through the new Bill. Known as the ‘Bill for the Prevention of Dedication of Women to Hindu Temples’ it reinvigorated debate on the devadasi question. The Madras Government appointed a Select Committee to ascertain people’s views on the proposed legislation.\textsuperscript{83} Unsurprisingly, the Self-Respect movement and the Women’s Indian Association actively and unequivocally supported the Bill.\textsuperscript{84}

Responding to the Madras Government’s request for his opinion on the Bill, Periyar endorsed it wholeheartedly citing material greed and religious indoctrination as key motivators of prostitution through dedications. He argued that prostitution jeopardized public health

\textsuperscript{82} Dravidan, 4 February, p. 4, 12 April, p. 6 and 11 May 1929, p. 4

\textsuperscript{83} The Bill elicited no further action on the part of the Government which, considering the direct interventionist nature of the Bill in a religious custom, wished to tread cautiously. The circulation of the Bill itself was proof of this cautionary approach. With Muthulakshmi Reddi’s resignation from the Council in April 1930 in protest against the arrest of Gandhi during the Salt Satyagraha campaign, the Council lacked the strong leadership necessary to see the Bill through to its passage.

\textsuperscript{84} For the Women’s Indian Association position, see NMML, Muthulakshmi Reddi Papers, F. No. 11, Part III (Vol. 1). In her letter dated 13 March 1930 to the Secretary of the Madras Legislative Council, Margaret Cousins, International Representative, Women’s Indian Association, reiterated the Association’s pro-abolitionist stand calling the provisions of the Bill as “the logical extension and corollary” of the earlier 1929 Act. She urged the Government to support it and enable its passage into law.
through the spread of venereal diseases. He pointed to the absurdity of the orthodox Brahmin opposition to the proposed legislation wherein they cited the shastras in defense of the practice of dedication. Since earlier legislation had already penalized the dedication of minor girls and the shastras prohibited the dedication of post-pubertal girls, the orthodox had no religious grounds on which to oppose the Bill. Periyar claimed that they had no more loopholes to exploit and should support the bill without any delay. Given the context in which Periyar wrote the letter that is in response to a Government request for his opinion, he assumed a more neutral and reasoned tone where the Hindu religion was concerned than was his usual stance. He even cited “safeguard[ing] the self-respect of Hindu society” as a reason for the Government to act. In an earlier article, Periyar had criticized the government’s solicitation of community leaders’ opinions on the merits of the bill as a delaying tactic to postpone reaching a decision. For Periyar, the decision was straight-forward. To defend such an obviously heinous practice in the name of religion was an act of barbarity and cruelty, utterly lacking in self-respect and dignity. To him, the fact that it took so long for “an absolutely necessary and immensely useful” social reform legislation such as to be proposed underscored the colonial rulers’ dependence on Brahmins until recently. The advent of the non-Brahmin Justice party in 1916, the granting of reserved seats for non-Brahmins in the Madras Legislative Council by the Government of India Act of 1919, and the formation of Justice party ministries in 1920 and 1923 following its electoral victories had altered the socio-political scene in the Madras presidency.

Periyar’s criticism of the devadasi system was premised upon the mistreatment of women in the name of religion by Brahminical patriarchy. It was devoid of the language of middle-class

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morality that valorized chastity and wifehood. In condemning this institution, he did not appeal to a glorious past when either the practice did not exist at all or as some argued if it did exist at all it was an honorable profession devoid of its current degeneracy. Periyar’s pro-abolitionist stance did not view the devadasi system as denying women their proper ‘feminine’ role of domesticity, implicit in which was a more progressive and feminist stance than was the norm. Given his attack on the notion of karpu or chastity which he argued was unfairly applied to women and women alone and was the basis of women’s oppression, he was less concerned with the devadasis’ alternative sexuality than with their exploitation by religious patriarchy.

In contrast, Muthulakshmi Reddy, in her relentless campaign to abolish the devadasi system, framed her arguments in terms of morality, civilization and nation. She argued that the system hindered women’s legitimate roles as wives, mothers and citizens, thus linking the devadasi issue with the project of middle-class domesticity and nationhood. The Women’s Indian Association echoed these sentiments in no uncertain terms:

Organised women associations like ours have been always standing and urging for a high standard of morality in sex relationship so as to maintain the sanctity and stability of family life, and we are therefore, wholly opposed to all laws, usages, customs and practices – whether social, religious or legal – that tolerate and encourage illegal and irregular sex relationship or promiscuity in any form or shape…. Therefore the State should make only such laws and encourage only such practices and customs as are conducive to good health, good morals and to the proper growth, mental and moral and spiritual nature of men and women. Again any practice or custom that interferes with the sanctity and stability of family life, the health and vitality of the race should not be encouraged.

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88 Kudi Arasu, 8 November 1928.

89 Reddi, My Experience as a Legislator.

Thus, the devadasis were caught in the exorable tide of middle-class feminism that valorized the conjugal family norm as the site for women’s sexuality.

Muvalur Ramamirthammal’s position straddled this discursive divide between the explicit mainstream concern with devadasis’ sexuality and Periyar’s explicit concern with their exploitation by religious patriarchy. Like her compatriots, Ramamirthammal, Self-Respect activist and foremost campaigner for the abolition of the devadasi system, framed her critique in terms of religion, caste, and patriarchy. But her abolitionist position also sought to restore women to their ‘proper’ place within the conjugal family. Thus Periyar’s indifference toward devadasis’ sexuality was not shared evenly within the Self-Respect movement.

Ramamirthammal’s novel Dasigal Mosavalai Allathu Madipetra Minor (The Treacherous Net of the Devadasis or the Minor Grown Wise) published in 1936 tells the story of two devadasi sisters who, under the tutelage of their mother, use music as a cover to lure rich men into their web of deceit and who finally realize the immorality and folly of their ways as they find themselves exploited by men and Brahmin priests. The two rich men - sons of zamindars – who fall prey to the devious manipulations of the sisters are eventually reformed by two reformist women – one a reformed devadasi and another the reformist wife of one of the zamindars. The sisters’ niece who is sold by her father into the devadasi profession against her wishes runs away, marries her music teacher, and becomes a staunch proponent of devadasi abolition. The novel ends with a social reform conference attended by the main characters in the novel wherein a resolution calling for the abolition of the devadasi system is passed.

\[91\] Kannabiran and Kannabiran, Web of Deceit.
The novel is a polemic against the devadasi system that castigates its moral depravity, thus echoing mainstream discourse rather than Periyar’s critique. The novel’s preoccupation with unraveling the deceitful and dishonest ways in which devadasis trick men into parting with their money and leaving their wives reveals a moralizing stance. But in doing so it alludes to the contemporary socio-political context in two ways. One, the removal of official patronage reduced many devadasis to the level of mere prostitutes wherein deceit and trickery became necessary if were to maintain the economic autonomy which they were traditionally accustomed to and dependent upon. Two, in 1936 the devadasi system was still left standing - albeit in altered ways - despite the act of 1929, thus making more urgent the need to bring to the fore the condition of the devadasis. On another level, the novel’s emphasis on the morality of devadasis can also be read as signifying the beginnings of the transition from radicalism to a more moderate approach toward social reform as the language-as-mother metaphor escalated during the anti-Hindi campaign of the late 1930s and the demands of electoral politics necessitated certain compromises especially with regard to women.

Despite the novel’s preoccupation with the morality of the devadasis, it cannot be read merely as an echo of the mainstream discourse. The novel breaks away from the mainstream discourse in three important ways. One, in contrast to the mainstream discourse that refused to allow devadasis a subject position, it gives them a voice in negotiating their place within society.

in a climate that was suffused with reformist calls for eradication of the institution.\textsuperscript{93} Two, by firmly setting the novel in the context of the lives of devadasis themselves, Ramamirthammal addresses their immediate concerns as opposed to abstract goals such as nation and womanhood. Three, as a former devadasi herself, the author is able to invest the novel’s reformist thrust with an authenticity that was lacking in the mainstream discourse.

As a committed Self-Respect activist, Ramamirthammal also employs the familiar Self-Respect discourse of anti-Brahminism and calls for action to destroy Brahminism once and for all:

> In the name of Sastras and in the name of gods, women today are treated worse than beasts….First we must destroy the foundations on which the devadasi system rests namely – god – religion-Smirthis – sacred texts, Puranas. If these go there will be no justification for the devadasi system to remain in existence…..Is it not because of this religion, god and Brahminism that they are spared by the law? That is why these must be wiped out first.\textsuperscript{94}

The final chapter which describes a social reform conference addresses the nature of women’s exploitation and squarely blames religion, shastras, and Brahmins for the devadasi system.

While Periyar’s position on the devadasi debate refrained from castigating women’s sexuality outside marriage even as he unequivocally condemned the devadasi system as an exploitative institution, mainstream reformist discourse as well as that of Self-Respecters such as Ramamirthammal denied any position for women outside of the conjugal family unit. Thus, the immorality of non-conjugal sex inhered in the consensus to abolish the devadasi system. The issue of sexuality came to the fore again with the debates on birth control and divorce which by


\textsuperscript{94} Kannabiran and Kannabiran, \textit{Muvalur Ramamirthammal’s Web of Deceit}, p. 202
their very constitutive terms threatened certain fundamental patriarchal constructions of Hindu womanhood.

While birth control challenged the traditional belief that sexual intercourse was a sacred act of procreation within marriage, divorce rejected the notion that marriage is a sacrament. Consequently, they directly confronted patriarchal control of women’s’ sexuality within marriage. Birth control and divorce challenged expectations of female sexual chastity: one was that women should be virgins at the time of marriage and should remain celibate for the rest of their lives upon the death of their husbands. The other was that sexual intercourse even within marriage should be tied to procreation and cannot be indulged in for pleasure alone. Divorce allowed for the possibility that women could exist independently as, among other things, sexual beings outside of marriage. In that sense, it stimulated the same patriarchal fears that had devised elaborate rules for enforcing chaste widowhood. But a divorced woman could not be subject to such rules for she underscored, by her choice to dissolve her marriage, the contractual nature of marriage, and thereby the possibility that she could marry again. Therefore, with divorce, neither the expectation of virginity at the time of marriage nor the expectation of celibacy outside of marriage were certain. Birth control, by separating sexual intercourse from the biological function of reproduction, allowed for the possibility that women could desire and experience sexual pleasure for its own sake unfettered by the consequence of pregnancy and childbirth. However, the proponents of birth control linked it to issues of health, physical fitness, citizenry, economy, and nationhood, and therefore, found support among the educated upper-classes and upper-castes that dominated the nationalist movement. It came to be divested from sexuality, and thereby became worthy of speaking about in the public sphere.
The discourse on divorce had a different trajectory, bereft as it was of such direct connections to issues that animated the debate on birth control. Divorce, unlike birth control, directly challenged the sacramental nature of marriage which allowed women only two possibilities – marriage or widowhood. By creating the possibility for women to exist outside these two states, the call for the legal provision of divorce was revolutionary. Both sacramental marriages which women entered as virgins and enforced chaste widowhood controlled women’s sexuality. With divorce, women could stand as sexual beings in their own right outside of marriage, and thus undercut the very notion of female chastity. Self-Respect discourse on divorce and birth control shared some characteristics with the mainstream nationalist narrative while articulating a different rationale.

Divorce

In the Madras presidency events during 1929 stimulated contentious debate about the validity and desirability of divorce. In February, the first Self-Respect conference in Chingleput passed resolutions designed to revolutionize Hindu marriages. One of them declared that “marriage should be terminable at the will of either party and that no restrictions should be placed on remarriage.”\(^95\) Two months later *Kudi Arasu*\(^96\) and *Dravidan*\(^97\) reported on the Fifth Social Reform Conference held in the United Provinces (UP) under the presidentship of Uma Nehru\(^98\) that demanded the legal right to divorce for women deserted or ill-treated by their

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95 *Revolt*, 20 February, 1929.

96 *Kudi Arasu*, 28 April, 1929.

97 *Dravidan*, April 5 and 8, 1929.

98 Married into the Nehru family, Uma Nehru has been characterized as a progressive feminist for her times, whose opinions were often at odds with her colleagues in the nationalist and Indian women’s movement. A frequent
husbands. It also praised Baroda, a ‘progressive’ princely state in western India for legalizing divorce. In November, the fourth Madras Women’s Social Reform Conference held in Madras city under the presidency of Mrs. Srinivasa Iyengar passed a much-debated resolution in favor of divorce.

The vociferous reaction to both the Chingleput Self-Respect Conference and the Madras Women’s Conference resolutions attested to the revolutionary potential of divorce. While the UP conference took a more cautious stand on divorce by adding the qualification “when a husband deserts or ill-treats his wife” – one that was more palatable to the conservative elements who characterized divorce as a dishonor to women and their chastity, the Chingleput conference and the Madras Women’s Conference did not add any such caveat leading. Consequently, some non-Brahmin leaders as well as the newspaper Justice strongly disapproved of these resolutions on divorce. An article in Justice, reflecting elite non-Brahmin opinion, took a more conservative stance than the UP Social Reform Conference. First, it could not conceive of any reason other than physical cruelty and/or unfaithfulness as reasons for which women should be granted the right to terminate a marriage. Second, even under these conditions, it only conceded legal


99Mitra, Indian Annual Register, Volume 1, pp. 19 & 20.

100 Kudi Arasu, 24 November, 1929, p. 12; Mitra, Indian Annual Register, Vol. 11, pp. 20 & 400.
separation with maintenance. Divorce with the mere suggestion of the possibility of remarriage for women was unacceptable:

To ask for a law of divorce… means that the divorced wife should have a right to remarry. We venture to think that the very idea will be absolutely repugnant to millions of our women all over the country, and that the loathsome suggestion would be repudiated by them as strongly as possible….we feel resolutions such as this, would have a serious effect on general social reform and would give a setback to all those very necessary changes and improvements which are required in our social polity. We cannot congratulate the social section of the Women’s Conference on the resolutions that they have adopted without reflection on their consequences, direct and indirect.\(^\text{101}\)

The article’s horrified protest at what divorce implied – that women could remarry and thus violate the sacramental nature of marriage, even as the husband was living – attested to the Self-Respect movement’s radical position on divorce. The possibility for women’s agency that divorce opened up was thus unacceptable.

Although more muted in its criticism, *Swarajya*, a nationalist newspaper edited by T. Prakasham\(^\text{102}\) and published simultaneously in English, Tamil, and Telugu, cautioned “the ardent protagonists of the women’s movement to steer clear of the unfeminine bellicose temper and unlovely excesses with which the awakening of similar consciousness has been accompanied, in its initial stages, in other countries”\(^\text{103}\). Sami Venkatachalam Chettiar, a non-Brahmin member of the Swarajya Party, speaking on the topic of ‘Youth and the Self-Respect Movement’ at the second anniversary celebrations of the Non-Brahmin Association, affirmed the sacramental and religious nature of Hindu marriage. Claiming that divorce would destroy the very foundations of


\(^{102}\) A Telugu Brahmin lawyer, journalist, and nationalist, Prakasham was elected general secretary of the Indian National Congress in 1921 and to the Central Legislative Assembly in 1926. He was chief-minister of Madras Presidency from April 1946 to March 1947 and of Andhra state in independent India from October 1953 to November 1954.

\(^{103}\) *Swarajya*, November 18, 1929, p. 1596, in *NNPR*, November-December 1929, pp. 1477-1804.
Hindu society, he urged the youth to ignore such resolutions as they would result in severe evils. In contrast, speaking at the same event, A. Ramasami Mudaliar, a prominent non-Brahmin leader of the Justice Party, Mayor of Madras and editor of *Justice*, applauded the resolution on divorce as a welcome move to end the oppressive customs deeply embedded in religion and to accord social equality to women. The revolutionary potential of divorce rendered untenable any simple, uncomplicated distinction between Brahmins and non-Brahmins, between nationalists and Justicites in their response to legalizing divorce.

The impact of divorce would be revolutionary, for it would place women outside of the protection of the patriarchal trinity of father, husband, and son who were entrusted with guarding their chastity. This foundational challenge that divorce posed was unpalatable to many, irrespective of caste or nationalist affiliations or even gender. Reporting on the Madras Women’s Conference, an earlier article in *Kudi Arasu* pointed out that some attendees spoke against the proposal to allow divorce. The president, Mrs. Srinivasa Iyengar walked out of the conference when the proposal was passed by two votes. In her presidential address, she cautioned against acting in haste. While it was necessary to accord women equal status and to

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104 *Dravidan*, April 6, 1929, p. 7.
105 Ibid.
107 The conference was inaugurated by the wife of the new governor, George Stanley and attended by S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Margaret Cousins, Irish feminist and theosophist and founder-secretary of the WIA, Malathi Patwardhan, Secretary of WIA and editor of *Stri Dharma*, Rukmini Lakshmipathy, Congress member and first woman to be elected to the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1937, and Alamemangathayarammal, Justice Party member and editor of *Dravidan*, among others.
108 She was the wife of S. Srinivasa Iyengar, Brahmin Advocate-General of Madras Presidency (1916-1920), law member of Madras Presidency (1916-1920) and president of the Swarajya Party, a faction of the Indian National Congress (1923-1930) and the daughter of Sir V. Bhashyam Iyengar, the first Indian advocate-general of Madras (1897-1898 and 1899-1900), official member of the Madras Legislative Council (1897, 1899 and 1900), and acting judge of the Madras High Court (1901-1904).
strive for women’s progress, she maintained that doing too much too soon through legal measures was inadvisable. Her remarks concurred with the *Justice* assertion that the women of India, aside from the few advanced, westernized women, would never accede to divorce. Still women, however few and whatever their sympathies and interests, came together to demand the legal provision of divorce and so lent credence to Self-Respect efforts to grant women greater autonomy with regard to marriage.

Countering the criticism of the Chingleput and the Madras Women’s Conference resolutions, *Kudi Arasu, Revolt*, and *Dravidan* emphasized the absolute necessity for a law enabling divorce since it was a key factor in granting women freedom in general and in improving women’s status within marriage in particular. Periyar who authored several of these responses, published in Tamil in *Kudi Arasu* and in English in *Revolt*, expressed profound bewilderment and disappointment at the stance that a “democratic periodical such as our *Justice* took on the matter.”\(^{10}\) While he anticipated a backlash from orthodox quarters, he was not prepared for the condemnation of the proposal in *Justice*. Periyar claimed that “all the newspapers in South India without exception have condemned the resolution on divorce”\(^{11}\) and contested the notion that the legal facilitation of divorce would immediately result in large numbers of women leaving their husbands, thereby threatening the very foundations of chastity.

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109 *Kudi Arasu*, 24 November 1929. An article in Kudi Arasu severely condemned the attitude of upper-class/upper-caste women such as Mrs. Srinivasa Iyengar who as wives of ministers, judges, lawyers, landlords, and doctors were interested only in safeguarding their interests. Therefore, to expect them to sympathize with their lower-class/lower-caste sisters and to work toward ameliorating their sufferings would be a mere pipe dream. Similarly, one cannot expect anything better from Congress men and women, for they valorized women such as Sita, Nalayani, and Chandramathi as epitomes of chastity and undying, unquestioning devotion to husband. Therefore, the Self-Respecters were the only hope for ensuring women’s freedom. Efforts should be made to prevent the Congress and the wives of ministers, judges, and landlords from entering the legislatures, and to ensure that Self-Respect women did. This article was written following the Mysore Government’s decision to legalize divorce in June 1933. See *Kudi Arasu*, 16 July 1933, p. 12.

110 *Kudi Arasu*, 24 November and 29 December, 1929, p. 8.

No one had to fear a protective and facilitative law because people would make use of it only when necessary and not for the mere opportunity it afforded. Therefore, some people’s belief that such a law is dangerous can only be attributed to fear arising out of their selfish interests. Their assertion that women themselves will not accept this as it posed great danger to them was nullified as women themselves passed this resolution. In the women’s conference highly intelligent and educated professional women had carefully deliberated the issue. Periyar’s criticism specifically and correctly targeted upper-caste men whose high-caste status was predicated upon control of women’s behavior. Divorce threatened the very foundations of their gendered location as upper-caste men. Periyar’s contention that women, by passing the resolution calling for the legalization of divorce, demonstrated its acceptability among women was flawed on two counts. One, it abrogated for these women the right to speak for all women. Second, by emphasizing the elite character of these women, Periyar failed to counter the critics’ claim that these were “advanced women” who were intent upon “approximating…Western standards.”

Another resolution passed at the Madras Women’s Social Reform Conference to accord women all freedoms on an equal footing with men in all matters, along with the one on divorce, generated the most contentious debate.\textsuperscript{112} An article in \textit{Justice} found the resolution demanding the same standard of conduct for women as for men “spectacular”.\textsuperscript{113} It tried to elaborate on this further by claiming that behavioral expectations for men being as low as they were, what ought to be done was to raise these expectations to meet the high standards set for women rather than lowering the latter to meet the former. Unfortunately, it obfuscated the real issue, which was that

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 24 November 1929.
women should have equal freedom in matters of sexuality as men. These two resolutions acutely tested the commitment of both intellectuals and activists to women’s freedom. Periyar appealed to *Justice* to shed any remaining blind beliefs and stand at the forefront of social reform by making service to society its mainstay.

The Self-Respect movement’s progressive position on divorce must be understood within the context of its radical emphasis on rationalism as a means to combat superstitions. Traditional marriage, for Self-Respecters, was firmly grounded in religious orthodoxy and superstition. The Movement laid the gendered, oppressive nature of marriage at the feet of the Hindu religion. Rejecting outright the sacramental nature of Hindu marriage, it posited marriage as a contract or agreement that individuals freely chose to enter and therefore could choose to terminate. For Self-Respecers, marriage and divorce were two sides of the same coin. Contractual marriage and divorce were crucial ingredients in a program of radical personal emancipation. In 1930, Periyar applauded the efforts of the Andhra Women’s Conference to bring forth a resolution on divorce as indicative that women would soon attain complete liberation.\(^\text{114}\) Its fate notwithstanding – the proposal was defeated by one vote - Periyar argued that the very fact that women came together to propose such a measure in a land where people cringe upon merely hearing the word ‘divorce’ and deliberated thoughtfully upon the issue for three hours were strong, positive signs of women’s progress. For Self-Respecters, divorce was not just a way out of marriages that were overtly cruel and abusive but an option that could be exercised for reasons of personal incompatibility between two individuals. In the event that divorce was not legalized, Periyar threatened to propagate “rejection of marriage” for all and “plurality of wives” for men. He suggested that men should boldly go ahead and marry girls of their choice. These suggestions,  

\(^\text{114}\) *Kudi Arasu*, 21 December, 1930.
made with much sarcasm, were the only means to end the misery that people experienced as a result of marriages performed in the name of religion that paid no attention to issues of compatibility.\textsuperscript{115}

K.M. Balasubramaniam, a prolific writer and activist of the Movement, wrote a series of articles on divorce between August 1931 and January 1932 that further elucidated for the readers the various contours of this debate. While reiterating the liberating potential of divorce, particularly for women, he sought to answer the critics’ contention that its legalization would lead to immorality in society. He viewed the resolution on divorce passed at the Madras Women’s Conference as having had an explosive impact on society, for it collapsed substantive differences among various groups of people such as old and young, rich and poor, Brahmans and non-Brahmins, Hindus and non-Hindus and motivated them to stand united in strong condemnation of the resolution and of the women who were behind it.\textsuperscript{116} These critics feared the sexual freedom that women might gain through divorce. As Self-Respecters conceived and the Madras Women’s Conferences affirmed, marriages could be terminated for reasons of incompatibility with the result that the divorced individuals could then freely remarry.

Divorce threatened both the notion that women should seek termination of marriage only under extreme circumstances such as overt physical cruelty, and the notion that even under such conditions, they should at best seek legal separation with maintenance with no option of remarriage. Critics’ fear of women’s sexual freedom emanated from the belief that women were naturally endowed with excessive sexual energies and therefore had to be controlled within the patriarchal family unit throughout their lives – as daughters, wives, and widows. Divorce

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 17 August 1930.

