



# **A.S. Ponnammal, The First Women Independent Member In Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly - A Study**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a comprehensive study of A.S. Ponnammal, the first and only woman elected as an independent member to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly, highlighting her political journey, social impact, and legislative contributions from 1962 to 2000. Born in a marginalised community, Ponnammal rose to become a powerful advocate for the downtrodden, women, farmers, and students. The study emphasises her role as a fearless legislator, voicing concerns on caste discrimination, women's rights, prohibition of alcohol, and rural development. Despite her later political setbacks, Ponnammal's legacy as a pioneering, independent, and people-centric leader continues to hold a unique place in Tamil Nadu's political history.

**Key words:** Independent Member, Legislative Assembly, Caste-Based Reservation.

## **Introduction**

Tamil Nadu state has identified some women personalities as outstanding political figures. Among the few, A.S. Ponnammal is one of the towering personalities in the political arena. She is fondly called akka (elder sister) by everyone in the political history of Tamil Nadu. She has an interesting biography. She lived an admirable life both in her politics and in her personal life.<sup>1</sup> She belonged to a lower class, and throughout her life she worked not only for the people of her community but for all the people of the society. She excelled in politics and fought for women's rights. Notably, she was elected to the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly multiple times.

In 1980, she won the Nilakottai constituency as an independent member.<sup>2</sup> This is the first and last time a woman candidate has won as an independent till date. Popularly known as Nilakottai Ponnammal, she continued to be the notable voice of the assembly, not only for his constituency but for all people, especially the poor.

It is to be noted that she has administered the oath of office to M. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa as the preterm speaker.<sup>3</sup> In her political career, she has worked in the Legislative Assembly with the following Chief Ministers: K. Kamaraj, M. Karunanidhi, M.G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalithaa.<sup>4</sup> This article will examine Ponnammal's achievements as an independent member from 1980 to 1984.

Ponnammal, popularly known as Nilakottai Ponnammal, was born in the year 1926 in Alaganpatti village in the Nilakottai area of the Madurai district. She did her primary education in his native town. Later, a social activist named Vaidyanatha Iyer sent the underprivileged children to study in South Arcot District, and Ponnammal was one of them. But she could not pass the 10th grade. She got married in her teenage and had a daughter. As it interferes with her public life, he married her younger sister to her husband. She had the opportunity to meet Jawaharlal Nehru once in Palani, which laid the foundation for her political career. She was very fond of Gandhi's philosophy. She joined the Indian National Congress Party.

### **Political Journey**

In the 1957 elections, she contested from the Nilakottai constituency on behalf of the Congress party and won by securing around 29,623 votes. It is noteworthy that she became a member of the Legislative Assembly at the age of 25.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1962 Legislative election, she again contested on behalf of the Congress party from the Cholavandan constituency of Madurai District and won the election by securing around 25,911 votes.<sup>6</sup> The Congress party did not give her a chance to contest the assembly elections held in 1967 and 1971. In 1977, she contested from the Palani assembly constituency as an independent and got only 504 votes, losing her deposit.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980 assembly elections, she contested as an independent from the Nilakottai constituency and won by securing around 48,892 votes. This is the first time in Tamil Nadu that a woman contested as an independent and registered a victory. In 1984, she again contested the Palani assembly constituency on behalf of the Congress party and won. She won the 1989 and 1994 assembly elections from the Nilakottai constituency on behalf of the Congress party. In the 1996 assembly elections, she contested and won the Nilakottai constituency on behalf of the Tamil Maanila Congress Party.

Finally, in the 2001 assembly elections, she contested as an independent from the Nilakottai constituency and lost her deposit by getting 7533 votes.<sup>8</sup>

### **First Woman Independent Member**

The seventh Assembly election in Tamil Nadu was held in May 1980. The AIADMK won, and M.G. Ramachandran became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for the second time. A total of 17 women contested this election, out of which six women contested as independents. The total number of women voters in the 1980 election was 14428458. A historic event took place in this election. A.S. Ponnammal, who contested as an independent in the Nilakottai constituency, won by securing 48892 votes.<sup>9</sup> This was the first and last time that a woman candidate won as an independent in the

Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. Of the six candidates who contested as independents, none of the other five candidates managed to secure more than a thousand votes and lost their deposits.

Between 1952 and 2001, only 266 women candidates contested as independents in the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. Remarkably, only one woman has won it.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Voice of the Downtrodden People**

"I speak as a member of the Harijan community and as a woman"<sup>11</sup>, the above words were spoken by Ponnammal in her 1981 assembly speech. 18% reservations for lower castes in government jobs has been provided, but it has not been filled till date. Therefore, she raised her voice in all legislative speeches that a committee should be set up to investigate and fulfil the 18% quota in all government departments.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the upper castes lent money to the lower castes and charged exorbitant interest. Tamil Nadu had a bad situation where the upper castes grabbed their lands from people who could not pay interest. Ponnammal voiced in the assembly that the lands that had been captured should be recovered and handed over to the downtrodden people. She also demanded that the government distribute additional land to the underprivileged. She argued that instead of giving them free dhotis and sarees, if the government provided them with land, they could improve their livelihood.<sup>13</sup> She further raised her voice that the government should make all efforts to ensure the livelihood of the 18 lakh Harijan families living in Tamil Nadu. Whenever Ponnammal spoke in the Assembly, the words about the livelihood of the downtrodden people were bound to be there.

