



A satyagrahi who funded the education of countless women in the Kongu region

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In 1957, my grandmother, one of the first women in Coimbatore to go beyond schooling, was surprised to see the word, 'paid', on her semester fee slip when she was planning to drop out owing to financial constraints. Much later, after she had joined the college as a faculty member, she discovered the identity of her anonymous benefactor – T. S. Avinashilingam Chettiar – who funded the education of countless women in the Kongu region," recalls Selva Priya, a third-generation student at the Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, a deemed-to-be university.

Avinashilingam was born in 1903 into an affluent family in Tiruppur in the composite Coimbatore district. He spent his formative years under his uncle, T.A. Ramalingam Chettiar, an influential figure in the Coimbatore municipality and later a Lok Sabha member.

Social equality

After gaining a law degree in 1924, Avinashilingam embarked on philanthropy by establishing an orphanage in Coimbatore. It was the first of its kind in the Madras Presidency as it accepted 'Harijan' children, overcoming objections from traditional quarters.

However, his advocacy for social equality earned him a peculiar epithet by his mid-20s – the 'Professional Beggar'. But he wore this title with pride, as Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya did before him, considering the act of soliciting public donations for the uplift of the poor as a noble pursuit.

In 1926, Avinashilingam's life transformed when he met the Mahatma as he toured Tamil Nadu to gather support for the Civil Disobedience Movement. Avinashilingam asked Gandhi if Khadi could compete with mill goods in the long run. Gandhi's profound response left a lasting impression: "Just as the great temples of Tamil Nadu prospered not on economic principles but on the faith and devotion of people, so will the Khadi industry, providing millions with employment." An inspired Avinashilingam decided to relinquish law and join the



A lasting contribution: T.S. Avinashilingam presenting a copy of the Tamil encyclopedia to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at Rajaji Hall on January 6, 1958. The Tamil Valarchi Kalagam published the encyclopedia. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

independence movement. Avinashilingam rose through the ranks quickly, becoming the president of the District Congress Committee. Soon, Avinashilingam, alongside lifelong comrades C.P. Subbiah and K. Subramaniam, spearheaded a procession at Coimbatore's famous Valankulam tank, a symbolic act of resistance to the British salt law. Avinashilingam found himself incarcerated, and shuttled between the Coimbatore and Vellore prisons for six months.

Solitary confinement

His prison term was exacerbated by solitary confinement in a cramped chamber. His existence was reduced to a struggle for survival, with only a pot for sanitary needs. "I am surprised I did not turn blind after living in darkness days on end," the Padma Bhushan awardee wrote later in his autobiography, *The Sacred Touch*. During his subsequent imprisonment in the Madurai and Cuddalore prisons, Avinashilingam met K. Santhanam, who

would later become the Minister for Railways.

In the desolate confines of the Cuddalore jail, Avinashilingam was haunted by the agonising cries of fellow prisoners en route to their execution. Yet, amid the darkness, he and his fellow inmates found solace in the timeless verses of Tamil literature. To drown out the cries, prisoners would sing the evocative verses of Subramania Bharathiar's song: "*Yaam arindha mozhigalile thamizh mozhi pol...Inidhaavadhu engum kaanom.*" He translated academic texts into Tamil and religious Tamil verses into English during his time in prison. After his release from prison, during Gandhi's visit to the Madras Presidency in 1934, Avinashilingam orchestrated a week-long campaign in the State. "Here, amidst conversations with 'Harijans' pleading for temple access, Gandhi, with Avinashilingam's help, conducted several informal meetings to address issues of the locals," says S. Padmanabhan, a Tiruppur-based historian.

"During one such visit, a harrowing incident unfolded near the Podanur junction level

crossing, where a car carrying Avinashilingam and Gandhi collided with a traffic signal. Miraculously, no harm befell either of them," he adds.

As India's independence neared in 1947, he became actively involved in meetings at Queen Mary's College (QMC), Madras, coinciding with his election to the Legislative Assembly in 1946. Until 1949, Avinashilingam served as the first Education Minister of the Madras Presidency in independent India. During the tenures of Premiers Tanguturi Prakasam and O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiyar, he advocated Tamil as the medium of instruction in secondary education. He initiated the Educational Reorganisation Scheme aimed at holistic development rather than turning out clerks and subordinates.

Push for higher education

In 1946, as India transitioned to self-governance, it possessed a surplus of foreign exchange acquired from loans to England and America during the Second World War. To harness this surplus for national development, a segment was allocated for sending deserving youth abroad for higher education, with the aim of facilitating their return to contribute to India's advancement. Avinashilingam, tasked with selecting a candidate from Madras, chose Rajammal P. Devadas, a student of QMC. She studied at Ohio State University and was eventually appointed Chief Home Economist for the Government of India.

Avinashilingam also founded the Tamil Valarchi Kalagam. As the Education Minister, he proposed a 10-part Tamil encyclopedia project, costing ₹18 lakh. However, due to financial constraints, the plan was rejected. He solicited public contributions and obtained ₹5 lakh from the State government. He also personally contributed. From 1954 to 1968, the Tamil Valarchi Kalagam dedicated itself to compiling and publishing the first Tamil encyclopedia.

Today, Coimbatore's ascension as an educational hub serves as a testament to Avinashilingam's foresight during the 1947 Assembly session, when he stated, "I believe that when the history of this province's education is written, these years will be considered as those of bold ventures, transcending time itself."



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