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Ibid} 30 August 1931, p. 4.
implicitly undermined this demand for female chastity. Balasubramaniam alluded to this connection between female chastity and the opposition to divorce, and used examples from Western societies, Muslim communities, and communities within Hinduism to demonstrate that the legalization of divorce did not make those societies and communities any less moral than the high-caste Hindus who used the prohibition of divorce as a mark of their high moral status. Here he underscored the fundamental Self-Respect position that caste and women’s oppression were inextricably linked wherein control of women’s sexual behavior and high-caste status were directly proportional. He concluded his serialized articles on divorce with the eloquent argument that “without the root called divorce, there can be no tree called women’s freedom”

**Birth Control**

If the Movement saw divorce as one important means to free women from the constraints of sacramental marriages, its advocacy of birth control sought to free women from the patriarchal expectation of procreation and motherhood. Birth control functioned as another site upon which the Self-Respect movement constructed its identity politics – a politics that during the 1920s and 1930s manifested a radical politics of gender alongside caste. In the early 1930s the Madras Legislative Council twice debated the issue of opening birth control clinics in the Presidency, the first time in 1930 and then again in 1933. Public opinion in response to these events ranged from the orthodox that viewed birth control as immoral to the progressive, reflected in the Self-

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Respect discourse that foregrounded its potential for women’s autonomy, with the middle-class and nationalists advocating birth control to address issues of population, economy, and national health but within the context of marriage.\textsuperscript{120} At a public meeting convened in October 1933 to address public concern following the Council’s deliberation on the issue of opening birth control clinics in government hospitals and that featured speakers who were both Brahmin and non-Brahmin and men and women, Mrs. Dadhabhoy, secretary of WIA, emphasized that birth control instruction should be imparted only to married couples.\textsuperscript{121}

In her gendered analysis of birth control debates in late colonial India, Barbara Ramusack argues that while women advocates of birth control differed from their male counterparts in their emphasis on maternal and infant health as the key rationale for birth spacing that contraceptive methods would facilitate, they did not challenge the primacy of motherhood in Indian women’s lives.\textsuperscript{122} Self-Respecters, both women and men, comprise the “definite minority” that Ramusack identifies as those who “related birth control to greater autonomy for women.”\textsuperscript{123} Thus, in contextualizing the Self-Respect position on birth control within these larger debates, Anandhi S. and Sarah Hodges have rightly underscored its progressive character.\textsuperscript{124}

For Periyar, who firmly believed that men were directly responsible for women’s slavery, it was pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood that sustained women’s dependence on men, and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[120] TSA, \textit{NNPR}, July-December 1933, pp. 568-569, 614 and 615.
\item[121] \textit{Kudi Arasu} 5 November 1933, p. 13.
\item[123] Ibid, p. 56.
\end{footnotes}
advocated rejection of these as essential for women’s freedom. Acknowledging that this position was radical – one that could be considered foolish by people, he argued that he saw no other means by which to ensure women’s freedom. To the potential criticism that this was against nature, he pointed to the myriad ways in which human beings, in stark contrast to other living beings, already lived and acted in conflict with nature and that therefore acting in a similar way in this matter alone was not going to cause the world to come to an end. He even dismissed the argument that the human species would not be able to renew itself if women stopped giving birth by claiming that women’s physical safety and well-being which were jeopardized through pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood were valid reasons for rejecting them. He even contended that women’s refusal to bear children would indirectly benefit men for they too, relieved of the worries and responsibilities of child-rearing, could live freer and more capable lives.\footnote{Kudi Arasu, 8 August, 1928.}

If Periyar’s views on birth control advocacy represented the extreme progressive end of the spectrum, the views of Vepa Ramesam, judge of the Madras High Court and prominent member of the Madras Neo-Malthusian League, represented extreme orthodoxy. In his testimony delivered before the Age of Consent Committee, Ramesam advocated the use of birth control to justify his position against raising the age of consent and in support of child marriage. He argued that it is not early consummation (one year after puberty) but frequency of childbirth that contributed to the problem of maternal and infant health. He feared that postponing consummation beyond a year after puberty would lead to ‘immorality’ in society as girls’ unfettered sexuality would be hard to control. The availability of birth control measures, in this scheme of things, became another reason to justify child marriage and early consummation.\footnote{See Age of Consent Committee: Evidence, 1928-1929, Volume IV, Oral and Written Statements of Witnesses from the Madras Presidency (Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch, 1929), pp. 342-352.}
Birth control thus rarely if ever was deployed in the service of women’s sexual freedom, further underscoring the Self-Respect movement’s radical departure on this issue.

Periyar reiterated his radical position on birth control again in 1930 in the wake of its increased public visibility through the activities of the Madras Neo-Malthusian League, the debates in the Madras Legislative Council, and widespread press coverage. While happy that there was no difference of opinion between Self-Respecters and other birth control activists on the necessity for birth control, Periyar pointed to the fundamental differences between the two groups in the reasons they gave for advocating birth control. He reaffirmed that women’s freedom and choice were the sole motivating factors in Self-Respect advocacy of birth control. He rejected every mainstream motivation as he characterized them, such as maternal and infant health, national economic progress, and prevention of fragmentation of family property. Periyar also saw it as unfortunate and disappointing that during the Madras Legislative Council debate on birth control in 1930, both S. Muthiah Mudaliar as a representative of the government and Muthulakshmi Reddy as a representative of women opposed birth control.\textsuperscript{127} Addressing the issue of establishing birth control clinics in the Presidency, both Mudaliar, the non-Brahmin minister for public health, and Reddi, the Deputy President of the Council, advocated sexual restraint and continence as the preferred method for controlling births. Periyar urged his readers to ignore this “peculiar” stand of the government and to individually undertake whatever measures necessary in this regard, for propagation of birth control was more important than that of prohibition and prevention of contagious diseases\textsuperscript{128}. In May 1931 the fourth Self-Respect

\textsuperscript{127} Proceedings of the Legislative Council of the Governor of Madras: Official Report, Thursday, the 27th March 1930, Issued 30-4-30, Vol. LIII, No. 9, pp. 624-628.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 6 April 1930.
Conference held at Tanjore resolved that childbearing stood as an obstacle in women’s attainment of freedom and equality on par with men and therefore that birth control was indispensable for women’s liberation.\textsuperscript{129}

While Periyar’s views on birth control reveal a radical consciousness about women’s sexual freedom and were not evenly present across the Movement, other Self-Respect activists too, both men and women, for the most part opposed the sanctity attached to reproduction and envisaged birth control as a key tool for expanding women’s freedom. They placed their arguments for birth control within familiar discourses such as eugenics, health, economics, and population, as well as reproductive freedom. Writing in \textit{Kudi Arasu} during 1931, T. D. Gopal, viewed birth control as the panacea for all the disabilities women suffered. With this one tool, he argued, women had the opportunity to liberate themselves from the burden of incessant motherhood that severely constrained women’s freedom. Since birth control concerned women directly and belonged to women and women alone, he urged women to take up ownership of this issue, and thereby create a life of respect and possibilities for themselves and consequently determine society’s future. It was an unprecedented opportunity as well as an awesome responsibility, and women had no choice but to embrace it and use it wisely for their freedom and for the good of society.\textsuperscript{130} Gopal’s emphasis on birth control as a woman’s prerogative and duty echoed Periyar’s position in the potential he found in it for freeing women from their biological destiny. He rejected sexual continence as an impractical method for controlling births because it was unnatural and not in the control of women alone. More importantly he rejected

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 6 May 1931.

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 22 March 1931; 3 May 1931, pp. 5-6, 19.
the mainstream view that conjugality was the proper site for practicing birth control. Gopal also made eugenic arguments claiming the authority of medical science to explain and justify why people possessing certain medical and psychological conditions should not reproduce. He also suggested that women from the labouring classes should refuse to bear children until such a time when their children could live with dignity and respect in society. While for the one group, birth control served the ‘noble’ end of preventing the transmission of diseases to the offspring, for the other group birth control was envisaged as a means by which communities could bargain for a better life for their progeny. In the latter case, Gopal subverted the eugenic project that sought to discourage reproduction among the ‘undesirable’ classes by advocating birth control as an enabling tool that women could use to claim better treatment and facilities for their community. In doing so, he underscored the crucial/indispensable nature of the work that the labouring classes performed for society. Birth control now empowered these hitherto powerless women. Like their upper-class sisters, they should claim birth control as their own and fully utilize its potential for their freedom and for the improvement of their community. Thus, Gopal, like Periyar, emphasized birth control’s liberating potential for women.

Similarly, for women Self-Respecters, birth control represented a significant opportunity for women’s sexual freedom. They made public speeches and wrote in Movement periodicals arguing for birth control. For Rajammal Vasudevan, birth control offered women a means to have some control over their bodies and hence their lives within a patriarchal society. Indrani Balasubramaniam challenged the sanctity attached to motherhood and envisaged birth control as

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132 Kudi Arasu, 12 April 1931, pp. 5-6, 15.

133 Kudi Arasu, 1 March 1931.
a basic right of women.\textsuperscript{134} In her critique of Hindu religion and the compulsions of child birth, P. Achammal expounded on birth control’s potential to break the link between women and their biological destiny of motherhood.\textsuperscript{135} Citing the case of western women who she saw as enjoying freedoms on par with men as a result of practicing birth control, P. Janaki viewed it as absolutely essential that women in India use birth control to break the chains of bondage to men. She also challenged the expectation that women breast-feed their children by arguing that it, like pregnancy and childbirth, sapped women’s energy and strength, leaving them weak and unable to participate in robust activities such as sports.\textsuperscript{136} G. A. Annapurni, in her speech delivered at the Self-Respect Women’s Conference in Madras in December 1931, unraveled the beliefs associated with motherhood that gave it an aura of religious sanctity and cited birth control as proof of the myth that surrounded motherhood.\textsuperscript{137}

In their rejection of women’s biological destiny and support of birth control’s potential for women’s bodily freedom, the discourse of Self-Respecters on birth control functioned outside what Sanjam Ahluwalia shows to be the elitist politics of middle-class feminists, Indian nationalists, western activists, colonial authorities, and the medical establishment that rationalized procreation and regulated women’s sexuality.\textsuperscript{138} However, the extent to which Self-Respecters were able to speak to the differential experiences and needs of their constituency is open to question for two reasons. First, the women and men who wrote and spoke on birth

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 8 March 1931.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 10 May 1931.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 10 January 1932.

control were upper-class/upper-caste non-Brahmins. Second, the act of discoursing about birth control necessitated objectifying it as a thing in and of itself, thereby extracting it from the lived experiences of women. In that sense, Self-Respecters participated in elitist birth control efforts that failed to account for women’s emotional, cultural, and economic dependence on family and community.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the multiple sites including institutions, practices, and discourses upon which sexuality was articulated in colonial India. These sites provided the complex discursive terrain upon which various groups staked and constructed their identity. The orthodox construed these sites as inviolate spaces beyond the purview of legal intervention. The nationalist reformers claimed them in the service of a particular construction of nationhood. The Self-Respect movement actively participated in this process by constructing its identity through a radical politics of gender along with caste. In attacking normative institutions such as child marriage, enforced chaste widowhood and the devadasi system as artifacts of caste Hindu patriarchy and in advocating divorce and birth control as avenues for women’s sexual autonomy, the Movement registered its progressive stance on women’s issues and posed a foundational challenge to Hindu society.
Chapter 3
Reform of Marriage, Reform through Marriage

At the first Self-Respect conference convened in Chingleput in February 1929, three resolutions on marriage were passed. One called for the minimum marriageable age for women to be fixed at sixteen and the prohibition of infant and child marriages. The second declared marriage to be a contract and agreement that “should be terminable at the will of either party” and that “no restrictions should be placed on remarriage”. The third asserted that “parties to marriage should be given the free right to chose their partners irrespective of caste, creed and race, and the present laws relating to marriage should be amended accordingly.”

When viewed from the vantage point of previous reforms efforts targeting women’s status, how did these resolutions address the women’s question differently, even radically? When viewed from the immediate historical context that witnessed intense debates on the women’s question, how did these resolutions reflect, contribute, or further the cause of women’s freedom and equality? A brief analysis of the charged history of colonial reform efforts will help us assess the extent of the radical potential for women’s liberation that Self-Respect marriages afforded.

Social Reform and Marriage

Nineteenth century legal enactments that sought to improve the condition of women targeted, directly or indirectly, the institution of marriage or at least the customs and practices surrounding it as the meaningful site for reform. Prohibition of sati in 1829, enabling of widow

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1 Revolt, 20th February 1929, Vol. 1, No. 16, pp. 126-128. Revolt, an English weekly, edited by Periyar E. V. Ramasami and S. Ramanathan, began publishing in November 1928 to popularize the Movement’s ideals and goals to a wider audience.
marriage in 1856 and raising the age of consent to sexual relations in 1891 were predicated upon the assumption that women’s lowly status was inextricably tied to the gendered nature of Hindu marriage wherein its sacramentality and indissolubility were binding upon women for life. The near universality of marriage and the practice of child marriage ensured that women lived and functioned within the constraints of the institution for most of their lives. Whether as wives or widows, Hindu women bore the physical, cultural markers of their status easily identifiable through attire and adornment, (non-)participation in festivities, diet, and ascription of sexuality. While these beliefs, practices and customs were most descriptive of upper-caste, particularly Brahmin, marriages, their increasing prevalence among the other castes during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the product of colonial rule. As Ranjana Sheel contends that:

During the colonial period . . . the codification of Hindu laws by the British led to the Brahminization or Sanskritization of society and established the Brahma form of marriage . . . as the only legally accepted form. . . . The colonial restructuring of the socio-economic order marked by incomplete modernization and the reinforcement of tradition from above moulded the class/caste patterns. . . . Such developments promoted caste rigidities as well as Brahmanization of the socially mobile sub-caste groups.

Prem Choudhry and Veena Talwar Oldenberg have also argued for the causal link between colonial policies regarding property rights and taxation and their negative impact on women as

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2 Chakravarti, “Gender, Caste and Labour,” in Chen, Widows in India, pp. 63-92. Chakravarti argues that traditionally the strict control of female sexuality determines the sexual and social identities of both the Hindu wife and the Hindu widow. While the former’s sexuality is tied to reproduction and is legitimized through marriage, the latter’s sexuality is denied through the requirement of absolute chastity.

3 Ranjana Sheel, “‘Brahmanizing’ State, ‘Sanskritizing’ Castes, and Dowry in Colonial India,” in Breaking Out of Invisibility: Women in Indian History, ed. Aparna Basu and Anup Taneja (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 2002), p. 128; also Chakravarti in fn. Above points out that caste status and restrictions on women were directly proportional with the result that the Brahmanization/Sanskritization of upwardly mobile caste groups led to greater constraints placed on women’s sexual and social freedom.

wives and widows in Haryana and Punjab respectively. Rochona Majumdar historicizes arranged marriages which are celebrated today as the apotheosis of tradition within the economic structures of colonial rule and postcolonial society. She argues that whatever forms and practices Hindu arranged marriages may have included in the centuries before colonization, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these forms and practices were reshaped by colonial and postcolonial modernity. Modern institutions and ideas had a profound impact on marriage practices. The print media enabled the publication of matrimonial advertisements seeking brides and grooms. The monetization of relationships found expression in the escalation of the practice of dowry. The cultivation of distinction and cultural capital manifested itself in debates about what constitutes a tasteful wedding. Rule of law and ideas of rights and personhood facilitated legal reforms in property ownership, distribution, and inheritance. Therefore, while colonial laws interpolated customs and practices surrounding marriage and in the process homogenized them to reflect a Brahminized version, the colonial context that opened up new avenues of expression and participation through courts of law, the press, and associational forms reconfigured the norms and modalities associated with marriage.

At the same time, socio-religious reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj devised new/modified forms of marriage in keeping with their reform goals. The

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7 Founded in 1828 by Ram Mohan Roy in Calcutta, the Brahmo Samaj was a socio-religious reform movement that professed the belief that there is one God and advocated the abolition of idol-worship and the caste system. The Brahmo Samaj played a significant role in the Bengal Renaissance of the early nineteenth century, and is considered to be the harbinger of modernity in India. See David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

8 Founded in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswathi in Punjab, the Arya Samaj believed in the supremacy of the vedas and condemned practices such as idol-worship, the caste system and untouchability claiming that they lacked vedic
Brahmo Samaj marriage was legalized in the form of the Special Marriage Act III of 1872 that provided a common form of civil marriage for all communities. It became possible for an Indian of whatever caste or creed to enter into a marriage with a person belonging to any caste or creed, provided the parties registered the contract of marriage declaring that they did not profess or have renounced adherence to any religion. The Arya Samaj marriage was conferred legality through the Arya Marriage Validation Act, 1937 (Act No. XIX of 1937). While both forms of marriage promoted inter-caste unions, Arya Samaj marriages also featured fire-based vedic rituals, although in shortened and simplified form and in language understandable to the wedding couple. Brahmo Samaj marriages with their emphasis on contract enshrined in the Special Marriage Act III of 1872 became the progenitor of the post-independence civil marriage law of 1954 but without the requirement of renunciation of religious faith. However, Arya Samaj marriages retained the sacramental nature of marriage while expunging it of elaborate and ostentatious rituals.

After a period of relative quiet following the age of consent (to sexual relations) controversy in the late nineteenth century, the women’s question once again came to occupy center-stage in colonial India in the late 1920s. The publication of Katherine Mayo’s Mother India in 1927 intensified efforts to lobby the Government of India to pass the Bill introduced in the Central Legislature by Harbilas Sarda to raise the age of marriage. The Government appointed the Age of Consent Committee in June 1928 to hear views on the subject from representatives of various provinces. The All-India Women’s Conference, the national forum for

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9 See Perveez Mody, “Love and the Law: Love Marriage in Delhi”, Modern Asian Studies 36, 1 (2002), pp. 223-256 for an illuminating analysis of how the 1872 Act, in response to a petition received by the colonial state to legislate for marriages among the members of the Brahmo Samaj, was passed, amidst orthodox opposition, in considerably expanded form to include all Indians.
social and political concerns pertaining to women, was founded in 1927. In November of that year, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, deputy president of the Madras Legislative Council, tabled the Devadasi Abolition Bill in the Madras Legislative Council. These initiatives stimulated a vigorous examination of sexual morality and appropriate conjugality.

The Self-Respect movement participated in these debates with characteristic enthusiasm and passion and welcomed legal intervention to improve women’s condition. Its advocacy for the minimum age of marriage for women to be fixed at sixteen and its call for the prohibition of infant and child marriages reflected the general reformist consensus about improving women’s condition. Its advocacy of freedom to choose one’s marriage partner and to divorce emanating from its recasting of marriage as a contract transcended the limits of reform that the wider societal discourse afforded. However, even here, the Movement’s demand that marriage be made a contract enabling inter-caste marriages and divorce was not novel. The Special Marriage Act III of 1872 made such marriages possible by conferring on them legal validity. Two questions follow from this. One, why did the Self-Respect movement not popularize the civil marriage option afforded by this Act as opposed to devising its own form of marriage? Second, what made Self-Respect marriages radical given that they were not the first to frame marriage as a contract with its concomitants of individual choice and the possibility of divorce and inter-caste marriages? The answer lies in the Movement’s belief in the potential of marriage reform to fundamentally transform society.

Self-Respect marriages were public-political platforms for propagating Movement ideals and goals. This objective required the mobilization of people to attend these marriages. Civil marriages conducted in the courts were/are lonely affairs bereft of the sanction and approval of the community at large. Perveez Mody argues that the association of court marriages with love
marriages or marriages of individual, not family, choice cast them as “socially deviant.” This attitude stems from the context and the debates surrounding the passing of the Special Marriages Act III of 1872 wherein orthodox native opinion denounced the granting of legal validity to love-unions. Also, marriages in India are considered a religious union that is given a public face through lengthy community celebrations. This belief castigates love marriages sanctioned by the courts and requiring a denial of faith as “a most unholy union.”

I argue that while marriages were key sites for the propagation of Movement ideals, they were granted legitimacy and sanction not by the traditional community of kin but the community of Self-Respecters.

Self-Respect marriages rejected the traditional conception of marriage as a sacramental, indissoluble, endogamous, family-arranged union but retained its communal aspect. The social deviancy or the unholy aspect of Self-Respect marriage emanated from its non-sacramental choiceful nature but its legitimization through community, albeit a different community, mimicked traditional marriages. While court marriages provided legal validity to marriage reform, they were, by their very nature, bereft of the communal aspect of marriage. The non-communal aspect of these marriages made them doubly deviant and unholy, making them, in most cases, a last option for couples who wished to marry a person of their choice. Thus, the landmark Act of 1872 remained an option only in theory for most Hindus and was utilized mainly by the small community of Brahmos. Like the Act of 1856 that legalized widow remarriages, this Act was dependent upon people acting in opposition to norms and traditions. The Act’s potential for reforming beliefs and practices about marriage was minimal at best. Traditionally Hindu marriages were legitimimized through the sanction of the community and not the law. Marriages bereft of this sanction, viable options no doubt for those without any other

10 Mody, *Love-Marriage in Delhi.*
recourse, had little validity within the community. Self-Respect marriages joined this crucial traditional aspect with the reformatory elements embedded in the Act of 1872 to bring them into the mainstream of society. To be sure, the Self-Respect movement used marriage as a key avenue for propagating its social reform goals, and therefore required a public forum. But for the men and women who contracted Self-Respect marriages, the public aspect ensured them a support group. In a society where the penetration of state institutions is low, community, rather than legal, sanction functions as a stronger foundation of support.

The propagandist goals of Self-Respect marriages necessitated that they be held not in clinical and disinterested settings such as courts but in homes of Movement leaders and activists, at venues of Movement meetings and conferences, and in cinema halls. The use of such spaces for the conduct of marriages underscored the Movement’s revolutionary agenda and its confrontational politics. The goal was to publicize to the larger community in a public-political way the goals of Self-Respect marriages. Therefore, while the marriage itself may not have been entirely new or even radical in that it involved the declaration of intent to marry and signing of a contract, its deployment as a powerful tool to transform society and its conduct in personal, informal, interested, communal spaces charged with ideology and mobilizing large crowds of people were novel, radical, and confrontational.

The Self-Respect movement, unlike the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, was not motivated by the need to respond to the ‘colonial gaze’, but rather sought to fundamentally transform society by challenging caste, religion, and gender roles. It had no desire to protect any sacred space of Hinduism and Hindu society. This was in contrast to the the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj which, in responding to the British criticism of India’s religious and cultural practices, sought to advance a more unified, organized form of Hinduism – the rational,
Upanishadic form by the former and the Vedic form by the latter. This collaboration between
colonial officials who strove to bring order to what they saw as India’s polytheistic and chaotic
religious traditions and upper-caste/Brahmin scholars who privileged the centrality of Sanskrit
texts produced an exclusionary Brahminic version of what came to be labeled ‘Hinduism’. The
Self-Respect movement having no such objective launched a frontal attack on Hinduism and its
sacred works in its newspapers and periodicals, and in its meetings and conferences. This
relentlessly offensive approach meant that it had nothing to lose that is it could enact reforms not
merely of a reformatory but of a revolutionary kind, unfettered by the need or desire to ‘look
good’. This is exactly what the Movement did in the arena of marriage during the 1920s and the
1930s.

Among Hindus, marriage was deemed an indispensable rite of passage. It affected everyone
in society. Marriage was the site upon which religion, caste, and patriarchy converged most
emphatically and left their most indelible mark, and therefore it provided the most apt platform
for reforming society. Anandhi, S, Geetha, V and Sarah Hodges have attested to the

11 The Arya Samaj believed in the infallible authority of the Vedas while the Brahmo Samaj favored the
monotheistic philosophy of the Upanishads.