### **The Voice for Women's Rights**

In 1981. In the Assembly, Ponnammal strongly raised the question of why women engaged in ordinary work in society are paid less than men when there is no difference in salary between men and women working as collectors in the government administration.<sup>14</sup> She voiced that the government should make efforts to ensure equal pay for equal work for men and women. She argued that only when wage discrimination was avoided would women's social status rise and their livelihoods be ensured.

Ponnammal raised her voice against some sexual crimes against women in Chennai city. She argued that the hands of those who humiliate women should be amputated and that democracy should be kept aside in matters related to women's safety.<sup>15</sup> She has argued that there should be laws and measures for the protection of women, similar to those in Arab countries. Ponnammal was constantly raising her voice in the Legislature for women's educational development and their right to employment, women's safety and dignity.

### **The Voice for Farmer's Rights**

"I am speaking here as a farmer," she used to say whenever she spoke in the assembly for the welfare of Ponnammal farmers. Ponnammal raised her voice for the farmers during droughts when the farmers were suffering without a water supply. She has spoken in the assembly that the government should come forward to protect the welfare of farmers by setting up public wells at necessary places.

Ponnammal had registered her opinion against the hike in electricity tariff for agricultural use

from 12 paise to 14 paise per unit. When the AIADMK government proposed to abolish the land tax payable by farmers, Ponnammal proposed an alternative arrangement, that instead of abolishing the land tax, a better solution would be to reduce the tax, as the land receipt is very important to the farmers, Ponnammal argued that the farmers should not lose that receipt, which is a basic requirement for availing crop loans.

Ponnammal was furious when the price of sugarcane purchased from sugarcane farmers was reduced from 12 per cent to 10 per cent. Ponnammal argued that reducing the procurement price of sugarcane when the prices of agricultural fertilisers were skyrocketing was a bad economic move and would encourage farmers to commit suicide. She has recorded her opinion that the government should ensure fair procurement of sugarcane and protect the interest of the farmers.

Ponnammal has also raised her voice for the welfare of farmers involved in animal husbandry. There was a shortage of grass, which is the main fodder for cattle. She also expressed the idea that the government should plant grass for livestock on government lands lying idle and give it to the farmers at a low price.<sup>16</sup> Thus, born in a farming family, she always stood at the forefront to solve the problems of the farmers and for the benefit of the farmers.

### **The Voice for Student Rights**

Ponnammal, who raised her voice for equal pay for women, demanded equality for students from all walks of life in the scholarships provided. In her address to the Assembly, she said that the price of food sold in canteens is equal for all sections of the population and that education scholarships should be equal for all students irrespective of caste. Generally, the scholarship is given mostly to meritorious students. Although Ponnammal belonged to the Scheduled Castes, she expressed her opinion in the Assembly that education is for all and therefore the scholarship for it should be the same for all sections. Ponnammal has thus proved that caste differences do not come before the educational welfare of students.

Ponnammal has also raised her voice for the students who pass the college final exams with low marks. Students who pass with less marks or just pass marks do not get any benefit after passing. Ponnammal realized that the future of the students is greatly affected when they cannot get any kind of employment based on those marks, and demanded that such students should be given an additional 5 marks. She also opined that if they are unable to provide additional marks, the marks of these students may be reduced and they will be failed, then they will be given a chance to re-sit the exam.

### **Assembly Constituency Development Works**

In her assembly speech, Ponnammal mentions the relationship between herself and her constituents as follows, "There are many girls in my constituency, I am elder sister to them, I am elder sister to their father, and I am elder sister to their mother too, they surround me saying Akka ....Akka...." Thus, Ponnammal has become a family member of all the families in her constituency, an elder sister to all the people.<sup>17</sup>

Ponnammal herself was the main reason behind the construction of Mavutu Dam in Sirumalai. At a time when the number of government colleges across the state was few, she used her influence to bring a government college for girls in her Nilakottai assembly constituency. Ponnammal was instrumental in building canals to irrigate more than 10,000 acres of land in the Cholavantan region. She was responsible for the establishment of the Government Primary Health Centre in Battlagundu town. Apart from these, Ponnammal was instrumental in the construction of many new school buildings and court buildings in her assembly constituency.

