

# MADRAS PRESIDENCY WOMEN IN THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT

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“You must be the change you wish to see in the world” – M.K. Gandhi.  
“Woman is more fitted than man to make exploration and take bolder action in nonviolence. There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to man. Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacity. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with women.” (M.K. Gandhi)

This paper profiles the participation of women, including student activists, who followed Mahatma Gandhi's lead by participating in the Quit India Movement. The Quit India Movement was followed by the INA (Indian National Army) activities of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and the RIN (Royal Indian Navy) Mutiny which further weakened the foundation of the British Empire in India. Captain Lakshmi Sehgal of Madras was an associate and Commander of the INA's Rani Jhansi regiment. During this period, women extended the discipline and sacrifice of their homes to the nation as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Women in the early 1940s seem to have wanted to prove Gandhi right.

### **The Quit India Movement**

‘Quit India’, ‘Bharat Chhodo’. This simple but powerful slogan launched the legendary struggle in response to Gandhi's call for immediate independence, which also became famous by the name of the ‘August Revolution.’ It was a civil disobedience movement in which, the common people of the country demonstrated an unparalleled heroism and militancy.<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi, in his Quit India speech on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1942, called for a determined, but non-violent resistance. He gave the call “Do or Die”. Congress Leaders like Kamaraj, who was the Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency at that time, Sathyamurthi. S, Muthuranga Mudhaliar, M. Bhakthavatsalam and 30 others from Madras, went to the Gowalia Tank Maidan (Bombay) where the speech was held. Nehru also spoke about the importance of the movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Thapar-Bjorkert, Suruchi. *Women in the Indian Nationalist Movement*. Page 261.

<sup>2</sup> Chandra, Bipan. 1989. *India's Struggle For Independence*. Page 457.

The next day, while the delegation was returning by train, they were informed about the police waiting in the stations for their arrest. This alerted Kamaraj, who decided to get himself arrested only after the arrangements for the August revolution was made in all districts. He disguised himself as a villager and carried with him a bundle which contained important documents about the movement. Along with K.R. Kalyana Rama Iyer, he planned to spread the movement in all districts.

The British responded by declaring Congress an unlawful body and arresting Congressmen all over India. The arrests were a signal for the outbreak of uprising everywhere in the Presidency as elsewhere in India, in which violence was freely intermingled with non-violence paralysing the administration.<sup>3</sup>

During the Quit India movement, the situation in the Presidency worsened because Rajaji had resigned from the Congress and he objected to the Quit India movement. This decision baffled many in the south.<sup>4</sup> The lack of able leadership in the South provoked the students to join the movement. College students abstained from classes. Throughout the movement, the students of Loyola, Christian, Presidency and other engineering colleges figured prominently in staging demonstrations, obstructing electric trains, braving lathi charges and whipping and courting imprisonments. Students of Loyola and Pachaiyappa's colleges agitated by throwing stones at the police and were dispersed by lathi charge. On 12<sup>th</sup> August 1942, Mohan Kumaramangalam asked students of the Presidency College to call off the strike. The students, however, passed a resolution to continue the strike.

In the Annamalai University, students hailing from various linguistic regions conducted meetings protesting against the arrest of Gandhi and delivered powerful speeches in their respective mother tongues. Women students also took part in the protests. Students of Queen Mary's college observed hartals and led processions shouting "Quit India" slogans until they were dispersed by the

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<sup>3</sup> Sundararaja, Saroja.1989. *March to Freedom in Madras Presidency, 1916-1947*. Page 602

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi, Rajmohan.1997. *Rajaji, A Life*. Page 237

police. The director of public instruction issued a circular asking heads of educational institutions to report to him the daily attendance class-wise until normal attendance was restored and also any demonstration by students in their institutions.<sup>5</sup>

### **Participation of women in the movement**

The nationalist movement as led by Gandhi was based on non-violence. Metaphorically the streets were viewed as moral battlefields and this ideology guided women to step over the thresholds of their homes. During the quit India movement in the 1940s, 20 years after the non-cooperation movement and 10 years past civil disobedience, more women came forward to participate because of the precedence in the past two decades.<sup>6</sup>

When most of the men-folk were in prison, women came forward to take charge of the struggle. Mahatma Gandhi remarked: “When the history of India’s fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place.”

