



# S. AMBUJAMMAL: FROM NATIONALIST ACTIVISM TO SOCIAL WELFARE LEADERSHIP IN TAMIL NADU

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## Abstract

Ambujammal, one of the prominent women leaders of the Indian freedom struggle in Madras, dedicated her life to social service and nationalism. She actively participated in the boycott of foreign cloth in 1932 and was appointed the third dictator of the movement when male leaders were arrested. Her involvement in *prabhat pheris*, processions, and meetings demonstrated her fearless spirit. She also founded the Voluntary Corps of Madras, which played a crucial role during the 1941 refugee crisis when people fled from Burma. This article explores her life, activism, and literary contributions in detail, situating her within the larger narrative of women's participation in India's freedom struggle.

**Keywords:** Ambujammal, freedom struggle, Madras, voluntary corps, refugees

## Introduction

The Indian freedom struggle was not only a political movement but also a profound social transformation that drew men and women from diverse backgrounds into the service of the nation. While the contributions of male leaders have received substantial attention, the role of women has often remained underrepresented in historical narratives. Yet, women played a decisive role in mobilizing public opinion, sustaining the spirit of nationalism, and extending the reach of Gandhian constructive programmes at the grassroots level. Among these pioneering women leaders was S. Ambujammal (1899–1981), whose life stands as a testament to courage, service, and intellectual commitment. This article examines Ambujammal's life, activism, and literary contributions, situating her within the wider framework of women's participation in the freedom struggle. In doing so, it

highlights how individual lives like hers both reflected and shaped the broader currents of nationalist history, particularly in South India.

### **Early Life and Family Background**

S. Ambujammal was born in 1899 into a distinguished and politically active family in Mylapore, Madras (now Chennai). Her father, S. Srinivasa Iyengar, was a renowned lawyer, freedom fighter, and one of the most respected nationalist leaders of South India. He earned the epithet “Lion of the South” for his oratory, integrity, and fearless opposition to colonial rule. As a leading figure of the Indian National Congress and President of the All-India Congress Committee (1926–1927), he influenced not only political developments in the Madras Presidency but also the upbringing of his daughter. Ambujammal’s mother came from a cultured and pious family, ensuring that her early environment combined intellectual discipline with spiritual grounding.

From an early age, Ambujammal was exposed to political discussions, debates on social reform, and the atmosphere of service that defined nationalist circles. Unlike many women of her generation, she was not confined to conventional domestic roles but was encouraged to pursue intellectual and cultural accomplishments. Educated at home, she gained proficiency in Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit, and English, developing the linguistic skills that would later support her literary career. Her training extended beyond academics: she excelled in Carnatic music, which remained an important part of her cultural identity throughout her life. At the age of eleven, Ambujammal was married to Desikachari, who served as an assistant public prosecutor under her father. The marriage brought her a child, but domestic life was accompanied by several hardships. Her husband’s physical and mental health deteriorated, her mother’s health declined, her grandfather passed away, and her younger brother suffered an injury. Despite these challenges, Ambujammal faced them with remarkable resilience, drawing strength and guidance from her father’s support.

Her early years reflected the tension between privilege and responsibility. The family’s frequent interactions with nationalist leaders cultivated a political consciousness that shaped her worldview. In 1921, when Mahatma Gandhi visited Madras and stayed with the Iyengar family, Ambujammal had her first personal encounter with him. This meeting had a transformative effect, and Gandhi himself affectionately shortened her name to Ambujam. From that moment, she began to internalize Gandhian ideals of simplicity, truth, and service, which guided both her personal choices and public actions. The combination of a politically influential father, an intellectually stimulating home environment, exposure to nationalist leaders, early marriage and domestic challenges, and personal resilience created the foundation for Ambujammal’s later activism. Her upbringing instilled in her both the confidence to lead and the humility to serve, qualities that would define her role as a woman freedom fighter in Madras and beyond.

### **Political Awakening and Freedom Struggle**

Ambujammal's political consciousness and commitment to India's freedom struggle were deeply influenced by her familial environment and her father, S. Srinivasa Iyengar, a prominent nationalist leader. Her earliest exposure to political ideas came through discussions at home and visits by nationalist leaders, which shaped her understanding of colonial oppression and the role of women in public life. Her first direct encounter with Mahatma Gandhi occurred in 1921, during his visit to Madras. Gandhi's interaction with Ambujammal and other women of the household had a transformative impact on her. At his request, she began spinning the charkha, actively participating in the Gandhian programme of self-reliance. Inspired by Gandhi's vision of women's participation in the nationalist movement, Ambujammal decided to join the Indian National Congress, marking the beginning of her public political career. Around this time, she also became aware of broader movements for women's engagement in society, such as the Women's Indian Association, founded in 1917 by Annie Besant. This period represented a new chapter in her life, as she transitioned from a life of privilege to one devoted to Gandhian ideals, nationalism, and social service.