12 Ramayana, considered a sacred Hindu epic, was a favorite target of attack. A series of articles in the Revolt and
Kudi Arasu in the late 1920s ‘exposed’ the Ramayana for its ‘low standard of morality’, ‘nefarious influence’ and
‘debasining doctrine’. In his radical, revisionist interpretation of the Ramayana, Naicker attempted to sensitize his
audience to the political subtexts of Dravidian subjugation and women’s oppression in the epic. He pointed to the
incident where Rama justifies his killing of Vali from a hidden position by claiming that the laws of dharma do not
apply to beasts – the beasts here being Dravidians in Periyar’s interpretation. Also, he read Rama’s repudiation of
Sita after her long captivity and her ordeal by fire as signifying Aryan mistreatment of women. See Paula Richman,
“E.V. Ramasami’s Interpretation of the Ramayana”, Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in

13 Anandhi, S, “Women’s Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925-1948”, Social Scientist, Vol. 19, Nos. 5-6,

14 Geetha, V, “Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship”, in Anupama Rao (ed.) Gender and Caste, (London:
Zed books, 2005).
centrality of marriage reform and the consequent reconfiguring of family life to the Self-Respect movement’s revolutionary goals. Mytheli Sreenivas studies Self-Respect marriages as a crucial ingredient in the enactment of Dravidian/Tamil nationalism. Dravidian/ Tamil nationalism in its opposition to what it considered the upper-caste, Aryan biases of Indian nationalism launched a broader critique of Hindu society. However, over time, as with all nationalisms and in the interests of electoral politics, it subsumed the critique of gender roles under the call for a unified Dravidian/Tamil identity. Self-Respect marriages have especially suffered from this shift as their fundamentally anti-patriarchal nature has been erased to make room for Tamilness. A recent Self-Respect marriage clearly highlights this erasure. At a recent Self-Respect wedding between the daughter of a State politician and the son of a State bureaucrat, Self-Respect marriages were hailed for preserving Tamil culture and pride, and for eschewing caste in the interest of a common Tamil identity. Given this, it is crucially important to underscore the anti-patriarchal emphasis of Self-Respect marriages during the 1920s and 1930s.

While sacramental, endogamous marriages ensured the hegemony of religion and caste in Hindu social life, the wearing of the thali as a symbol of marriage by women alone and the ritual of Kanyadaan, among others, underscored patriarchy. Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy, the founder of the Self-Respect movement, who offered an uncompromising critique of male institutions of

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17 http://hindu.com/2008/05/19/stories/2008051957710600.htm, accessed on 20 October 2010. The Hindu is a leading English language daily headquartered in Chennai (formerly Madras).

18 Literally, the gift of a virgin girl.
power, referred to this confluence between religion and patriarchy most succinctly when he argued that:

The sole purpose behind marriage in India is to make women the slaves of men. Rituals have been designed merely to cover up that fact so that women can be fooled into thinking that marriage has something to do with Godliness.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, the Self-Respect movement from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s – the decade that I argue comprised its most radical phase – substantially reformed marriage practices as a major step toward challenging the nexus among caste, religion, and patriarchy.

While Self-Respecters unequivocally supported raising the age of marriage and age of consent for sexual intercourse, their program of marriage reform was more radical in its goals. They aimed at far-reaching reforms that attacked the very nature of marriage, its practices, rituals, and symbols. For the nationalists and women’s movement leaders, constrained as they were by the urgency to respond to Katherine Mayo’s Mother India and demonstrate that India deserved self-rule, the passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 that penalized the marriage of girls under 14 served to seal any further debate or action in the arena of marriage reform.²⁰ Self-Respecters regarded raising the age of marriage and consent as just the beginning in a more challenging project to fundamentally transform social structure, organization, and relations.

Thus, although efforts to reform marriage were not new, what was new was the impetus behind them. While the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj primarily responded to the British denigration of Hindu society, the Self-Respect movement’s program was provoked primarily by

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¹⁹ Pagutharivu, December 1936, p. 60. Pagutharivu was a monthly Tamil periodical of the Self-Respect movement published from Erode.

Brahmin ritual superiority within Hindu society— one that was exacerbated by their professional and economic advancement under British rule. The Self-Respecters’ subject-position as subalterns within the Hindu caste system afforded them an insider perspective on the inequalities it maintained and nurtured. Their critique was embedded in their concrete experiences emanating from these inequalities. More authentic, material, deeper, and wide-ranging, it necessitated more fundamental changes than what the outside, top-down perspective such as that of the British would allow. The (mostly) discursive basis of the colonial ‘gaze’ that prompted reforms was here replaced by the (mostly) material basis of the insider ‘gaze’. Thus, I argue that an internal rather than the external stimulus of colonial rule animated the Self-Respecters, and therefore held greater potential for overturning traditional marriage practices.

Marriage as involving the private, intimate sphere inhibited full-scale public scrutiny in the mainstream except when nationalists and leaders of the Indian women’s movement involved themselves in the debate surrounding the age of consent to sexual relations and age of marriage. Once the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed into law in September 1929 prohibiting the marriage of girls under fourteen, and was seen as blunting the edge of Mayo’s condemnation of Indians’ aspirations for self-rule, the nationalists and women’s movement leaders focused on issues they deemed more urgent such as women’s suffrage. To the Self-Respecters, unmotivated as they were by the urgent need for swaraj or self-rule or by the need to repudiate Mayo whose contentions in fact they enthusiastically supported, marriage provided an apt

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22 Self-Respecters argued that self-respect must precede self-rule, for without it self-rule would amount to nothing more than replacing British rule with Brahmin rule. They sought to restore to the lower-castes and out-castes their self-respect which the Hindu caste system had denied them.

23 Ayyamuttu, *Mayo Kurru Moyya Poyya [Mayo’s Charges: True or False?]"*
platform from which to make known the movement’s larger, long-term agenda. Thus, the personal space of marriage became an intensely political space that challenged the strict dichotomy posited between the private and the public in colonial India. This chapter analyzes Self-Respect marriages in terms of the what, how, and why as they subverted/transformed the nature, practices, rituals, and symbols of traditional marriage. These marriages, reports of which appeared in Movement periodicals since at least August 1926, occurred with increasing frequency from 1928 among various non-Brahmin castes. They were geographically dispersed in the Tamil-speaking areas of the Madras presidency with heavy concentration in the south-central districts of Madurai, Trichi, and Tanjore.

Reform of Marriage

The Chingleput resolution that declared marriage to be an agreement, a contract between two willing, consenting individuals was controversial. First, it dissociated marriage from the Hindu religion that deemed it to be sacrament and therefore indissoluble. It considered marriage to be nothing but a “means of securing human feelings to lead to a real and happy life” and held that religion should have nothing to do with it. Periyar considered the Hindu religion especially culpable in the atrocities committed in the name of marriage. He maintained that Islam, in spite of purdah, and Christianity accorded greater rights to women in marriage.


25 Tamil was spoken in the southern districts of the Presidency from a few miles north of Madras city to as far west as the Nilgiri hills and Western Ghats – the area that comprises the post-independence state of Tamilnadu.

26 Revolt, 6 March, 1929, Vol. 1, No. 18, p. 137.

27 Purdah is a practice that involves the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealed clothing including the veil and by the use of screens and curtains within the home.
Second, the resolution rendered the contracting individuals rather than families the agents/subjects. Family-arranged endogamous marriages maintained and perpetuated caste divisions and caste exclusivity. Self-Respecters argued that marriages should be wrested from the control of families and that the decision about whom to marry should belong to the individuals alone. Third, it made marriage open to dissolution, and thus enabled divorce. Self-Respecters maintained that since the goal of marriage was to lead to the happiness of the couple, the right to divorce, when a husband and wife decide that they cannot or do not want to live together anymore, only facilitated that goal. All of these changes would radically enhance women’s autonomy. Not only were the orthodox, which usually meant the Brahmins, horrified but also many non-Brahmins.29

The Self-Respect movement as one strand of the larger Dravidian movement attracted a large number of non-Brahmins to its cause. However, many non-Brahmins were also appalled by what they saw as the Movement’s radical goals. These non-Brahmins were usually upper-caste and belonged to nationalist parties. Many leaders of the Justice Party attempted to tame the radical rhetoric of the Self-Respect movement or downplay it by portraying it as the opinion of just “one or two of the more extreme advocates of the Movement”.30 These non-Brahmin leaders, most of belonged to the landowning and merchant castes, aspired to political power and

28 Kudi Arasu, 11 April, 1937, p. 10.

29 In the Madras presidency, the term ‘non-Brahmin’ was used to refer to all those who were not Brahmins under the Hindu caste system. However, the use of the term ‘non-Brahmin’ to refer to all Hindus except the Brahmins in the Madras presidency was problematic because it encompassed numerous and diverse caste groups under one umbrella. These caste groups ranged from the elite Mudaliars and the Chettiar whose members comprised the Justice Party, the political arm of the non-Brahmin movement to the “untouchables” at the bottom of the religious, economic, and social order. While these caste groups deferred to the Brahmin in sacral matters, they were hierarchically ordered along social, ritual, and religious lines that made any claim to represent the non-Brahmin voice a moot point.

30 Justice, August 27, 1932, p. 6.
official influence commensurate with their wealth and status in society. They were not interested in radical reforms that would negatively affect their social standing which was intimately tied to ritual status legitimated by Brahminic practices and customs.\textsuperscript{31} Since the Self-Respect movement’s major thrust was in the realm of social reform, many of its proclamations and actions were unpalatable to non-Brahmins who wanted to maintain the status quo in the socio-religious sphere while upsetting it in the political and occupational spheres. Since women’s roles and behavior are deeply embedded in caste, with an inverse relationship between caste status and women’s freedom, radical reform in women’s condition directly affected caste prestige, and therefore was viewed with great skepticism by these non-Brahmins. An article in \textit{Revolt} titled “Chingleput Conference Resolutions and the \textit{Justice}” – obviously a response to \textit{Justice}’s conservative stand on marriage – asked:

\begin{quote}
Are not the religious principles and marriage systems responsible for all these [women’s lowly status within marriage]? In the name of ‘self-respect’, with a view to reformation and with equality as our end and aim, we met in conference, to purge these evils out. A resolution that men and women should choose their own partners in life, to lead a peaceful happy and loving life, was brought in. If this is considered as unwarranted and unacceptable, what else is acceptable? . . . If marriage is for pleasure, its course should lead to pleasure for both. If the marriage is not for pleasure or love, and if it is for world’s sake and to procreate it is of no use. If a marriage is to confine the woman as an unconditional slave to help her husband in his existence and to satisfy him, we are compelled to advise our women folk not to subject themselves to these rigours, not to marry but lead a life thoroughly independent and to their respective desires.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

In April 1929, a few months after the Chingleput conference, at the second anniversary celebrations of the United Non-Brahmin Association held in Madras, leaders of the community were invited to speak on the topic “Youth and the Self-Respect Conference.” Speaking at this

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\textsuperscript{31} In \textit{Social Change in Modern India} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), M.N. Srinivas defines ‘Sanskritization’ as a process by which castes lower in the hierarchical order could aspire to high caste status by adopting the customs, rites, and beliefs of Brahmans. See Chapter 1.
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meeting, Sami Venkatachalam Chettiar, a non-Brahmin member of the Swaraj Party, referring to some of the resolutions passed at the Chingleput Conference said that “[Divorce] will destroy the very foundations of our society. I say that marriage has to do with religion....you young people should not be deceived by such resolutions. It will result in severe evils . . .” An editorial in Dravidan severely condemned Chettiar’s speech and even called him a traitor to his community (of non-Brahmins). M. Bhaktavatsalam, a non-Brahmin nationalist, called the Chingleput resolutions “most absurd and ridiculous” and challenged Justice Party members most of whom who he believed were privately ashamed of the proceedings of the Chingleput conference to either publicly dissociate themselves from the Self-Respect movement and its resolutions or to dare to make these resolutions a clear election issue. At a meeting of non-Brahmins in Tanjore district, the speakers similarly condemned the Chingleput conference and proposed that a movement to counter its resolutions had to be started in the interests of non-Brahmins themselves.

Countering such criticism and what the Self-Respecters claimed was orthodox Brahmin propaganda to mischaracterize the resolution as a means to spoil women, to dishonor them and make them unchaste, and to enable the carrying off of one man’s wife by another man, they

33 Dravidan, 6 April, 1929, p. 7.
34 Ibid, p. 8.
35 Belonging to the Mudaliar caste, he was a member of the Madras Provincial Congress Committee and the Congress Committee in 1922 and 1922 respectively. He was Secretary of the Tamil Nadu Congress Civic Board during the district board and municipal elections of 1926 and 1935. He was elected to the Madras Municipal Corporation in 1936 and served as Deputy Mayor. Elected to the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1937, he served under two Congress governments. In 1944, he was elected to the Constituent Assembly of India. He was Chief-Minister of Madras state in independent India from 1963 to 1967.
argued that the right to divorce is necessary for the abolition of women’s slavery sanctioned by religion through marriage.38 A. Ramasami Mudaliar, a prominent Justice Party leader and ardent supporter of the Self-Respect movement, speaking at the same meeting as Venkatachalam Chettiar asserted that the resolution on divorce emanated from marriage customs that were deeply embedded in religion and that allowed the ill-treatment and oppression of women within marriage, and that therefore, the right to divorce is necessary for women’s security.39

By overturning the fundamental edifice on which marriage stood which was that once married a woman remained either a wife or a widow, the Movement’s resolution on divorce opened up a third possibility – a woman could assume another societal state – that of a divorcee. Making marriage a contract automatically gave women (and men) the choice and freedom to define their status in society – singlehood (unmarried), wife, widow, and divorced. This possibility directly challenged the Manu Smrithi that gave sanction for women in Hindu society to remain unattached from a male relative.

Marriage as a contract also eliminated the key Hindu marriage ritual of kanyadaan. Kanyadaan, which means the giving away of a virgin girl, is derived from the Sanskrit words Kanya which means virgin girl and Daan which means donation. Kanyadaan is a very significant ritual performed by the father of the bride as a religious duty in the presence of guests invited to witness the wedding. It is a highly patriarchal ritual emanating from women’s permanent dependent status as described in the Manu Smrithi that states that a woman must never be independent, for as a child she should depend on father, in her youth on her husband,

38 Dravidan, April 5, 1929, p. 4

39 Dravidan, April 6, 1929, p. 7
and after his death on her sons.\textsuperscript{40} It further states that a woman’s separation from her above-mentioned male protectors will bring dishonor on her and her family. Therefore, the Hindu, particularly Brahmin, father’s supreme religious duty was to transfer, preferably before she attained puberty, his daughter from his protection to her husband’s with her honor unsullied. Not surprisingly, the ritual of kanyadaan that epitomized most dramatically the link between religion and patriarchy became an early casualty in Self-Respect marriages.

Self-Respect marriages enabled the bride and the bridegroom to make their vows in their own words and on their own terms before the gathered audience. By delegitimizing Sanskrit chants that only Brahmin priests understood, Self-Respect marriages cut at the very root of the Brahmins’ exclusive knowledge that Self-Respecters argued were designed by Brahmins to entrench their superior ritual status. In Salem district, as early as 1926, three marriages within the Balija Naidu community were conducted by non-Brahmin priests – an act which was seen as a trendsetter for that community.\textsuperscript{41} One of the families was initially resistant to this change, and had even brought a Brahmin priest to the wedding. However, upon witnessing two families permitting non-Brahmins to perform their weddings and after persuasion by Self-Respect leaders gathered at the event, the family courageously relented, dispatched the Brahmin priest and had non-Brahmin priests conduct the wedding. Similarly, in Tanjore district, two more marriages among Naidus were not only performed by non-Brahmin priests but also were conducted in the inner precincts of the local temple where traditionally only Brahmins were permitted.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} See Wendy Doniger, \textit{The Laws of Manu, a new translation, with Brian K. Smith, of the Manavadharmasastra, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1991), p. 115.}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, November 21, 1926, p. 426.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, September 5, 1926, p. 262.
Moreover, the traditional three-day marriage involving unnecessary expense was reduced to a
one-day event.

While Self-Respecters deemed these marriages praiseworthy for eliminating Brahmin priests
from the conduct of the wedding ceremony, they pointed to the dangerous practice of merely
changing the actors while retaining the act i.e. these marriages had non-Brahmin priests conduct
Brahminic rituals. Thus, the Movement frowned at the practice of substituting non-Brahmin
priests for Brahmin priests at weddings:

The recent society wedding at Madras of Sir K.V. Reddy’s daughter was conducted with
the help of Non-Brahmin priests and the Brahmin purohits were altogether excluded. We
commend the action of Sir Kurma in thus openly siding with the new movement in South
India to abolish the profession of purohits. But we cannot refrain from pointing out that
it will not do for leading men of action of the stamp of Sir K.V. Reddy to merely
substitute one caste of priests for another. The Institution of priesthood is immoral and
deserves to be done away with. The wearing of the thread and the uttering of the mantra
works the superiority complex in the sanest of men. Let us beware of half measures
which may intensify the evil instead remedying it. We should avoid giving occasion for
the rise of a new class of Brahmins from among the present non-Brahmins themselves.

For Self–Respecters, the priestly class represented most dramatically the means by which
Brahmins manifested their high-caste status and their role as religious intermediaries. Getting rid
of this class was a necessary step in democratizing religion.

The tying of the thali along with kanyadaan the most patriarchal of Hindu marriage
rituals, and hence a prime target of attack by the Self-Respecters. They considered it a
patriarchal symbol that denoted women’s slavery to men:

According to Brahmins, once the thali is tied, it cannot be removed until the husband’s
death; a woman cannot have another marriage; therefore, a woman’s future happiness is
completely tied to this rope and coin-size dollar that hangs from it. A married woman,

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43 Kudi Arasu, 26 September, 1926, p. 295.

44 Revolt, 26 December, 1928.
due to the great value of the thali, has to be permanent slave in her husband’s house no matter how cruel he, his parents, and other relatives are….A woman who has the thali tied on her is a wife even when the husband is a leper, an alcoholic, or impotent; the girl is a permanent slave to such a husband.45

Thus, the elimination of the thali was considered crucial in Self-Respect marriages. An article titled ‘Self-Respect Marriage: No Thali’ reported an inter-caste marriage without religious rituals and thali-tying.46 Indeed, a Self-Respect discourse existed about how men should also wear the thali and remove it upon the death of their wives. Muvalur Ramamirthammal, a pioneering Self-Respect activist who broke away from her Devadasi origins to marry and subsequently campaign for the abolition of the system, explicating on the traditional significance attached to the thali and the consequences borne by women as a result of it, challenged the fairness of this one-sided ritual and symbol of marriage:

During the marriage, the bride-groom ties a piece of gold on the bride, calling it a thali. Once that thali is tied, the woman is expected to be the man’s servant. What justice is this! Is it not fair that women should also tie a thali to the man just like the man did to the woman? What do you say? Is what I say fair or not? Does restraining a woman by tying her with a rope mean that the man is untied?47

Another article48 even suggested that given the situation today, the most suitable symbol of marriage for men would be – not the thali – but the same thing that Indra was cursed with in ancient times.49 Quoting a Western interpretation of the thali as a mark of the male sexual organ that is put around a woman’s neck at the time of marriage, the article goes on to say that widows who do not have to wear this atrocious symbol on them are really blessed, and doing away with

45 Dravidan, 28 September, 1929, p. 8
46 Kudi Arasu, 1 November, 1931.
47 Dravidan, 27 July, 1929, p. 3.
48 Kudi Arasu, 15 February, 1931.
49 Refers to the story of Indra, the king of the gods in Hindu mythology who was cursed by a sage (whose wife he duped into having sexual intercourse with him) that his entire body be marked by the female sexual organ.
the thali, if it does nothing, will at least get rid of the differences between married and widowed women.\textsuperscript{50}

In practice, the thali was targeted in two ways at Self-Respect weddings: one was to eliminate it, and thereby abolish a traditional symbol of inequality; the other was to have the marrying couple exchange thalis and thereby subvert its traditional significance.\textsuperscript{51} The latter was more dramatic in its impact. Subversion as an overtly political, confrontational, and offensive act had the potential to draw attention, both positive and negative, to the norm being subverted. In fact, Self-Respect marriages were by their very nature subversive, for they deployed an institution that held great sanctity in society in the cause of radical reform. As Sarah Hodges argues, the movement could have done away with marriage entirely, and thereby further extended their ideology of rational individualism.\textsuperscript{52} But the fact that the Movement promoted a certain kind of marriage and mode of conjugality following from it points to two factors. One was that precisely because marriage was such a sanctified rite of passage that held great cultural value, subverting its nature, practices, and rituals rather than eliminating them altogether was more useful politically. The second was that given its indispensability as a social institution,

\textsuperscript{50} Refers to the physically visible differences between married women who adorn themselves with the symbols of marriage such as the thali and widows who are deprived of them upon the death of their husbands.

\textsuperscript{51} A humorous incident involving a Self-Respecter’s attempt to overturn a traditional marriage practice occurred at a Brahmin-officiated Mudaliar wedding during the gift-giving following the marriage ceremony. While guests were giving the couple gifts of silver and cash, an ardent Self-Respecter asked the priest to chant the requisite mantras while he gave the couple as their wedding gift a huge framed portrait of Periyar with the slogan “Down with Brahminism” etched on it. Confused and perplexed, the priest hesitated at this unusual request but was persuaded by Self-Respects gathering there to do it. Muttering something under his breath, the priest chanted the mantras as the gift was handed over. The bride-groom who had so far been accepting the gifts of silver and money with little interest suddenly brightened up and enthusiastically took the gift with both hands. He requested that the portrait be hung right then and there in the wedding hall and garlanded. Witnessing this minor revolution, some prominent Self-Respecters among the guests expressed their happiness with shouts of “Well done! Well done!” Later it was found that the priest had muttered something to this effect under his breath before chanting the mantras: “What is this? Today they brought in a portrait and made me chant mantras for it. Tomorrow, if they bring chicken, fish, and goat as gifts, am I supposed to chant mantras for them too?” Kudi Arasu, May 16, 1937, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{52} Hodges, Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce, p. 93.
promoting an alternative form of marriage was a more practical strategy for propagating reform than the total elimination of marriage.

The exchange of rings and garlands at Self-Respect weddings also signified equality and that the marrying couple were partners. While the exchange of garlands was a traditional marriage practice which Self-Respecters retained, the exchange of rings was new. Both represented the Self-Respect emphasis on equality between men and women in marriage. At a Chettiar marriage in Chettinad in July 1935, the bride and groom exchanged rings, garlands, and gold chains. However, while Self-Respect marriages were designed to combat caste and patriarchy, their defining feature were the elimination of Brahmin priests and their rituals including *kanyadaan* while the ritual of *thali*-tying was resorted to at times to the chagrin of Movement leaders. At what was termed a Self-Respect love marriage between comrades Dayanidhi Ammal and M. Rajaram, the declaration of intent to marry by the marrying couple was followed by the bride-groom tying the *thali*. Leaders in their speeches, while appreciative of the anti-Brahmin and anti-ritual aspects, condemned the practice of *thali*-tying at Self-Respect marriages. 53 Similarly, at another wedding attended by prominent Self-Respecters, the marrying couple - comrades Savithri and Vadivelu – were reprimanded for resorting to a ritual that signifies women’s slavery and were reminded that the elimination of priests alone does not comprise a Self-Respect wedding. 54 Given that the *thali* remains the supreme and necessary symbol of marriage for women in Tamil culture – one that continues to be emphasized and

53 *Kudi Arasu*, 18 April, 1937, p. 16.
54 *Kudi Arasu*, 10 September, 1933, p. 13.
glorified in popular culture such as movies and television shows\textsuperscript{55}, the omission of this ritual carte-blanche was probably the most difficult transition even for Self-Respecters.

