

The Role Of Native Women In Merger Movement In Pondicherry

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Abstract: Pondicherry was under the control of the French since 1673. The French India was not an integrated territory. They were separated in different regions. The people of this region were speaking different language and practicing different social habits, initially that was accepted here. They condemned the Imperialist policy of French India. The freedom movement started here very seriously after India's Independence. The native Pondicherry women in too carried the task and participated in the freedom struggle against the French rule in Pondicherry.

During the merger movement V. Subbiah, then the communist leader in Pondicherry, organized labourers movement against the cotton textile mill management and the French administration. The women who were working in the textile mill joined in that protest very boldly. Those who actively participated in the movement were Bangarrammal, Avaniammal, Thaiyanayaggiammal, Aukammal, Thamayanthi, Vijayalakshmi, Thilagavathi Clemanso and Saraswathi Subbiah.

These native women in Pondicherry followed different techniques against the French colonial rule in Pondicherry and finally they got success. Pondicherry was liberated from French rule on 1st November, 1954.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pondicherry played a significant role in the history of freedom movement. Native women occupied a dignified place since the Chola period. During the French colonial rule in Pondicherry, the youth and the working class always spearheaded any political and social economic movement. The British influenced historians and native intellectuals naturally had to come to Pondicherry. Social reformers both men and women appeared on the Indian stage to uplift the women of the land. The women participation in the Indian National Movement was significant. The native women had the capacity and ability to participate in the Merger Movement in Pondicherry. The role played by women in the freedom struggle is one of the most unique, fascinating and interesting aspects of modern history. But their contribution has been hidden and not many sources are available for that. The present study brings to light the role played and the contribution made by some eminent women fighters of Pondicherry to the freedom struggle of Pondicherry.

Men and women are two inseparable constituents of human society. They have always shared sorrows and joys together. In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a common belief that women were fit only for household work and that their place was in the kitchen. Women's conditions and status were the lowest. Later stage social reformers both men and women appeared to uplift the womanhood of the

land. The women made a distinct contribution to the cause of Indian freedom.

II. IMPACT OF INDIAN NATIONAL LEADERS

The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the political revolutionaries in the Indian National Congress, the congress leaders' inspiring speeches and writings, political activities, Satyagraha movement, and the imprisonment of political leaders by the British Government. The arrival of nationalist leaders like Bharathi, V.V.S. Iyer and Aurobindo Ghosh, and the visit of National leaders like P.G. Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru to the French India inspired the spirit of Nationalism among the masses of the French India. The political Parties of French India like the Communists, Indian National Congress, Socialist and Dravida Kazhagam joined together without any difference in the struggle for the Merger Movement in Pondicherry.

III. WOMEN AND INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

The history of India's freedom struggle is both unique and fascinating. Still more interesting is the part played by women in the national struggle. The birth of the Indian National Congress furnished a political platform to women. The famous women freedom fighters were Jhansi

Rani Lakshmi Bai, Dr. Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amirit Kaur, Ambujammal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sarojini Naidu and the like. These women joined men to protest against the British colonial power. They took out processions, demonstrations and organized camps for women to give them the required training for India's independence.

IV. THE POLITICAL AWAKENING

The French revolution inspired the people in this region with liberal and democratic ideas. The philosophies of Rousseau, Voltaire and Mazzini influenced the mind of the educated Pondicherrians. In fact, western education had produced a class of western educated intelligentsia. This class was responsible for awakening the country through both social and political reforms. Pondicherry was challenged to remove the handicaps. Equally challenging to this section of the people was the rigid administrative system. If the country was politically free, social reforms would be easier to secure. Social freedom is interlinked with political freedom. In the middle of the twentieth century women in Pondicherry were responsible for the fight for freedom.

V. NATIVE WOMEN IN PONDICHERRY

The participation of women in the freedom movement was not commendably noteworthy during the initial days of the movement. In the later phase, women in Pondicherry showed that they were equal to men in their courage and determination while participating in the freedom movement to fight against the French Government in Pondicherry. Women of educated and liberal families as well as those from the rural areas actively joined in the liberation movement in Pondicherry. The initiative, bravery and leadership that the women showed in the freedom movement in Pondicherry, contributed significantly to the freedom struggle.

The prominent women were *Saraswathi Subbiah, Avaniyammal, Avukkammal, Bakkiyam, Danabakkiyam, Manickamammal, Veeralakshmi, Manoranjitham, Rukkumani, Sampooranam, Anthonyammal, Parvathiammal, Juliet Annoussamy* and *Thayanayagiammal*. These women made important contribution to the merger movement in Pondicherry.