Uneducated and educated women sacrificed time and materials, volunteering, campaigning, protesting, fasting, and donating to the causes of freedom. Women's early contribution to the national movement started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with women's participation in the Indian National Congress. Their nature of struggle was not just non-violent, but also included armed movement. Some women students protested against the British rule by picketing the Secretariat.

The long list of women who participated in the quit India movement, some of whom also championed women’s rights, includes:

- ✧ Lakshmi Menon, who was to become Nehru's Deputy Minister for External Affairs;
- ✧ Ammu Swaminathan, who was the first woman worker of Madras Congress and also a cousin of  
A. V. Kuttimalu Amma (featured below);

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<sup>5</sup> Sundararaja, Saroja.1989. *March to Freedom in Madras Presidency, 1916-1947*. Page 602.

<sup>6</sup> Thapar-Bjokert, Suruchi. 2006. *Women in the Indian Nationalist Movement*. Page 92.

- ✧ S. Manjubhashini who along with Ammu Swaminathan organised strikes when other important leaders were arrested. Both were arrested and detained under Rule 20 of the Defense of India Rules.<sup>7</sup>
- ✧ Dr. Rukmani Lakshmipathi;
- ✧ Durgabai Deshmukh, a lawyer by training, who established the Andhra Mahila Sabha which grew into a complex of institutions, hospitals/training schools, working women's hostels;<sup>8</sup>
- ✧ Mrs. A. C. Krishna Rao who founded the Seva Mandir;
- ✧ Ammanna Raja, who later became the Deputy Speaker of the Assembly;
- ✧ Duvvuri Subbamma, a follower of Gandhi, who broke social restrictions and participated in the movement, inspiring other women;<sup>9</sup>
- ✧ Saraswathi Pandurangan from Royapuram;
- ✧ Vai Mu Kodainayaki of Triplicane, the writer who also sang songs about freedom;
- ✧ Sarojini Naidu, poet and freedom fighter;
- ✧ Anjali Ammal, a social worker and reformer;
- ✧ Rajam Bharati of Purusawalkam, who later became a Municipal Councillor;
- ✧ Ambujammal, daughter of S. Srinivasa Aiyangar, who founded the Srinivasa Gandhi Nilayam and chaired the State Social Welfare Board;
- ✧ Krishnabai Nimbakar, a doctor who was part of the underground movement in the 1940s
- ✧ Hemlata Shenolikar and Gulvadi, who entered the district courts and hoisted the tri-colour on the judge's seat in Dharawar (Karnataka) on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1942.<sup>10</sup>
- ✧ K.B. Sundarambal, the first stage and screen star to become a member of the State Legislature.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sundararaja, Saroja.1989. *March to Freedom in Madras Presidency, 1916-1947*. Page 608.

<sup>8</sup> Thapar-Bjokert, Suruchi. 2006. *Women in the Indian Nationalist Movement*. Page 57.

<sup>9</sup> Thapar-Bjokert, Suruchi.2006. *Women in the Indian Nationalist Movement*. Page 57.

<sup>10</sup> Taneja, Anup. 2005. *Gandhi, Women, and the National Movement, 1920-47*.

<sup>11</sup>Muthaiah, S. 2004. Women Freedom Fighters. *The Hindu*.. December 13.

## Profiles

### *A.V. Kuttimalu Amma*

A.V. Kuttimalu Amma actively participated in all movements of the Congress in Kerala. She was an advocate of khadi who led batches of women picketing foreign cloth shops during the Swadeshi movement. During the Quit India movement, the government had banned the Malayalam newspaper *Mathrubhumi* for publishing a feature on European soldiers' misbehaving with women in Kochi. Amma led a procession of women, holding her 2-month-old baby in her arms, breaking the ban order in Calicut. When she was arrested, she demanded and gained permission to carry her baby to the Presidency jail. Public outcry against the decision forced the government to cancel the order. Amma served as KPCC President, MLA and Director of *Mathrubhumi*.