Since marriage as a contract also removed the Brahmin priests and rituals from the actual conduct of the ceremony, Movement leaders and community elders substituting for priests presided at the ceremonies. They gave speeches highlighting the reformatory aspects of Self-Respect marriages and of the Self-Respect movement. These changes challenged religion and caste along cultural, ritual, and economic lines. Brahmin priests benefitted monetarily, religiously, and socially since the wedding rituals reaffirmed their superiority within the caste system and reinforced their crucial role at weddings. Self-Respect marriages aimed to undermine the economic basis of the Brahmin priests who were considered exploiters of the masses in the name of religion. Speaking at a Self-Respect marriage between Dhanraj and Chellammal at Saidapet in July 1927, Pandit S.S. Anandham, a \textit{Siddha}\textsuperscript{56} practitioner, pointed out that although Brahmins conduct their marriages ostentatiously over five days after determining whether the couples’ horoscopes were compatible and the time for the wedding was auspicious, there are more widows in their homes. Consequently, he argued, these Brahmin-rendered services were but a means to earn a livelihood since they had no bearing upon the future wellbeing of the marriage.\textsuperscript{57} The right kind of marriage was one that ignored superstitious

\textsuperscript{55} In popular movies and television shows, it is common for the wife (and others as well) to refer to the husband as ‘the man who tied the \textit{thali}’ as justification for putting up with ill-treatment and abuse.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Siddha} is a traditional medical system of India that is of Dravidian origin with its literature entirely in Tamil. In \textit{Recipes for Immortality: Healing, Religion, and Community in South India} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Richard Weiss analyzes the association between twentieth century reformulation of \textit{Siddha} and revivalist constructions of a pure and ancient Tamil community.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Dravidan}, 12 July, 1927, p. 6
beliefs and was based on choice and consent, and conducted in a frugal, simple manner and quickly.\textsuperscript{58}

S. Neelavathi, a fiery, outspoken Self-Respecter whose marriage in 1930 with Ramasubramaniam, another Movement activist was largely attended and widely reported and who wrote prolifically in Movement periodicals, called attention to the “havoc wrought by meaningless, vulgar rituals” and accused the “wily Brahmin” of committing “daylight robbery” in the name of ritual.\textsuperscript{59} She attacked the notion of pollution attached to menstruation, childbirth, and consummation of marriage. She saw this as a mere pretext for the Brahmin to enrich himself: “The orthodox have decreed that for any event of significance – any rite of passage - be it birth, death or anything else, be it auspicious or inauspicious, the Brahmin should perform a particular ritual….The Brahmin has chanced upon a way of swindling the non-Brahmin.”\textsuperscript{60}

Upon risk of being called Brahmin-haters, she saw it as the duty of Self-Respecters to sensitize people to the treachery of Brahmins and their rituals. She pointed to the contradiction and inconsistencies in the argument that claims for Brahmins and their rituals an auspicious role in the conduct of weddings for the future happiness of the couple while attributing the frequent unhappiness of wedded life to one’s fate. If fate was the determiner of happiness and unhappiness, she asked, then what was the role of the Brahmin and his rituals other than to collect “the gifts of rice and pulses placed beside him.” Neelavathi thus launched a wide-ranging critique of caste and religion, and underscored the pitfalls of superstitious beliefs that caused one

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Srilata, \textit{The Other Half of the Coconut}, pp. 41-43.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, p. 42.
group to connive to keep the others perpetually bound to its irrational and inconsistent pontifications.

Self-Respect marriages were marked by their simplicity both in terms of rituals and monetary expenditure. Traditional marriages were seen as elaborate and ostentatious and consequently an economic drain on the bride’s family who often went into debt because of it.\textsuperscript{61} At a Self-Respect wedding in Kumbakonam in Tanjore district in 1933, leaders refused to allow any gift-giving by the groom’s friends and relatives stating that it should be done separately in their private capacity and not during the wedding itself.\textsuperscript{62} In doing so, Self-Respecters were not only trying to reduce expenses and curb ostentation but also underscoring the public/political nature of Self-Respect marriages by holding them up as exemplars of Movement ideals.

Self-Respecters maintained that individuals and society benefit not from five-day marriages with processions and priest-craft but from simple marriages that are based on suitability of age, and unity of thought, opinion, and action.\textsuperscript{63} A short and simple ceremony – comprising the declaration of intent to marry, the statement of vows, and exchange of garlands and/or rings - was thus a key feature of Self-Respect marriages. Six Self-Respect marriages among Mudaliars were conducted in thirty minutes near Erode on 20 June, 1929.\textsuperscript{64} Similarly, in 1930, an inter-caste Mudaliar-Vellalar marriage along Self-Respect lines was conducted in five minutes.\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{61} Pagutarivu, July 1937, p. 21
\textsuperscript{62} Kudi Arasu, 10 September, 1933, p. 13
\textsuperscript{63} Dravidan, 12 July, 1927, p. 6
\textsuperscript{64} Dravidan, 26 June, 1929, p. 9
\textsuperscript{65} Kudi Arasu, 16 November, 1930, p. 14
\end{flushright}
Traditionally, dowry constituted an important element in the expenditure that the bride’s family incurred for weddings. Although dowry possibly began as a voluntary gift by the bride’s parents for her security, by the early twentieth century it had become a burden for the bride’s family because the groom’s family demanded it as payment for relieving the family’s burden, both economic and religious, of caring for an unmarried daughter.\textsuperscript{66} Hinting at the issue of dowry, an article in \textit{Pagutharivu} in 1937 pointed out that:

\begin{quote}
It is a sad thing that our countrymen are unwilling to grant women any rights whatsoever in the matter of marriage. As though women are objects for sale, they are bought from the bride’s family by the bride-groom’s family.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}

The article further claimed that for many families with sons to be married off, marriages have become first and foremost a means to make money, with girls being a mere conduit for this. Reporting on a case wherein a Brahmin lawyer, with his son married to a young girl, used the performance of the consummation ceremony as a means for making money, the \textit{Dravidan} argued that the girl’s parents, knowing that the lawyer can perform another marriage for his son while the same option is not available to them, would give as much money as they possibly can.\textsuperscript{68}

Writing in \textit{Kumaran} in 1930, Kamalakshi, a Brahmin woman,\textsuperscript{69} further illuminates the financial burden borne by the bride’s family on account of marriage. Brahmin marriages involved two significant events – the wedding itself performed when the woman was still a child as in the case of the author and the consummation of the marriage performed when the girl attained puberty. When her parents were unable to pay the amount demanded by the groom’s

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\textsuperscript{66} See Oldenberg, \textit{Dowry Murder}.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Pagutharivu}, July 1937, p. 18

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Dravidan}, 28 September, 1929, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{69} Srilata, \textit{The Other Half of the Coconut}, pp. 28-31.
parents for consummating the marriage, she realized that she was doomed to spinsterhood and celibacy her entire life since “in the Brahmin community … remarriage for someone like me is out of the question.” She considered her situation worse than that of widowhood because in the latter case, it would be seen as her fate and life would proceed on a prescribed path. However, in her case, the situation could be changed with a little money. Yet the inability of her family to pay the amount demanded by the groom’s family doomed her to a state worse than widowhood. She contemplated on the irony of her situation wherein she was considered married by virtue of the wedding ceremony performed when she was still a child while in actuality remaining unmarried for the rest of her life because of the non-consummation of the wedding.

By making the marrying couple consenting parties to the marriage contract, Self-Respect marriages obliterated the traditional role that families and parents played in arranging marriages, most often of children, and thereby made dowry a non-issue. Now that the bride was a free-thinking, consenting party to the marriage, she ceased to be a burden to be got rid of.

Self-Respect marriages were an end in themselves in that they gave men and particularly women control over a key aspect of their lives. Women were seen especially as victims of the traditional sacramental marriages. Such marriages attacked Brahmin ritual superiority and undermined their economic base which was tied to the celebration of key rites of passages, with marriage being one of paramount importance. Even if the Self-Respect movement had stopped with this reform of the nature, practices, symbols, and rituals of marriage, they would have implemented their discourse about the inextricable link between caste and patriarchy, for these

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marriages challenged Brahmin ritual superiority within the Hindu caste system and addressed women’s inferior status within religion.

But the Self-Respect movement did not stop here – its agenda was larger and more fundamental. To achieve their goals, the movement used marriage as an avenue for Self-Respect propaganda. Self-Respecters were unapologetic and defiant about their public subversion of marriage practices.

Reform through Marriage

Self-Respect marriages overturned the traditional symbols, rituals, and practices of marriage to achieve the larger end of ridding society of caste affiliations, gender inequality, religious rituals and superstitions, and meaningless, resource-draining pomp and show. While widow marriage and inter-caste marriages were hailed as reform marriages and may or may not have eliminated Brahmin priests and rituals, Self-Respect marriages which necessarily meant the absence of priests and rituals were lauded as signifying true social reform or even revolution. But the movement and its leaders used every opportunity to attend/highlight any marriage that had reformatory potential, be it widow marriage, inter-caste marriage, or register marriage, or Tamil marriage.

Self-Respect marriage ceremonies featured speeches by leaders who were invited sometimes as guests, but many times to preside over and conduct the marriages. These speeches typically lasted longer than the wedding ceremony itself. For example, while the marriage between

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71 By ‘Tamil marriage’, they essentially meant love marriages, for they argued that such marriages were the norm in the Tamil land before the coming of the Aryans. Movement leaders often eulogized Self-Respect marriages as continuing, after a long break when Aryan Brahminic Hinduism dominated, the original form of marriage practiced in the Tamil land.
Visalakshi and Kuzhandhayappan in November 1930 in Erode conducted without Brahmin priests and rituals lasted an hour, the speeches, including one by Periyarr on the principles behind Self-Respect marriages, lasted four hours. These speeches usually followed the wedding ceremony, but sometimes they inaugurated the wedding. For example, in September 1930 in Nagerkoil, the marriage of Kamalambal, a widow with a child that provoked great opposition from her community necessitated a speech even before the ceremony itself. In this long speech, Periyarr pointed out that while this marriage may be novel for the India, for the Self-Respecters it was merely a regular Self-Respect marriage reaffirming the principles of the movement.

Leaders’ presence at weddings was solicited to legitimate such revolutionary marriages and to ensure their successful conduct, especially when a marriage was deemed to be controversial. In January 1929, when K. Subbammal of the Devadasi community, after having rebelled against her family’s attempts to dedicate her to the temple and left her parents, decided to marry M. Periaperumal Pillai, students of the Teacher Training School at Erode where she worked decided to help her and requested Periyar and his wife to preside over the marriage. Lauding the marrying couple as exemplars of Self-Respect principles, Periyarr described them as people who “having gotten rid of superstitions and meaningless customs, chose each other out of their own free will. This is the right marriage, and we welcome the kind of marriage that we are witnessing today wherein the bride and bride-groom are marrying out of love. We congratulate the brave couple!”

N. Guruswamy, another leader, speaking at the same event, extolled the benefits that

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72 *Kudi Arasu*, 16 November, 1930, p. 11
73 *Kudi Arasu*, 28 September, 1930,
74 *Dravidan*, 5 February, 1929, p. 2
75 Ibid.
education held for women. For example, it gave the bride the courage to go ahead with a Self-
Respect marriage. By her act, she has proved that “she is braver than the woman” who went to
America to challenge Miss. Mayo, than those Congress actors who excitedly criticized Mayo, and
those nationalists who pretended to shed tears for India’s suffering.” Chellappa Gounder,
Sub-Registrar of Ezhumathur, went further to link this marriage to pre-Aryan marriages in the
Tamil land. Arguing that such marriages were the norm in the Tamil land before the coming of
the Aryans, he pointed out that:

Today’s marriage is not new to Tamilnadu because in Tamilnadu i.e. before the Aryans,
love-marriages were the norm….In Tamil literature such as Tolkappiyam and
Silapadikaram, love marriages are the only kind that are talked about.

Movement leaders often eulogized Self-Respect marriages as exemplifying this original
form of marriage practiced in the Tamil land and restoring to Tamils their forgotten tradition.
Speaking at the Self-Respect marriage of comrades Ezhumalai and Radhabai, Movement leaders
emphasized the antiquity of such marriages, and extolled the benefits such marriages held for
society such as the elimination of women’s slavery as a result of matching personalities (of the
marrying couple) and not their horoscopes. Thali-tying, priesthood, baseless rituals,
meaningless chants and incantations, and blind superstitions were means by which Aryan
Brahmins enslaved the Tamil people. Therefore, “we should strive for marriages with our lovers

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76 He was referring to Sarojini Naidu, prominent nationalist and leader of the women’s movement, who went to
America to counter the negative impact of Mayo’s book. See Arora, “The Nightingale’s Wanderings,” pp. 87-105.
77 For example, M. K. Gandhi called Mayo’s book “a drain inspector’s report.” See The Truth about “Mother
India,” p. 1.
78 Dravidan, 5 February, 1929, p. 2
79 Ibid.
80 Kudi Arasu, April 11, 1937, p. 10.
as described in our ancient literature along Self-Respect lines...in our mother-tongue.\textsuperscript{81} An article in \textit{Kudi Arasu} titled “Tamil Marriage is Love Marriage: Tamil Society Can Thrive Only if Tamil Marriages Thrive” made the connection between marriage and health of society. It appealed to Tamils to get rid of caste which instead of facilitating feelings of love among people created feelings of envy and conflict, and to stand united by marrying according to the ancient Tamil principle of love.\textsuperscript{82} In alluding to a past of individual freedom and choice, they were deploying the larger Dravidian/non-Brahmin discourse that posited a dichotomy, both genetic and cultural, between Aryans and Dravidians. Thus, marriage served to entrench further the Aryan-Dravidian dichotomy.

Movement leaders were received with great fanfare and pomp when they arrived at the place of marriage, and were taken in a procession to the marriage venue accompanied by music – an overturning of a traditional ritual wherein it is the bridegroom and his party who are accorded this honor upon their arrival. By making the leaders of the Movement the beneficiaries of this honor, they were underscoring the larger significance of these marriages for society. At the wedding of M. Subbammal and M. Periaperumal Pillai (referred to earlier), Periyar and his wife Nagammal were recipients of this honor. Some of these marriages were conducted at the residences of Self-Respect leaders, including Periyar’s house in Erode.\textsuperscript{83} On these occasions, the marrying couple also made donations to movement periodicals such as \textit{Kudi Arasu}, \textit{Revolt}, \textit{Viduthalai}, and \textit{Dravidan}. Many of these marriages were attended by large numbers of people from nearby towns and villages who were curious to witness this novel marriage ceremony.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Dravidan}, 12 July, 1927, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 23 July, 1939, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Dravidan}, 29 July, 1929, p. 1 and August 27, 1929, p. 7.
Self-Respect marriages became political spaces where Movement leaders, having taken the place of priests and parents, propagated Self-Respect ideals. These marriages were eulogized as marriages of love and choice as opposed to traditional marriages that were arranged by families as a religious duty, as simple, low-cost marriages, and as devoid of rituals that entrenched the caste system. Speaking at the marriage of Arunagiri Chettiyar with T. Sundari, the adopted daughter of S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Deputy President of the Madras Legislature, Surendranath Arya, a member of a reformed Christian Church, pointed to caste restrictions as the principal reason for unhappiness in marriage and appealed to parents to allow their girls to have love-marriages. He further maintained that happiness derived from a union of hearts and minds alone will allow couples to stay married forever, and that this union is possible only when caste that comes in the way of love-marriages is abolished.

An article in 1933 in *Kudi Arasu* illustrates how parental/family pressure to marry within caste caused a young man great agony. Identifying himself as a Self-Respect comrade, N. Ramanathan explained how he was caught between his community’s disapproval stemming from his firm decision to not marry within his caste of Nattukottai Chettiars because of the meaningless rituals and blind superstitions associate with Chettiar weddings, and his Self-Respect comrades’ suggestion to marry a widow. Unable to decide between family/community demands and Movement ideals, he appealed to young men to learn from his predicament and find a way to escape it sooner rather than later. Similarly, A. S. Manibai, a woman from a poor

84 *Kudi Arasu*, 1 November, 1931
85 *Dravidan*, 1 April, 1929, p. 7-8.
86 *Kudi Arasu*, 10 September, 1933
family, lamented her parents’ refusal to accept her decision to marry a man from another caste.\textsuperscript{87}

Thus, the Movement saw individual choice and freedom in marriage as the only way to eliminate caste-based marriages. C. Murugappa, manager of \textit{Kumaran}, a Self-Respect journal in Tamil published from Karaikudi in southeastern Madras presidency, summed up a Chettiar-Reddi\textsuperscript{88} marriage he witnessed thus:

\begin{quote}
The marriage that was conducted today is a noteworthy one. It was conducted with a reformist aim. It is a good augury for the nation that members belonging to wealthy, business communities came forward to marry in this manner. People of our community spend an enormous amount of money on marriages. Today, very few rituals were conducted. It is these rituals that cost money and cause unhappiness. Marriages like today’s will help to get rid of rituals on both rituals. When people from different castes get married, it becomes an easy way to get rid of rituals on both sides. It is not possible to get rid of rituals when people of the same caste marry.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quote}

Thus, Self-Respect marriages were seen as a means to transcend caste, get rid of priesthood and its rituals, and curb unnecessary and extravagant expenditure.

Two kinds of Self-Respect marriages received much press in Movement periodicals. One was marriages among prominent leaders of the Self-Respect community that were celebrated as examples of ‘practicing what one preaches’, and the other was those that had as many reformatory ingredients as possible, for example, inter-caste, widow, priesthood, Brahminic, patriarchal ritual-free marriages or some combination of these. When the marriages of Movement leaders and prominent activists manifested these reformatory ingredients, they were cause for much celebration and ‘chest-thumping’. The following section analyzes how Movement leaders and activists politicized such marriages and thereby made a public spectacle of a private, personal matter.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 8 March, 1931, p. 15
\textsuperscript{88} An inter-caste marriage.
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Dravidan}, 1 April, 1929
\end{flushright}
“The Personal is Political”

When Pattukottai Maragathavalli married Karaikudi S. Murugappa on June 29, 1929 in Thiruparankundram near Madurai, she was hailed as a “messiah”, a “heroic woman”, a “lion of social reform”, and “Joan of Arc of the Self-Respect movement”. Murugappa, editor of Kumaran, was lauded as a “Self-Respect hero” who transformed his words into action. The marriage itself was hailed as “an important one in the history of India”, as contributing to “our nation’s progress”, and as deserving of being written in golden letters in the annals of the Self-Respect movement. Leaders of the Self-Respect movement such as Periyar, Kovai A. Ayyamuthu, and S. Gruruswamy, assistant editor of Revolt, the Movement’s English periodical, showered praises on the couple for their courage.

The response to this marriage within the Self-Respect community exemplifies one significant means by which the Movement propagated its goals for social reform. By celebrating marriages involving prominent activists as examples of ‘walking the talk’, leaders sought legitimacy for the Movement’s radical social reform program. By highlighting the ‘courage’ of women such as Margathavalli, they foregrounded women’s agentive role in contracting such marriages. Self-Respect marriages were thus crucial sites for the production and enactment of

90 Dravidan, 1 July, 1929, p. 4
91 Ibid, p. 5
92 Ibid.
93 Revolt, 7 July, 1929.
94 Dravidan, 1 July, 1929.
95 Ibid, p. 4.
96 Ibid, July 2, 1929, p. 6.
97 Dravidan, July 6, 1929, p. 13.
women’s agency as they sought to break the nexus between caste and patriarchy manifested in the sacramental, indissoluble nature of Hindu marriages by divesting them of Brahmin priests and Brahminic rituals such as kanyadaan and thali-tying. They opened up a space for women to become actors in their own destiny through exercising conscious choice in marriage. They were celebrated as public-political events as leaders and activists organized, conducted, and officiated at these weddings, and made speeches attesting to the potential of Self-Respect marriages to fundamentally transform Hindu society.

The marriage between Margathavalli and Murugappa contained all the ingredients that made for an ideal Self-Respect marriage. It was a widow marriage. Widowed at a young age, Maragathavalli had lived the restrictive life of a Hindu widow for a few years. It was an inter-caste marriage. Maragathavalli belonged to the Vishwakarma community, a middle-level artisanal group, and Murugappa belonged to the Nattukottai Chettiar community, a high-status mercantile caste group. In fact, the marriage was hailed as “the first of its kind” for the Chettiar community. It was a love-marriage as opposed to the traditional marriage arranged by parents. Maragathavalli attended the First Self-Respect Volunteers’ Conference convened in Pattukottai, her hometown in southeastern Madras Presidency, in May 1929. She was emboldened to think of remarriage while listening to the speakers at the conference and was particularly drawn to Murugappa who had spoken eloquently on the need for widow marriage. She approached Ramamirthammal and apprised her of her situation and her desire to marry again. Ignoring parental opposition, Maragathavalli married Murugappa.99

98 *Dravidan*, July 1, 1929, p. 4.

99 Ibid, July 1, 2 and 6. 1929.
This combination of widow and inter-caste marriage, along with Maragathavalli’s self-initiative to seek and marry the man of her choice, signified the most progressive form of marriage. As Periyar observed, while marriages without Brahmin priests and rituals were becoming common, only one in a hundred involved widows and/or inter-caste couples. He urged activists and well-wishers of the Movement to consider this phenomenon, for it showed the strong hold of caste and religion in people’s lives. Brahmin priests and rituals were only one, albeit a key element, in this equation. Eliminating them from the marriage ceremony was only the beginning. In many ways, non-Brahmins, already sensitized to the notion of Brahmin domination in Hindu socio-religious life and its deleterious effects on non-Brahmin interests, found it easier to do away with Brahmin priests and rituals than with caste distinctions among themselves. Rigid caste hierarchy among non-Brahmins preserved and nurtured caste endogamy. Moreover, caste status and patriarchal control over women were directly proportional i.e. the higher the caste status the greater the constraints on women – a phenomenon that made widow marriage and elimination of thali-tying from the marriage ceremony unpalatable to many. The Margathavalli-Murugappa marriage challenged both caste orthodoxy and gender relations among non-Brahmins.

Their marriage was conducted along Self-Respect lines without Brahmin priests, without Sanskrit chants, and without the rituals of kanyadaan and thali-tying. Instead of Brahmin priests who signified caste hierarchy, Periyar and his wife Nagammal as Movement leaders conducted the marriage; instead of Sanskrit chants that only priests understood, the bride and groom exchanged vows in Tamil. Instead of the thali that marked the woman alone as married, they

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100 Kudi Arasu, September 15, 1929.
exchanged rings and garlands as equal partners.\textsuperscript{101} Challenging caste and religion, Self-Respect marriages were envisioned as secular agreements between two free-thinking individuals. Therefore, as discussed earlier, doing away with Brahmin priests and Sanskrit chants was at the heart of such marriages, several of which were reported in the Self-Respect press. Replacing the ritual of thali-tying with the exchange of rings and garlands that sought to establish equality between marriage partners, although a key element in Self-Respect marriages, was not a requirement for a marriage to be deemed a Self-Respect marriage. Thus, Self-Respect marriages ranged from the basic (no Brahmin priests and Sanskrit chants) to the advanced (involving as many reformatory aspects as possible). The marriage of Maragathavalli and Murugappa was an advanced Self-Respect marriage, and therefore its eulogization within the Self-Respect community as trendsetting.

Three more such marriages over the next several months involving prominent Movement activists attest to women’s active participation in the Movement’s challenge to caste and patriarchy. The inter-caste marriage between T.S. Kunjitham, a regular contributor to Revolt and S. Guruswamy, assistant editor of Revolt, was touted as another first, this time for the Mudaliar community which considered itself “next [only] to the Brahmins in orthodoxy and privilege of birth”.\textsuperscript{102} Guruswamy, who belonged to this community, was threatened and cajoled by his community to not go through with the marriage, and his nearest relatives boycotted it en masse.\textsuperscript{103} Not only was the fact of marrying outside caste considered a “blasphemy” but also the caste of the bride was unacceptable to the members of the groom’s community.

\textsuperscript{101} Kudi Arasu, July 7, 1929.
\textsuperscript{102} Revolt, January 19, 1930.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
Kunjitham belonged to the “lowly” devadasi community in contrast to the upper-caste Mudaliar community to which the groom belonged. At the time of her marriage, she was a senior in Queen Mary’s College pursuing a B.A. degree in Economics and Political Science, and graduated a year after her marriage along with her husband. Both her educational attainment and her continuance of education after marriage were uncommon for the time. Supported by progressive-thinking parents, she had escaped the fate of the women of her community. Unlike Maragathavalli, she did not actively seek the man of her choice. Rather, Periyar, intervening on behalf of Guruswamy who as a committed activist of the Movement expressed his desire to contract an inter-caste marriage, preferably with a widow, approached Kunjitham and her family. Upon the suggestion of Periyar and other colleagues that he consider marrying a woman from the Devadasi community by way of furthering the cause of Devadasi abolition, Guruswami consented to their mediation on his behalf with Kunjitham and her family. Their marriage on 8 December, 1929 was thus a consciously reform-minded one, underscoring the extent to which committed activists such as Kunjitham and Guruswamy practiced what they preached. It was an advanced Self-Respect marriage involving an inter-caste couple, with no Brahmin priests and rituals, and no thali-tying.