Gandhi visited the Iyengar household again in 1925, during the Vaikom Satyagraha, a campaign advocating the temple entry rights of Harijans. Gandhi stayed at the Iyengar residence for three days during his journey, and it was during this visit that he gave Ambujammal a copy of *Mother India* by Katherine Mayo. This gift symbolized Gandhi's encouragement for Ambujammal to cultivate a critical, informed perspective on India's socio-political challenges. Ambujammal actively embraced the principles of Gandhian non-violence, demonstrating her commitment through a range of public activities. She wore white khadi, participated in PrabhatPheri early morning processions in which nationalist songs were sung and engaged in street-level activism such as selling khadi and protesting foreign goods. She collaborated with other prominent women activists, including Rukmini Lakshmipathi, Durgabhai Deshmukh, and Y.M. Kothainayaki, participating in demonstrations, processions, and public meetings. Her activism extended to campaigns against foreign cloth, toddy shops, and other symbols of colonial and social oppression.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement, Ambujammal emerged as a fearless leader. In January 1930, she led the foreign cloth boycott at Rattan Bazaar in Madras, and although arrested by the police, she was released due to her father's intervention. However, the struggle resumed with renewed vigor in 1932, during which Ambujammal once again led the boycott. This time, she was arrested alongside Janammal, sentenced to six months' imprisonment, and fined Rs. 250 for violating colonial laws. Her courage and leadership during these campaigns led to her appointment as the third dictator of the foreign cloth boycott movement in Madras, at a time when most male leaders were imprisoned a testament to her prominence and influence in the nationalist movement.

Ambujammal's activism was not limited to civil disobedience; she also focused on women's empowerment and education. During her imprisonment in Vellore Jail, she taught Tamil to illiterate women and Hindi and English to those who knew only Tamil. She also trained women in handicrafts such as sewing and flower work, enabling them to achieve economic self-reliance. Her commitment to constructive work exemplified the

Gandhian ideal of service alongside political activism. Further extending her public service, Ambujammal founded the Voluntary Corps of Madras, which organized and maintained order during meetings and protests. During World War II, in 1941, the corps played a crucial role in providing relief to refugees fleeing from Burma, offering food, shelter, and medical aid. This period highlighted Ambujammal's capacity to combine political leadership with humanitarian service, reinforcing her reputation as a socially conscious and fearless activist.

Throughout these years, Ambujammal remained deeply committed to Gandhian philosophy. She consistently emphasized the importance of women's participation in the nationalist movement, advocating for self-reliance, education, and social reform. Her activism represents a unique intersection of political struggle, social service, and moral leadership, situating her among the most significant women leaders of the Madras Presidency during India's freedom movement.

### **Social Service and Post-Independence Roles**

Ambujammal's dedication to social service was a natural extension of her nationalist activism. While her political engagement drew public attention, she equally invested herself in humanitarian work, education, and the welfare of marginalized communities. Her vision of service was deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals, which emphasized self-reliance, upliftment of women, and direct action to address societal needs. During her active years in the freedom struggle, Ambujammal recognized the importance of empowering women through education and vocational training. In Vellore Jail, where she was imprisoned for her participation in the foreign cloth boycott, she taught Tamil to illiterate women and Hindi and English to those who knew only Tamil. She also trained women in handicrafts, such as sewing and flower work, enabling them to gain economic independence. These efforts demonstrated her commitment to constructive work, reflecting Gandhi's belief that social reform and national service were inseparable from the political struggle. Her social activism extended beyond education and vocational training. In 1941, during the turmoil of World War II, refugees from Burma arrived in Madras seeking shelter and sustenance. Ambujammal, through the Voluntary Corps of Madras, played a critical role in organizing relief efforts, providing food, clothing, and temporary accommodation for displaced families. The corps not only assisted refugees but also supported the organization of public meetings and maintained order during nationalist campaigns, illustrating Ambujammal's ability to combine administrative skill with humanitarian concern.

After India achieved independence in 1947, Ambujammal continued her public service by holding important positions within the Indian National Congress and state institutions. She served as the State Vice President of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee from 1957 to 1962, a role in which she influenced political and social policy at the state level. Simultaneously, she was appointed Chairman of the State Social Welfare Board (1957–1964), overseeing programmes aimed at improving women's welfare, child development, and the implementation of social reform initiatives. Her leadership in these roles reflected her enduring commitment to

bridging the gap between political governance and social welfare.

