Ahead of her time

The Mahatmaji Seva Sangam was started with the aim of emancipating women. The driving force behind the endeavour was Vaithi Manidhi Mudumbai Kothainayaki.

Reminder of a glorious past...the façade of the Mahatmaji Seva Sangam.
– Pics by S. R. Raghunathan.

AS ONE climbs the narrow steps of the Mahatmaji Seva Sangam, one gets the feeling of entering a hall of history. The walls of each room would have told many a story, if they could.

After Gandhiji's ashes were dissolved in the 'Waters of India', a *madisar*-clad *mami* in Chennai returned home from the solemn rite with grief in her heart and a decision in her mind.

And the Mahatmaji Seva Sangam was inaugurated on March 7, 1948, in the conservative locality of Triplicane. Vaitha Manidhi Mudumbai Kothainayaki or Vai Mu Ko as she was popularly known, started a welfare organisation in the memory of her departed hero.

The organisation was 'by women, of women and for women.' Harikatha exponent C. Saraswati Bai was nominated as the president of the Sangam, with seven committee members. Kothainayaki was one of its secretaries.

A journalist, novelist, nationalist and much more, Kothainayaki made inroads into several seemingly male bastions with the silent support of her husband. She decided to provide opportunities to women to help them emerge out of their cocoons. Classes were conducted in various fields such as veena, violin and vocal music, shorthand, weaving with the charka, Bhagavad-Gita, sloka and even Hindi.

Vai Mu Ko's daughter-in-law Padmini Srinivasan recalls, "My mother-in-law invariably met Gandhiji on all his visits to the city. Every time he would ask, "*Sowhkhyama*? Have you learnt Hindi?" When she replied in the negative, he would remark with a smile, "I will learn Tamil faster than you will learn Hindi."

Initially, the Sangam functioned from the houses of some of its members. Few years later, Kothainayaki felt the need for a permanent premises for the Sangam and in 1953, she bought a building in Triplicane. A frescoe of Gandhiji with his Dandi adorned the façade. Padmini recalls, "When Rajaji came for the inauguration, he asked her, "Kothai, how are you going to repay the debts?' She confidently answered, '*Parthasarathi Perumal paarthuppar*'. Within five years, my mother-in-law had repaid every rupee borrowed."

Fund-raising activities at the Sangam included exhibitions and sales of handicrafts (made by the members), lucky dips and plays (staged by the members). A feature about the plays was that the audience was restricted to women. Padmini reveals, "This was because conventional women like us were acting in the play and in keeping with the norms of the times, men were not allowed."

The Sangam attracted visitors such as Pattammal Vasan, A.V.M. Rajeswari Ammal, and leading writers like Kalki Krishnamurthy and others.

Carnatic concerts by D. K. Pattammal, discourses by Prativadi Bhayankaram Annangaracharia and other artistes, frequently took place at the Sangam. G. P. Kamala, Vai Mu Ko's musical protégé, says, "In the month of Margazhi, we sang Tiruppavai, to the accompaniment of an 'all women' orchestra at various temples with Kothai in the lead." At the Sangam, Bharatanatyam was also given a fillip. Classes were conducted, arangetrams were organised and even titles bestowed on several performers. Apart from the traditional festivals, the Sangam also celebrated music festivals and national occasions. Kothainayaki also constantly came up with new ideas like debates, mimicry, fancy dress competitions, games and so on, to help women shed their inhibitions.

The Balika Kazhagam, a cultural activity group comprising young girls, contributed its mite to the Sangam activities. While emancipation of women was its key mission, the Sangam also focussed on social service. Donations were given to various causes like free education, poor feeding and so on.

Just 40 years after Kothainayaki's death, she has plunged into relative obscurity and the Sangam is left with only a shadow of its original glory. "We still provide funds for a few charitable causes but our resources are meagre," Padmini sighs. As one leaves the building, the frescoe of Gandhiji touches a chord of admiration in your heart. ■

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