Conducted in Periyar’s mansion in Erode, it was well-attended by “members, workers, leaders and other followers and admirers of the Self-Respect movement.” A unique feature of the marriage was Kunjitham’s address in English on women’s right to education at a public meeting convened in the evening to commemorate the couple under the presidency of S.


105 Revolt, 19 January, 1930.
Ramanathan, editor of *Revolt*. Reporting on the marriage in *Kudi Arasu*, Periyar wrote of “this wonderful speech” that raised expectations with regard to Kunjitham’s future reform work. He also commented on her ability to speak Telugu fluently which would help in spreading the Movement in the Telugu regions of the Presidency.

Kunjitham fulfilled the expectations she raised through her speech at her wedding. Considering wearing flowers in the hair and the *bindi* on the forehead as religious customs, she did away with them. She also wore no jewelry. Her refusal to adorn herself thus – a requirement for married women, made people wonder if she was a widow. Apparently, it cost her her position as a teacher. Her refusal to wear the physical markers of a married woman, her association with the Self-Respect movement and the nature of her marriage were considered revolutionary and unacceptable in traditional society. Later she was also dismissed from her job as headmistress of a girls’ high school in Chennai where she had introduced physical education and other sports. This was as a result of her passionate speech at the Tanjavur Self-Respect conference in 1932. There, she condemned Brahmins, Sanskrit, and Sanskritic works such as the Parasara Smrithi and Manu Smrithi as foreign impositions on the Tamil people. When she died, Periyar paid rich tributes to her selfless service and reform zeal that brooked no compromises.

Another famous Self-Respect marriage that, much like the Margathavalli-Murugappa marriage, contained all of the possible ingredients was the one between Sivakami, a young widow belonging to an orthodox Vellala family from Thanjavur, and Sami Chidarambaranar, a

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106 *Kudi Arasu*, 15 December, 1929.

107 Ibid.

108 Traditionally, a dot of red color applied in the center of the forehead close to the eyebrows by Hindu women, particularly married women.

Tamil scholar who applied Periyar’s rationalist and egalitarian principles to the study of Tamil literature and culture. Married at 11 and widowed soon thereafter, Sivakami lived as a widow for several years before she met and married Chidambaranar with the help and guidance of Ramamirthammal. Her father, Kuppuswami Pillai, was the mirasdar, municipal councillor and honorary magistrate of Kumbakonam, thus adding social prominence to their caste orthodoxy. Stiff opposition in her hometown necessitated moving the venue of marriage from Kumbakonam to Periyar’s hometown of Erode.110 Chidambaranar was committed to remaining single until his association with the Movement when the zeal of social reform influenced him to make a personal contribution to it through contracting an inter-caste, widow marriage. It was a high profile marriage with a general invitation to it published in Kudi Arasu. The wedding was conducted on May 5, 1930 in Periyar’s garden by his wife, Nagammal, under the tent that was erected for the Second Self-Respect conference which was scheduled to commence in a few days. The bride and groom were taken from Periyar’s mansion to the marriage venue in a car in a slow procession through the main streets of Erode accompanied by music and several dignitaries.

This marriage demonstrates how the Movement made a public-political spectacle of a purportedly private matter to draw attention to its reformatory nature. Periyar and other activists saw great potential for societal transformation in marriage reform. Caste, religion, and patriarchy were all casualties in the ideal Self-Respect marriage. Attended by about 500 people, the marriage was deemed a grand success testifying to the reformatory zeal that was spreading among the people. The bride and groom exchanged rings and addressing each other as life-partner read their vows and signed the marriage agreement. Prominent Self-Respect personalities including Periyar, Ramamirthammal and Guruswamy gave reform speeches.

110 Kudi Arasu, 4 and 11 May, 1930.
Emphasizing the patriarchal nature of the ritual of thali-tying, Periyar asserted that unless it was mutual, it smacked of nothing more than deception practiced on women in the name of religion. All the speakers commended Sivakami’s courage in discarding custom and tradition to marry again.\textsuperscript{111}

At the wedding of S. Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam on October 5, 1930, there was hardly any standing room. Over 2000 people attended it, the majority of them being Self-Respect activists, both men and women. Born in a Telugu speaking family belonging to the Naidu community in Trichy, Neelavathi was sensitized to the ideals and principles of the Self-Respect movement and began contributing articles to some of the periodicals while still young. By the time she came to marry Ramasubramaniam, she was well-known in the Self-Respect community, particularly among the youth, for her fiery and passionate style. On the advice of Periyar, she decided to contract an inter-caste marriage in keeping with her social reform credentials. Impressed by her intelligence, passion, and courage, Murugappa took it upon himself to facilitate her marriage with his assistant editor, Ramasubramaniam. Belonging to the Nattukottai Chettiar community, Ramasubramaniam incurred the wrath and displeasure of his family and married Neelavathi without their support or participation.\textsuperscript{112} Kudi Arasu published an invitation to the marriage from Periyar and his wife and the response to it was tremendous.\textsuperscript{113} The marriage witnessed a unique event when a question-and-answer session was held to clarify and elaborate on the Movement’s position on marriage. To a question about remarriage, Periyar reiterated the Movement’s stand on the contractual as opposed to the sacramental nature of

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{113} Kudi Arasu, 1 October, 1930.
marriages, and that therefore, marriages were tentative rather than eternal arrangements. Thus, divorce should be permitted on grounds of mutual incompatibility between spouses and men and women should be allowed to remarry. A few weeks after the wedding, some progressive members of the Chettiar community hosted a tea-party in honor of the wedded couple at the home of A. Chokkalingam Chettiar in Karaikudi. Lasting over four hours, the event featured speeches in praise of the wedded couple and in support of inter-caste marriages.

Self-Respect marriages, even the basic ones, were political statements. Their transformational potential lay in their foundational impact on the three institutions that sustained Hindu society – religion, caste, and patriarchy. Therefore, Movement leaders and activists who attended these marriages in large numbers made speeches underscoring the larger goal of reforming marriage practices and customs. Marriages provided concrete evidence of the Movement’s commitment to an egalitarian society. When prominent Movement activists themselves were the principal actors in some of these marriages, the political potential of such marriages was even more powerful. Therefore, these marriages were much feted within the Self-Respect community as examples of “walking the talk”. Women who contracted such marriages were highly commended for their courage, for tradition and custom were seen to be especially severe on women.

Maragathavalli and Sivagami were married and widowed when still young and endured the constraining life of the Hindu widow. The sacramental nature of Hindu marriages had a gendered effect with women required to adhere to its indissolubility even upon the death of their husbands while widowers could remarry. Hence, marriage of widows posed a powerful

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114 Ibid, 12 October, 1930.
115 Ibid, 16 November, 1930.
challenge both to religion and patriarchy in one stroke. Kunjitham rejected the fate of the
women of her community to not only marry but also marry an upper-caste man. Self-Respecters
deemed the practice of dedicating women to Hindu temples to be exploitative of lower-caste
women by upper-caste, especially Brahmin men, in the name of religion. Hence, the marriage of
women belonging to the devadasi community challenged the foundational institutional
triumvirate of religion, caste, and patriarchy. Even when Self-Respect marriages did not involve
widows or inter-caste couples, they, by definition, cast women as subjects, for otherwise it would
violate their contractual nature. Considerations of kinship, caste, and community were replaced
by those of love, desire, and compatibility.

Recognizing the revolutionary and therefore controversial nature of such marriages,
Movement leaders lent full support to them by responding to invitations soliciting their presence
at these weddings, by allowing the use of their homes as marriage venues, and by taking up
organizing, conducting, and officiating responsibilities for these marriages. Periyar personally
attended many marriages conducted along Self-Respect lines in the initial stages to popularize
such marriages but increasingly found it impossible to keep up with all invitations he received.
He then selectively attended only those that went beyond merely priest-free and rituals-free
marriages to involve more of the potentially destabilizing ingredients. The case studies
discussed here were examples of such marriages. These marriages successfully severed the link
between caste and patriarchy, cast women as agents, and served as platforms for the propagation
of Movement ideals.
Conclusion

To write a history of Self-Respect marriages is to write a social history of the Movement that highlights women’s agentive role in radical social reform. Like other social reform movements, marriage and conjugality were ideologically deployed in the service of social reform. This availability of marriage and family for ideological deployment also meant that a different politics would avail of them differently. Moreover, as Hodges suggests, the deployment of marriage as a site of radical reform was fraught with contradiction, for marriage was first and foremost a conservative institution.\textsuperscript{116} The limits of such a deployment became obvious as later derivatives of the Self-Respect movement, namely the Dravidian political parties, successfully realigned marriage, family, and conjugality to serve the interests of electoral politics. Self-Respect marriages have suffered from the politics of Tamil nationalism that interpolated the Movement’s radical gender ideology beginning with the anti-Hindi agititations of the late 1930s. Their (mis-)representation as signifier of Tamil culture and pride alone reflects the definite turn toward a conservative politics of conjugality that was mobilized in the service of electoral politics. Also, the discourse about the pre-Aryan, Dravidian/Tamil nature of Self-Respect marriages became confining as Tamil nationalism was increasingly and militantly defined in opposition to an Aryan-Sanskritic imperialism represented by Hindi. Unsurprisingly, family, often the primary the site of patriarchal gender relations, became tethered to the masculine politics of nationalism and trapped women within the discourse of chastity and purity.

\textsuperscript{116} Hodges, \textit{Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce}. 

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Chapter 4

Tamil Nationalism Resolves the Women’s Question? Anti-Hindi Agitations and Tamil Identity

The anti-Hindi agitations of the late 1930s marked an important moment in the transformation of the politics of Tamil/Dravidian identity in the Madras presidency. During this period, the Self-Respect movement found itself participating in an explicitly political event that marked the beginning of Tamil nationalism as a mass movement. The decision of the Congress government in Madras to make the study of Hindi compulsory in secondary schools in the Presidency in April 1938 sparked widespread protests that served to crystallize identity based on ethno-linguistic nationalism.¹ As language increasingly became the marker of identity, Tamil and Hindi came to encompass a range of categories including caste, region, race, and even religion. They became easy, one-word signifiers for a host of identities that had been informing the discourse of Brahmin vs. non-Brahmin since the late nineteenth century.

Language and Identity

Although the crystallization of identity around language was not a unique phenomenon, Sumathi Ramaswamy cautions against viewing the Tamil case as a mere reproduction of the European experience.² She proposes the analytic of “language devotion” in its pious, filial, and

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erotic forms as an entry point into the study of Tamil linguistic nationalism - one that better explains why language (Tamil) was able to mobilize people from differing social, political, religious, and ideological locations in its cause. She notes that:

[The anti-Hindi agitations] threw together religious revivalists like Maraimalai Adigal with such avowed atheists as Ramasami; Gandhians like Kalyanasundaram with men like Annadurai who preached secession from India; university professors and elite antiquarians, such as Somasundara Bharati and Purnalingam Pillai, with populist street poets, pamphleteers, college students and young men like Chinnasami who immolated themselves.

The apparent contradiction between devotion to language and the atheistic leanings of the Movement can be reconciled on two levels. One, atheism did not have a universal following within the Movement for many Self-Respect activists denounced the social effects of religion rather than contest or even refer to its truth-claims. Second, devotion and atheism need not necessarily be irreconcilable. Devotion can be secular as well, although the necessarily irrational aspect of devotion is in violation of reason. But in the context of anti-Hindi (read anti-Sanskrit, anti-Brahmin, anti-Aryan, anti-North), devotion to Tamil was also a sign of a secular rationalism since it was contrasted with the predominantly religious and superstitious, and therefore irrational, nature of Sanskritic literature. Moreover, Saivism comprised a strong undercurrent within the Dravidian movement. Although the Self-Respect movement was at odds with the Saivite revivalism propagated by the likes of Maraimalai Adigal, it could not sever itself completely from its parent movement (Dravidian movement). Ultimately, a culture suffused with devotion was bound to find its object of devotion that was in consonance with its anti-Hindi sentiments. Language thus became the most apt deity for the demonstration of such devotion.

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As Ramaswamy points out, even Periyar, in spite of his denunciations of such irrational glorification and deification of language, was caught up in its inexorable logic and co-opted into the pantheon of men and women who served Tamil.⁵

In this sense, Tamil linguistic nationalism participated in the phenomena that Lisa Mitchell, in her study of Telugu linguistic nationalism, identifies as the transformation of understandings about language from “the language of the land to the language of the people and the birth of mother-tongues.”⁶ This process, she argues, began in the late nineteenth century and crystallized into the idea of “Telugu people” as opposed to “Telugu land” and “Telugu-speaking people” by early twentieth century.⁷ Language thus came to be understood as a distinguishing attribute of individuals.⁸ Similarly, speakers of Tamil became Tamil people as Tamil Purists such as Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950) imbued with the recent missionary-orientalist rendering of Tamil as a language distinct from and comparable in antiquity and sophistication of development to Sanskrit “craft[ed] a nationalist imaginary out of the Tamil-Saivite past.”⁹ Such a construction enabled the Hindi issue “to easily mobilize a ‘Tamil vernacular’ public,”¹⁰ serving the Self-Respect movement, the Justice Party, the Pure Tamil Movement, and other variants of the Dravidian movement with large numbers of followers, including women, who courted arrest and went to prison. The Pure Tamil Movement or Tani Tamizh Iyyakkam, a strand of the

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⁵ Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue, pp. 233-242.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid.
The Dravidian movement, was started in 1915 by Maraimalai Adigal with the goal of purifying Tamil of foreign words, especially Sanskrit. Like its counterparts – the Justice Party and the Self-Respect movement – it stood in opposition to Aryans, Sanskrit, Brahmins, and the North represented politically by the Brahmin-dominated Congress in the Madras presidency. It regarded Hindi, a derivative of Sanskrit, as a tool of potential northern domination in independent India. But it differed from the Self-Respect movement in one crucial aspect – while the Self-Respect movement was atheistic, the Pure Tamil Movement was founded on the bedrock of Saiva Siddhanta, the most widespread and influential system of religious and philosophical thought among the Tamil-speaking people of South India and Sri Lanka, in which Shiva is worshipped as the supreme deity. Its canon is the Tirumurai, a collection of Tamil devotional hymns written by Shaivite saints from the fifth to the ninth century.

**Dravidian vs. Aryan**

This confluence of interests and ideologies in the common cause against Hindi was possible because Hindi was constructed as Aryan, North, and Sanskritic (therefore unoriginal) as opposed to Tamil which was Dravidian, South, and non-Sanskritic (therefore highly original).

Hindi was characterized as a mere child as compared to the mature Tamil which possessed an

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13 *Kudi Arasu*, 29 August 1937.
ancient and highly developed literature.14 This construction of Tamil was a contribution of British orientalist inquiry into languages that replicated in the context of South India the earlier efforts in Bengal.15 Robert Caldwell’s (1814-1891) *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* first published in 1856 did for Tamil what William Jones’s scholarship had accomplished for Sanskrit in the late eighteenth century.16 An evangelist Christian missionary who served as Bishop in Thirunelveli district in the Madras Presidency, he achieved lasting fame for positing that the South Indian languages of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and others belonged to a separate family of languages that he called ‘Dravidian’ possessing an ancient literary history distinct from Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages.17 The implications of this construction were far-reaching, intimately tied as it was to the European project of uncovering the genealogy of languages as not an end in itself but as a

14 Ibid, 19 September 1937 and 17 October 1937. Scholars debate the precise dating of Sangam poetry, the earliest corpus of Tamil literature. Kamil Zvelebil, the distinguished scholar of Tamil, suggests the period between 100 BC to 250-300 AD as the most probable. See *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1992), p. 128. The dating of Hindi literature is also problematic because the language labeled Hindi today is the modern standardized version which is vastly different from the earlier dialects/versions, some of which are still spoken in some parts of North India. Modern Hindi literature dates back to about the mid-nineteenth century, before which ‘Hindi’ literature was mostly composed in Braj whose origins are placed anywhere between 1200 to 1400 AD. See Michael C. Shapiro, “Hindi,” in *The Indo-Aryan Languages*, ed. George Cardona and Dhanesh Jain (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 279-280; David Rubin, “The Short Stories of Premchand,” in *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 168.


means to uncover the genealogy of nations.\(^\text{18}\) Caldwell did not restrict himself to making philological claims; he expounded on the history, society, and civilization of the Dravidians as being distinctly non-Aryan with its corollaries of non-Brahmin and non-Sanskritic.\(^\text{19}\) The missionary perception of Brahmins as the greatest obstacles to conversion to Christianity was an influential factor in his argument.\(^\text{20}\) The foundation thus laid by Caldwell and later nurtured and extended by P. Sundaram Pillai, J.M. Nallaswami Pillai, and Maraimalai Adigal – all of them members of the upper-caste Vellalas - found its apotheosis in the anti-Hindi agitations.\(^\text{21}\) The frequency and intensity of attacks against Brahmins and the Congress – representatives of the hegemonic aspirations of the Aryan, Sanskritic North – during this period increased as C. Rajagopalachari, the Brahmin Congress Premier of the Madras presidency and the central architect of the compulsory Hindi policy, became a convenient scapegoat.

**Gender and Tamil Nationalism**

The anti-Hindi agitations marked an important moment for Dravidian gender politics. This chapter argues that while women participated actively in these agitations through picketing, rallies, conferences, and courting prison, they came to be deployed differently than men in the cause of Tamil nationalism. Women protestors were glorified as “mothers of the war against

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\(^{18}\) Trautmann, *Languages and Nations*, pp. 1-42.


\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Hindi” while men were glorified as “heroes of the war against Hindi.” As C.S. Lakshmi argues, the anti-Hindi agitations were yet another site of the deployment of ‘woman as mother’ concept that has been a key element in classical Tamil literature. The Purananuru, literally *Four Hundred (poems) of the Exterior*, belonging to the puram genre of classical Sangam poetry, eulogizes heroic mothers of heroic sons who die in battle. Lakshmi argues that these poems depict mothers’ bodies as divine, sanctified, pure sites “from which ‘naturally’ flows endless stream of milk of valour to turn into blood of warriors in the bodies of their sons” such that “[w]here the son is a coward or a warrior…the mother has considered it her own limitation or achievement.” These poems also valorize women’s chastity, for it is by the channeling of their sexual energy through chaste wifehood and motherhood that women acquire the mystical power to produce valorous sons.

Anandhi S. has argued that the Movement’s co-option into the patriarchal language of the anti-Hindi agitations is not surprising given its failure to instill “a new anti-patriarchal consciousness” among its followers as well as the uneven spread of anti-patriarchal

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22 Viduthalai, 16 November 1938 and 26 January 1939; Kudi Arasu, 4 December 1938, 1 January 1939 and 12 March 1939.

23 C.S. Lakshmi, “Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu,” Economic & Political Weekly, October 20-27, 1990, Vol. 25, Nos. 42 nd 43, WS 72-83. Classical Tamil literature generally refers to Tamil writing before the advent of Bhakti or devotional poetry in about 600 AD, and is divided into the Sangam corpus of the akam (erotic/interior) and puram (exterior/heroic) genres dating from about 150 B.C. to 250 A.D, and the post-Sangam corpus of didactic poetry and the early epics dating from about 250 A.D. to 600 A.D. See Zvelebil, Tamil Literature, pp. 32-33.


25 Lakshmi, Mother-Community, p. WS 72.

26 Ibid; Hart and Heifez, Four Hundred Songs.
consciousness within it. Therefore, patriarchal values lay dormant within the movement, and erupted when the opportunity presented itself. The anti-Hindi agitations afforded just such a space for a re-assertion of patriarchy. Thus, nationalism’s inexorable logic utilized the patriarchal potential that lay quiescent within the movement for a period to relegate women to a secondary and supportive position. Therefore, this turn to a patriarchal politics beginning in the late 1930s was a fruition of internal as well as external factors.

The essentialization of women as mothers during the anti-Hindi agitations, while not novel within Tamil culture, was invested with specific meanings as Tamil nationalism, like most nationalisms, was first and foremost a masculine project. Language itself was feminized as goddess, mother, and maiden, with the motherhood image eventually becoming dominant with the ‘mother’ pleading, commanding, cajoling, and appealing to ‘her’ sons to fight for ‘her’ honor. As language increasingly overshadowed caste as the key marker of identity and the terminology shifted from Brahmin vs. non-Brahmin to a more explicit Aryan vs. Dravidian/Tamil, a concurrent displacement of caste as a central unifying category occurred. In


the Brahmin-non-Brahmin discourse, caste was the defining element - one that afforded considerable space for confronting patriarchy as it was seen as inextricably linked with caste. In the discourse of Dravidian/Tamil nationalism during the anti-Hindi agitations, caste, language, race, and region became conflated with language emerging as the dominant or even sole marker of identity.

In this reconfiguration of identity, men were envisioned as discrete subjects and agents while women and their bodies became invested with a non-differentiated, universal meaning of motherhood. As Ramaswamy argues, women’s individuality was subsumed under “a larger narrative of Tamil devotion” that privileged the maternal. This morphing of the ideological bases of the movement from identity based on caste to one based on Tamil nationalism constrained women’s freedom and choices by making them symbols of the honor of the nation. This familiar trajectory for women in nationalist movements underscores women’s problematic and complex relationship to nationalism. Problematic because while nationalism, particularly anti-colonial nationalism, provided a space for women to articulate their needs and aspirations, it simultaneously glorified women’s supportive role in achieving the larger and most prized masculine goal of all - modern nationhood. Complex because women had to constantly weigh their needs and aspirations in terms of what was good for the nation. Moreover, by casting the nation itself in feminine terms, men became the subjects and agents of nationhood while women were relegated to being symbols and objects.

Although the anti-Hindi agitations were yet

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30 Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue, p. 188.

31 Women’s symbolic role within nationalist movements has been a key focus of analysis in feminist scholarship on nationalism. While women were mobilized in large numbers to contribute to the cause of nationalism, not only was their participation in it gendered but also they were used as symbols, particularly in their roles as mothers, to represent the collectivity. Feminist scholarship has had to grapple with this paradox to consider the extent to which nationalist projects have liberated women. There is general consensus that nationalisms have empowered women in many ways but almost never liberated them. For a succinct summary and review of this scholarship, see Temma
another demonstration of this pattern, it would be ahistorical to suggest that this deployment of the feminine reflects an undifferentiated historical continuity within Tamil culture.

The Self-Respect movement in the decade prior, as we have seen, sought to free women and their bodies from “bear[ing] witness to the integrity of the community, nation, and race”\(^{32}\) and to unsettle the ‘naturalness’ of motherhood for women. The language of nationalism interpellated\(^{33}\) women along conventional lines of motherhood and marginalized their concerns. Women’s issues did not completely disappear from the Movement’s agenda, but they lost their substantive force. Tamil nationalism glossed over inequalities within the so-called Dravidian/Tamil society just as Indian nationalism subordinated them to the greater goal of freedom from foreign rule. Differences and inequalities thus came to be camouflaged in the garb of nationalism, since nationalism was seen as the higher ideal - one that challenged imperialism and drove out the imperialist.\(^{34}\) Inequalities within the so-called nation were at best the lesser evil to be addressed at a later stage after the greater evil of imperialism was destroyed and at worst intrinsic to the nationalist project – written into its script so to say, thereby excluding

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\(^{32}\) Geetha, “The Story of a Marriage.”


