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**Neelambikai Ammaiyar:  
Profile of a marginal player**

**Vijaya Ramaswamy**



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Neelambikai Ammaiyar  
(6 August 1903–5 November 1945)





## **Neelambikai Ammaiyar: Profile of a marginal player**

### **Vijaya Ramaswamy**

Neelambikai Ammaiyar was born at Nagapattinam on 6 August 1903 to Vedachalam Pillai (Maraimalai Adigal) and Saundaravalli Ammaiyar. She was named Neelambikai after the presiding deity of the temple known as Neelayathatchi. The emotional fragmentation she would undergo throughout her life was reflected in the first days of her birth. After naming her ‘Neelambikai’ her father, the co-founder and great votary of the *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam* (literally ‘Pure Tamil Movement’), tried his best to Tamilize her name as ‘Karuppamma’ but to no avail. Neela whom her brother fondly calls ‘The Mother of *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam*’ in his biography of her,<sup>1</sup> was caught in the trap of nomenclature and despite her loyalty to Tamil, would respond only to ‘Neela’ and not ‘Karuppamma’. In an interview with Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, the sister-in-law of Neelambikai Ammaiyar, (9 December 2002), I was told that the change of name officially never occurred in the case of Neelambikai although her father had made a successful transition from Vedachalam to Maraimalai.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar’s writings and political opinions have survived the cruel silencing of women’s voices which has largely been their fate in history, thanks ironically and perhaps inevitably to three men—Maraimalai Adigal, her father who enabled her to publish *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* her first collection of articles in 1926, Tiruvaranga Pillai, her husband who published the rest of her prolific writings

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\* Revised version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 23 July 2013.

(amounting to thirteen books) and Tirunavukkarasu, her brother who became her biographer. This short biography published in 1946 is no more than a hundred-odd pages in sharp contrast to Tirunavakkarasu's biography of his father which runs into 877 pages! His work published in 1945, the year she died, is hagiographic in nature and in fact suffixed by adulatory condolence messages. The brief profile hides much more than it reveals although the personal and political predicament of Neelambikai Ammaiyar is present throughout the text as a palimpsest.<sup>2</sup> Sarada Nambiarooran, who obtained her M.Phil degree from Bharatidasan University working on Neelambikai Ammaiyar, restored this gender imbalance by publishing her partial biography in 1990.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, however, a thesis devolving around the ideas of Neelambikai cannot become a substitute for a full-fledged biography.

Neelambikai Ammaiyar's difficult times and more difficult choices are therefore best recovered from her own biographies of both Western and Tamil women, both the choice of subject and the framing of each facet of the biography in terms of her own experience as a woman and a political thinker. These writings are to be seen in conjunction with the sub-text of Tirunavukkarasu's narrative. Tirunavukkarasu's biography of his sister Neelambikai Ammaiyar as well as her own self-reflexive writings, provide the most perceptible site of the inter-play of conflicting emotions and fragmented identities that characterized her personality.

### **To be a Woman and a Tamil at the Turn of the Century: Neela's Early Years**

Neelambikai had an excellent education at home necessitated by her withdrawal from school due to ill health. She was grounded almost equally well in English and in Hindi as she was in Tamil. She was an avid reader of Shakespeare and the poems of Tennyson and Wordsworth. Her interest in the Hindi languages leaned largely towards devotional literature and the songs of Kabir, Meera and others, which she sang before appreciative Tamil audiences.

In many of her attitudes, opinions and anxieties regarding women, her writings partially conflate the literary and social self-expression of

Subbalakshmi Akka and Panditai Krishnaveni Ammaiyar both of whom guided her education through school. In fact, Neelambikai stayed in the women's hostel and later in the widows' home run by them and studied in the girl's school which they had established. Her almost fanatical devotion to Tamil language and literature, and correspondingly her animosity towards Hindi and English, both of which represented alien domination to her, was undoubtedly influenced by these two women, although Neelambikai in her quest for Tamil purity went even further.

Neelambikai's sound knowledge of English accounts for her many translations from English to Tamil including the *Six Hundred Parallel Proverbs in Tamil and English* in 1931 and the Hindi-Tamil dictionary published in 1937. The inter-textual influences clearly perceptible in the writings of Neelambikai draw their sustenance from such diverse sources as the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe in the United States and Harriet Martineau in England (who is credited with having authored as many as 1,624 essays!); the Tamil devotional traditions of the Tevaram, Tiruvachagam and the spiritual writings of Ramalinga Adigal; the political and social treatises of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker and the training in Tamil language and tradition provided by her father Maraimalai Adigal.

Passages in Tirunavukkarasu's biography about Neelambikai's early training in Tamil texts by her father are both moving and revealing. There were no fixed hours of study and the days Neela cooked his favourite dishes well (including *milaku rasam*), she would be taught a few lessons from Tamil classics like *Silappadikaram*, *Purananuru*, *Nannul*, *Villiputhurar Bharatam* and the like. This too, only after her enthusiasm had dissolved into tears. The biographer's chapter on Neela's education is aptly titled 'Father's Mischief and Daughter's Sorrow' (pp. 8-11). Learning against such odds Neelambikai Ammaiyar delivered her first public lecture in 1916 when she was thirteen on the theme of 'Parental Duties'. The script was the father's. Emotional rupture between father and daughter occurred when, not content with scripting her early lectures, Maraimalai Adigal sought to script her personal life as well.

**Profiling Neelambikai within the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam**

Neelambikai Ammaiyar has to be situated within the problematic of the political and literary scene of the 1920s and the 1930s in the old Madras Presidency. The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam and Dravidian renaissance foregrounds her historical location. This section therefore looks at the various histories of the Tamil Freedom Struggle—Maraimalai Adigal's biography by Tirunavukkarasu (1959), an account of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam by Sarada Nambi Arooran (1994) and secondary texts on the Tamil Separatist Movement.

