

A Miles Stones Of DR. Muthulakshmi Reddy

**B.MEHARUNNISHA,
ASST PROF OF HISTORY,
THIRU.VI.KA GOVTS ARTS COLLEGE,
TIRUVARUR.**

*“You need to fast and meditate
to be born as a woman”*

-Kavimani Desiga Vinayagam Pillai

To be born as a woman is indeed a matter of pride and privilege. This is what the illustrious life of Dr. Muthulakshmi conveys to the society. She was a morning star and foreboding of twilight in the darkened sky of Tamil patriarchal society. Her advent to the public sphere sent tremors to the powerful castles and fortresses of Tamil patriarchs. Among those heroic women who fought against the oppression and subjugation of women, Muthulakshmi always occupies a position of pride. Muthulakshmi was born in Pudhukottai on 30th August, 1886 to Narayasami and Chandrammal. As someone who had an unquenchable thirst for education, she was able to study medicine and also became the first woman medical expert of India.

Muthulakshmi wanted to serve the poor and destitute, thus naturally she opted for the post of House Surgeon in which she can offer medical service to the poor pregnant women in their hour

of need. Thus, she was appointed as a house surgeon in a maternity hospital. There she served a lot of women in their needful hour.

To support and nurture an ecosystem in the medical field where even women can take part equally like men, an organization which trains women in the medical field was functioning at national level. It was also created in Lady Wellington Medical School through the tireless effort made by Muthulakshmi. In organizations such as these, women got their training in the medical field. While she was on her trip to London for a medical research about cancer, she met a doctor called Sir. Ranstmise and with his help she was able to open a cancer research hospital in Adyar, Chennai. They started it on 8th April, 1951 with a mission to eradicate cancer. The then president of India, Rajendra Prasad, was the chief guest of the opening ceremony. In the year of 1952, Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru placed the foundation stone for the Cancer Research Institute. Dr. Muthulakshmi is the one to whom the complete credits of all these measures would naturally go.

Dr. Muthulakshmi also fought vehemently against an oppressive patriarchal tradition of Devadasi system which reduced women into mere objects who exist only to delight and to be consumed by men. In this practice, women who belong to particular caste were made Devadasis whose sole purpose is to delight the men from the rural elite caste groups. She often went on tours around Tamil Nadu to propagate against these oppressive Devadasi systems and the practice of child marriage. She propagated ferociously and with certain courage mindless of the negative reactions. Devadasi system existed in most of the temples of Tamil Nadu and beautiful

and intelligent women who are well versed in all arts such as music, literature etc. Were made Devadasis as part of their tradition. Muthulakshmi played a prominent role in abolishing this tradition.

In the year of 1929, Muthulakshmi prepared a legislative draft and proposed it on 2nd February. Influential people strongly opposed this draft for reasons which are quite clear. In the year of 1930, Periyar, Father of Tamil Nadu, wrote an article in Kudiyarasu titled 'Devadasi Ozhippuchattam' (Abolishing Devadasi system bill) in which he supported the draft prepared and proposed by Muthulakshmi and he expressed his wholehearted support for the cause of banishing Devadasi system. In the year of 1930, bills were passed abolishing devadasi system. Indian Seva Samaj was formed to organize and give new life to Devadasi women. In the same year, a bill was passed in the Delhi parliament called Sharadha bill which was drafted to abolish child marriage.

In 1930, in order to provide alternative life supporting opportunities for Devdasi women, she started a house called Avvai Illam. In 1936, Avvai Illam changed its location Adyar, chennai. The inmates of the Avvai Illam were trained as nurses, health supervisors, village servers, caretakers, women welfare workers etc. In Avvai Illam, Devadasi women were given business training and they were also trained as high school teachers and in this way Muthulakshmi played a vital role in creating and nurturing a support system for the devadasi women to start a new life of self-reliance and dignity.

In the beginning of the Twentieth Century, there existed an evil system called the Devadasi System in the southern part of India and the people were quite apathetic to the problem. Gandhi himself asserted that this system would have died long ago but for the apathy of the public. Public Conscience in this country was passive and dormant. While the public did not consider it as a big issue, Gandhi was moved by the horror of this and said that “my whole soul rose in rebellion against the custom of dedicating minor girls for immoral purposes”. He felt that if man restrained his lust and society stood up against the evil, it would be easy to eradicate this evil.

This System of Devadasi is first evolved in India, cannot be ascertained definitely. Probably, this system was as old as the hills, and it was native to the soil of this country. The matriarchal system of families, formerly obtained throughout the entire Dravidian India, corresponded to a similar system that once existed in Southern Europe. Asia Minor, Egypt and Mesopotamia were the sources of the Devadasi Custom which percolated into Tamil Nadu.⁴ Our Social Reformers took effective steps to eradicate this evil custom from the society. Under this system, young girls were dedicated to temples and they were nurtured under healthy notions of religion and thought. But soon Devadasis system degenerated and Devadasis looked upon prostitution as their caste duty and Dharma. According to Muthulakshmi Reddy, Champion of the Devadasis, this dedication became identical with an evil profession and it grew to the extent of purchasing and adopting young innocent children and training them for an immoral life, at an age when they could not very well see the future before them.⁵ Again, she wanted to save them from enforced prostitution and brought home the fact that the state and religion should guard the morality of the people and improve the moral tone of society. It was sickening to her that the

Hindu temples, instead of protecting their chastity, exposed them to an immoral life. This system could not be easily abolished. The agitation to weed out this evil went on for a long period and the British Government also showed keen interest in its abolition.²⁵⁸ Hence the Indian Penal Code was amended to prevent the dedication of girls below the age of eighteen.