\(^{34}\) According to Yuval-Davis, nationalism is predicated on the creation of a sense of solidarity among a core, ‘authentic’ group that mutes differences of class, race, ethnicity, and gender under the call of a fantasized unity of identity. In this conception, differences are not discounted but are subordinated to the ideals and aspirations of the core, ‘authentic’ group. See Gender and Nation, Chapter 4.
certain groups - those who are not construed as subjects or agents - from the so-called nation.\footnote{Mrinalini Sinha argues that the space that was opened up for the articulation of a radical politics of caste and gender in the late 1920s during the intense debate stimulated by the Mayo controversy was quickly closed by the demands and needs of Indian nationalism. See \textit{Specters of Mother India}, pp.}

Women have almost always found themselves in this excluded category, with Tamil women being no exception.

This shift from caste to language as the sole marker of identity thus raises several questions: Did a critique of caste as articulated by the Self-Respect movement afford a wider and deeper space for manifesting women’s liberation, since caste was seen as inextricably tied to patriarchy? Did the intense focus on and glorification of language work to the disadvantage of women? If so, what are the ways in which Tamil nationalism constrained the space for a radical articulation of women’s liberation?\footnote{Following feminist theorists such as Ann McClintock, I make a distinction between liberation and empowerment in that the former encompasses the latter and not vice versa. While nationalist movements empowered women in many ways including opening up a space for women to claim politico-legal rights, they rarely if ever liberated them from social, religious, and cultural constraints. Liberation thus means freedom in a more fundamental and foundational sense.}

The Self-Respect attack on caste was motivated by what it saw as the stark social inequalities that the caste system perpetrated and therefore its goal was the amelioration of this situation whereas the glorification of language was motivated by primordialism.\footnote{Primordialism contends that nations are ancient, natural phenomena. Harold Schiffman, while noting the difficult-to-quantify aspect of primordial attachments stemming from its tendency for non-rational attachment rooted in sentiment, nevertheless identifies the Tamils, following from Clifford Geertz’s examples of language-based identities, as perhaps the best example of a group of people noted for their intense attachment to language. See Harold Schiffman, “Language, Primordialism and Sentiment,” in \textit{Languages of Sentiment: Cultural Constructions of Emotional Substrates}, ed. Gary B. Palmer and Debra J. Occhi (Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1999), pp. 25-38.} Tamil nationalism sought to create a sense of solidarity based on the fantasy of Tamil as a naturally cohesive category of identity that appealed to history, religion, race, and region. Ramaswamy refers to this construction of an explicitly ethnic identity that originated during the anti-Hindi protests as ‘Dravidianism’. She argues that “Dravidianism’s driving imperative was a vision of the Tamil community as an autonomous racial and political entity
(inam), even nation (natu), whose sacral center is occupied solely by Tamil, from which all its members claim shared descent.”

Like all nationalisms similarly imagined, Tamil nationalism used women as symbols to represent this fantasized collectivity. When women became symbols as in Mother India and Mother Tamil, their subjectivity and agency as discrete individuals were erased or at least minimized. Such symbolization delineated their roles in glorified but constrictive terms while at the same time opening up a space for their participation in limited ways. Delineating this paradox in the case of Bengali nationalism, Radha Kumar argues:

The association of Durga with ‘Mother India’ and the increasing use of Kali to sanction violence in a struggle for independence from colonial rule…can be read as turning the threat in these figures away from the self (of the Hindu male), and directing it instead against the ‘other’ of the Western colonizer….the harnessing of shakti to nationalism was not only a way of making it safer – of containing it – but also a ways in which women could find a role for themselves in nationalist struggles. Certainly as the rhetoric of Bengali nationalism grew increasingly mother-centered, more and more women began to get involved in nationalist activities, supporting students rusticated for their participation in the movement against partition, sheltering revolutionaries, and acting as couriers for extremists.

Thus, women’s uneasy, ambivalent, complex, and problematic relationship with nationalism - one that casts women as incomplete subjects while at the same time mobilizing them in large numbers in its cause, has been a focus of much feminist analysis.

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38 Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue, p. 63.

39 Durga, a manifestation of Devi, the mother goddess, depicted as having ten arms, riding a tiger, and carrying weapons, is an embodiment of the creative feminine power.

40 A fiercer form of the mother goddess, Kali is represented as a dark woman with four arms; carrying a sword and a skull, wearing a necklace of skulls, with her tongue protruding from her mouthm standing with one foot on the thigh, and another on the breast of her divine consort, Shiva.

Speaking in the context of Indian nationalism, Tanika Sarkar argues that such a mobilization cannot be dismissed as merely instrumental, for women themselves “feel that they have a stake when it comes to nation-building…. [for] often it is at times when the nation comes into being through a process of struggle that women can come into their own.”

Suruchi Thapar points to this uneasy relationship between women and nationalism within the Indian nationalist movement. The mobilization and symbolization of women in the cause of Tamil nationalism reveals a similar process - one in which women responded in large numbers to the call of nationalism at the same time that they were marked as symbols of the honor and virtue of the nation and as mother-figures for whom men are willing to lay down their lives.

Indian nationalism and regional nationalisms like Tamil nationalism and Bengali nationalism in colonial India staked the cultural identity of their respective communities and nations on this notion of womanhood. Women’s activism was contained within this patriarchal idiom of nationalism that ensured that the roles and activities of women stayed within its limits. The casting of the land, in the case of Indian nationalism, and of the language, in the case of Tamil nationalism, in feminine terms meant that men were the actors and subjects, for motherhood in its glorified and symbolic form – chaste, pure, and sacred - was meant to ignite in sons the qualities of bravery and courage. Maps of India with the body of a woman in her goddess form mapping the territory were commonplace in the nationalist movement, first used extensively during the swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905, during the


nationalist movement, and after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 to depict the mutilated condition of the country, continuing into post-colonial representations of the nation up until the present. During the agitation against the partition of Bengal in 1905, Viceroy Lord Curzon was depicted as standing over a vivisected Mother India, axe in hand. In the latter, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime-Minister of India, was shown standing over the body of a woman overlaid on a map of India, with her right limb severed (representing Pakistan), holding a bloody knife. Tamil nationalism deployed similar imagery such as when Rajagopalachari was depicted as hurling a knife representing Hindi at Tamil represented as a woman in her goddess form, and as dishonoring Mother Tamil by disrobing her, the latter invoking the famous episode of the disrobing of Draupadi in the epic *Mahabharata*. So when women responded to the call of nationalism, they were complicit, implicitly or explicitly, in this gendered construction of national citizenship. Urvashi Butalia notes that:

Thus the same motherland which came to signify ‘home’ and ‘country’ for men had a different meaning for women. For Indian women, the process of nation-making was not one of finding an identity, rather it was simply one where old, existing patriarchies, old models of hierarchy and control, found new expression. Women were left very much where they were before – and perhaps even worse off.

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46 *Viduthalai*, 18 May 1938.

47 *Kudi Arasu*, 19 December 1937. *Mahabharata* is one of the two major Sanskritic epics of ancient India, the other being *Ramayana*. A defining moment in the epic involves the attempted disrobement of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, by Dushasana, a Kaurava, when the Pandavas lose their kingdom as well as Draupadi to the Kauravas in a crooked game of dice.

In the case of Tamil/Dravidian nationalism, the historic persistence of ‘women as mothers’ trope in Tamil literature was given new shape and new expression as the nation was beginning to be passionately imagined as descent and kinship through language. Both language as mother and as mother-tongue encapsulates women’s ambivalent stake in the project of nationalism. As mother-Tamil, she appeals to her sons to guard her honor, and as mother-tongue, she nurtures them in the formative years of their lives. In both roles, she invokes the most elemental, passionate, and primordial emotions and attachments which when deployed in the cause of identity construction around language reinforced her foundational yet domestic, supportive and nurturing role. Consequently, women’s public participation in Tamil nationalism was an extension of their private role, non-threatening to fundamental patriarchal structures, thus camouflaging deeper patriarchal structures and attitudes. The gendered politics of Tamil/Dravidian nationalism that began during the late-1930s, steadily solidified through the 1940s and reaching its apotheosis with the electoral victory of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in 1967 aptly demonstrates this phenomenon. This retrogressive gender politics has remained stable, if not worsened, over the last seven decades. Several events and processes testify to the gendered discourse and practices of Dravidianism in post-independent India and to its increasingly masculinist discourse that deployed culturalist nationalist symbols of womanhood to mobilize popular support – a strategy that has been instrumental in the electoral victories of the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) since 1967.


50 Geetha, “Story of a Marriage.”

Women in the Cause of Tamil

Women’s presence in the anti-Hindi agitations was noteworthy for both its variety and its numbers. Women marched in the streets, addressed public meetings and organized conferences, picketed schools, and courted arrest. Photographs of women with children who courted arrest and went to prison filled the pages of the *Kudi Arasu* and *Viduthalai*. Glorified as ‘mothers’ in contrast to men who were glorified as ‘heroes’, they included nationalists, Self-Respecters, Tamil Purists, elites and commoners, and came from different Tamil-speaking regions of the Presidency. They organized women’s conferences that reverberated with the anti-Hindi rhetoric, with women’s issues receiving token consideration or at least framed within the larger and more urgent cause of Tamil. The most famous of them was the Tamilnadu Women’s Conference held in Madras on 13 November 1938 at the height of the anti-Hindi agitations. It was noteworthy for two reasons. One was for its resolution calling for the use of the title ‘Periyar’ in speech and writing when referring to E.V. Ramasami in recognition of his unparalleled and unprecedented services in the cause of social reform. The other was for its impassioned denunciations of Hindi that led to women taking to the streets and courting arrest in the cause of the mother-tongue.\(^{52}\)

The Conference demonstrated that the Hindi issue was able to mobilize women of different class and caste backgrounds as well as ideological persuasions in the cause of Tamil nationalism.

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\(^{52}\) *Viduthalai*, 14, 15, 16 November 1938; *Kudi Arasu*, 20 November 1938.
Neelambikai Ammaiayar (1903-1944), daughter of Maraimalai Adigal, the patriarch of the Pure Tamil Movement, and herself its staunchest proponent, a translator, biographer and compiler of dictionaries, well-versed in Hindi and English along with Tamil, presided over the Conference. Meenambal Sivaraj (1902-1992), born into an Adi-Dravida family and married to an Adi-Dravida leader, active in the adi-Dravida uplift movement, and committed follower of B.R. Ambedkar, hoisted the Tamil flag displaying the emblems of the Pandya, Chola and Chera kings of the Sangam period. Narayani Ammal, a Tamil scholar, opened the Conference, and V.P. Thamaraikkanni Ammaiayar (1911-1971), a novelist and essayist who Tamilized her given Sanskrit name and aligned herself with the Self-Respect Movement in the late 1930s, gave the welcome address. Other prominent women leaders at the Conference were Muvalur Ramamirthammal, a Self-Respecter of Devadasi origins and indefatigable proponent for the abolition of the Devadasi system, and Dharmambal, a Siddha practitioner and a committed activist in the cause of women.

In her welcome address, Thamaraikanni Ammaiayar made a spirited and passionate appeal to Tamil women to right the wrongs heaped on Mother Tamil. Calling Kannagi the ‘leader of

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{58}}\] For an analysis of Neelambikai Ammaiayar life and writings, see Vijaya Ramaswamy, “Tamil Separatism and Cultural Negotiations,” pp. 61-83.


\[\text{\textsuperscript{56}}\] Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongues*, p. 188; Ramaswamy, *Tamil Separatism*, p. 67.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{57}}\] *Kudi Arasu*, 20 November 1938, 5-6 and 14-17.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{58}}\] Kannagi is the heroine of *Silappadikaram*, the Tamil epic of the post-Sangam classical period (c. 250 to 600 AD). Written in three parts with each part set in the capital of each of the three Tamil kingdoms of Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras, it tells the story of Kannagi’s marriage to Kovalan in Puhar, the Chola capital, Kovalan’s neglect of his wife after he falls in love with Madhavi, a beautiful courtesan skilled in the art of dance, his destitution following a misunderstanding with Madhavi, his arrival in Madurai, the Pandya capital to recoup his fortunes by selling
our community’ – one who rose up against injustice, she impressed upon her audience the urgency of the situation and urged them to act like Kannagi. She began her speech with a reference to the power of Kannagi’s chastity that had destroyed a king and a kingdom in retaliation for the injustice done to her husband and consequently wronging her as his wife.

Having set up Kannagi as the quintessential Tamil woman – chaste and brave, she then proceeded to underscore the maternity of Tamil - as the mother “who has given birth to all of us" and who “is also the mother of Kannagi.”

By establishing a deep, elemental connection between Kannagi and Tamil, Thamaraikanni delivered to her audience two key messages. One, that Kannagi, a woman much revered and loved by Tamils, was Mother Tamil’s daughter much like other Tamil women, and therefore neglecting Mother Tamil was akin to dishonoring Kannagi. Two that Kannagi’s bravery and courage owed much to her being raised in the lap of the Tamil mother. Therefore, Kannagi and Tamil mutually complemented each other: while Kannagi’s achievements were on account of her being a Tamil woman, Tamil was much honored by her. By using the figure of Kannagi, whose story is very popular among Tamils and has been dramatized on stage, and sung in ballads and other folk-forms, Thamaraikanni sought to make the cause of Tamil immediate and familiar to her audience.

Like other elite Tamil men and women, Thamaraikanni sought to create a community of Tamils replete with manipulation of symbols and invention/reinvention of traditions. This constructed Tamil community was also ‘natural’. Its antiquity going back to a hoary past with a

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Kannagi’s anklet, where he is falsely accused of stealing the queen’s anklet and beheaded, and Kannagi’s terrible retribution for such an act of injustice wherein she calls down fire on the city and the city of Madurai is burnt when Kannagi tears down one of her breasts and flings it down. In the final part, Kannagi, the chaste wife, now in the Chera kingdom, is deified as a goddess and a temple is built in her honor by the Chera king. Source: Mohan Lal, ed. *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Volume 5 (Sasay to Zorgot) (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), pp. 4098-4099.

59 *Kudi Arasu*, 20 November 1938.
continuous, unbroken common history and language made it ‘natural’. The paradox of the constructed nature of this ‘naturalness’ was resolved in terms of Tamils’ enslavement by Aryans. During the long period of subservience to Aryans, Tamils had lost their sense of community and history. Thamaraikanni described the aim of the conference as “doing what is needed to save the Tamil community from being foundationally destroyed and to wake Tamils from their stupor”. Reminding them of their ‘natural’ community required the invocation of their ancient culture. This discursive construction of the ‘naturalness’ of the Tamil community involved the use of British scholarship such as that of Robert Caldwell and modern institutions such as the print media. It also implicitly recognized differences among Tamils that had to be nevertheless muted under the veneer of a single, unitary identity created and nurtured by a core (elite) group for its benefit.

The Conference was touted as a great success both for the number (more than 5000) and the geographical diversity of women (from many regions of the Tamil-speaking areas of the presidency) who attended it. Thamaraikanni described it as one-of-a-kind in the history of the Tamil land.60 Prior to its inauguration, the conference was widely publicized in the columns of Kudi Arasu and Viduthalai as significant. One such column argued that since the Tamil language refers to earth, land, language, arts and wealth in feminine terms such as Mother Earth, Motherland, Mother-tongue, Saraswathi (patroness of the arts), and Lakshmi (patroness of wealth and prosperity), it behooves women more than men to come forward and right the wrongs done to Tamil.61 Just as the historically popular figure of Kannagi among Tamils was re-invented and her association with the Tamil notion of karpu or chastity was manipulated to serve

60 Ibid.

61 Kudi Arasu, 6 November 1938, p. 8.
the cause of Tamil nationalism, the historically feminized concepts of earth, land, language, arts and wealth were utilized to mobilize women in the cause of Tamil nationalism. The apparent contradiction between symbolization and real participation was resolved by using the symbols themselves as a means to mobilize women. The mother metaphor appealed to women in an immediate, personal, and familiar way at the same time that language as mother was outside of them. Mother Tamil represented all Tamil women in their ‘natural’ universalized essence as mothers while simultaneously she was the mother of all Tamil women.

Thamaraikanni cited this dual relationship of women to language as mother to impress upon them their pivotal role in protecting and preserving Tamil. Participating in the highly gendered language of Tamil nationalism, she personified Tamil as follows:

She [Tamil] is the mother who has given birth to all of us….She remains youthful in spite of her age. But her radiance has been affected. On her golden skin, we can see scars and wounds. On her face, we can see signs of suffering. Her hands are locked in chains. Isn’t it our duty as children to protect her who is our mother? She has already won some victory over enemies. The results of the recent municipal elections in places like Chennai and Thiruchirapalli have broken the chains off one of her hands. But the other hand remains in chains. Let us lose no time and break her other chain, reinstate her former radiance, and wipe off the scars on her body.62

In her conclusion, Thamaraikanni sought to co-opt her audience into this putative nation of Tamils by appealing to explicitly primordialist sentiments. She described the achievements of ancient Tamil women who displayed courage, devotion, chastity, determination, piety, and simplicity to urge women to serve Mother Tamil. Referring to Manimekalai, the eponymous heroine of another classical Tamil epic,63 she claimed that:

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62 *Kudi Arasu*, 20 November 1938, p. 15.

63 A Buddhist composition, *Manimekalai*, c. 500-600AD, tells the story of the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi who gradually shuns the life of a courtesan to become a renunciant in search of liberation, after controlling her
“Women are not independent beings. They are always dependent beings. Therefore, they do have the right to follow the ascetic path.” Manimekalai, who falsified this belief of a foreign land by rejecting in the prime of her youth the true love of a prince and taking up the ascetic life and thereby being a path-finder for the world, belongs to your community.\footnote{Kudi Arasu, 20 November 1938, p. 16.}

On Andal, a Tamil Vaishnavite saint,\footnote{One among the twelve Alwars, Vaishnavite saints of Tamilnadu, Andal (c. 400-600 AD), Antal wrote the \textit{Thiruppavai} in praise of Krishna (one of the ten avatars of Vishnu, the preserver God of the Hindu Trinity) which is considered to be one of the most popular hymns in all Hindu devotional literature. Source: Amareesh Datta, \textit{Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature, Volume 1 (A to Devo)} (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006), pp. 168-169.} she elaborated that:

“Those who are born as women do not own home or name. They have to be born as men at some time to attain liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. Women are born tainted.” Antal who crushed this belief contained in foreign works [referring again to the Laws of Manu] into powder and considering the garland as her husband, wrote works such as “Thiruppavai” belongs to your community.\footnote{Kudi Arasu, 20 November 1938, p. 16.}

She is ostensibly quoting from \textit{The Laws of Manu}, signified by the lines within quotation marks, to make the point that Tamil women have defied Brahminical prescriptions. Both women were seen as manifesting their Tamilness most emphatically by rejecting beliefs and rules contained in Sanskritic works – a point that had particular salience during this period when Hindi, a derivative of Sanskrit, was seen as a tool of Aryan, Brahminic imperialism. Karaikkal Ammaiyar\footnote{Considered to be the first poet to write hymns to Shiva, the destroyer God of the Hindu Trinity, in Tamil, Karaikkal Ammaiyar (c. 500-600 AD) is the author of four works of poetry. Her life embodies the tension between worldly duty and the pious life of service to God. See Elaine Craddock, \textit{Siva’s Demon Devotee: Karaikkal Ammaiyar} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 1-4.} and Avvaiyar\footnote{There are supposed to have been two women by the name of Avvaiyar, one belonging to the Sangam period, and the other belonging to the later Chola period, c. 1000-1200 A.D. The former is generally the attributed author of several didactic verses noted for expounding simple yet profound ethical ideals based on the normal experience of the average human being. Source: Amareesh Datta, \textit{Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature, Volume 1 (A to Devo)} (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006), pp. 295-296.} were among the other women whom Thamaraikanni considered icons who made sexual attraction to the prince of the city. See Anne E. Monius, \textit{Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3-13; Lakshmi Holmstrom, \textit{Silappadhikaram Manimekalai} (Madras: Orient Longman, 1996), pp. 177-182.
seminal contributions to Tamil language and literature. She urged her audience to learn about the brave women of the Pura Nanuru, such as the one who was ready to cut off her breasts upon hearing that her son had fled the battlefield but to her joy found that it was a rumor and rejoiced at the heroic death of her son in battle.

Similarly, Nilambikai’s deployment of gendered images in her presidential address was both a strategy for making the cause of Tamil immediate, personal, and familiar to her audience and a reflection of her conservative stand on women’s roles and responsibilities. As Ramaswamy argues, while both women functioned within and participated in the patriarchal imaginings of language as mother, they responded to this symbolization in different ways. While Thamaraikanni saw a role for women’s militant activism in the cause of Tamil, Nilambikai envisioned a more traditional role for women in the cause of Tamil. After making numerous feminized references to Tamil such as being Tamil as mother’s milk that was necessary for laying a healthy foundation and Tamil as a hungry mother who was languishing for want of sustenance from her children, Nilambikai listed the various ways in which women could contribute to the regeneration and progress of the language. Women should be employed as teachers of Tamil in girls’ schools where the task of teaching Tamil should be taken seriously. At these schools, traditional native dress code should be mandated. At home, mothers should supplement school instruction by reading the great works of Tamil literature with their children. Moreover, formal education should not alienate women from performing traditional female duties such as cooking and household management. When women and girls protected and


70 Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue, p. 183-189.
preserved the Tamil language and the customs and practices of the Tamil land, Tamil and Tamil women would prosper.

In keeping with her uncompromising commitment to the Pure Tamil Movement, Nilambikai urged women to speak pure Tamil devoid of foreign words by which she meant Aryan words. This act in itself would be a great service to Tamil. In spite of her deep dismay at the neglect of Tamil, she considered the presence of so many women at the Conference as a sure sign of a better future for Tamil. Nilambikai envisioned a domestic, supportive role for women at home and an extension of the same in their role as teachers of Tamil in girls’ schools. These ideas were in consonance with her conservative views on what constituted suitable literature for women, on the primacy of women’s roles as mothers, and her ambivalent attitude toward widow-marriage. She encouraged women to read religious literature so that they could become good mothers. She supported remarriage for younger girls but opposed it for widows over the age of twenty.\footnote{Ramaswamy, “Gender Politics and Literature,” pp. 77-78.}

This Conference launched women’s militant activism in the common cause against Hindi. On the day following her speech, 14 November, 1938, the first batch of five women including Dharmambal and Ramamirthammal were arrested for picketing the Hindu Theological High School on Mint Street in Georgetown, Madras.\footnote{Viduthalai, 14 November, 1938, p. 2.} On 21 and 28 November and 20 December, 1938, three more batches of women holding a Tamil flag demonstrated outside the School, shouted anti-Hindi slogans, and courted arrest.\footnote{Justice, 23 and 30 November 1938, p. 4 and 21 December 1938, p. 1.} In December 1938, Periyar was sentenced to one year rigorous imprisonment, later commuted to simple imprisonment, on the charges of
inciting women to picket the Hindu Theological High School, praising the five women who went to jail, and further inciting women to come forward in large numbers to emulate them.\textsuperscript{74} As the agitations intensified, more women participated in the demonstrations against Hindi so that by February 1939, thirty six women had been arrested. At least eight of them were with their children.\textsuperscript{75} In September 1939 when the last batch of five women was arrested, the total was seventy three women with thirty two children accompanying their mothers to prison.\textsuperscript{76} Ramaswamy notes that the individuality of these women was silenced through their cooption into the larger narrative of Tamil devotion, although her examination of prison records reveals some diversity. Mostly illiterate and unemployed, these women hailed from different areas of the Presidency and ranged in age from eighteen to seventy.\textsuperscript{77}

Given that women as a group were denied agency and subjecthood within this narrative, it is not surprising that individuality among women was silenced. This denial of agency to women reflects what Kamala Visweswaran has argued in the case of colonial and male nationalist response to and treatment of women nationalists and their speech.\textsuperscript{78} According to her, both the category “women” and the category “poor” excluded poor women. While the

\textsuperscript{74} TSA, Home Department Proceedings, 13\textsuperscript{th} May, 1939, File No. 4; Public (General) Department, G.O. No. 241 dated 3-2-1939 – L.A.Q – December 1938 – Conviction of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker; also see, “Anti-Hindi Agitation: Charges Against Mr. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker,” \textit{Madras Mail}, 26\textsuperscript{th} November 1938 and ‘Is This the Law?’ \textit{Justice}, 14\textsuperscript{th} December 1938.