Women who wrote and spoke in the public domain during Neelambikai's period, the early part of the twentieth century, did so during the transitional era of colonialism which witnessed anti-imperialist struggles in different forms. Tamil women involved in the freedom movement reflected the inherent tensions in gender politics, a tension that is visible in parallel movements in virtually all the Indian regions during those years. Some Tamil women took recourse to what they considered the progressive potential within westernization, read 'progressive liberal' writers of the West and expressed their views in English as well as in Tamil, their native tongue. While agitating against colonial rule at one level, at another level they sincerely believed that British liberal ideas were crucial for women's emancipation. Many of them sought their goals within the broader mass movements of their time while a sizable section of women opted out because their concerns were being indifferently addressed within these broader streams. Some Tamil women came under the umbrella of the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam of Periyar in their goal of combining anti-Brahmanism with anti-patriarchy. And yet all these women were themselves the products of a patriarchal society and hence unable to stand outside it and articulate entirely in the voice of women. The resultant tensions get reflected in a peculiar situation in which while they constantly express their anguish over women's miseries arising out of a patriarchal order such as illiteracy, destitution, and the stigma of widowhood, they themselves continue to function within the patriarchal paradigm. Neelambikai Ammaiyar conceived thirteen times and bore eleven children during her seventeen years of married life. Women like Subbalakshmi Ammal and Achalambikai Ammaiyar continued to eulogize wifely duties,



modesty and chastity, in their public speeches. These internal tensions resulted in fragmented identities and fractured goals so palpably evident in the life of Neelambikai Ammaiyar.

The Theosophical Society which represented the political aspirations of an English educated elite, somewhat along the lines of the Brahma Samaj, was started in Adayar (Chennai) in 1853. The famous Banyan tree, spread over a kilometre, which was the meeting ground of the Adayar group and the Theosophical Society, continues to flourish to this day. Annie Besant and Margret Cousins spearheaded the Home Rule movement that Besant started in Tamil Nadu in 1915. 1906 was a landmark year in the Theosophical movement which combined the planks of Swaraj, spiritual renaissance and social reforms especially in the interests of Indian women. In this year the leagues for social service were founded and named 'The Sons of India' and 'The Daughters of India'. Annie Besant and the Theosophical movement became the focal point for upper class Tamil women seeking emancipation from the clutches of tradition and patriarchy. Theosophical literature as represented in the writings of Madam Blavatsky, Annie Besant and others was however far from being anti-traditional but had its own curiously structured 'Anglo-Hindu' ideology. It combined a women's movement much along the lines of the western suffragette movement with notions of womanly duties and traditional feminine ideals as depicted in Hindu scriptures. Correspondence relating to the formation of Indian Women's Association under the banner of the Theosophical Society between women such as Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarayadasa and locality leaders like Parvati Ammal in Salem brings together these twin notions. Some of the correspondence is about starting charkha spinning and tailoring classes for women along with motivating them to participate in anti-British marches.<sup>4</sup>

It is significant that these two somewhat opposing thrusts came together in 1917 when Margret Cousins became the editor of a new journal aptly titled *Stree Dharma*. It was also in the same year that Annie Besant led a women's delegation to the Viceroy demanding voting rights for women. The All India Women's Conference was founded by Margret Cousins at Madras in 1926. Its primary motive was to bring about an effective fusion of women's consciousness and

women's issues with the intensifying national consciousness and freedom struggle in the Madras Presidency.

The westernised, English-speaking Tamil women who were yet deeply conscious of their Hindu tradition were exemplified by Rukmani Arundale and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi. Both of them, each in her own fashion, were social rebels. Rukmani, despite her orthodox Brahmanical upbringing, had chosen to marry a foreigner flouting all notions of **varnashrama dharma** and **varna sankara** (the admixture of varnas). Muthulakshmi Reddi had a mixed parentage, her father being a Brahmin and her mother a Shudra of the Isai Vellala caste from which the Devadasis were usually drawn. She violated patriarchal norms of femininity by qualifying for medicine and also engaging actively in politics. She became the first woman legislator of Tamil Nadu.<sup>5</sup> Expressing themselves primarily in English, many upper class Tamil women inspired by the Congress mass movement, became adherents of Gandhi. Gandhi's call to women to come out of the seclusion of their homes and participate in India's struggle for freedom, found its popular base among the group who followed Annie Besant and came to be sarcastically referred to in the 1920s and 30s as 'Adayar feminine politicians' (the term 'feminist' had not then gained currency). Raising the marriageable age for women, women's education, voting rights and the Devadasi bill to end prostitution in the name of tradition, especially in south India, were some of the important women's demands raised by them.

It was however the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam started by Neelambikai Ammaiyar which became the signifier of Tamil identity. In it crystallized the Tamil quest for its own distinctive self-expression vis-à-vis the English-speaking, westernized intellectuals and the Sanskrit/ Hindi-oriented Congress followers. The anti-imperial struggle in Tamil Nadu came to be dominated by Tamil renaissance and Dravidian nationalism in the context of what then used to be the Madras Presidency. The Tamil ethno-nationalist movement was a very significant development in Tamil Nadu politics from the 1920s to the 1940s.

The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam did not merely claim separateness from the 'mainstream' Congress led nationalist struggle but in fact moved

parallel to it and represented ‘a counter culture’. It can be perceived as the beginnings of Tamil separatism which has persistently struggled against the domination of the centre in terms of Congress ideology, linguistic domination of the Hindi belt and unequal resource allocation. The Tamil freedom movement also provided pointers for the post-colonial developments in Tamil Nadu, especially the foundations of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam as well as the intensifying anti-Hindi, anti-Brahmin agitations which persist to this day.

Gender politics in the transitional era also became closely associated with the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam on the one hand and the English-speaking, west dominated Theosophical movement on the other. Women within the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam led by Neelambikai Ammaiyar perceived Sanskrit and Hindi as representative of the Brahmanic–patriarchal discourse. This deep antipathy towards what we would term today ‘colonialism from within’ assumes primacy in her writings with the anti-colonial discourse against the British, taking second place. The anti-Sanskritic, anti-Brahmanical tone of the Tamil women working within the Tani Tamil Iyakkam made them forge links with the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam (self-respect movement) of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker (Periyar). Women’s active participation in the politics of the freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu is set against this complex and intricate grid of national interests, ethnic, linguistic and regional identities as well as gender concerns, both at the individual and at the collective level.

The nomenclature ‘Tani Tamizh Iyakkam’ can be translated literally as ‘separate Tamil movement’. Its apparent manifestation was linguistic separatism or ‘a movement towards purification of Tamil’. Its political and cultural dimensions take off from this crucial point of difference. The origin of this movement is romanticized by Tirunavukkarasu in his biographies of both Neelambikai Ammaiyar and Maraimalai Adigal. To quote him from his book *Neelambikai Ammaiyar*:

*1916. Neelambikai may have been around thirteen years of age. One evening father and daughter were walking in the garden. Neela sang the song composed by Ramalinga Adigal which begins with the stanza:*

*Even if the child forgets its mother or  
the mother the child born from her womb,  
Even if the life spirit forgets the body,  
Or the body its life force...'  
The learned heart its learning  
The eyes forget to blink  
I will never forget Namashivaya  
Which shines forth in the hearts of sages.*

Adigalar interrupted the singer to ask 'Neela, do you not think that this poem would sound so much better if the Sanskritic (vadachol) word *deham* was replaced by the Tamil word *yakkai*...? At this juncture Neela said with spirit, 'let's from this moment give up the use of Sanskritic words and expunge them from our vocabulary. Let's learn to speak in pure Tamil'. Her father immediately changed his Sanskritic name Swami Vedachalam (Swami of the Unshakeable Mountain) to the Tamil version Maraimalai Adigal. (Tirunavukkarasu:1946:13)

The panegyric introduction to Tirunavukkarasu's biography in fact hails her as Tani Tamizh Tai/Tiruvatti, 'the mother of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam' (p. 3).