Due to social reformist efforts, traffic in minor girls was brought under the Indian Penal Code in 1925. Muthulakshmi Reddy felt that the Status of Devadasis could be improved only by relieving them of compulsory temple service and the self confidence of the community could be improved only by offering education to their sons and daughters. The Hindu Religious Endowments Act was passed in 1929 in the Madras Legislative Council and the Act liberated the Devadasi Community from temple service and granted the inam lands of temple to their families. Devadasi Act was finally passed in 1947 to root out the system once and for all.⁶ Muthulakshmi Reddy paid more interest in the abolition of Devadasi System in temples. In her own words, "I have been telling all along and feeling most acutely that it was a great piece of injustice, a great wrong, a violation of human rights, a practice highly revolting to our sense of morality, to tolerate young innocent girls to be trained in the name of religion to lead a life of promiscuity, a life leading to the disease of mind and the body. Moreover, the famous Social Reformers from Andhra also contributed to the eradication of the Devadasi Custom from Andhra. Among them Veresalingam Pantulu and S.R. Venkataratnam Naidu were pioneers in taking up this social purification work. They advised the Devadasis to marry. They further advised them not to engage themselves in marriages, festivals and in temple service. Venkataratnam Naidu opened a memorable campaign for Shuddhi Movement for eradicating this system.

At the 40th Indian National Social Conference held at Madras in 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddy delivered a speech in which she expressed anguish at the apathy of the Government and its inability to recognize dedication as tantamount to prostitution. She was critical of the Government's inability to help the cause of the "weak and the hands of the enlightened representatives. Muthulakshmi Reddy related the evils of the custom to the pathetic condition of the girls who, from their childhood, were exposed to the immoral trade and a life of sin, crime and castigation.

This Bill on Special Marriages proposed to revise the Special Marriage Act of 1872 so as to provide a special form of marriage which could be taken advantage of by any person in India or abroad irrespective of the faith of either party to the marriage. The parties may observe any ceremony for the solemnization of their marriage but certain formalities were prescribed before the marriage could be registered by Marriage Officers. For the benefit of Indian Citizens abroad, the Bill provided for the appointment of diplomatic and consular officers as Marriage Officers for solemnizing and registering marriages between Citizens of India in foreign countries. Provision was also sought to be made for permitting persons who had already married under other forms of marriage to register their marriage under this Act and thereby avail themselves of these provisions.

When Muthulakshmi Reddy was President of Women's Indian Association, the Government sent the Special Marriage Bill, 1952, for getting its opinion regarding this Bill. The Association sent their opinion to the Government that the orthodox and the conservative people need not oppose the Bill as this was only a permissive legislation and not a compulsory one. Marriages

were becoming more and more a contract and State should make provisions to cover every kind of marriage. After Independence, Muthulakshmi Reddy was nominated as a Member of Legislative Assembly during the year 1952-1953 by the then Chief Minister, Rajagopalachari. She gained another opportunity to improve our society by supporting a series of legislative measures.

Conclusion

The 73rd Amendment of Indian constitution provides for one-third reservation for women in the Panchayats. It has led to an upsurge of women in the political field. At the present there are many of the women representatives elected in the legislative assembly and social government. Thus can be said that, though there are many legislative and constitutional provisions covering almost all aspects of the life of women, yet the main concern is that after all this legislative exercise, what is required is that after this legislative exercise what is required is the implementation of laws in the true spirit, so that women can enjoy equal rights and status as that of a man.

Reference:

1. Jones William, *Menu Dharma Sastra* (Madras: Higginbotham's and co, 1980) p.321.
2. Lina Gonzales, *Women and Human Rights* (New Delhi: A.P.H.Publishing house. 2001) p.134.
3. Wilson John, *History of the suppression of Infanticide in Western India* (Bombay: Smith Taylor and co, 1955) p.165.
4. Journal of *Empowerment of Women* (XXXII No.17, April 26- May 2, 1997)

5. Browne, *Infanticide and its Origin* (London: W.H Allen and co, 1957) p.66
6. J.A, Dubies Abbe., *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (London: Clarendon press, 1933(pp.73-77).
7. V.A. Smith, *History of India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1968) p.185.
8. Statistics Report (UNICEF: 2000) p.319.
9. L.A.K Iyyar, *Devadasis in south India: Their Traditional Origin and developments, Man in India (vol.7, No.47, 1927)* p.132.
10. B ayadere, *Devadasis in India* (New Delhi: University Press, 1988) p.145.
11. M.Sundar Raj., *Prostitution in Madras, a study in Historical Perspective* (Delhi: Saffron publisher, 1993)P.133.
12. Sonji, *Unfinished gushers : Devadasis , Memory and Modernity in south India* (Chicago: University Press, p.165.
13. Dr, Muthulakshmi , *My experience as on legislation, (autobiography)*