Ambujammal's approach to social service was deeply intertwined with her literary and educational pursuits. She utilized her writings to educate, inspire, and mobilize the public, particularly women. Her books, translations, and articles often reflected Gandhian principles, promoting self-reliance, morality, and civic responsibility. Notably, she maintained a correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi, preserving letters that have become important historical documents highlighting the intersection of nationalist politics and women's engagement. Through her sustained social work and institutional leadership, Ambujammal emerged as a pioneer in women's empowerment and social welfare in Tamil Nadu. She demonstrated that activism was not limited to protests and political campaigns but encompassed education, relief work, and policy leadership, thereby leaving a lasting impact on society. Her ability to seamlessly navigate between political activism, literary engagement, and social service exemplifies the multidimensional role women played in shaping modern India.

### **Literary Contributions**

Ambujammal's literary pursuits were deeply intertwined with her activism and social engagement, reflecting her commitment to Gandhian ideals and the promotion of nationalist consciousness. Her first short story, *Avar Enge Iruppar?*, was published in *Kalaimagal* magazine in 1940, marking the beginning of her foray into Tamil literature. Although she did not produce an extensive body of fiction, her writings were purposeful, often serving as instruments for social and moral instruction. At Mahatma Gandhi's request, during her time at the Wartha Ashram, she translated the first two kandams of the *Tulsi Ramayana* into Tamil in a dialogue style, demonstrating both her linguistic skill and her dedication to making spiritual and ethical texts accessible to the wider public. She also translated notable works such as K.M. Munshi's *Vedavithakar Vyasara* and the novel *Sevasathan*, which was serialized in *Ananda Vikatan* and later adapted into a successful film.

In addition to translations, Ambujammal authored several original works that reflected her personal experiences, familial legacy, and devotion to Gandhian principles. Her book *Mahatma Gandhi Ninaivu Malai* is particularly significant, offering insights into Gandhi's philosophy and his personal interactions with her. She also wrote *En Thanthaiyaar*, a tribute to her father, S. Srinivasa Iyengar, highlighting his role as a nationalist leader and moral guide. At the age of seventy, she published her autobiography, *Nan Kanda Bharatham*, documenting her life experiences, social service, and participation in the freedom struggle. Beyond books, Ambujammal contributed numerous articles to magazines such as *Kalaimagal*, *Kalki*, and *Bharatamani*, using these platforms to engage the public on topics ranging from social reform to women's empowerment. Her literary endeavors were further enriched by her work as a consultant for literary publications with *Dinamani Kariyalayam*, reflecting her sustained influence in Tamil literary circles. Through her writings, Ambujammal not only chronicled her personal journey but also preserved the narratives of the Indian freedom movement from the perspective of women activists. Her literary contributions serve as an invaluable source for

understanding the intersection of nationalism, social reform, and women's agency in early twentieth-century South India, ensuring that her voice and the voices of women like her remains an integral part of India's historical and cultural memory.

### **Obituary, Awards, and Legacy**

S. Ambujammal remained devoted to the upliftment of marginalized communities, particularly women and children, throughout her life. Even into her eighties, she maintained a remarkable level of activity, embodying the Gandhian spirit of service and commitment to social welfare. However, advancing age gradually affected her health, and she eventually became bedridden. Ambujammal passed away on October 6, 1983, leaving behind a legacy of courage, activism, and humanitarian service. Until her last days, she served as the Life President of the Srinivasa Gandhi Nilayam, an institution dedicated to social and educational initiatives. In recognition of her lifelong contributions to society and the nation, the Government of India awarded her the Padma Shri in 1964, acknowledging her service in social welfare and public life. The Tamil Nadu government also commemorated her contributions by naming a road in Chennai after her, ensuring that her memory remains integrated into the city's cultural and civic landscape. Following her demise, the Congress committees across Tamil Nadu observed three days of mourning, and party flags were flown at half-mast throughout the state, reflecting widespread respect for her work and influence.

### **Conclusion**

S. Ambujammal's life is a remarkable example of courage, dedication, and service. Born into a privileged family, she used her opportunities to become an active participant in India's freedom struggle, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. She led protests like the foreign cloth boycott, organized Prabhat Pheris, and worked to help refugees, showing her commitment to both political and social causes. Besides her activism, she contributed to literature and education, translating important works and writing about Gandhi, her father, and her experiences. After independence, she continued serving society through leadership roles in the Congress and the State Social Welfare Board. Honored with the Padma Shri and remembered through a road named after her, Ambujammal's life exemplifies the impact of long-term public service, courage, and the transformative role of women in both the freedom struggle and post-independence nation-building. Her dedication to social justice, education, and the welfare of marginalized communities continues to inspire generations, making her one of South India's most notable women leaders and a lasting model of commitment and service.

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