It is significant that Neelambikai herself centre-stages this incident in her preface to her collection of essays *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* making it the *raison-de-etre* for her many essays on the need to purge foreign words from the Tamil language and keep it pure.<sup>6</sup> When I visited Maraimalai Adigal's Pallavaram residence in Chennai (October 20, 2013) which had been Neelambikai Ammaiyar's home till her marriage, Kalai Chelvi, her grand daughter proudly showed me the rambling garden and the bench where this historic conversation took place.

Women within the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam had a predominant concern with Tamil identity and Dravidian renaissance. The spin off from these primary concerns was the rejection of Brahmanical/Sanskritic patriarchy as well as their immediate problems of negotiating between political and social activism on the one hand and their own location and role as mothers/ wives/ daughters-in-law within Tamil society.

The idea of wholly 'liberated' Tamil women therefore becomes an oxymoron for Neelambikai as well as for many of her contemporaries given their own placement within the patriarchal structure.

The role of women in the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam is best illustrated in terms of an unusual occurrence on 14.11.1938. An army of women consisting of a motley crowd of housewives, intellectuals, authors and professionals assembled in front of the Theological High School in Madras. The women raised slogans like 'Down with English' and 'Down with Hindi' interspaced with 'Tamizh Vazhga' meaning 'may Tamil flourish'. Five of the women leaders were arrested and jailed. Among these were Neelambikai Ammaiyar, Moothatti Moovalur Ramamritham Ammaiyar, Malarmugaththammai, Pattammal and Dharmambal. More women courted arrest in the cause of Tamil in 1939. Each of these women was to carve out a place for herself in the sphere of Tamil renaissance, Dravidian nationalism and gender based social reforms. The anti-colonial, anti-Hindi discourse conducted entirely in chaste Tamil untainted by Sanskritic words or phrases was a feature of Tamil ethnic nationalism that began in the 1920s. The anti-Hindi resurgent Tamil discourse however continued to be a dominant cultural characteristic of politics and literature in Tamil Nadu even into the 1990s, almost fifty years since India won freedom. Surprisingly, K. Nambi Arooran, the nephew of Neelambikai and author of *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism* (Koodal Publishers, Madurai, 1980) makes only peripheral references to the role of women in the upsurge of Dravidian Nationalism and particularly the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam. In fact his index leaves out the name of his aunt Neelambikai!

In the 1940s, during the years of political transition from colonialism to freedom, Neelambikai Ammaiyar was conferred the title 'Tanitamizh Tiruvatti' that is, 'Champion of Pure (separate?) Tamil'. Neelambikai died in 1945 just before independence. But Dr. Dharmambal kept alive the cause of Tamil especially among women and in 1951 Dr. A. Chidambaranathan conferred on her the title 'Vira Tamizh Annai'<sup>7</sup> literally 'The Valiant Tamil Mother'. The votaries of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam harped on the need to purge Tamil of Sanskritic notions of language and poetics in order to nativise it. It is significant that the *Tolkappiyam*, a work on Tamil grammar and poetics composed by

the Sangam poet and grammarian Tolkappiyar, dating back to the early Christian era, figures repeatedly in the writings of the advocates of the Tani Tamil Iyakkam. Neelambikai Ammaiyar rejecting the entire 'marga' tradition of Sanskrit poetics says that the Tamils should draw upon *Tolkappiyam*, *Pingalandai* and *Diwakaram* which constitute the indigenous sources of literary inspiration (Tani Tamizh Padukappu: 46 in the anthology *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*). In fact the writings of Periyar, Bharati Dasan, Neelambikai Ammaiyar, Maraimalai Adigal and others focus not so much on anti-English/ British sentiments as on anti-Hindi sentiments.

Even within Tamil Nadu the Iyakkam represented Dravidian nationalism rather than Tamilian nationalism. The movement segregated Sanskrit as well as its cultural signifiers—the Brahmins. Neelambikai's myriad writings especially her essays reflect the sharp anti-Brahmanical, anti-Sanskritic tone of this movement. It is important in this context to note the formation of another movement which also had an anti-Brahmanical thrust. This was the Tamil Isai Sangam (Tamil Music Sangam) founded in 1942 by Raja Annamalai Chettiar at the Annamalai University in South Arcot district. This was an organisation to counter the Madras Music Academy founded in 1926 by Brahmins. The Tamil Isai Sangam by and large extended its patronage to non-Brahmins and emphasised Tamil music in contra-distinction to the Sanskritic musical traditions of Muthusvami Dikshitar. Neelambikai's expertise in the singing of Tevaram and Tiruvachagam and her passionate espousal of Tamil devotional traditions, further strengthens this linkage. The Tamil Isai Sangam also extended patronage to indigenous musical traditions like the playing of nadasvaram (wind instrument). This was also the entry point for women of the Devadasi community making a mark in the field of Carnatic music. It brought to the forefront vocalists like M.S. Subbalakshmi (who was honoured with a Bharat Ratna in 1999), M.L. Vasanthakumari, Veenai Dhanammal and her nieces Brinda and Mukta, whose musical virtuosity arose from the Devadasi tradition to which they belonged. It is further noteworthy that while Isai Vellala women (as also women of some other communities like the Kaikkolar) took to the Devadasi profession, their male children became nadasvaram players. Tamil Isai Sangam brought both respectability and recognition to traditional communities dedicated to music and dance.

For Neelambikai and for many other women, the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam represented an even more crucial avenue for self-expression. It provided them a powerful vehicle of protest against patriarchal practices and institutions since the patriarchal notions within Hindu society derived their validity and sustenance from the Brahmanical 'high tradition' texts. The Tamil Brahmins jealously guarded and enforced these practices, which included child marriage, denial of education to women, tonsuring of widows etc. Interestingly some of these customs especially the practice of dowry and even tonsuring of widows, persist to this day in the more conservative parts of Tamil Nadu, not only among the Brahmins but equally among 'sanskritized' upper caste non-Brahmins like the Pillais, Mudaliyars and Naidus.

