

**LITTLE THINGS:
WORLD WAR II AND WOMEN
IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY**

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The experiences of women in the Madras Presidency during World War II are interesting to look at because traditional war narratives typically exclude women, also because very little literature exists on the subject. This essay draws on historical records of the War, literature on women and war, memoir/personal recollections, and an interview. While case studies illustrate how women became victims and active contributors in war situations, historical records and literature on women and war supply background information and facilitate analysis of case studies.

Women and war

Depending on circumstances, women are either victimised or respond actively to war. As victims, they become refugees, are sexually violated or must cope with domestic violence. They lose work and family members (Turpin 1998, 3-9). For instance, during the 1943 Bengal Famine, food was often withheld from women regarded while male members, especially the head of the household, were regarded as more valuable (Mukherjee 13). Women's responses include joining the military — fighting as soldiers, participating in auxiliary services (working in munitions factories, attending to communication systems, working as nurses) — and participating in groups that actively resist war (Turpin 1998, 9-13). Accounts of women's experiences of World War II in the Madras Presidency are few, two of which – Mrs. Sengamalam and Mrs. Chandramathy Moses' stories – will be discussed here.

Women's organisations

In war situations, women's organisations are likely to crop up as a means to ease the transition of women's role in civil society. For the most part, women move out of the domestic sphere into occupying more public roles. In a society like that in India in the 1940s, this couldn't have been an easy transition to make. Women's organisations are likely to have been formed because of a commonality of feelings. The Women's Swadeshi League, founded by S.

Ambujammal and Krishna Rau, organised activities for their members which included selling *kebaddar*, joining *prabhat pheris* and preaching the true values of *swadeshi* (Thapar-Bjorket 57). These organisations, through such activities, convinced women that they are not incompetent outside the household.

War can also be women's work

During wars, women also join military organisations. Though India was officially part of the Allied forces, the Indian National Army (INA) disapproved of India's participation in the war as an ally of the British. The INA saw the war as an opportunity to push for national independence. This view concerning India's position in World War II influenced sections of Indian society, particularly subsequent to 1942. The experiences of women in the Madras presidency during World War II took place in this context.

Women in the INA participated as nurses and soldiers as a part of The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the women's regiment of the INA. The INA camps in Singapore, Rangoon and Bangkok trained women as soldiers. Most members of the Women's Regiment were recruited from the expatriate Indian populace in Southeast Asia. But there were also women who left their family in India to join the Army, like Lakshmi Swaminathan, who was the head of the Department of Women's Affairs within the INA, later to be commander of the Women's Regiment (Thapar-Bjorkert). The decision to join the INA, even if voluntary, resulted in the division of the family.

Englishwomen like M.E. Richards, who joined the Women's Auxiliary Corps in Europe in 1942 also served in India (Benson, WW2 People's War). The Women's Auxiliary Corps (India), a subdivision of the WAC, was an organisation of women living in India who were trained to do managerial works. A woman volunteer complains about the living condition in the Auxiliaries' Mess. Women – especially low-ranking officials – were not issued with basic dining implements like spoons and forks. They were often asked to give up their rooms to

accommodate officers with relatively high ranks. The same volunteer claims she better-paid as a certified teacher than in the WAC (I) (Lawrence, A Case Study – WAC (I)).

Resistance at home

Women who remained at home during wars were not necessarily passive victims. The domestic sphere can be politicised. Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert tells the story about her grandmother, Kamala Seth, who would memorise patriotic songs from Arya Samaj meetings and political conversations with her husband to sing and narrate these to her children in his absence. The grandmother was an avid reader, learning about the development of events outside the house through Hindi magazines that the family subscribed to (175).

Women, in being confined to the domestic sphere, were marginalised. Kamala Seth's activities within the family unit – reciting patriotic songs, giving her children a nationalist perspective of the goings-on outside the house, creating an altogether nationalist environment at home – are not uncommon. Men assembled themselves in groups and did the same things outside the house in a larger scale. Are Kamala Seth's clandestine activities significant? Rather than trying to locate the impact of Kamala's doings on her children or the home atmosphere, one must recognise the fact that through her covert activities, she upset a potential 'victim' role and reclaimed a subject position.

The stories of Mrs. Sengamalam and Chandramathy Moses echo Kamala Seth's story.

Mrs. Sengamalam¹ is a resident of Mylapore, Chennai. When World War II took place, she was a student at Srirangam Girls Higher Secondary School, Chennai. She remembered the war years as a relatively peaceful period. School was running without interruptions, as was life at home. Her knowledge about the war and other political matters was restricted to reportages in newspapers and information from a friend's radio. "I would tell my mother I have some homework to do. I'd go to a friend's place – because she had a

¹ Personal interview, conducted on 9th August 2008.

radio – listen to the news and run home.” She spoke about public meetings and rallies in support of the Indian National Army, and groups of women who sat together, spinning khadi. Her mother, she says, was reluctant to let any of her children take part in political activities. When two of her brothers eventually joined the army, it was out of financial necessity.

Chandramathy Moses, now a resident of Vizag, remembered the period between 1940-1941 as a politically turbulent year. She recognised multiplicity of perspectives in the way her two professors – one British, one Indian – spoke about circumstances concerning the war. By the summer of 1942, there was scarcity of food and other essentials. Food and textile prices went up; both were issued to civilians by quota on ration cards. “If there was one good thing we learned during that time, it was to be economical,” she says. “Paper, soap, kerosene and sugar were in short supply. We learnt to manage with whatever little we had. Thrifty ladies invented several recipes to make use of leftover food.”²

Writing about women and war

War affects women differently because social constraints, often in terms of gender, make it less possible for women to have control over their lives. Even as victims of war, men do not have to cope with the possibility of domestic violence or sexual assault; they will not be cornered into prostitution.

Women’s confinement to the domestic sphere may be viewed as the patriarchal society’s system to keep women from entering civil society as equal partners of men. Women in the 1940s – except for a privileged few – are likely to have considered customary their designated space within the household. A war is an external force that interrupts internal dynamics of a society. Any war takes away an individual’s autonomy to a measure. To a society with solid internal dynamics, a war must stir the recognition that one sex is more capable (in terms of choices) of sustaining control over their lives.

² Published in Vizag Online, edition August 2003.

These accounts of war experience offer an alternative to the mainstream stories of massive battles and heroic deaths. They appear little – Kamala Seth’s songs, Sengamalam’s modest lies to her mother in exchange of snippets of news, the thrifty women’s invented recipes in Chandramathy Moses’ story. What magnifies them is the implied refusal to be powerless.

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