\textsuperscript{77} Ramaswamy, \textit{Passions of the Tongue}, p. 188.

former meant elite women, the latter meant (poor) men, with the elite male envisioned as the normative subject of nationalism. Thus, the project of feminist retrieval of women’s voices, unintentionally, colludes with the colonial-nationalist erasure of subaltern women, for “where the voices of some women do emerge, recuperation of a … middle-class or elite subjects is inevitable.” Caution and vigilance, she suggests, are necessary for historians so that elite women’s voices are not universalized. In 1938, women who organized and spoke at the various conferences during the anti-Hindi agitations came, with very few exceptions, from upper-caste and upper-caste backgrounds. While their speeches were reproduced in detail in Movement periodicals and newspapers, official response tended to minimize, denigrate or deny the impact of women’s speech and activism. As already discussed, Thamaraikanni’s speech at the Taminadu Women’s Conference had all the ingredients for inflaming passions and rousing women to action. But it was Periyar who was arrested and convicted for inciting women to picket the Hindu Theological School. In her analysis of colonial and male attitudes toward nationalists women’s speeches, Visveswaran points out that:

[A]ctivists might prove themselves strong or weak speakers, but it was their social status or standing rather than elocutionary skill that made their speech worthy of notice. Thus, elite women such as Sarojini Naidu made ‘strong and impressive’ speeches with ‘telling effects’, and while the speeches of C. Rajagopalachari (or Rajaji) during the Vedaranyam Salt March in April of 1930 might have been less than rousing, his stature made him worthier of arrest than more powerful but unknown orators.

Periyar’s stature not only as the founder-leader of the Self-Respect movement and emerging leader of the Justice Party but as an elite male, the subject of Tamil nationalism much like a figure like Rajagopalachari was the subject of Indian nationalism, made his speech eminently

79 Ibid, p. 89.
80 Ibid, p. 92.
more noteworthy and impactful. In their subaltern position in relation to the normative male, the speeches of Thamaraikanni and other women were denied any agency. This denial of agency also worked to portray the agitating women as acting entirely at the behest of Periyar, as tools in the cause of Tamil with no deeper motivation or commitment on their part. During court hearings, the prosecuting inspector and the sentencing judge denigrated their activism by referring to it as ‘shouting slogans’ and ‘creating nuisance or disturbance’. In a patronizing gesture, they were told that they would be pardoned and let go if they promised to refrain from such activities in the future. As Visweswaran points out in the episode with nationalist women, women protestors during the anti-Hindi agitations almost always received lighter sentences than men, attesting to the lack of seriousness or deeper commitment attributed to women’s activism stemming from their subordinate status vis-à-vis the men.

Sporadic instances of women’s defiance and individuality did penetrate the largely masculinist discourse of Tamil nationalism. During court hearings following the arrest of eight women with children for picketing the Hindu Theological School on 20 November 1938, women clearly articulated their deep and sustained commitment to the anti-Hindi cause and emphasized their free choice in participating in the agitations. In response to the prosecuting inspector’s suggestion that jail is a difficult place and that their husbands might be worried and upset over their arrest and potential conviction, women responded that “We are willing to bear any difficulty for the sake of the progress of our language and land. Our husbands have no right to interfere in this. Not that they are the kind who would interfere.”

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81 Viduthalai, 15 and 16 November 1938; Kudi Arasu, 20 November 1938.

82 Kudi Arasu, 27 November 1938, p. 4.
At the Vellore Women’s Conference held on 26 December 1938, women attendees demanded that T.S.S. Rajan, the Brahmin Congress Minister of Public Health in the Madras Government, tender an unconditional apology and resign from office for accusing women of going to prison merely to procure free milk for their children.83 Speaking at the same Conference, Thamaraikanni took umbrage at the tasteless insinuations made in a nationalist newspaper about women involved in the anti-Hindi agitations calling them but “mere grain to the pestle wielded by men.”84 She also asserted her right to sing the songs of Subramania Bharathi, the Tamil nationalist poet, even though Periyar and others might frown upon it because she personally admired the poet and liked his songs.85

Yet, as V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai argue, women received little in a political sense in return for their unprecedented sacrifices, for they participated in the gendered discourse on language.86 In one instance, a group of women led by Dharmambal who had gathered to witness the arrest of thirty-nine male anti-Hindi agitators in front of the Hindu Theological High school performed arti in the traditional manner of women sending off their men to war.87 As already mentioned, on November 14 1938, Dharmambal was one of the first women to court arrest and serve jail time during the anti-Hindi agitations. She apparently saw no contradiction between

83 Vuduthalai, 27 and 30 December 1938; Kudi Arasu, 8 January 1939; also, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, “Virgin Mother, Beloved Other: The Erotics of Tamil Nationalism in Colonial and Post-Colonial India,” in Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independent India, ed. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 17-56 for a discussion of Thamaraikanni Ammaiayar’s short story titled Punitavati Allatu Tamilar Vitudalaip Por (Punithavathi, or the Tamilian Fight for Freedom) as an example of a female nationalist’s account that refuses “to be contained within the male narratives of desire.”

84 Vuduthalai, 30 December 1938, p. 8; Kudi Arasu, 8 January 1939, p. 6.

85 Ibid.

86 Geetha and Rajadurai, Non-Brahmin Millennium, p. 508.

87 Kudi Arasu, 18 September 1938. In Hinduism, arti refers to the waving of lighted lamps before an image of a god or a person to be honored or blessed while chanting a prayer or singing a hymn.
the radical, agentive activism of that act and the traditional supportive role that this act signified. This public display/assertion of the traditional women’s role and duty underscored the limits of women’s participation – one that assuaged patriarchy. As already discussed, Neelambikai Ammaiayar, in her speech at the Taminadu Women’s Conference on 13 November 1938, referred to Hindi as an alien woman who was feeding on the generosity and goodwill of the Tamil people while their true mother, the nurturing Tamil, has sadly enough been left to go hungry. Neelambikai Ammaiayar, in her speech at the Taminadu Women’s Conference on 13 November 1938, referred to Hindi as an alien woman who was feeding on the generosity and goodwill of the Tamil people while their true mother, the nurturing Tamil, has sadly enough been left to go hungry. 88 Thamarakkanni Ammaiayar addressing the same conference spoke passionately about the need for Tamil women to rise up in anger in aid of their ailing Mother Tamil. 89

These women, much like their sisters in the Indian nationalist struggle, straddled the line between tradition and ‘modernity’ that brought them out of their homes into public spaces to participate in the nationalist struggle but within the confines of a new patriarchy. Women who took part in the anti-Hindi agitations were staunch proponents of Tamil, and with few exceptions, were not strident feminists. Their concern for Tamil translated to a vision of middle-class Tamil motherhood. Neelambikai Ammaiayar manifested this concern and vision in her life and writings. 90 The Hindi issue afforded these women, already involved in propagating the use and purification of Tamil, an opportunity to deploy their ideals in its cause. Not all of these women made common cause with the radical vision of the Self-Respect movement – a vision that was under threat in the context of the anti-Hindi protests that “combined atavism, notion of wounded male pride and honour and which reified womanhood.” 91

88 Kudi Arasu, 20 November, 1938.
89 Ibid.
90 Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue, pp. 186-187; Ramaswamy, Tamil Separatism, pp. 77-78.
91 Geetha and Rajadurai, Non-Brahmin Millennium, p. 508.
Thamaraikanni Ammaiyan alluded to this disjunction between the Self-Respect movement and anti-Hindi movement in her address at the women’s conference in Vellore in December 1938. She vehemently condemned a report in a nationalist newspaper that referred to the Tamilnadu Women’s Conference in November 1938 as a Self-Respect Women’s Conference. Considering it a serious misnomer, she pointed out that the women attendees of this Conference came from a variety of political and ideological persuasions and were not all followers of the Self-Respect movement, and that the presence of Periyar at the Conference did not automatically make it a Self-Respect conference, for he spoke at the Conference solely upon the invitation of the women organizers. A critical reading of her objection suggests two possibilities. One, that the Hindi issue mobilized a wider section of Tamil society than the Self-Respect movement and therefore was a mass movement that brought together women of widely differing backgrounds. However as later history demonstrates this diversity was erased by its co-option into a hegemonic narrative of language and nation. Two, the Self-Respect movement’s radical vision of egalitarianism cannot be contained within this narrative and that the language of nationalism that the Hindi issue brought to the fore was too limiting for the deployment of this vision.

The Self-Respect movement, as M. S. S. Pandian argues, considered the language issue as another tool in the political empowerment of subordinated groups rather than as a means of exploiting primordial and atavistic sentiments. However, in making cause with Tamil nationalists, Self-Respecters were forced to make compromises and dilute their vision for radical reform. Thus, the end – the abolition of compulsory Hindi – justified the means,

92 Kudi Arasu, 8 January, 1939.

retrogressive as they were, especially for women. The emergence of a militant Tamil nationalism was the direct result of the refusal of the Congress government in Madras, particularly Rajagopalachari, the Congress Premier, to see or at least acknowledge the difference between the teaching of Hindi and the compulsory teaching of Hindi. Rajagopalacharaiar declared the government’s intention to introduce the compulsory study of Hindi in August 1937 although the Government Order was passed only in April 1938.\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Justice} published a series of editorials titled “The Hindi Move” that anticipated the agitations citing the compulsory clause in the Government Order as highly objectionable which underscored the Government’s ignorance of local feelings on the matter and as indicative of the imperialist tendencies of the Sanskritic North.\textsuperscript{95} Although the Premier categorized any and all opposition to Hindi as communalistic, the protests clearly indicate that the participants objected to its compulsory nature.\textsuperscript{96} Thamaraikanni emphasized this at the Tamilnadu Women’s Conference in December 1938:

> A silver anklet is \textit{by itself} beautiful and useful as well. But if that silver anklet that belongs on the feet of the queen wishes to adorn her head, then wouldn’t that bode ill-omen for it? Won’t she try to push it off her head to the ground? Similarly, if Hindi stays in its place, then we won’t worry about it. We reject it only because it is trying to forcibly occupy the place of our mother-tongue. I have no problem with people in Tamilnadu who volunteer to learn it . . . . Our request is only that it should not be made a compulsory subject.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Justice}, August 12, 1937.

\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Justice}, 10, 11, 13 and 16 September, 1937. In his correspondence with Linlithgow, the Governor-General of India, Governor Erskine repeatedly referred to the communal nature of the anti-Hindi agitations as resulting in no small measure from the misguided policy of the Congress Government and the obstinate stand of the Congress Premier. See BL, IOR MSS Eur F 125/65-68, Linlithgow Collection: Correspondence with the Governor of Madras and his Secretar, 1938-1940.


\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Kudi Arasu}, 20 November 1938, p. 14.
As a result, the protesters deployed a virulently communal rhetoric that viewed Hindi and what it represented in direct opposition to Tamil and what it represented. In doing so, it constructed the Aryans and Dravidians as fundamentally different, coexistence among whom was not possible. From this construction emerged the demand for a separate state for Dravidians in 1940. This demand would eventually be silenced by the rise of Telugu nationalism that viewed with suspicion the hegemonic aspirations of Tamil nationalism and the 1956 linguistic organization of states in post-independent India.  

With the resignation of the Congress government in October 1939 in protest against India’s involvement in the War and the suspension of the anti-Hindi agitation soon afterwards, Governor Erskine issued a press communiqué withdrawing the compulsory Hindi policy in February 1940. However, the Hindi issue left behind a bitter legacy of the hegemonic aspirations of the Aryan Sanskrit North in the guise of Congress and Brahmins in the Madras presidency. With independence imminent at the end of the War, the discourse of Aryan-Dravidian difference acquired increased salience leading to the postulation that such a fundamental dichotomy which made co-existence impossible necessitated a separate nation for Dravidians. Dravidian nationalism sought to camouflage linguistic differences among Dravidians to posit a homogenous identity based on a non-Aryan culture.

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99 BL, IOR MSS Eur F125/68, Linlithgow Collection: Correspondence with the Governor of Madras and His Secretary, 1940, Letter dated 4 March 1940 from Erskine to Linlithgow; Viduthalai, 24 February 1940, p. 4.
Demand for Dravida Nadu

At the fourteenth Justice Party Convention held on 29 December 1938, Periyar was elected as President of the Party which was struggling to survive after its resounding defeat in the 1937 elections. Periyar, whose popularity was at its peak during the anti-Hindi agitations, was seen as the only leader capable of reviving the flagging fortunes of the Party. Speakers at the Convention stressed Tamil people’s right to a separate sovereign state – an idea first proposed at a large meeting held at the Madras Beach on 11 September 1938 to celebrate the arrival of a procession of anti-Hindi protestors from Tiruchirapalli. This idea was later expanded to include all Dravidians, replacing the earlier slogan “Tamil Nadu for Tamilians” with “Dravida Nadu for Dravidians”. The Justice Party, at its Convention held in Thiruvarur in August 1940, formally adopted a resolution demanding a sovereign state of Dravida Nadu. In 1944, Periyar withdrew the Party from electoral politics, transformed it into a social reform organization merging it with the Self-Respect movement and rechristened it Dravidar Kazhagam (DK).

The DK intensified the demand for a separate sovereign state for Dravidians. Between April and July 1947, several petitions addressed to Governor-General Louis Mountbatten urged the Government to include the DK in the discussions pertaining to transfer of power to Indians. If not included, these petitioners asserted, the decisions made at these sessions would not be

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100 Justice, 30 November, 7, 21 and 28 December 1938; Viduthalai, 29 December 1938; Kudi Arasu, 1 January 1939.

101 Kudi Arasu, 18 and 25 September 1938.

102 Kudi Arasu, 26 November 1939.

103 Viduthalai, 23 August 1940.

104 Kudi Arasu, 2 February 1944.
binding on the Dravidians of the Madras Presidency.\textsuperscript{105} As such pleas were rejected by the Government, Periyar urged his followers to mark 15 August 1947 as a sad day for Dravidians as power passed into the hands of the Aryans. The 1940s continued to witness a series of anti-Hindi protests in response to repeated Government attempts to promote Hindi through the compulsory Hindi policy, with the most intense agitations occurring in 1948-49 in response to the Government of India’s directive to all states to promote the compulsory study of Hindi to meet its goal of installing Hindi as the sole official language of India in 1965.\textsuperscript{106} These attempts served to further entrench the perception that the Aryans were determined to establish their hegemony over the Dravidians and continued to feed the discourse of Dravidian separatism. With the rise of Telugu nationalism in the early 1950s, the demand would revert back to Tamil separatism. However, the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 would blunt the edge of language separatism and the Constitutional (Sixteenth) Amendment Act 1963 - enacted to protect the sovereignty and integrity of India – that banned political parties with separatist demands would mute the demand for a separate state for the Tamils.\textsuperscript{107}

\textbf{A Momentous Event}

While Tamil/Dravidian nationalism dominated the discourse and activities of the Justice Party and later the DK for much of the decade of the 1940s, it did not completely overtake women’s issues. However, the engagement with women’s issues would never again achieve the radicalism that had marked the 1920s and the 1930s. Periyar continued to speak and write on

\textsuperscript{105} NAI, Secretariat of the Governor-General (Reforms), File no. F.41/11/47 titled ‘Representation from the Dravidian Federation of Madras’.


women’s issues, as did other Movement (later DK) activists. In July 1949, Periyar’s marriage to Maniammai, a woman almost forty years younger than him, dramatically brought into question his commitment to the cause of women’s equality and freedom. C.N. Annadurai, the charismatic emerging leader of the DK and longtime ‘lieutenant’ of Periyar led the opposition to his marriage.

Using his acclaimed writing skills to great effect, Annadurai, as well as other DK members who concurred with him, wrote a series of articles in *Dravidanadu*, a weekly journal he edited and published, condemning Periyar’s “mismatched marriage” as a betrayal of the Self-Respect movement’s principles and of Periyar’s ideals. Of particular relevance to his criticism was the fact that Periyar had frequently and unequivocally condemned the marriage of young girls/women to old men. Hence, for Anndurai and others, the sense of betrayal was intense and deeply-felt. Moreover, as long-time activists alongside Periyar in the cause of social reform, they were shocked and saddened by Periyar’s statement that he trusted no one in the Party to carry on his ideals and that therefore he was nominating Maniammai as his heir both in personal matters and for the leadership of the Party. Consequently, they demanded that Periyar cancel his marriage plans and retract the allegations he had cast on long-time activists of the Party. Otherwise, they would have no choice but to leave the DK and start their own Party, for under existing circumstances it would be impossible for them to continue to accept Periyar as their leader and serve the Party without being regarded as hypocrites by the people.

In response to this criticism, Periyar and his supporters defended the marriage as a personal matter that did not flout the principles of the Self-Respect movement or of Periyar

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108 *Dravidanadu*, 3, 7, 10 and 17 July 1949.
himself. They claimed that Periyar condemned marriages between younger women and older men when they involved very young girls because implicit in them was the element of coercion or lack of choice. When judged by these criteria, Periyar’s marriage was not hypocritical for Maniammai was neither a young girl – she was an adult woman in her thirties – nor coerced – she had a choice, for she had chosen to remain unmarried for so long.  While this explanation was technically sound, the recourse to the notion that marriage as a private matter was disingenuous. After all, the issue at stake – marriage – was the crucial site upon which Periyar and his Movement had mounted their most powerful critique of caste, religion, and patriarchy. Marriage, far from being a private matter, occupied center-stage in the discourse and activities of the Movement, exemplifying most dramatically that the personal is indeed political. Periyar, in fact, recognized the political implications of his marriage. Anticipating the criticism, he provided a detailed explanation of the process and events that led to his decision to marry Maniammai on 9 July 1949.

Sami Chidambaranar, the Tamil scholar and long-time activist of the Self-Respect movement who wrote a biography of Periyar in 1931, published one of the most interesting and emphatic defenses of Periyar’s marriage. In hailing Periyar’s marriage with Maniammai as a revolutionary act, he sought to highlight the one quality that made Periyar a great revolutionary but a poor politician – his uncompromising nature that cared nothing for fame, notoriety, criticism or praise. For Chidambaranar, Periyar’s marriage with Maniammai in the face of severe condemnation and possible political fallout underscored this quality. His political differences with Periyar notwithstanding, he reiterated that he had no disagreements whatsoever

109 Kudi Arasu, 16 and 23 July 1949; Viduthalai, 13, 17, 19, 21, 25 July and 4, 14, 17 and 18 August 1949.

110 Viduthalai, 19 and 28 June 1949.
with Periyar on social reform. Considering that the Periyar-Maniammai marriage provided the proximate cause for DK members who had for some years disagreed with Periyar’s politics to leave the Party to found the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in October 1949 under the leadership of Annadurai, Chidambaranar’s defence exemplified a different response to the event. In lauding as revolutionary what was condemned as a retrograde act, Chidambaranar shifted the focus away from what it signified regarding Periyar’s commitment to improving women’s status to what it demonstrated about Periyar’s personal qualities. He also did not speak to what the critics considered as Periyar’s autocratic leadership and his mistrust of Party members. An admirer of Periyar, he did not let his political differences with him blind him to what he saw as a revolutionary act, which begs the question as to what was revolutionary about the Periyar-Maniammai marriage. Certainly, an older man marrying a younger woman was not revolutionary. That Periyar committed this act could not have been revolutionary, particularly given that he was the most radical proponent of women’s freedom during the 1920s and 1930s. In fact, it could only have been construed as reneging on his principles. Perhaps Chidambaranar considered the possibility that Periyar, more than anyone else, would have been acutely aware of the potential implications of his marriage, and that therefore his decision to marry Maniammai could only mean that it was the right decision for him, the DK and possibly Maniammai. More importantly perhaps he sought to respond to the critics by emphasizing that this one act did not diminish Periyar’s status as a social revolutionary.

Writing in defense of Periyar’s marriage, C.R. Visalakshmi argued that by all accounts it was a marriage of choice entered into by two adults who were well aware of how it could be construed by their critics.\footnote{Kudi Arasu, 13 August 1949, pp. 11-12.} Therefore, while Maniammai entered into this marriage out of her
love, regard, and respect for the “old lion who walked haltingly with the help of a cane”, Periyar acted on his ideals by choosing her as heir to his property and to his post within the organization. Thus, Visalakshmi found the critics wanting when it came to acting on their discourse on women’s rights. She thus deftly turned the critics’ argument that Periyar had ‘turned the clock back’ on women’s progress by his marriage. In doing so, she asserted the public-political nature of Periyar’s marriage that further cemented his stature as a true revolutionary in the mould of Socrates, Marx and Lenin. Possibly referring to Annadurai, she argued that the ability to write well might make one a ‘Shakespeare’ but not a revolutionary, thus paying tribute to his writing skill while warning people to not be carried away by the power of his words and recognize the underlying hypocrisy of his criticism. Visalaksmi’s response can be construed as feminist in that she accorded agency, however speculative, to Maniammai and underscored the political and economic power she accrued over longtime male activists through this marriage.

It was only fitting that the ‘women’s question’ as manifested in the Periyar-Maniammai marriage became the catalyst for a crucial turning point in the politics of Madras State (later Tamilnadu) when in 1967 the DMK won elections to the state legislature and formed the government 1967 inaugurating the domination of Dravidian parties in the politics of the state. That Periyar, an uncompromising critique of patriarchy, marriage, the site of the Self-Respect Movement’s most radical reforms, and mismatched ages of bride and groom, often the target of Self-Respect critique, were the major participants in this drama was, as they say, poetic justice.

This chapter has argued the position that nationalism is detrimental to feminism by demonstrating the same in the case of the gendered articulation of Tamil nationalism. While feminism germinated in the soil of anti-colonial nationalism and hence was intricately connected to it, often endorsing national independence from a colonial power as the primary goal, the
radical gender politics of the Self-Respect movement emerged prior to and independent of the specific form of Tamil nationalism that the compulsory Hindi policy engendered in the Madras presidency. Feminism’s imbrication in the anti-colonial nationalist project was a natural corollary of its mode of emergence and evolution, and hence postcolonial feminism’s skepticism of nationalism’s liberatory potential for women. The Self-Respect movement’s radical gender politics was only tangentially related to anti-colonial nationalism. While the specific form of the encounter between Brahmins and non-Brahmins that manifested in the Dravidian movement and its various strands was a product of British colonialism, the Self-Respect movement eschewed all ties to the Congress variety of nationalism and directly attacked the Hindu religion and its caste system. This challenge to anti-colonial Indian nationalism afforded a space for a radical critique of caste-bound patriarchy that was conspicuous by its absence in the feminism that was tied to nationalism. However, this radical critique of gender relations became submerged in the discourse of Tamil nationalism in the late 1930s. Thus, women had more to lose in this case than in the feminism tied to anti-colonial nationalism where its subordinate status was a constituent element. This chapter has highlighted the sharp disjuncture from the earlier period that Tamil nationalism entailed for women. It sets in vivid contrast the period from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s when the Movement brooked no compromise in challenging patriarchy.

**Women and Post-Colonial Tamil Nationalism**

The gendered politics of Tamil identity inaugurated during the anti-Hindi protests manifested itself in the post-independent period in several ways. As feminist theorists have argued, gender has been crucial to the articulation of nationalist projects both in the colonial and
post-colonial period. Women are constructed as biological, cultural, and symbolic producers of nations and hence their behavior, especially sexual behavior, is a matter of national concern. Cinema provides an apt and key site for the interrogation of gender, given the close, almost inextricable link, between Tamil cinema and politics from the late 1930s, the formative years of Tamil nationalism. To state certain well-known facts, C.N. Annadurai, the first Dravidian chief-minister of the state, M.G. Ramachandran (popularly known as MGR) and J. Jayalalitha, both two-term chief-ministers, and M. Karunanidhi, currently serving his fourth term as chief-minister, were intimately connected to cinema. While Annadurai and Karunanidhi were script-writers for movies, MGR and Jayalalitha were popular movie actors, with the former’s iconic status in Tamil cinematic lore well-acknowledged. In fact, the political and cinematic images of MGR, the enormously popular film star turned politician, cannot be meaningfully separated.