### **Meeting and Parting Ways—Political and Personal**

#### *Tani Tamizh vs Svaya Mariyadai*

The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam by its attack on Sanskrit/ Hindi logically extended its struggle to encompass anti-Brahmanism in all its manifestations. It therefore became associated with the South Indian Liberation Front started in 1916 which then led on to the foundation of the Justice Party, the Dravida Kazhagam etc. The Justice Party with its anti-Hindi anti-Brahmanical programme formed the government in Tamil Nadu after the 1920 elections. The Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam, literally 'Self-Respect Movement' of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker followed immediately after. Ironically both the words 'svaya' and 'mariyadai' meaning 'self' 'respect' are Sanskritic in origin! E.V. Ramaswami Naicker, in spearheading a movement for the self-respect of those he called the indigenous Tamils, discarded the negative description of them as non-Brahmins, a description which still moves within the Brahmins and the other polarity and instead popularised the notion of *Dravida*. In attacking Brahmins he also attacked patriarchal institutions perceived as social representations of Brahmanism. It is noteworthy that it was at the First Tamil Women's Conference (Tamil Nattu Perumagalir Manadu) held on 13 November 1938 that its chairperson Neelambikai Ammaiyar conferred on E.V. Ramaswami Naicker the title of 'Periyar' in recognition of his support to women's causes.

Both *Viduthalai* and *Kudiarasu*, the journals run by Periyar carried fiery articles by him like ‘Why did Women Become Enslaved?’<sup>9</sup> He argued that it was the emergence of private property that led to a situation in which women themselves became property (Anandi:1991:25). He also condemned in print the despicable practice of old men marrying young girls. Yet Periyar’s life itself seem to contradict these principles when he married Maniamma, a party worker young enough to be his daughter. A short story by Neelambikai’s contemporary Tamarai Kanni Ammaiyar was in fact a apocryphal representation of this incident (Lakshmi:1984:78). The disenchantment with Periyar led to women like Moovalur Ramamritham Ammaiyar, who had been a staunch supporter, breaking away.<sup>10</sup> Neelambikai Ammaiyar and the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam also parted ways with Periyar although neither of the biographies written by Tirunavukkarasu—that of Neelambikai Ammaiyar or of Maraimalai Adigal—goes into the cause of the rupture.<sup>11</sup> It is not unlikely that this as well as the larger issue of his distancing himself from gender issues especially the Devadasi Bill influenced Neelambikai’s disenchantment with the Periyar movement. A major factor in the parting of ways was perhaps the avowed atheism of the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam in contrast to the strong religious foundations of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam. Both Maraimalai Adigal and his daughter Neelambikai were steeped in Saiva Siddhanta philosophy as well as the devotional aspects of the Bhagavata movement such as the singing of Tevaram and Tiruvachagam hymns. The iconoclastic acts of the Periyar group such as garlanding the image of Ram with dirty slippers may have offended the religious sensibilities of Neelambikai as well as her father. It is significant that out of the fifteen essays in the *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* not one is a direct attack on Brahmins although both Brahmanical rituals and Sanskritic textual traditions are under fire. The hagiographical and utterly inadequate biography of Tirunavukkarasu leaves out both—the celebration of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker’s movement by Neelambikai by conferring on him the title of ‘Periyar’ at the women’s conference in 1938 and the break with his Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam that followed soon after. What he does talk about at great length is her religiosity and her pilgrimages to renowned Saivite shrines in Mylapur (the Kapaleesvara temple where her marriage took place in 1927), Tiruvanmaiur, Trisulam, Tiruvorriyur, Tirukalahasti and Kanchipuram (pp. 33–34; 48–



50 etc). The inference here would be that given her deepseated religiosity which is palpable in whatever she did or wrote, she could not have continued to subscribe to Periyar's ideology which was firmly rooted in atheism. Her differences with Periyar are in many ways obvious although unstated by the biographer. One must add here that despite their strong differences Maraimalai Adigal and Periyar kept up their communication and two of the last entries in Maraimalai Adigal's diary state, 'I wrote a note of appreciation on Periyar and sent it to the Pondicherry Sunday edition'. (31.7.1948) and 'Periyar E.V. Ramasami Naicker came to see me today with Aalarasu and we spoke for an hour' (final entry in diary dated 4.8.1950).<sup>12</sup>

While the public domain within which Neelambikai functioned is altogether absent from Tirunavukkarasu's canvas, his narrative is deliberately muffled when it comes to the more sensitive issues of her private life. The early chapters of the biography glorify the father-daughter relationship. It says that she met and fell in love with V. Tiruvarangam Pillai (referred to as 'Aranganar') in 1918 with the blessings of her father who hailed him as 'the sixty fourth Adiyar' (Tirunavukkarasu:1945:11). The reference is to the 63 Saivite Nayanar who represent the pantheon of Saivite saints. However, the professional relationship between the two men soured over the publication of some of Adigal's articles on *Tiruvachagam* by Aranganar's publishing firm. Maraimalai Adigal forbade their marriage and Aranganar went away to Tirunelveli where he started the publishing firm called 'Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam' in 1920 which continues to be one of the oldest and most respectable publishing firms in Tamil Nadu. For nearly ten years Neelambikai Ammaiyar was not allowed to meet her fiancé. It was however during these years that her father encouraged her to write articles in *Tani Tamizh* which were published in various journals like *Dravidan*, *Deshabhimani*, *Anandabodhini*, *Ottrumai* and *Tamilnad*. These were eventually published as *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* in 1925. The biographer says that she spent the nine years between 1918 and 1927 in teaching in various schools, writing and going on pilgrimages. It was also during these years that she developed chronic asthma, which today is seen as a psychosomatic illness and may have been occasioned by her personal frustrations. In the teeth of Maraimalai Adigal's opposition she and Aranganar got married in

1927 in the Mylapur Kapaleesvaram temple. The biographer writes that the marriage had the blessing of her father (p. 37). Thiru Muthukumaraswami the son-in-law of Subbaiyya Pillai contradicted this in an interview (interview with the author, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2002) categorically stating that Maraimalai Adigal refused to even attend her wedding despite being in the same town and it was K.Subhramanya Pillai who blessed her marriage. After marriage Neelambikai moved with her husband to Tirunelveli and it was the Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam started by her husband which published twelve of her books.

