

FROM FOREIGN CLOTH TO LIQUOR SHOPS: PICKETING AND PROHIBITION AS TOOLS OF MASS RESISTANCE IN TAMIL NADU

M.SUBHA ANANDHI¹, DR. R. DHANABAL²

RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY, ANNAMALAI NAGAR - 608 002
RESEARCH SUPERVISOR, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY ANNAMALAI UNIVERSITY,
ANNAMALAI NAGAR - 608 002

Abstract

The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1932) marked a crucial transition in the Indian freedom struggle from limited constitutional protest to widespread mass resistance. In Tamil Nadu, this transformation was most clearly reflected in the twin campaigns of picketing foreign cloth shops and the anti-drink (prohibition) movement, which together linked economic nationalism with social reform. This article examines how picketing and prohibition functioned as interconnected tools of non-violent resistance, bringing nationalist politics into everyday public spaces such as bazaars, streets, and liquor shops. Women emerged as central actors in both movements, leading campaigns, mobilising communities, and enduring severe colonial repression in the form of arrests, imprisonment, fines, and physical harassment. By targeting colonial revenue and moral authority, these campaigns undermined British control while fostering popular participation and ethical nationalism. The study argues that the combined strategies of picketing and prohibition played a decisive role in deepening the mass character of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Civil Disobedience Movement, Tamil Nadu, picketing, prohibition, women's participation.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian National Movement witnessed a significant transformation during the interwar period, as political resistance expanded beyond elite leadership and constitutional methods to involve large sections of the population. Among the most striking features of this transformation was the active participation of women in nationalist politics. The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1932) marked a decisive phase in this process, providing women with unprecedented opportunities to enter public life and participate directly in mass resistance against British colonial rule. In Tamil Nadu, women's participation assumed a distinctive and powerful form through picketing of foreign cloth shops and liquor shops. These activities brought women into streets, bazaars, and public spaces traditionally dominated by men, challenging both colonial authority and patriarchal social norms. By persuading consumers, distributing leaflets, burning foreign cloth, and standing for hours outside liquor shops, women transformed everyday economic and moral practices into acts of political defiance. Their involvement was not symbolic; women emerged as organisers, leaders, and sustainers of resistance, especially when male leaders were arrested. This article examines women's participation in picketing and the anti-drink movement in Tamil Nadu during the Civil Disobedience Movement. It argues that these campaigns provided women with a platform to assert political agency, combine nationalism with social reform, and play a central role in converting the freedom struggle into a truly mass movement.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of women in picketing and anti-liquor campaigns during the Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu.
2. To analyse the contribution of women to mass mobilisation through non-violent protest and economic boycott.
3. To study the imprisonment, fines, and repression faced by women volunteers under colonial rule.
4. To assess the significance of women's participation in strengthening the Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu.
5. To Understand the social and cultural impact of women-led activism on society and the nationalist movement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical and descriptive method to analyse women's participation in picketing and anti-liquor campaigns during the Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu. It relies on both primary and secondary sources,

and the collected data are examined through analytical interpretation to understand patterns of participation and colonial repression.

Background of the Civil Disobedience Movement

Following the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922, the Indian national movement entered a phase of relative inactivity, with no organised mass agitation for several years. This situation changed with the arrival of the Simon Commission in 1928, which excluded Indian representation and provoked widespread opposition throughout the country. The Commission became a symbol of colonial disregard for Indian political aspirations and intensified nationalist sentiment. In response, Indian leaders convened the All Parties Conference in 1928, which resulted in the drafting of the Nehru Report under the leadership of Motilal Nehru, with Jawaharlal Nehru as its secretary. The British Government's refusal to accept the proposals further radicalised the Indian National Congress. At its Lahore Session in December 1929, the Congress adopted the historic resolution of Purna Swaraj (complete independence) and resolved to launch a nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement. On 15 February 1930, the Congress Working Committee authorised Mahatma Gandhi to initiate the movement.

The Salt Satyagraha became the most visible and widely remembered symbol of the Civil Disobedience Movement, capturing national and international attention. However, beyond the salt campaign, the movement expanded into several other forms of sustained mass resistance, including the boycott of foreign cloth, picketing of shops, and the campaign against liquor and intoxicating drugs. These forms of protest, particularly prominent in regions such as Tamil Nadu, involved continuous grassroots mobilisation and significant participation by women, yet they have received comparatively less attention in mainstream historical narratives.

Thus, while the Salt Satyagraha is commonly recognised as the defining episode of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the widespread picketing of foreign cloth and anti-liquor campaigns played an equally important role in sustaining popular participation and challenging colonial economic and social structures. These lesser-known forms of resistance formed the backbone of the movement at the provincial and local levels, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Women-Led Picketing of Foreign Cloth Shops

During the Civil Disobedience Movement in Tamil Nadu, picketing of foreign cloth shops emerged as a prominent and visible form of nationalist resistance, transforming everyday economic choices into acts of political defiance. Women volunteers were the backbone of these campaigns, challenging both colonial authority and traditional gender norms. They distributed leaflets, collected foreign cloth, and publicly burnt it as a symbolic protest, urging the public to reject imported goods and adopt Swadeshi alternatives.