### Prohibition of Alcohol

Ponnammal's legislative speech against the relaxation of liquor prohibition in 1982 is an important and famous speech of distinction. "I am saying this because I am a woman too, think about the condition of mothers, women suffer a lot due to alcohol, so alcohol should be banned completely" This powerful speech of Ponnammal created huge vibrations in Tamil Nadu. She condemned the AIADMK, the party that had won her independence, for relaxing liquor, and the DMK, which supported the relaxation of liquor. Thus, Ponnammal was the person who condemned the ruling party and the opposition as one in a speech against liquor.

Ponnamal, who worked for the people till her last breath, suffered from uterine cancer in her old age. Despite being an MLA in many terms, like a common man, she was admitted to Madurai Rajaji Government Hospital for treatment. She died on November 24, 2015, after the treatment failed.

A comparative study is necessary to realize the uniqueness and excellence of Ponnammal, who was elected as an independent woman legislator. Ponnammal's uniqueness is easily understood when compared with other women legislators from Tamil Nadu. No woman legislator who has won in Tamil Nadu, especially Jayalalithaa, who was the Chief Minister, has won as an independent. Only Ponnammal contested as an independent and won. The AIADMK backed her in the 1980 Legislative Assembly elections when Ponnammal contested as an independent. The truth is that she could not have won without the support of a major party. There is also an incident where she contested another election as an independent and lost her deposit. Although she won with the support of a major party, she has a place in the history of Tamil Nadu as the only woman independent legislator.

Ponnammal's victory as an independent in the Tamil Nadu political scenario is a huge achievement. To realize the glory of this achievement one has to compare it with the political conditions of other neighbouring states. In the state of Kerala, where leftist ideology is deeply entrenched, three women have won assembly elections as independents since 2001 (Saraswathi Amma – Chengannur – 1980<sup>18</sup>, Kamalam – Kalpetta- 1982<sup>19</sup>, Nabeesha Ummal – Kazhakuttam - 1991<sup>20</sup>). The Kerala political arena has given women more opportunities to contest independently and win. Such wide opportunities are not available to the women of Tamil Nadu. Despite being an eminent personality, a strong back-up from a political party is essential if a woman is to contest and win as an independent candidate in the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu.

## Conclusion

A.S. Ponnammal's political legacy is a remarkable chapter in Tamil Nadu's history, symbolizing courage, social commitment, and pioneering leadership. As the only woman to have won a Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly seat as an independent candidate, her 1980 victory stands as a singular achievement in the state's political landscape. Rising from a marginalized background, she consistently championed the rights of the downtrodden, women, farmers, and students, making her voice a powerful force in the Assembly. Her tireless work for constituency development, social justice, and gender equality earned her deep respect across party lines. Though she received support from a major party during her independent win, her legislative contributions, integrity, and fearless advocacy have cemented her place as an iconic and unmatched figure in Tamil Nadu politics.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Vikadan*, 2015, November 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Times of India*, 2015, November 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Hindu Tamil Thisai*, 2015, November 25.

<sup>4</sup> *The Hindu*, 2015, November 26.

<sup>5</sup> India votes. com /Vidhansabha / /Tamilnadu /Cholavandan, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Indiavotes.com /Vidhansabha /Tamilnadu /Cholavandan, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> *Statistical Report on General Election (1977), to Legislative Assembly of Madras (PDF)*, Election Commission of India, Archived from the (PDF) on 27 January 2013, Retrieved 14 October 2014, p.12.

<sup>8</sup> Indiavotes.com / Vidhansabha / Tamilnadu / Nilakottai, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> *Statistical Report on General Election (1980), Legislative Assembly of Madras (PDF)*, Election Commission of India. Archived from the (PDF) on 27 January 2013, Retrieved 14 October 2014, p.12.

<sup>10</sup> *Statistical Report on General Election (1952-2001), Legislative Assembly of Madras (PDF)*, Election Commission of India. Archived from the (PDF) on 27 January 2013. Retrieved 14 October 2014.

<sup>11</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 10/04/1981, Secretariat, Chennai

<sup>12</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 21/04/1981, Secretariat, Chennai.

<sup>13</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 28/03/1983, Secretariat, Chennai.

<sup>14</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 21/04/1981, Secretariat, Chennai.

<sup>15</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 05/07/1980, Secretariat, Chennai.

<sup>16</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 31/01/1981, Secretariat, Chennai.

<sup>17</sup> *Sattamantra Peravai Nadavadikkai*, 31/03/1983, Secretariat, Chennai.

<sup>18</sup> *Statistical Report on General Election (1980), Legislative Assembly of Kerala (PDF)*, Election Commission of India. Archived from the (PDF) on 27 January 2013. Retrieved 14 October 2014, p.10.

<sup>19</sup> *Statistical Report on General Election (1982), Legislative Assembly of Kerala (PDF)*, Election Commission of India. Archived from the (PDF) on 27 January 2013. Retrieved 14 October 2014. p.10.

<sup>20</sup> Indiavotes.com / Vidhansabha / 1987 /Kerala / Kazhakuttam.