

# South Indian Freedom Fighter The Queen Of “Velunachiyar” - A Historical Perspective

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**Abstract:** The emergence of reform movements in the Nineteenth Century marks the beginning of a New Era in the Indian History. Western Education and Industrial Revolution brought about a new awakening in the midst of Indian Intellectuals. The enlightened and educated Indians developed the consciousness about the Glory of Indian Culture and realized that the existing social evils such as Purdha System, Untouchability, Ban on Widow Remarriage, Infanticide, and Devadasi System and a host of other evil practices were leading to human degradation. Under such circumstances, various social and religious reformers rose to meet the challenge of the times. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, regarded as the Father of Indian Renaissance, is the forerunner of all reformers in the galaxy of such social reformers and Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddi is considered the first Woman social reformer in South India.

**Keywords:** Social Reforms, Political Achievements, Education, Women Movements, Hospital Achievements

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of reform movements in the Nineteenth Century marks the beginning of a New Era in the Indian History. Western Education and Industrial Revolution brought about a new awakening in the midst of Indian Intellectuals. The enlightened and educated Indians developed the consciousness about the Glory of Indian Culture and realized that the existing social evils such as Purdha System, Untouchability, Ban on Widow Remarriage, Infanticide, and Devadasi System and a host of other evil practices were leading to human degradation. Under such circumstances, various social and religious reformers rose to meet the challenge of the times. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, regarded as the Father of Indian Renaissance, is the forerunner of all reformers in the galaxy of such social reformers and Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddi is considered the first Woman social reformer in South India

## 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

My Experience as a Legislator by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi provides a detailed sketch of how she became a Legislator and also about the legislations introduced due to her initiative in the Legislative Assembly. P. Subramanian's Social History of the Tamils, 1707 – 1947, narrates the growth of Devadasi System in Tamil Nadu and the condition, especially of women, in the Madras Presidency. Sushila Nayar and Kamala Mankekar in, Women Pioneers In India's Renaissance, have explained Muthulakshmi Reddi's early life and her political participation. Rajkumar Purthi's, Women's Movement and Freedom Struggle, has traced the origin of All India Women's Conference and its contribution to society. S. Ramsharma's, Education of Women and Freedom Movement, has dealt with the All India Women's Conference and their efforts regarding Women's Education and also it has emphasized the kind of education to be given to women.

It has further explained the resolutions passed covering all levels of education like primary, secondary and collegiate to promote women's Status by the All India Women's Conference. Radhakrishna Sharma's, Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women, provides detailed information about social evils, social reform movements and origin of women's organizations and their contribution to the Women's Enfranchisement. Muthulakshmi Reddi's, Autobiography, explains her family background, early life and also her entire activities in the emancipation of society.

## 3 OBJECTIVES

Estimate the role of Muthulakshmi as a social reformer. Evaluate the services of Muthulakshmi Reddi as a member of the legislature. Assess the role of Muthulakshmi Reddi as a medical practitioner. Explain Muthulakshmi Reddi's contribution to the upliftment of women and children. Study Muthulakshmi Reddi's achievements as the President of Women's Indian Association.

### EARLY LIFE

Muthulakshmi was born in 1886 in the Princely State of Pudukkottai. (Geraldine Forbes2000) Her father, Narayanaswamy Iyer, first married a Brahmin girl who died very early. Hence he married again on Chandrammal, born in Isai Vellalar Caste, a caste in which women were dedicated to service in Hindu Temples. Chandrammal gave birth to eight children but four of them died at an early age. Among those who survived Muthulakshmi was the eldest. She had a younger brother and two sisters. Narayanaswamy served as the Principal of the Maharajah's College, Pudukkottai. He was impressed by his daughter's thirst for knowledge even when she was a child of four years and he was keen to educate her. When she was eleven years old, her father retired prematurely owing to some difference between him and the Diwan of the state. Her family suffered financial hardship (K.R. Narendra Singh, 2001) and therefore, Muthulakshmi's mother wanted to stop her from school. Due to her kind teacher, Balaiah, she was allowed to continue her school education up to her 13th year and she successfully passed the Lower Secondary Public Examination. After attaining puberty, she was stopped from attending school as was the custom in those days. Her father employed a private tutor on a payment of Rs.2 per month for one year to teach fourth form subjects at home. Subsequently, her father himself gave her tuition for one or two hours a day,