VI. SARASWATHI SUBBIAH

The prominent woman fighter of Pondicherry was Saraswathi Subbiah whose service in the awakening of the women of the state was remarkable. She was born on 22nd October 1924 at Aarani in Vellore district of Tamilnadu. She was the second daughter of Sadagoban and Sudamani. She completed her primary education at Polur, Cheyyar and Aarani of Vellore district. She then joined the intermediate course at Queen Mary's College in Chennai. She was a great scholar in Mathematics. At the age of nineteen she was married to V. Subbiah an active communist worker in Pondicherry.

VII. POLITICAL AWARENESS OF SARASWATHI SUBBIAH

Saraswathi Subbiah entered into the political field in the year 1944 along with her husband and carried out the communist activities with great enthusiasm. She actively devoted her time to carry out the communist activity for that purpose. She visited every nook and cranny of both urban and rural places of Pondicherry region. In the initial stage of their travel, she spread communist principles and formed a number of women's associations in the rural areas. Frequent meetings were organized and she inspired the rural women to join struggle for freedom. She also created an awareness amongst the women of their roles and responsibilities. She was able to raise their voice against anti-French colonial rule in Pondicherry.

VIII. WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Saraswathi Subbiah organized a women's conference in Pondicherry. The first Indian Women Conference was organized by her at Rodier Mill ground, Pondicherry, on 9th April 1946. More than ten thousand women participated in that conference. They were mill workers, agricultural labours, and home-makers from all over the French territories. She presided over the conference and created an awareness that both men and women are equal and she also spoke for the upliftment of women in French India. They wanted social, economic and political equality from the French Government. Women were motivated for struggle for freedom. At the end of the conference, the first resolution was unanimously passed by the members to obtain complete independence. Her dynamic speeches during the conference inspired other women to involve themselves in the mainstream freedom movement.¹⁴

IX. AVANIYAMMAL

Avaniyammal was one of the women freedom fighters in Pondicherry. She worked at Rodier Mill in Pondicherry. She was born on 15th September 1897. She lost her husband at a young age. From 1935 she actively participated in the trade union activities. She mobilized women mill workers and enrolled them in the trade union. In 1937 the trade union was legally recognised by the French Government. She became one of the administrators of the trade union in Pondicherry. She was one of the leading members of women organization. She also participated in the first Women Conference at Pondicherry (1946), which was organized by Saraswathi Subbiah. She worked alongwith Saraswathi Subbiah for the Independence of Pondicherry.

X. AVUKKAMMAL ALIAS PATCHAIYAMMAL

She was a resident of Pondicherry. She worked for the upliftment of the weaker sections. Her husband was a Rodier Mill Worker. Alongwith her husband she worked for the welfare of women mill workers in Pondicherry. Avukkammal

formed a Women's Association. Later these women joined in support of trade union in the 1936. She condemned the exploitation of working class by the capitalists. These people got low wages but had more number of working hours in unhygienic conditions in the factories. She frequently raised her voice against the capitalists and in support of the women mill workers. Generally the situation was in favour of Avukkammal. She mobilized women mill workers to agitate against the French rule.

XI. BAKKIYAM

Bakkiyam was a very courageous woman. She was born in 1920. She hoisted the Indian National Flag in a public place in Pondicherry. She was arrested by the French Police and sent to Pondicherry Central Jail. She was released from Jail and yet continued her struggle against the French. Again she was arrested by the French Police and she escaped from Police Van and left to a border area of neighbouring district of Tamilnadu. She returned to Pondicherry after the liberation of 1954.

XII. DANABAKKIYAM

Danabakkiyam was married to Natesa Mudaliar of Mudaliarpet in Pondicherry. She was a famous leader among the people of the rural area at Mudaliarpet. Danabakkiyam organised women rallies and door to door campaigns against the French Government. In 1947 she mobilized various sections of women in and around Mudaliarpet to fight for the freedom movement. Her national sentiment and inspiration motivated the people against the French. It was suppressed by the Government through police forces. In 1950 she escaped from police custody to a neighbouring district of Tamilnadu. She continued agitation against the French Government from there.

XIII. MANICKAMMAL

Manickammal was born in 1890. She married Pavadai Padaiyachi of Mudaliarpet. She and her family members were uneducated. Her family members were well known communists. In 1946 she celebrated the Gandhi Jayanthi week along with her family members for freedom movement. During the celebration her two sons were attacked and murdered by the Goondas of the Pro-French Group. The French police also continued to trouble her. From police actions she escaped to Kottakuppam of Tamilnadu and continued her struggle for freedom movement of Pondicherry.

