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Dr. S. MUTHULAKSHMI REDDY'S STRUGGLE FOR THE EMANICIPATION OF WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

The Twentieth Century witnessed the growth of the Women's Movement in Tamil Nadu. The women leaders of Tamil Nadu organized well themselves by forming women organisations. The entry of Gandhi in the Indian politics attracted the women and they participated in the Nationalist Movement. The involvement of the women leaders in politics promoted the subject of the women liberation among the nationalist leaders. The Women Indian Association and All India Women Conference were the two pioneer women organizations which claimed the political and social rights for the women. In these two organisations, Dr. S. Muthulakshmi enrolled herself and served in various capacities which laid the pathway for the emancipation of women to a larger extent. Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy was one of the prominent leaders of Tamil Nadu who worked for the social upliftment of women. Apart from the few outstanding women like Pandita Ramabai and Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddi was hailed as a pioneer in many fields including initiation of social legislation for eradication of social evils connected with women. Her main area of activity had been in ameliorating the problems of women and children.



KEYWORDS: S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, Devadasi, Madras Legislative Council, Immoral Traffic, Tamil Nadu, Gandhi, Hindu, Pudukkottai, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Born at Thirukokarnam in Pudukottai district on 30th July 1886, she got her collegiate education at His Highness Rajah's College, Pudukottai as a first women there.¹ She acquired her MBCM degree in 1912 and started her career as a private Medical Practitioner at Egmore in 1913. While studying She kept contact with the national leaders like Nanjunda Rao, Bharathi, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant.² Then she married Sundara Reddy and went along with him to England where she got FRCS degree as a first Indian Woman. That degree helped her to get specialisation in the

diseases of women and children.³

In 1926 she was able to enter the Madras Legislature as its first woman member. In 1928 she was unanimously selected by fellow members as the first woman Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council.⁴ Under her able guidance, the Madras Legislature initiated useful legislation for women like the abolition of Devadasi System, prevention of child marriage, abolition of immoral traffic in women and women's education.

Within a short period of her legislature career she had achieved many tough things and passed more momentous motions than any legislature had done during its life time. For the establishment of a children's hospital, for the introduction of compulsory medical inspection for boys and girls, for the exemption of girls from the payment of fees, she was tirelessly agitated, and emerged as a successful woman leader.

Her act for the suppression of brothels for which, though not moved directly by her, she can claim the fullest credit for it. On 5th September 1928, K.R. Venkatrama Iyer, a Council member introduced a Bill at the Madras Legislature Council for the suppression of Brothel and Immoral Traffic, and Muthulakshmi Reddy, the champion of women cause supported it.⁵ In the course of the discussion on the bill, Muthulakshmi Reddy insisted that the Government should establish rescue homes for accommodating the girls and women rescued from the brothels. After analysing all the causes of the bill in the council, it was passed into law as 'Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act' on 31st January 1930.⁶ According to this Act (Act No.V of 1930); keeping brothels or allowing premises to be used as brothel was liable to punishment. The local government was vested with the power to make rules for the establishment of rescue homes and provide them with adequate accommodation.⁷ To expedite the implementation of the Act, the women leaders along with Muthulakshmi Reddy met Muhammad Ushman, the Home member of the Government of Madras. Muthulakshmi Reddy insisted that in case of government failure to establish rescue homes the existing institutions, such as the Madras Children Aid Society would be made use to give asylum to the fallen women.⁸ The pressure of public opinion under the able leadership of Muthulakshmi persuaded the government for amendment of the Act. ⁹Accordingly, the Madras suppression of Immoral Traffic (Amendment) Act' was passed on 30th October 1931.¹⁰ This act came a long way in regulating immoral life in the Madras City and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu.