The symbol of woman as mother was successfully deployed in Tamil cinema which created culturally acceptable female subject positions through its portrayal of women in stark contrasts such as good vs. bad, pure vs. impure, traditional vs. modern. The pure, chaste,

113 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, chapters 2 & 3.
114 Puri, *Countering Nationalism*, chapter 3.
good, traditional woman is held up as the ideal Tamil woman who finds her ultimate fulfillment when she marries the hero, the quintessential Tamil man. C. S. Lakshmi points out that:

Good and bad women, in clear black and white divides, have been the obsession of Tamil cinema in a way. Not only are their physical features different but even their language, dress and body structures are different. The good woman embodies all that Tamil culture stands for where women are concerned. She is chaste, intelligent, motherly, and divine. The bad woman is a coquette, a temptress and a loudmouth who finally get her dues. Built into these oppositional black and white portraits are complicated symbols like the thali, turmeric, kumkum and widow-white. That is how the basic ground plan is drawn.\(^\text{118}\)

This “basic ground plan”, argues Sathiavathi Chinniah, has remained intact even though the portrayal of the heroine has undergone considerable change over the last decade or so,\(^\text{119}\) suggesting a superficial rather than a deeper shift in conceptions of womanhood. According to Chinniah:

From having been the traditional, sari-clad, docile protagonist of early Tamil cinema, representative of a ‘passive subject’, the kata-nayaki [heroine] has become a modern, scantily clad, mischievous woman, indicative of a ‘pleasurable object’. Despite this transformation, the secondary position assigned to the kata-nayaki continues especially with the overt emphasis on chastity or karpu…In fact, this attribute is used as a device to ensure that the Tamil film kata-nayaki, whether assigned the role of a passive subject or pleasurable, remains entrapped within cultural notions of womanhood constructed by the patriarchal order in Tamil society.\(^\text{120}\)

Both Lakshmi and Chinniah argue that even ‘realistic’ cinema which are supposed to depict real women and many of which have women as the central protagonists and ‘bold’ themes ultimately reinforce dominant patriarchal ideals.

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\(^{119}\) Sathiavathi Chinniah, “The Tamil Film Heroine: From a Passive Subject to a Pleasurable Object,” in Ibid, pp. 29-43.

\(^{120}\) Ibid, p. 29.
The glorification of Kannagi by the DMK is another instance of the cultural nationalist intent of Tamil identity politics in post-independent India. “Valorized as the epitome of chastity and Tamil female valour,”\textsuperscript{121} Kannagi’s statue, along with those of nine writers and scholars, was unveiled in Chennai during the Second International Tamil Conference in December 1968 amidst great pomp and splendor with tens of thousands of people in attendance. With one hand holding the anklet and the other hand stretched out in a gesture of pointing, the statue captures a pivotal moment in the epic when Kannagi demands justice in the Pandya king’s court for the wrongful accusations conviction, and death of her husband, Kovalan. This and her subsequent act of burning the city of Madurai in wronged rage have been the source of much glorification in the discourse of Tamil nationalism as evidenced in Thamaraikanni Ammayar’s address at the Tamilnadu Women’s Conference. Although her act of challenging a king and demanding justice is considered a testimony to a woman’s courage when provoked, its source is attributed to her chastity as manifested in her steadfast devotion to an unfaithful husband. This is a significant departure from the discourse of the Self-Respect movement which criticized Tamil literary classics such as \textit{Silappadhikaaram} for promoting inequalities between men and women and resisted glorifying women as bearers of an authentic Tamil identity.\textsuperscript{122} This act is also seen as testimony to a pre-Aryan Tamil past when an ordinary subject could challenge a king, an act as a result of which a contrite king falls dead unable to bear the enormous injustice of his action.

More recently, the controversy over the sudden, unexplained disappearance of her statue form the beachfront in Chennai in December 2001 during the Jayalalitha’s term as chief minister


\textsuperscript{122}M.S.S. Pandian, \textit{Brahmin and Non-Brahmin}, p. 225.
reveals a pluralistic discourse about Kannagi’s significance for Tamils. While some considered the installation of her statue as the DMK’s attempt to divest Kannagi of her divinity in keeping with its rationalist credentials. Others, particularly some residents of Triplicane, a neighborhood toward which the statue’s outstretched hands pointed, saw it as negatively impacting the prosperity of the community. Nevertheless, the DMK used the opportunity to affirm its Tamil nationalist credentials. For example, Karunanidhi described the removal as a “challenge to the Tamil pride” and called on “self-respecting” Tamils to protest this defiling of Tamil culture, dignity, and tradition, a rhetoric that received support from many Tamil scholars and writers and led to a series of protests. In her analysis of Parasakthi (1952), a film which represents the first significant attempt by the DMK to utilize cinema for political ends with dialogues penned by Karunanidhi and which was a huge box-office success, C.S. Lakshmi argues that the symbol of Kannagi is invoked in the film through the two main female characters – the heroine and the hero’s sister. Referring to a dialogue by the heroine, who is presented as a woman with a strong, independent mind and who delivers monologues on social revolution, Lakshmi attests that:

The ‘new ‘ woman is bold enough to hold her man’s hand casually, call him by his name and address him in the singular, and even intersperse her conversation with English. But her monologue when the hero leaves her looking for his sister without taking proper leave of her, is to wonder if her left her because she was an idealist. An idealist does not have to be a Manimekalai (the one who becomes a saint) but can be a Kannagi, she says. That particular monologue is a crucial one in terms of attitudes towards women, for it clearly points out that Kannagi is still the model to follow. Chastity is a yardstick that even the


124 Kannagi is deified and worshipped as a goddess in some parts of Tamilnadu as well as in Kerala and Sri Lanka.

125 Pandian, *Void and Memory*.

so-called radicals are not in a great haste to abandon. In fact, the character of the sister is built around this notion….The ‘new’ woman who aspires to be a Kannagi is not really different, except that she speaks at times a different language.  

This DMK appropriation of Kannagi’s significance for Tamil society attests to the notion of nations and nationalisms as “invented tradition” wherein political elites selectively appropriate and manipulate popular symbols for their political ends.

These conflicting claims to symbols of womanhood, argues Christine Keating, are also evident in Jayalaiitha’s deployment of them in her political campaigns. On the one hand she realizes the liabilities that come with being a woman, particularly a woman in politics but on the other hand she does not hesitate to use cultural nationalist symbols to win elections by portraying herself as a mother figure, as chaste woman, and as loyal to her man. Although single, she portrayed herself as most deserving of MGR’s mantle as leader of the AIADMK over and above the claims of his wife, Janaki. As a woman and as a Brahmin, she both challenged and reproduced the subject position allowed to her by Tamil nationalist discourse. Similarly, in her ethnographic study of leaders of POWER, a women’s organization dedicated to Periyar’s ideology in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, George Glynis found that family and caste remained dominant in these women’s lives. They had to negotiate within the circumscribed spaces that such institutions offered for their freedom and liberation, in the process both challenging and underscoring traditions and customs.


When seen in the context of the increasingly masculinist discourse of Tamil identity as represented in the feminization of language, the creation of acceptable female subjects – chaste, pure, good, and traditional - in films, and the glorification of chastity and fidelity through the figure of Kannagi, the more recent furor surrounding Tamil actress Khushboo’s opinions on female sexuality and premarital sex is merely another addition to the construction of retrogressive female stereotypes. Khushboo, a popular Tamil film actress, was quoted in the September 2005 issue of India Today’s Tamil edition on the topic of changing sexual attitudes. She emphasized the importance of safe sex for young girls indulging in pre-marital sex and sharply criticized the cultural premium placed on women’s chastity pointing out that “no man will expect his wife to be a virgin at the time of marriage.”

What protestors found unacceptable was her reference to female virginity as an impractical expectation in marriage today. Since control of female sexuality is crucial to nationalist projects which are almost always construed in masculine terms, even a hint of the possibility of sex outside marriage undermines the honor of the nation (read men). Under the auspices of the Tamil Protection Movement, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) and the


133 The PMK is based among the Vanniyars, a lower-caste group in South India, currently categorized under the OBCs (Other Backward Castes). Its founder and leader S. Ramadoss has articulated the demand for creating a separate state out of the Vanniyar-dominated northern districts of Tamil Nadu. Source: http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1917/19170400.htm (accessed on 31 January 2011).

Muventhar Munnetra Kazhagam (MMK)\textsuperscript{135} took to the streets to protest Khushboo’s remarks, causing many observers to express surprise at a Dalit organization chose to align itself with a Tamil nationalist cause, given that it has colluded with caste hierarchy and privileges.\textsuperscript{136} But like the DMK earlier, these groups, in their attempt to reach out to groups outside their base in Tamil society for political gains, have found it necessary to embrace a pan-Tamil identity with all its symbols. Notwithstanding the fact that Khushboo made no reference whatsoever to Tamils or Tamil women, Thol Thirumalavan, the leader of the DPI, called her an “immoral woman” and castigated her for “hurting the sentiments and lowering the dignity of Tamil women.”\textsuperscript{137} A few months later, in August 2006, the PMK rekindled the issue when it challenged Khushboo’s suitability to play the role of Maniammai, Periyar’s second wife, in a movie. It claimed that she was unworthy of playing this role since she had demeaned Tamil women through her remarks on chastity, little realizing that Khushboo’s remarks pale in comparison to Periyar’s radical views on women expressed in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{138} In fact, it is a willful misrepresentation of Self-Respect ideology in order to (re-) establish a unified, homogenized Tamil identity. Thus, construction of identities is an on-going process and not a one-time occurrence.

\textsuperscript{135} A party of the Thevars, a dominant ‘Backward Caste’ of the southern districts of Tamilnadu.


\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.

Conclusion

This analysis of the history of the construction of Tamil/Dravidian identity over the past century bears testimony to the argument that Tamil/Dravidian women have been increasingly scripted in ways comparable to women’s roles in the wider nationalist project. As George argues

[O]ver time, women have been subsumed in the expression of Tamil regionalist identity in the political arena and in dominant cultural representations, such as Tamil films, particularly those conveying nationalist themes. In this regard they are depicted as elsewhere in dominant nation-building discourses in India, according to conventional, normative gender scripts. Women’s roles as mothers, as good observers of family planning, or as goddesses signify the celebration of chastity, purity and feminine self-sacrifice to the service of regional social and political exigencies.\(^{139}\)

Thus, while Periyar and the Self-Respect movement reconfigured notions of womanhood in the interests of constructing an anti-Brahmin identity, their political successors reconfigured notions of womanhood in the interests of creating an undifferentiated, unified, homogenous Tamil identity. While the Self-Respect critique addressed the caste-bound patriarchy of Brahminism and therefore had great liberatory potential for women, the construction of identity based on Tamilness circumscribed women’s roles by trapping them within a discourse of chastity and purity. Tamil nationalism, like its counterpart on the national stage, ultimately came to be established through the symbolic appropriations of the images of the feminine.

\(^{139}\) Glynis George, “‘Four Makes Society’,” p. 519.
Epilogue

The More Things Change, The More They Remain the Same

The politics of the Dravidian movement, manifested through its different strands such as the Justice Party, the Pure Tamil Movement, the Self-Respect movement, the DK, DMK, and AIADMK, has been variously eulogized, debunked, exploited, and ridiculed over the course of the last nine decades. This dissertation has underscored the Self-Respect movement during the 1920s and 1930s as the most progressive strand of the Dravidian movement. It has provided a historically contingent perspective on why and how at a particular moment and in a particular region in colonial India a space was created for a radical articulation of caste and gender. Consequently, it has challenged three dominant trends in the writing of the history of women and social reform in modern India. In highlighting the forms of women’s participation in the Self-Respect movement’s crusade for social reform, it has moved away from the women-as-objects-of-social-reform model of historical analysis. In foregrounding the discourse and activities of women and about women in the Movement, it has unsettled the nationalist-women-as-chief-articulators-of-women’s-reform model of feminist history writing. In providing a region-specific focus on activism in the cause of women’s reform, it has underscored the diversity of experience under colonialism and dislodged Bengal-as-the-norm model of colonial history writing. In all three cases, it has built on earlier scholarship that has complicated our knowledge and understanding of the women’s question in colonial India. It has engaged with the feminist

140 In her pioneering work, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), Padma Anagol provides a regional perspective on the development of feminist consciousness in western India in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

141 Here, I refer to the scholarship of Tanika Sarkar, Mrinalini Sinha, Anshu Malhotra, Charu Gupta, Prem Choudhry, and Lata Mani, to name a few.
question of why colonial social legislation focused on the practices pertaining to women’s sexual behavior.

In consonance with more recent feminist interventions that have explored female agency, this dissertation has demonstrated the strategies, accommodations, and negotiations of women in a male-dominated world. As a corollary, it has engaged with gender history and emphasized the socially constructed nature of femininity and masculinity. It has deployed a postcolonial feminist perspective that refutes the construction of women as a homogenous group undifferentiated by region, caste, class, race, and ethnicity - a construction that has had the twin effect of (at best) regarding Third-World women as undifferentiated victims of patriarchy and (at worst) erasing through cooption their different histories and experiences. Consequently, this dissertation contributes to the feminist unsettlement of conventional narratives that posited an incremental process of social enlightenment for women as manifested in the volume of social reform pertaining to women in colonial India. The Self-Respect movement’s discourse and action on women’s reform unraveled the consonance between Victorian sexual puritanism and Indian liberal reformism and sought to establish a radically different sexual order. In this sense, the Movement’s intervention in the debate on women’s reform was feminist. However, my analysis has also highlighted the dilution of this radical vision by the Dravidian parties that claim allegiance to Periyar and the Self-Respect movement.

Another implicit theme in the foregoing analysis has been the relationship between discourse and identity or the extent to which identity is shaped by material reality and discursive construction. A primary focus has been group identity and the politics that ensues from it. The

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debate about group identity ranges from whether it is primarily manipulated/constructed by a small group of elites, whether it is a manifestation of an internal, self-aware, self-identified, and self-defined solidarity or whether it is a combination of the two resulting from a dialectic between elite manipulation and self-awareness internal to the group.\(^\text{143}\) This analysis claimed the latter notion as most useful and appealing for its recognition of both agency and manipulation in theforegrounding of certain identities at certain historical junctures. Politics of such identity-foregrounding are usually based on the argument that members of a putatively oppressed group can/should use their identity as a source of collective resistance to their commonly felt oppression. The politics of Tamil/Dravidian identity, like any politics of identity that consciously manipulates traditions in the cause of identity construction, exhibited both progressive and retrogressive tendencies.\(^\text{144}\) This analysis has explored the key historical shifts in the discourse of this identity politics to underscore its increasingly masculinist discourse. In the 1920s and 1930s, the paths of this regional movement and the larger nationalist movement diverged on the question of gender and caste. From the 1940s, these paths began to converge as the demands of electoral politics resulted in “ideological compromises and propagation of socially retrogressive stereotypes, including that of women.”\(^\text{145}\)

Although electoral politics, success in which depends on appealing to the lowest common denominator, has been a key factor in this compromise, we need to consider if the Movement’s vision for women’s freedom was so radical that it had little, if any, chance of having a deep,


lasting impact. The irony is that while on the one hand only such a radical probing of the fundamental beliefs that informed both the reformist impulses and the practices that were targeted by them could alter women’s condition so as to transcend the limits of liberal reformism, on the other hand implicit in this vision was the very real possibility for its rejection or at least its attenuation, given the millennia-old beliefs and practices that mitigate against it. It gives us pause as to whether reform that recognizes and takes into account some of these beliefs and practices rather than that which rejects them completely is a more practical strategy. So while the prohibition of sati and female infanticide, the raising of the ages of consent and marriage, and the legalization of widow marriage may not have challenged endemic beliefs about women, they did target those practices that severely debilitated women. Therefore, we cannot discount the fact that it was the realization of the limits of radical reform that influenced Periyar’s decision to retain the Self-Respect movement and later the Dravidar Kazhagam as a social reform organization eschewing electoral politics unwilling as he was to make the compromises necessary for success in it. This is not to say that the Dravidian parties that have dominated the politics of Tamil Nadu in the last four decades and that profess loyalty to the Movement made no effort to incorporate its goals within their program. For example, Annadurai legalized Self-Respect marriages during his tenure as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1967 to 1969. This dissertation has not dealt with the fate of these marriages after the legalization. Did the conferring of legal status on these marriages make them any more popular and acceptable,

146 The limited success of these measures in making a more fundamental impact on women’s lives raises the question of whether the language of rights alone is effective in the Indian context. In her study of the All-Women Police Stations established in Chennai in 1992 to address the issue of domestic violence, Mangai Natarajan argues that western models of integration which emphasize that women can and should be able to do the exact same things as men should not be imposed on traditional societies. According to her, these women’s police stations have been a great success precisely because they work on the principle of equal but different. They have been a boon both for the women police who found themselves discriminated against with little hope for career advancement and for the women who were reluctant to report domestic violence. As a result, over the last two decades, recruitment of women police has increased as has the reportage of domestic violence. See Women Police in a Changing Society: Back Door to Equality (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), Chapter 6.
and thereby bring them into the mainstream of society? Or did it make them seem more deviant?

Or did legalization serve to replace the public-political nature of these marriages? What has been the nature and frequency of Self-Marriages post-legalization? These would be key questions to consider in evaluating the long-term impact of this most crucial site upon which the Movement enacted its crusade for radical reform of caste and gender.

In Tamil Nadu, concrete measures to improve women’s status have existed alongside the construction of women as symbolic signifiers of Tamilness. Tamilnadu has an enviable record, next only to Kerala, on a number of developmental indices such as education, sex ratio, fertility, and maternal health.147 Scholars have attested to the legacy of the Self-Respect movement or at least to the role of the Dravidian parties’ professed loyalty to the Movement’s goals in the state’s distinctive record on social welfare.148 However, they have also pointed out that these successes have masked endemic beliefs and practices that continue to disadvantage women and girls.149

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149 Debarchana Ghosh, “Predicting Vulnerability of Indian Women to Domestic Incidents,” Research and Practice in Social Sciences, Vol. 3, No. 1, August 2007, pp. 48-72. Ghosh points to Tamil Nadu as showing the highest prevalence of domestic violence with 41 percent of the women reporting incidents since the age of 15 years. Of course, lower rates of reportage in other states do not directly translate to lower incidence of domestic violence, although this fact only exacerbates the situation in Tamil Nadu pointing to the possibility of a higher than the reported rate in the actual incidence of domestic violence in the state. Also, as Natarajan has noted (fn. 7), the higher reportage of domestic violence is attributable to the existence of All-Women’s Police Stations in Tamil Nadu. Without specifically analyzing the case of Tamil Nadu, Ghosh identifies general risk factors for vulnerability to domestic violence such as household standard of living index, husband’s education level, marital duration, women’s status of work, women’s educational level, number of children ever born, and husband’s work status. At least on three of these risk indicators educational level of both men and women and fertility, we can see the discrepancy between the state’s much-lauded success and women’s right to a violence-free life; Jasmin Helen Prasad, Sulochana Abraham, Kathleen M. Kurz, Valentina George, M.K. Lalitha, Renu John, M. N. R. Jayapaul, Nandini Shetty and
For example, the state comparatively much-lauded lower rates of fertility have failed to address the traditional preference for sons. This has resulted in a negative trade-off as far as girls are concerned between the number and gender of children. These findings have thus complicated the picture of Tamil women’s relatively higher status and greater autonomy and suggest a cautionary note about the state’s failure to address social issues such as dowry. A simplistic rendering of the state’s success story on developmental indices militates against the more recent increase in a class-specific form of girl child mortality in certain regions and villages among landed households, thus signifying an inverse relationship between land accumulation and female status. While not universal across the state, this finding demands a critical reexamination of the complex of factors that impinge upon women’s status and a readjustment or revamping of the state’s social welfare initiatives.

The Self-Respect movement’s radical vision and progressive philosophy has had a variable impact on the social fabric of Tamilnadu. In the matter of unsettling Brahmins from the exalted position they held in Tamil society, the Movement’s impact has been lasting. In the matter of women’s equality and rights, the success has, in the most positive analysis, been mixed. One can argue that the modern Tamil woman has gained little from the sweeping reforms that the Movement advocated. The modern Tamil woman, while gaining from the redistribute policies of social welfare, continues to struggle with her devaluation in a patriarchal society. True liberation for women is possible only when they are equally valued as members of

Abraham Joseph, “Reproductive Tract Infections Among Young Married Women in Tamil Nadu, India,” International Family Planning Perspectives, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 73-82. The authors attribute the low rates of treatment for these conditions to the low social status of women, particularly young married women in their husbands’ household and community.

150 Harriss-White, Gender Cleansing, p. 148.

151 Ibid, p. 127.
family, community, and society. The Self-Respect movement offered a program to enable this goal, even if only for a brief period.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adi-Dravida</td>
<td>original inhabitant of the Dravidian land</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>the highest of the four varnas in Hinduism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chettiar</td>
<td>a predominant trading caste group in southern India</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devadasi</td>
<td>‘female servant of the god’ dedicated to Hindu temples and married to Hindu deities whom she served through singing, dancing and performing other ritual duties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dharma</td>
<td>the principle or law that orders the universe; individual conduct in conformity with this principle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dravidian</td>
<td>pre-Aryan peoples of southern India who speak one of the Dravidian languages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kanyadaan</td>
<td>gift of the virgin girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khadi</td>
<td>coarse, handspun, cotton cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kshatriya</td>
<td>one of the four varnas in Hinduism comprising warriors and rulers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudaliar</td>
<td>a Vellala subcaste dominant in northern Tamilnadu</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puranas</td>
<td>popular narratives of myth, legend, and genealogy composed in Sanskrit varying greatly as to date and origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramayana</td>
<td>one of the two great Hindu epic poems composed in Sanskrit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryot</td>
<td>peasant cultivator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanskrit</td>
<td>the primary liturgical language of Hinduism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sati</td>
<td>ritual immolation of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaivism</td>
<td>Hindu devotional sect that reveres Shiva as the Supreme Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shastras</td>
<td>treatises written to explain some idea, particularly in matters involving religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiva</td>
<td>destroyer/transformer god in the Hindu Trinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smriti</td>
<td>body of Hindu scriptures that propound on the rules of dharma and include the puranas and the epics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sudra
one of the four Hindu varnas comprising laborers and artisans

Swaraj
self-rule

Tamil
one of the four main Dravidian languages spoken in southern India

Thali
a necklace worn by women to denote their married status

Upanayana
ceremony that invests the upper-caste Hindu male with the sacred thread and confers on him the right to read the Vedas and become a full-fledged member of the religious community

Upanishads:
Interpretive commentaries on the Vedas containing sophisticated and sublime philosophical ideas, composed from c. 800 to 400 BCE.

Vaishnavism
Hindu devotional sect that considers Vishnu the original and sole Supreme Being.

Vaishya
one of the four Hindu varnas comprising merchants and farmers

Varna
any one of the four traditional social classes in Hinduism

Vedas
four collections of hymns dating from c. 1500 to 800 B.C.E. that constitute the oldest and most sacred of Hindu religious texts

Vellala
traditional landowning caste in southern India

Vishnu
preserver god of the Hindu Trinity
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Simon Collection
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Willingdon Collection

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Appendix

British India, 1909
Linguistic Map of the Madras Presidency, 1913
Periyar E.V.Ramasami

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
First Issue of the *Kudi Arasu*, the Movement’s Flagship Periodical published from Erode in Western Madras Presidency

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
Maragathavalli and Murugappa

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
Kunjitham and Sami Chidambaramar

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai

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Neelavathi and Ramasubramaniam

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
“Rajagopalachari Hurls the Knife of Hindi at Mother Tamil”, Cartoon, Viduthalai, 18 May 1938

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
“The Disrobing of Mother Tamil by Rajagopalachari”, Cartoon, *Kudi Arasu*, 19 December 1937

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
Periyar with Jinnah (center) and Ambedkar (far right)

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai
Mother Tamil paying homage to Periyar

“Tamil Land is drowned in sorrow due to the death of Periyar EVR”

Cartoon from the Daily Thanthi, 27 December, 1973

Courtesy: Periyar Library and Research Center, Chennai