The women's wing of the Indian National Congress coordinated these campaigns, while women who could not participate directly supported by spinning khadi, mobilising neighbours, collecting funds, and distributing propaganda. The courage of these women inspired large sections of the population to join processions, meetings, and hartals, turning picketing into a catalyst for mass mobilisation.

Picketing spread across major cities and districts, including Madras, Coimbatore, Madurai, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Cuddalore, and interior taluks. Madras became the epicentre, with leaders like Lakshmiammal, C. Kamalabai, Mrs. Krishnabai, Janammal, S. Ambujammal, and later Rukmini Lakshmi Ammal leading high-profile campaigns. Arrests and harsh punishments, such as six months' rigorous imprisonment with fines, did not deter them.

In Coimbatore, Madurai, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Kovilpatti, Udumalaipet, Cuddalore, Bodinayakanur, and Rajapalayam, women such as Kamalambal, Ambujammal, Muthulakshmi Ammal, S.M.K. Kamalammal, Kanthimathi Ammal, Perianachi Ammal, Janaki Ammal, Anjalai Ammal, and others were imprisoned from four months up to two years, with fines ranging from Rs.5 to Rs.300. The colonial administration used both simple and rigorous imprisonment indiscriminately, with no leniency for gender, reflecting the perceived threat of women-led resistance. Despite repression, picketing continued, strengthened public sympathy, and demonstrated the resilience of women in the nationalist movement.

Women's Participation in Anti-Liquor Campaigns and Prohibition

Building upon the momentum of foreign cloth picketing, women also actively participated in anti-liquor campaigns, further demonstrating their leadership in nationalist activism. Following the Congress Working Committee's resolution on 27–28 March 1929, each provincial Congress Committee appointed a prohibition sub-committee to coordinate campaigns against intoxicating drinks and drugs.

Taluk secretaries organised Anti-Drink Sabhas, enrolling men and women volunteers committed to non-violent service. Monthly meetings, processions, village-to-village visits, and house-to-house campaigns promoted abstinence, while volunteers solemnly took pledges to support total prohibition in elections and local governance. Women were particularly instrumental in enforcing these measures and persuading people to give up alcohol. The anti-liquor movement had significant social and economic impact, reducing government revenues from excise duties and inspiring new forms of protest, such as cutting toddy trees. Women of all ages young mothers, widows, and unmarried girls stood outside liquor shops and opium dens from morning to night, quietly persuading shopkeepers and customers to abandon intoxicating drinks.

Leaders like Rukmini Ammal, Savithiri Sakunthala, and Saraswathi in Madras, as well as numerous women volunteers in Coimbatore, faced police brutality, verbal insults, and imprisonment. In Coimbatore, the boycott caused a revenue loss of Rs.1.25 lakhs, prompting the colonial government to issue repressive orders and arrest volunteers. Women arrested for participation endured harsh treatment, including ill-treatment in Vellore jail, segregation in “C” class rooms, being forced to remove “kumkum,” and physical abuse. Nevertheless, women-led picketing and prohibition campaigns mobilised communities, created public awareness of social evils, and strengthened nationalist sentiment.

Social Impact of Women-Led Picketing and Prohibition Campaigns

Women’s active participation in picketing foreign cloth shops and liquor prohibition campaigns had far-reaching social consequences in Tamil Nadu during the Civil Disobedience Movement:

Challenging Gender Norms: Women broke traditional barriers of seclusion and purdah by publicly participating in protests, picketing streets, bazaars, and liquor shops. Their visibility in public activism challenged patriarchal norms and inspired other women to engage in nationalist activities.

Moral and Social Reform: The anti-liquor campaigns reinforced existing cultural values linking abstinence to respectability. Women volunteers promoted moral reform by advocating total prohibition, reducing alcohol consumption, and discouraging the sale and use of intoxicating substances, particularly among lower-caste communities seeking social upliftment.

Empowerment through Leadership: Women often took leadership roles in local Congress committees, volunteer corps, and Anti-Drink Sabhas, gaining organisational and decision-making experience. This empowerment fostered political awareness and helped establish women as credible actors in public and political life.

Cultural Transformation: The campaigns normalized the idea that political resistance could be intertwined with social reform. Practices such as Swadeshi consumption, abstinence from liquor, and public moral advocacy became symbols of nationalist identity and civic responsibility, leaving a lasting imprint on Tamil society.

CONCLUSION

The campaigns of picketing foreign cloth shops and boycotting liquor outlets in Tamil Nadu during the Civil Disobedience Movement highlight the pivotal role of women in India’s nationalist struggle. Despite facing arrests, rigorous imprisonment, fines, police brutality, and social backlash, women persisted, demonstrating remarkable resilience and dedication to the cause of independence. These movements generated significant social, moral, and economic impacts by empowering women, fostering civic responsibility, reducing colonial revenue, and promoting ethical conduct in society. Ultimately, women-led picketing and anti-liquor campaigns illustrate how ordinary citizens, particularly women, became active agents of political change, transforming everyday acts of resistance into a powerful instrument of mass mobilisation and national transformation.

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