XIV. VEERALAKSHMI

Veeralakshmi too was a courageous and patriotic woman. She was the wife of Krishnasamy. She belonged to Mudaliarpet. Her attitude was a great challenge to the French Police. She went secretly to border areas of Tamilnadu

because of the French Police. From there she reached Nettapakkam which is twenty five kilometer away from Pondicherry. Veeralakshmi, whole heartedly supported Edouard Goubert who established parallel Government against the French Government. On 31st March 1954 Goubert hoisted the Indian National Flag in the police station at Nettapakkam. She worked for the liberation Government at Nettapakkam. The social service continued till her death.

XV. MANORANJITHAM

Manoranjitham was a resident of Tirukkanur a rural village of Pondicherry. It is situated 20 kms away from western side of Pondicherry. Manoranjitham, the first rural woman fought for the freedom movement and her patriotic sentiment spread in and around the villages. The French police searched for her to arrest her but she escaped to Nettapakkam. Manoranjitham joined the Liberation Government at Nettapakkam. She worked with other freedom fighters who escaped from Pondicherry.

XVI. RUKKUMANI

Rukkumani was born in 1939. She was the daughter of Sathiyamurthy of Murungapakkam in South Pondicherry. The spirit of violent method of agitation arose at the age of fifteen. She had contact with extremists. She believed that Pondicherry was free from foreign domination. Her extremist activities were clearly watched by the French Police. She was arrested, but she escaped from the police custody. She rejoined with the extremists' groups who were encamped in the Tamilnadu border areas. She continued her fight for liberation. Rukkumani was the first woman extremist in French India.

XVII. GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

The French Government employees also took part in the Freedom Movement in Pondicherry. They were *Anthonyammal, Lakshmi Rajabaiammal, Soundravalli and Veerammal*. These women formed women's association in both rural and urban areas and indirectly motivated patriotic ideology and hoisted the Indian National Flag in every house to protest against the French colonial rule in Pondicherry. The French Police attacked and looted their houses. These women escaped from police arrest. The French Government dismissed them from Government Service. These women lived secretly in the neighbouring states of Pondicherry. For more than five years they fought for liberation movement from there.

XVIII. PARVATHIAMMAL

Parvathiammal was a soldier in the Indian National Army, of Subhash Chandra Bose. She joined Jhansi Rani Regiment under Col. Lakshmi in Singapore. During the Second World War, the British army captured Singapore. After the fall of

Singapore, the INA soldiers were arrested by the British Army. Some of the INA soldiers escaped from Singapore. Parvathiammal was one of the soldiers who escaped to Pondicherry in 1945. She came in contact with women freedom fighters in Pondicherry and initiated extremist activities against the French Government.

XIX. JULIET ANNOUSSAMY

Juliet Anoussamy was the wife of Appakkannou Victor Anoussamy in Pondicherry. Juliet Anoussamy enthusiastically took part in freedom movement against alien rule. During the freedom struggle she mobilized women and working class to agitate against the French. Her house was attacked by the goondas at Bharathi street in Pondicherry. In 1950 the French Police arrested her but she escaped from Pondicherry to Tamilnadu border area. During her four years of stay in the area, she indirectly supported the freedom movement in Pondicherry. She returned to her Native Place after the liberation.

XX. KEZHOOR CONVENTIONS

The problem of French territorial settlement was declared on October 12, 1954 (for which the members of the Municipal Councils and Representative Assembly should give approval). Keezhoor Convention was held on October 18, 1954. It is 20 kms away from Pondicherry. This convention, accepted both British and French Governments respectively. Around 178 the members of the Representative Council participated in the referendum and 170 of them voted the favoured the merger of French establishments to the Indian union. Following these results, the French Indian Settlements merged with the Indian Union. The agreement for the defacto transfer of the French Colonies to the Indian Union was signed in New Delhi on October, 21 and it came into effect on November 1, 1954. The smooth transfer of power brought to an end nearly three hundred years of the French Colonial Rule.

XXI. LIBERATION DAY

The territorial administration has been celebrating 60th anniversary of the de facto merger day on 1st November. It would be observed from this year (2014) as a public holiday and the government would celebrate the day as Liberation Day of Puducherry. Puducherry Chief Minister N. Rangasamy to honour freedom fighters on this occasion. It is historic day of Puducherry.

XXII. CONCLUSION

The women had to travel a long way before they could be equated with men. Women created awareness among men. Womens' roles were a tremendous inspiration for the Merger Movement in Pondicherry. Their participation was of much importance for the movement. Their participation came from

various places – women from rural and urban areas, different castes, and social and religious backgrounds, government employees, women student, women mill workers, agricultural workers, women organizations and the like. The French Police attacked women who were active participants in the Liberation Movement and confiscated their properties. They were exiled from their families and they lived in the neighbouring districts of Tamilnadu and continued to fight against the French Colonial Rule. They dedicated themselves for the cause of Merger Movement in Pondicherry.

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