### *Ambujammal*

Ambujammal worked towards making women self-supportive. She organised welfare schemes for destitute women, provided food and basic education for orphans. This she did by starting a printing press to provide vocational training. She studied Hindi and taught it as Gandhi emphasised that the knowledge of Hindi was important to bring the people of India together. Ambujammal was awarded the Padma Sri in 1964.<sup>12</sup>

### *Padmaja Naidu*

Daughter of Sarojini Naidu, Padmaja Naidu devoted herself to the cause of the nation like her mother. She was the joint founder of the Indian National Congress of Hyderabad. She spread the message of Khadi and inspired people to boycott foreign goods. She was imprisoned for taking part in the Quit India movement.

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<sup>12</sup> Bhote, Perviz. 2000. Twin Tribute. *The Hindu*. November 30.

*Rukmini Lakshmi*

Born in Madras, she joined the Congress in 1923 and gave all her jewellery to the Harijan Welfare Fund. She was imprisoned for taking part in the salt sathyagraha. She was a great social reformer and worked for the upliftment of women in society.

*Sister Subbalakshmi*

Sister Subbalakshmi was a great crusader for women's rights in general and widows' rights in particular in the Madras Presidency. She was associated with organizations like the All-India Women's Conference and Women's Indian Association. Sister Subbalakshmi began her pioneering work for destitute women way back in 1915. Widowed at a very young age, she strived to improve the condition of child widows through proper education.<sup>13</sup> She started a social welfare centre for women and children near Tambaram, a school for women called Srividya Kalanilayam in Vidya Colony and an elementary school at Maduranthakam. As the founder of the Mylapore Ladies Club, she started the Vidya Mandir School at Mylapore in 1956. She received the Padma Shri in 1960.

*Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya*

Kamaladevi fought against social evils that restricted the development of women. She was an active member of the youth wing of INC. During partition, Kamaladevi set up co-operative societies and self-employment schemes to help refugees. She worked to revive traditional industries like weaving and handicrafts. As chief of the Board of Handicrafts, she started the pension system for craftsmen. She was a trade-unionist, a revolutionary, a reformer, a great patron of arts, an accomplished writer, an orator, and a freedom fighter.<sup>14</sup>

*Padmavalli Bharti*

In 1944, the call came for volunteers to serve the country. Gandhiji proposed to hold meetings in the Hindi Prachar Sabha, Madras. Many enthusiastic students, including Padmavalli, became

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<sup>13</sup> Sundaram, V. 2005. Great Crusader for Women's Emancipation. News Today. July 9.

<sup>14</sup> Kamat, Jyostna. 2003. The Pioneers: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. *Kamat's Potpourri*. April 5.

volunteers. Along with her friend Lalitha, she not only participated in the meetings but also helped to collect money for the freedom movement.

*Maya Thomas*

She joined the Satyagraha movement in 1941 as a research student in the politics department of the Madras University. She would sneak out of the hostel at dawn with Shakuntala Reddy, and distribute newspapers on the freedom movement. The actual printing was done by the men but the printing machine was kept under her cot because women were seldom suspected of taking part in such activities. She and Diraviam finalised the modus operandi for the picketing at the secretariat. Along with Shakunthala, Mahalakshmi and Anasuya, she was taken to the Magistrate's Court in Egmore, sentenced to six months simple imprisonment and taken to the Vellore women's jail.<sup>15</sup>

*Shakuntala Krishna Reddy*

Seven-year-old Shakuntala removed her two pairs of bangles, went up to the dais and gave them to Gandhi as contribution to the Harijan fund. Inspired by her parents, she joined the movement and participated in the picketing at the secretariat and went to jail.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas-nee Joseph, Maya. Diraviam, Leila. April 1999. At The Cross Road. Diraviam –Our Treasure. Asian Printers, Chennai. Page 139.

<sup>16</sup> Krishna Reddy, Shakuntala. Diraviam, Leila. April 1999. Memories That Linger. Diravaim –Our Treasure. Asian Printers, Chennai. Page 146.



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