Neelambikai lived another eighteen years after her marriage. The biography says nothing of the relationship between the co-founders of the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam, post Neelambikai marriage. It was Neelambikai's sister-in-law Mangaiyarkarasiyar who at 86 recalled that father and daughter never met after her marriage. Her mother seems to have seen her twice (author's interview with Mangaiyarkarasiyar on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2002). The startling truth is present as a sub-text in an appendix to the biography of Tiruvarangam Pillai by Pulavar R. Ilankumaran (*Kazhaga Amaichar Tiruvaranganar varalaru* published by the Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam, 1982). The appendix is a five-line condolence letter written by Maraimalai Adigal in 1945 to his son Tirunavukkarasu, Neelambikai's brother and biographer. Formal in tone, it acknowledges the receipt of the letter informing him of 'your sister Neelambal's death'. It is clear that he had not visited her at her bedside during her prolonged illness. Nor does the letter even acknowledge Neelambikai as his daughter (p. 121 of Aranganar's biography). It is amazing that Tirunavukkarasu's biography which lauds the support the father extended to his daughter (pp. 55–56 ff) nowhere mentions this surgical break between the two! However, a sentence in Maraimalai Adigal's diary does acknowledge his grief at the passing away of his daughter. In his entry dated 6.11.1945 he writes, 'Mr. Naidu came from the Kazhagam bearing the news of my daughter Neela's passing away yesterday. I cried...' <sup>13</sup> Neelambikai's daughter Pichchammal told me that they visited the Pallavaram house once when their great grandfather gifted them with a copy of his book. She told me they were living in abject poverty and the books meant nothing to them. <sup>14</sup>

### Cultural Loyalty and Assertion of Linguistic Identity

The strong anti-Hindi, Tamil chauvinist tone of Neelambikai's essays shows the influence of women such as Ambujammal, Krishnaveni Ammaiyar and Akka Subbalakshmi as also the conflation of ideas drawn from Maraimalai Adigal and Periyar. Neelambikai's anti-Sanskrit/ Hindi and pro-Tamil/ Dravidian essays earned her the honorific *Tani Tamizh Tiruvatti*. Her essays reflect her antagonism not only towards Sanskrit or Hindi as a language, but also to the entire processes of Sanskritization and Brahmanization which she looks upon as the cause of Tamil decadence. Making the point that intrusion of an alien language is inextricably linked with cultural invasion, Neelambikai shows that while the texts of the 'Second Sangam' such as *Tolkappiyam*, *Kalithogai* or *Ahananuru* and *Purananuru* contain a miniscule percentage of Sanskritic terms, the texts of the later Sangam period like the entire *Kizhkanakku* literature contain Sanskrit words in abundance. ('Tani Tamizh Padukappu' in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* pp. 46–47 ff).

The repeated emphasis of Neelambikai and others involved in the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam on the *Tolkappiyam* and other indigenous texts is to be explained by the fact that Tamil has always had its own tradition of poetics. For example, the use of *aham* (the interior) and *puram* (the exterior) as the primary literary modes and the systematic use of poetic themes or moods in consonance with the five *tinai*s (eco-zones) enumerated in the *Tolkappiyam* and elsewhere are strongly rooted in the Tamil *bhasha* tradition.

Neelambikai gives a number of examples such as *bhasha*, *brahmanar*, *jati*, *raja*, *manithar* and so on to show how Sanskritic terms and Sanskritic notions have intruded into the Tamil language. She adds that Brahmins began to define Sanskrit as 'girvani' and 'deva vani', to reflect the cultural superiority of Brahmins ('Tani Tamizh Padukappu' literally meaning 'protection to pure Tamil' in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* 1925: pp. 50–54). If one were to logically extend Neelambikai's argument in feminist terms, the beginnings of patriarchal notions like the purity–pollution polarities, women as ensnarement and the virtues of female chastity (*karpu*) are found in abundance in the *Kural* and *Naladiyar*. Both belong to the late Sangam period when

Brahmanical-Sanskritic influence was contending for social space with the indigenous Tamil culture. In contrast, the literature of the early Sangam age (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.) which has a sizeable contribution by women coming from diverse social backgrounds (Auvaiyar [Panar minstrel caste], Kakkai Patiniyar, Ilaiveniyar, Venni Kuyattiyar [potter caste], etc.) reflects the values of a matrilocal society ('Kalviyum Taimarum' [Literacy and Women] and 'Ozhungana Kalvi' [Right Education] in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*: 1925: pp. 1–12).

It is obvious that Neelambikai herself was the product of a cultural pastiche. She had a deep knowledge and admiration for both English and Hindi literature and yet her ideological/political commitments enjoined upon her the condemnation of both. This results in what can best be described as cultural schizophrenia.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the same cultural tension is to be perceived in her father Maraimalai Adigal. He was an avid reader of the English classics and corresponded with G.U. Pope who is responsible for some of the finest translations of Hindu religious texts including the *Tiruvachagam*. Tirunavukkarasu in his biography of Neelambikai comments that Adigal, looking upon the face of his infant daughter, would say 'Neela's face has the brilliance of geniuses like Shelley and Shakespeare' (Tirunavukkarasu: Neelambikai:1945). It is indeed ironical that the fond father could not think of similes nearer home such as the poetic genius of the celebrated woman poet Auvaiyar or Kambar, the Chola poet who authored the Tamil *Ramayana*. It is also noteworthy that the co-founder of Tani Tamizh Iyakkam translated Kalidasa's Sanskrit play *Shakuntalam* into Tamil! The tricky problem of cultural negotiation between an admiration for English as the signifier of western rationality and of Sanskrit as the language of Indian classical tradition on the one hand and the location of one's own Tamil identity in one's Dravidian roots on the other, gets carried into the persona of Neelambikai. Her own upbringing in a culture that was more pastiche than pure makes her a prime example of cultural fragmentation and cultural negotiations.

As early as 1937, Neelambikai compiled a Hindi–Tamil dictionary in which more than 7,000 technical terms in Sanskrit/ Hindi were provided with a Tamil equivalent. She undertook a somewhat similar exercise to show that the English language did not have anything more

to offer than the Tamil language in terms of the richness of its vocabulary, its idioms or its literary traditions. Her book *Six Hundred Parallel Proverbs in Tamil and English* was published in 1931. The aim of all these intellectual exercises was to show that neither Hindi nor English contained any linguistic features which were not existing in the Tamil language with Tamil having a superior edge to both these languages in view of its antiquity.