Similarly in 1923 an act was passed to make traffic in minors a criminal offence. In this venture, Muthulakshmi Reddy relentlessly waged a crusade demanding abolition of devadasi system. For that she secured inspiration from all India Developments.¹¹ As a consequence, she introduced a resolution on 5th November 1927, demanding the Madras Government to recommend to the Government of India a legislation at a very early date to end the practice of dedication of young girls and young women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes in the name of caste, convention or religion.¹² Supported by many members in the council it was taken into consideration. Finally after slight amendment made by C.P.Ramasamy Aiyar, the Law Member, the Council unanimously passed the resolution.¹³

Thereafter S. Muthulakshmi Reddy drafted a bill which stated: "it is necessary that the sanction of our temple authorities to such practice of dedication, which breeds immorality, promiscuity and irresponsibility in both men and women be done away within the interest of the individuals and the nation at large and thus the public be disabused that our religions encourage immorality and that the services those women in any way form an essential part of the worship in temples.¹⁴ For that bill she tried to get the sanction of the Government of India and in the meantime she also enlisted the mass

support to her venture.¹⁵ The Tamil Leaders like T.V. Kalyanasundaranar, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy strongly backed the efforts of Muthulakshmi Reddy.¹⁶

After enlisting public opinion, the bill of Muthulakshmi Reddy met both support and opposition. The opposition mostly came from the orthodox quarters which wanted to protect the system. The devadasis also strongly stood against it. A number of protest meetings were organised by them throughout Tamil Nadu.¹⁷ The devadasis apprehended that their future would be drift in the ocean of uncertainty. The orthodox Hindus feared that the government intervention in the devadasi system would affect in future their religious rights and interests.

On the other side, Muthulakshmi's bill invited innumerable letters of appreciations from individuals, recognised social associations as well as public bodies. The important among them are Coimbatore Manimehala Sangham, Tirunelveli Women Association for Devadasis, Voriur Devadasis Association, Chidambaram Devadasis Conference, Isai Vellalar Sangham of Coimbatore, isai Vellalar. Sangharn of Mayuram, Nagapatna, isai Vellalar Sangham, Citizen of Tirupathi, Cochin Society for the protection of minors, Kanchipuram League of Non-Brahmin Youth and Thanjavur District Tamil Sangham. The All India national conference held in Madras in 1927 whole-heartedly greeted the efforts taken by Muthulakshmi for the abolition of devadasi system. Then she published many articles about the problems faced by devadasis and tried to enlighten both men and women about the devadasi community.¹⁸ Following this many memorandums and petitions from aggrieved sections stressed that Muthulakshmi Reddy should proceed further more.¹⁹ At a meeting held at Tiruvaduthurai on 3rd December 1927, R. Rajarathinam Pillai voiced his concern thus: "If the devadasi system is to be maintained in the near future, Tamil land will witness a whirlpool of human blood."²⁰

Very soon the public opinion slowly revolved around the idea of Muthulakshmi excepting one or two bogus associations which distributed unworthy literature to the public in a bid to prevent the efforts of Muthulakshmi.²¹ Nevertheless, the support to Muthulakshmi surpassed every barrier. Due to great enthusiasm on 2nd February 1929, Muthulakshmi introduced her bill to amend the Madras Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926 (Madras Act III of 1927), for the Act prevented the enfranchisement (freeing) of various inams held by the devadasis and freed the devadasis from the obligation to perform services In temples. On that occasion orthodox leaders like S. Satyamurti in the Council blamed it as a threat to Hinduism. Reacting sharply, Muthulakshmi retorted by alluding to the Hindu Religious Endowment Act which had previously intervened in the religious affairs and done justice there.²² After a long deliberation the bill attained the stage of an Act in February 1929.²³ The Act prevented the dedication young girls to become devadasis in the Hindu temples, and by that Act the devadasi community attained a sense of self-respect and dignity.²⁴ Later, Muthulakshmi Reddy herself observed: "Madras has now earned the honour of being the first province in British India to undertake social and religious legislation of this kind, and thus make a definite attack upon the centuries old custom."²⁵ Mahatma Gandhi wrote in *Young India* glorifying Muthulakshmi's Act as follows: "such legislation would receive the hearty support of all lovers of purity in religious and general social life".²⁶ In the Erode Municipal Meeting she was appreciated for her strenuous effort in the Madras Legislature to eradicate the devadasi system which was considered as a hygienic mistake, a social injustice, moral monstrosity and a religious crime.²⁷