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to clear Fifth Form and Sixth Form and thereby a strong foundation was laid for her higher education. In 1902, she appeared for the Matriculation Examination. In those days, out of hundred students who appeared for the Matriculation Examination, only about ten passed. She was one among them. No other girl studied English in those days. Her success in the examination was a great surprise to the people of Pudukkottai. Her father received congratulations from a number of officials and non – officials. He was overjoyed at her success. She received an appointment order in the local girls' school which was only an Elementary School. But she wanted to go for her higher studies in St. Joseph's College, Trichy or Palomcottah Women's College, Trinaveli. There were no hostels for girls in those days. (Muthu Kannappar, 2002) Therefore her father had no choice but to apply for admission in the local men's College. This was only a Second Grade College. She learnt under qualified teachers. The Durbar Records in Pudukkottai have material on the above details. In the application for admission to Fine Arts Course which was written by her in English on February 4th 1904, Muthulakshmi recorded that she was "eager to commence the collegiate course". Till that time, no girl had been admitted in the college. Narayanaswamy Iyer encouraged the desire of the girl with his limited sources. (Gopala Krishna Gandhi 1983) When she applied to the college, it created quite a flutter. The main objection was that she was a woman and another one was her caste. The Principal thought that her admission would demoralize the boys and suggested putting her in a separate room with a separate lecturer. A gentleman in a letter to the Principal said that even this expenditure was unnecessary since he felt that furthering the education of a girl of that caste did not appear to him to help the cause of female education in the State. Some parents threatened to withdraw their boys if she was admitted. The Maharajah of Pudukkottai, being a sensible person, brushed aside the objection, and gave her admission. (C.S. Lakshmi, 1986) Thus the Maharajah's enlightenment opened a new chapter in the history of Women's Education in South India. It is amazing that a Prince came down from his pedestal, listened to the grievances of a humble girl and threw open the gates of a college facilitating her admission. She was the first girl student to be admitted to the Maharajah's College for men from where she passed her Intermediate in 1907 (S.P. Sen, ed., 1974) When she studied in Maharaja's College, Sathyamurthi, the famous politician and orator, was her classmate. In those days, she could not take part in games along with boys. She was given a small stair case room in the college. She completed her studies with the help of State Scholarship. When Muthulakshmi passed the Intermediate Examination in 1907, her father suggested that she could become a school teacher but she had higher aspirations. When one of her father's former students suggested medicine, her father gave the proposal serious consideration even though she had always been a sickly child, helped by traditional medicine and herbal remedies. Her mother's bout with Typhoid provided the personal motivation. Moreover, she wanted to leave home so that she could be free from her mother's obsession with marriage. She entered the Madras Medical College in 1907. (Geraldine Forbes) There were no hostels in those days for girl students. Further, her sisters and brother also came with Muthulakshmi for their studies. Hence they secured a rental house in Purasawalkam where many of her father's students and friends lived. P.S. Krishnaswamy Iyer's home was next to Muthulakshmi and