However, Neelambikai was willy nilly forced to acknowledge that the entry of words and phrases from outside into Tamil was the natural process of cultural and linguistic assimilations. Her long essay ‘Tamizhil Vadamozi Kalakkal Agathu’ (Eschewing the use of Northern Languages in Tamil) states her ambivalent situation:

Is it better to use Tamil in its pristine pure form or to use the common parlance which is an admixture (of Sanskrit and Tamil) to create literary pieces? ...The water we drink contains germs which are **naturally** found but we **artificially filter it to remove these germs**. So the language we speak **which spontaneously acquires alien vocabulary** (emphasis mine) must be distilled to produce pure literary Tamil.<sup>16</sup> (*Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*: p. 25. Translation mine.)

She realizes that the Sanskritization of one’s vocabulary and the Brahmanization of one’s culture was the ‘natural’ result of the prolonged historical association between Tamil and Sanskrit, between the ‘Adi Dravida’ Tamils and the ‘Aryanized’ Tamil Brahmins. Although *this composite culture is reflected in her own thinking and writing*, she still attempts the painful transition to ‘pure Tamil’ in her politics, social philosophy and literary writings. The degree of pastiche can be seen in the fact that despite her fanatical zeal to purge Tamil of any Sanskritic traces, her own name, Neelambikai, continued to be palpably Sanskritic.

Condemning the metaphor used by some of her contemporaries of Tamil and Sanskrit as constituting the eyes of the Tamil literary face, she feels that Brahmins have patronized and monopolized Sanskrit to their exclusive social advantage. Hence she further argues in her essay ‘Tamizhnadum Tamizh Mozhiyum Munneruvathu Eppadi?’ (How can

Tamil Nadu and Tamil Language Develop?), that the emergence of a tradition that is a confluence of Sanskrit and Tamil would be detrimental not only to the cause of Tamil but also to Tamilians.

Perhaps Neelambikai's major contribution to the enrichment of the Tamil language was her Hindi–Tamil Dictionary (*Vadatchol–Tamil Agara Varisai*). One of the verses lamenting the untimely death of Neelambikai says:

*Neelambikai,  
The one who sowed the seeds of pure Tamil  
in Tamil soil, harvesting good texts,  
through prolific use of Tamil  
subduing, crushing the pride of northern language....<sup>17</sup>*

However, apart from her anti-Hindi tirade Neelambikai does not seem to have done any political writing. Surprisingly, she does not attack British imperialism with the same vigour with which she attacks 'northern' domination.

### **Gendering Personhood, Tamil Identity and Social Concerns in Neelambikai**

Neelambikai's writings concerning with women's issues are however quite prolific. She expresses her strong faith in education for women and states that women should aim at the level of erudition that someone like Auvaiyar possessed—a wisdom that enabled her to write normative texts for the broad guidance of Tamil society. Her essay on the process by which the land of the Tamils and the Tamil language could move forward<sup>18</sup> contains extensive passages on women's education where she lays stress on Tamil. She says that modern Tamil women should emulate the example of the Sangam poets such as Auvaiyar, Kakkai Pattiniyar, Ponnudiyar, Vellividiyar and others (*Tamizhnadum Tamizhmozhiyum Munneruvathu Eppadi: 23*). To quote Neelambikai:

*Our language is called Mother Tongue, our land is Mother Land, knowledge is [feminized] as Kalaimagal and wealth as 'Tirumagal'. (p.12).*

Neelambikai emphasizes, in particular, the need to wean Tamil women away from western education and to familiarize them with women in spiritual literature.<sup>19</sup> This is the avowed purpose of her text *Muppenmanigal Varalaru*.

These sentiments are seminal to the emergence and gendering of Tamil nationalism. The iconic representation of Tamil as a woman was crucial to the whole issue of gender participation in the freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu. The feminizing of the language gave women an advantage over men in taking a lead role in the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam.<sup>20</sup> In fact it was in the 1940s, the years of transition from colonialism to freedom, that Neelambikai was conferred the title 'Tani Tamizh Tiruvatti'.

Neelambikai in her essays (in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*) also opposes the re-marriage of widows over twenty, although she, like her father Maraimalai Adigal, does support the re-marriage of child widows. Condemning the practice so widely prevalent in the West, Neelambikai holds forth to her women readers the example of Harriet Martineau who never married on losing her fiancée but chose to devote herself to literature. Neelambikai advocates a similar career in education and authorship to young Indian widows.<sup>21</sup> However, she condemns the practice of Sati in unequivocal terms and in an essay titled 'Irander Veetitrkku Chelbavarum Avveetinarum' ('The Living in the House of Death and Their Visitors') in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* she strongly attacks the attitude of a woman who sells all her resources to placate Brahmins and perform rituals in order to procure salvation for her husband and ends up destitute.

A major aspect of Neelambikai's life is her political activism in women's causes. She participated in virtually all the women's conferences held in Tamil Nadu, both before and after her marriage. In fact she founded the 'Saiva Madar Sangam' in 1942 in Palayankottai, Tirunelveli, which despite its religious garb actively engaged with women's issues, especially education and social reform. Her outstanding essay on 'How can Tamil Nadu and Tamil Language Develop' was originally a long speech delivered at the women's conference in 1938.

### Emotion and Angst in Neelambikai—Humanitarian Concerns

While she uses the biographical mode as well as public speeches (printed subsequently as essays) to express her concern for the plight of Indian women as shown by her biographical sketches in *Menaattu Penmanigal* (Book I and II) as well as *Muppenmanigal Varalaru*, Neelambikai's broader concerns go beyond women's issues. Her anguish over child labour comes through in her biographies of Elizabeth Browning as well as Harriet Beecher Stowe. The issue of slavery, which Stowe tackles through factual reporting (as in her account of the Dred Scott case) as well as fiction (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) not only receives a sympathetic handling in her biography by Neelambikai, but also finds an echo in her own writings in Tamil. In her strident anti-Aryan essay titled 'The Ancient inhabitants of Navalan Teevu' ('Navalanteevin Pazhaiya Kudigal', in *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*: pp. 79–86), she wonders what construes cultural superiority. What justified the Aryans stigmatizing Dravidians as 'dasyus' or the Brahmins denigrating the hunting, meat-eating tribals as barbarians? (pp.79–86).