In order to implement the Act, very effectively Muthulakshmi introduced the Prevention of Dedication of Hindu Temples Bill of 1930 in the Madras Legislative Council on 24th January 1930.²⁸ The public extended full-fledged support to this bill.²⁹ In the same year the Government of Madras issued an order to the effect that the system was abolished

by law. The passing of the Devadasi Abolition Act is the best achievement of Muthulakshmi Reddy as a legislator. And that is the magnum opus of Muthulakshmi.³⁰

Along with being a busy and active legislator, all through the years she attended various conferences at All India, Provincial and District levels. She also attended All Alien Women's Conference. She took credit for attending most of them either as President or distinguished visitor. No Women's Conference in India seemed to be complete without her attendance for a while.³¹

Whenever she had no conference to attend, she served on various committees. While a member in the Legislative Council, she served on several committees, such as health, welfare, temperance, vigilance, social hygiene, social reform and social service. In addition she also served on such purely Women's Associations such as the Women's Association, the Seva Sadan and the Children's Aid Society. Besides she was a member of the Hartog Committee on Indian Education. She represented India at the Paris Congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in 1926 as a delegate from India. In 1930 she was elected as President of the All India Women's Conference.³² In 1933 she visited America and attended the International Women's Conference in Chicago. Her contribution to the nation earned the Padma bhushan in recognition of her services.³³

Muthulakshmi's views on women and their activities are praiseworthy. She does not advocate University education for women; but wants that primary and higher education should be within the reach of every girl. She appealed through her speeches to such of those women who had education, experience and knowledge to enter into legislative bodies and render service to their country. Her council speeches are enlightening as repository of knowledge, informative and thought provoking on women issues. In order to give asylum to orphan women, widows, battered women and fallen women, she started Avuai Illam (Home) in 1930.³⁴ She was also a great woman nationalist. She was one among those who registered their protest against the arrest of Gandhi by resigning their place in the legislatures in 1930. She resigned her Deputy presidentship as well as her membership of the Madras Legislative Council.³⁵

Muthulakshmi's life was a noble and selfless one dedicated to the service of her downtrodden sisters. It was given to her to inaugurate the political emancipation of women and exemplify the same in her own life.³⁶ She was one of the front-line leaders of the women's movement in India. She was elected to the presidentship of the Women's Indian Association, the All-India Women's Conference and the Indian National Congress. As a writer, she was the author of a number of books which highlight the sufferings of women. The important among them are '*Caste and Pregnant Women*', '*Infant Mortality in India*', '*Women's Work in Madras*', '*My Experience as Legislator*', '*Mrs. Margaret Cousins Work in India*', '*Indian Women's Franchise*', '*Care of Chiding*', '*Evil of Child Marriage*', '*Why Should Devadasi Institution in Hindu Temple be Abolished*', and '*Cancer and Its Prevention*'.

As a nominated member, she served in the Madras Corporation from 1937 to 1939. In 1949, she organised Cancer Relief Fund and in 1952 she started Cancer Institute at Adyar in the presence of Nehru.³⁷ From 1954 to 1957, she served chairwoman of the Tamil Nadu Social Welfare Board and also for the second time entered the Madras Legislative-Council. In 1956 M.G. Ramachandran gave 30,000/- Rupees to Auvai Home to purchase 30 grounds of land in recognition of her social service. She passed away on 22nd July 1968 at the age of eighty-two in the Cancer Institute, Adyar.³⁸

To conclude, Dr. S.Muthulakshmi Reddy was one among the women stalwarts who dedicated most of her life for the women's emancipation in Tamil Nadu. She was much associated with the women organisations of Women Indian Association and All-India Women Conference. She attended various world women conference at different places of the alien and disseminated the views of world women leaders to India. She run many

welfare organisations for the women and through them she too much care of the needy women. Through her writings in the women journal, *Stridharma* and by her speeches she sensitized the women and advocated the progress of women in every sphere of the public activity. She was the author of many books and pamphlets, and in these works her selfless services the cause of the women were revealed.

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