Sarada Nambi Arooran effectively reconstructs the social persona of Neelambikai Ammaiyar. Her text is a meticulous analysis of the various writings of Neelambikai Ammaiyar classified under such heads as 'Reflections on Language', 'Observations on the Feminine', 'Thoughts on Religion' and so on. There is also for the first time an attempt to place her within the historical canvas in the chapter on 'The Historical Times of Ammaiyar and the Beginnings of the *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam*'. Unlike the other histories of this movement which marginalize the role of Neelambikai she redresses the imbalance in her doctoral thesis on the *Tani Tamizh Iyakkam: Emergence and Growth* published by the Chekkizhar Press, Chennai in 1994. However, Sarada Nambi Arooran's text fails to bring a critical perspective to this study of Neelambikai Ammaiyar and borders on the hagiographical. The main reason for this is that the text developed out of an M.Phil dissertation where biographical chiaroscuro has no place. As with the narrative of Tirunavukkarasu, the muffling of all personal nuances of Neelambikai's life is understandable in view of the proximity of both to the subject of their research. However, the author expressed the view (interview with the author, 9 December 2002) that there must





have been a lot of personal pain in Neelambikai's life. She made the interesting admission that perhaps she (Dr. Sarada Nambi Arooran) had not been allowed to interact with Neelambikai's children (while researching on this book) because of the unpleasant truths that may come out.

Neelambikai's emotional identification with maternity on the one hand and her strong urge towards political activism on the other such as participation in long marches in women's anti-imperialist rallies, resulted in much physical suffering. Mangaiyarkarasiyar said (interview with the author, 9 December 2002) that when Neela went for the women's conference and subsequent anti-British, anti-Hindi demonstration in 1938, she was holding her daughter in her arms.

Neelambikai herself found great emotional satisfaction in her 11 children and her biographer Tirunavukkarasu writes that her books were written while she was carrying one child and cradling another in her arms. (*Neelambikai Ammaiyar: 1945: 39 to 42. Translation mine*). The particular passage is worth quoting:

Herewith an example of Ammaiyar's patience. One day Ammaiyar was researching material for her writing. Four or five (sic) came running towards her. One climbed on to her lap clamouring for milk; one asked to be fed rice; one complained that he (her brother) pulled her hair and one ran away with her pen; a lot of noise, shouting and crying. Marai Tirunavukkarasu [that is, the biographer] came down the stairs on hearing the racket and asked in an angry tone, 'what's all this going on here, sister?' She responded with a smile, 'Aren't they charming? This is true happiness, the fruit of all my prayers.'

In a moving passage Tirunavukkarasu describes how Neelambikai in her advanced state of pregnancy completed one of her books and delivered her baby within a few days of it. When he advised her not to strain she is purported to have said, 'Who knows? I might deliver tomorrow and this book needs to be finished now' (*Neelambikai Ammaiyar: 1945:78*).

A strong autobiographical tone is perceptible in her biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe. She admires the manner in which Stowe negotiated between her social concerns, her many political writings and the upbringing of six children. Her books were written after her children went to sleep. Neelambikai paraphrases Stowe as writing to her husband:

You want me to be a successful writer. Will I be able to do so with small children to look after *and no room of my own?*

(Harriet Beecher Stowe *Ammaiyar in Mennattu Penmanigal*: 82)

In concluding the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Neelambikai Ammaiyar writes that her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and her many writings (including the celebrated Dred Scott case) on the horrors of enslaving mothers by forcibly separating them from their infants transformed public opinion in America. The very first print of her book sold 3,000 copies! Here was a shining ideal of a woman who was a loving wife and mother and a tireless campaigner against slavery. It would, perhaps, not be out of place to comment that during her fifteen years of marriage Neelambikai conceived thirteen times. She took care of her home and children and wrote thirteen books.

### **Negotiating Multiple Identities**

To conclude, Neelambikai Ammaiyar's life and times which comes through diverse discourses, the writings of others as well as her own highly subjective biographies, is a textured one. Her life provides us with a rich historical tapestry of multiple identities, emotional tensions and cultural negotiations. The Tani Tamizh Iyakkam which foregrounds the life of Neelambikai reflects the deep-seated anxiety of the Tamils to re-assert their identity in their life and in their writings in the wake of onslaughts on their culture both from English colonialism from outside and Hindi domination from within. In her persona, writings and politics, Neelambikai becomes the cultural site of fragmented identities and emotional negotiations, representing in a microcosm the larger predicament of Tamil women in those historic years of transition.

The palpable tension between a fierce assertion of personhood in asserting her identity as being both Tamil and a woman and balancing this assertion with her own location in a patriarchal society, reflected itself in Nilambikai's writings. She writes in her essay 'Muppenmanigal Varalaru' (The Life of Three Women):

Women should not be permitted to read texts like, Alli Arasanikkovai Pavalakkodi Malai, Eni Etram etc. **which may lead them into bad ways** (emphasis mine). They do not only read such texts day and night but also read books (Brahmanical Sanskrit texts) like Kaivalya Navaneetam which are false doctrines.<sup>22</sup>

Neelambikai Ammaiyar's statement indicates on the one hand the patriarchal responses to the Alli myth which was regarded as corrupting and subversive. At the same time her fears about the subversive influence of these texts on the women who read them 'night and day' shows that the notion of women's freedom and the urge to carve out one's own spaces independent of the ubiquitous patriarchal male, did exercise the imagination of girls/women who showed a penchant for the Alli ballads.

'The tension with stalwarts' of Dravidian nationalism like her own father Maraimalai Adigal and men with 'feminist' sympathies like Periyar is cradled within larger complexities in the relationship between movements such as the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam and the Dravidian movement and Tamil women such as Neelambikai, trapped between the public and the private domain. Women within the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam had a predominant concern with Tamil identity and Dravidian renaissance. The spin off from these primary concerns was the rejection of Brahmanical/ Sanskritic patriarchy. At the same time they faced the immediate problem of negotiating between political and social activism on the one hand and their own location and role as mothers/ wives/ daughters-in-law within Tamil patriarchal society. It appears that movements like the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam did not, and perhaps, could not, provide a viable alternative to women seeking their own space in the social and political domain.

Neelambikai as a product of cultural pastiche, appears to be the site of ambivalences and paradoxes both at the personal and at the



political level. Yet she had clearly generated a space within her mind which enabled her to engage with an extremely complex situation of imperial dominance, Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal oppression without opting out of her own location within the Tamil patriarchal framework. Given my own feminist logic when I repeatedly asked Neelambikai's biographer Sarada Nambi Arooran and others whether repeated child births (which eventually led to her premature death) did not indicate sexual exploitation, the unequivocal response was an emphatic 'no'. She was a happily married woman and people spoke of them as an ideal couple (interview with Mangaiyarkkarasiyar, 9 December 2002). Yet the same informant told me that Neelambikai never wore a *tali* which is a symbol of the marital status which every Tamil woman must wear! This seeming paradox seems to have found an uneasy coexistence in Neelambikai Ammaiyar. Clearly, for Neelambikai and her ilk, the journey towards personhood—being human, being a woman and being a Tamil—lay through less trodden paths confronting these intrepid travellers!



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> T.Tirunavukkarasu, *Neelambikai Ammaiyar* (biography in Tamil), Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam, Tirunelveli, 1946, Preface, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Her invisibility is even more glaringly apparent in the excellent book on *Dravidian Nationalism* by K. Nambi Arooran, a doctoral work from the University of London, 1972 published by Koodal Publishers, Madurai, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> This dissertation was published in 1990 by the Saiva Siddhanta Noolpadippu Kazhagam, Tirunelveli as *Neelambikai Ammaiyarin Padaippugalil Samuga Chintanaigal* (Tamil).

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi Private Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. See for example, File No.3 (1918–1930) beginning from letters dated 29 May, 1930 to 23 June, 1930, and 25 June, 1930 concluding with letter dated 29 June, 1930, with C. Anantachari and S. Kamakshi Ammal reporting to Margaret Cousins of the successful launch of the *charkha* spinning classes in the Salem area.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi's political career and social activism can be tracked through her private papers housed in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library which contains her private correspondence as well as her public responses to political and social issues.

<sup>6</sup> Neelambikai Ammaiyar's preface to *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal*, privately published, Chennai, 1925, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> The iconic representation of Tamil as a woman became crucial at one point within the Tani Tamil Iyakkam in particular and the freedom struggle in Tamil Nadu in general. C.S. Lakshmi has explored some of these connections in her article, 'Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu, (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 20–29 October, 1990, WS 72 to 94). The feminization and deification of Tamil is specifically explored by Sumati Ramaswamy in two articles—'Daughters of Tamil: Language and the Poetics of Womanhood in the Tamilnad', in *South Asia Research*, 12.1, 1992, pp. 38–59 and 'En/gendering Language: The Poetics of Tamil Identity' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 35, no. 4, Oct.1993, pp. 683–725. The theme is further pursued in her recent book, *Passions of the Tongue*.

<sup>8</sup> The politics of the Tamizh Isai Iyakkam as a movement which moved in tandem with the Dravidian movements, has been dealt with in a number

of essays but an excellent chapter by K. Nambi Arooran in his book on Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism (Koodal Publishers, Madurai, 1980) is specially significant because of the author's own familial connections as the nephew of Neelambikai and his location within the entire polemics of Tamil/Dravidian Nationalism.

<sup>9</sup> The gender politics of Periyar has been dealt with in a few articles — S. Anandi, 'Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement', *Social Scientist*, 216–217, Nos. 5–6, May–June, 1991; V. Geetha, 'Gender and the Logic of Brahmanism: E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar and the Politics of the Female Body' in Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti (eds) *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender*, Manohar Publishers and the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Delhi, 1999, pp.198–236 and K.Vijaya, 'Role of Women in Self-Respect Movement', Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 1994 (54<sup>th</sup> Session, Mysore, 1993). The most comprehensive treatment of the theme from a feminist perspective is V. Geetha, The citation from Periyar's essay is from Anandi's article, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally it was also largely responsible for Annadorai, Karunanidhi and others breaking away from the Justice Party of Periyar and forming the Dravida Kazhagam which later became Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). This discussion is still a very touchy issue with Periyar loyalists.

<sup>11</sup> K. Nambi Arooran's book *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism* in fact has a whole section on Periyar, the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam (Self Respect Movement) and the Justice Party. Despite this the book does not go into the conjunction and disjunction between the two leading Dravidian movements of the day—the Tani Tamizh Iyakkam and the Svaya Mariyadai Iyakkam.

<sup>12</sup> Maraimalai Adigal's Diary compiled by Marai Tirunavukkarasu as *Maraimalaiadigalar Naatkurippugal*, A.R.Venkatachalapathy (ed.), published by Maraimalaiadigal Press, Chennai, 1988, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Neelambikai's daughters Sundarathammal and Pichchammal at Kalai Chelvi's house in Saligramam, Chennai on 21.10.2013.

<sup>15</sup> This notion is an extension of G.N. Devy's argument in, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*, op.cit., passim.

<sup>16</sup> Neelambikai Ammaiyar, *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* (Essays on Pure

Tamil), Siva Siddhanta Kazhagam, Tirunelveli, 1925.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Elegy’ composed by Erode Siva Kuppasami Pillai in Tirunavukkarasu’s *Neelambikai* p.18. Translation mine.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Tamizhnadam Tamizh mozhiyum Munneruvadu Eppadi’, Neelambikai’s address before the Tamil Women’s Conference, published by the author through Kazhagam, Tirunelveli, 1938.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Muppenmanigal Varalaru’ (1940), Introduction.

<sup>20</sup> The feminization and deification of Tamil is specifically explored by Sumati Ramaswamy in two articles—‘Daughters of Tamil: Language and the Poetics of Womanhood in the Tamilnad’, *South Asia Research*, 12.1, 1992, pp. 38–59 and ‘En/gendering Language: The Poetics of Tamil Identity’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 35, no. 4, Oct. 1993, pp. 683–725. This aspect is dealt with in detail by her in *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Also see C.S. Lakshmi, ‘Mother, Mother Community and Mother Politics on Tamil Nadu’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 October 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Neelambikai Ammaiyar, *Menattu Penmanigal, Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam*, Tirunelveli, 1940, p. 107 ff.

<sup>22</sup> The essay ‘Muppenmanigal Varalaru’ is contained in Neelambikai Ammaiyar’s collection of essays called *Tani Tamizh Katturaigal* published in 1925 (in Tamil) by the Saiva Siddhanta Kazhagam, Madras. See pp. 26–27 for the above comment by her. An analysis of this quotation is to be found in my article ‘Tamil Separatism and Cultural Negotiations: Gender, Politics and Literature in Tamil Nadu’, *Social Scientist*, Nos. 5 and 6, vol. 26, May–June, 1998, pp. 61–83.

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(Fifteen essays on the need for pure Tamil, women's education, the epistemological fallacy of equating westernization with culture, etc.).

*Six Hundred Parallel Proverbs in Tamil and English* 1931

*Airopiya Mathar Eruvar* 1933

(biographies of Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale)

*Pattinaththar Paratiya Moovar* 1934

(hagiographies of Tiruneelakantar, Sirutondar and Kannappar, Saivite Nayanar saints)

*Tamizhnadum Tamizhmozhiyum Munneruvathu Eppadi?* 1938

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*Chiraichalai Chirthituttiya Elizabeth Fry Perumatti* 1939

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*Muppenmanigal Varalaru* 1940

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Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Tilakavatiyar and Mangaiyarkkarasiyar).

*Menattu Penmanigal* 1940

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