whenever Muthulakshmi's father went to her native place for his business and other purpose, Iyer and his wife looked after them. (K.V. Kalaimani, 2001) In her first year, she had difficulty in passing M.B.C.M. Course as it was not easy for students. Moreover, in those days, no Christian or European lady student passed the M.B.C.M. Examination in the first attempt in the Madras Medical College. This depressed Muthulakshmi, and so she attended classes regularly and studied her lessons well. In the second year, she passed in all subjects and then she was promoted to the third year. In the third and fourth years, she was equally successful in all her subjects, particularly surgery, obtaining high marks. When the results were announced in the class, one of the Professors of Muthulakshmi, Major Niblock, found out that a lady student got cent percent in surgery, and jumped out from his seat and shouted with joy. "A lady student Muthulakshmi has obtained cent percent". The whole class applauded her achievements. In those days, even European Professors entertained the impression that women students were not as good as men students. A Senior Professor and Surgeon, Col. Gifford in the Government Women and Children's Hospital, did not allow women students to sit in his class. Only his assistant, a Junior Professor, would lecture to them. It so happened that when prizes and medals were thrown open to both boys and girls, she was advised by Col. Gifford to appear for one such examination and he was so much impressed with her answers that he permitted all women students to attend his class from that day. Thanks to Muthulakshmi's outstanding performance, other women students gained the benefit of Col. Gifford's lectures. Finally, she passed out with honors from the College in 1912. She had offers of appointment from several hospitals, including the Government Victoria Hospital in Madras, now named Kasturibha Gandhi Memorial Hospital and from hospitals in Ludhiana, Punjab and Calicut. She, however, felt that she should have practical training under Senior Surgeons and Physicians though she was very proficient in theory. Therefore, she asked Col. Gifford to give her a place in the Government Hospital for Women and Children in Egmore. Hence he appointed her as a House Surgeon, saying that there had been no women medical officers before in that hospital. (Thirunavukkarasu, 1999) After finishing her House Surgeonship, she returned to her native place. She felt that she was bound to serve in her native state but the Anglo-Indian Lady Apothecary and the Chief Medical Officer created trouble for her at Pudukkottai out of jealousy. Therefore, she returned to Madras in 1914 and set up a clinic which became popular and she commanded a good practice. (Vasumathi Ramaswamy, 1987) From her early days as a solitary girl sitting on a segregated bench in the Maharajah's College at Pudukkottai, she had realized that the struggle for Gender Equality was only possible if women were educated enough to perceive that they shared common problems. Therefore, it was natural that Muthulakshmi became an early member of the Women's Indian Association. The Organization, founded in 1917, consisted of core Irish Suffragists and elite Indian Women of several castes and religions. Some of the most noteworthy included Annie Besant, Margret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malathy Patwarthan, Parvathy Ammal Chandra Sekaran, Mangalammal Sadasiva Iyer, Ammu Swaminathan, Hira Bai Tata, Rahamat Unisha Begam and Begam Yakub Hasan of Arcot. (D. Long Roger and Stanley Wolpert, 2004) She began working at the Government Hospital, treating women, children, urban and poor. In 1913, she became the

Residential Doctor for Subalakshmi Ammal's Brahmin Hostel for Widows. Muthulakshmi was associated with many Women's Associations in her early days such as the Women's Indian Association and the Muslim Women's Association. She was also a member of non-sectarian organizations like the Madras Seva Sadan, the Madras Vigilance Society and the Indian Ladies Samaj. (Stanly Wolpert, ed.,2006) While Muthulakshmi was studying for medicine, her parents arranged for her marriage. But she did not give acceptance because she believed married life would affect her service to the people. She did not want to become a mother so soon with all the responsibilities of married life. She was herself full of zeal to dedicate her whole life to the service of women and children in her own State where medical aid was a crying need. Therefore, she felt that marriage would be a bar to such a life of service. Magazines and news papers carried articles about Muthulakshmi's awards and honors and this publicity brought offers of marriage from young men. Dr.Sundra Reddi was one among them. (Geraldine Forbes,) He was born in 1873 in the village of Agaram, South Arcot District. When he was young, he was adopted by his maternal uncle, Subarayalu Reddiar who was the Chief Minister of Madras Presidency.<sup>24</sup> Sundra Reddi faced many difficulties when he studied for MBCM. After finishing his studies, he joined as a Surgeon in the King George Hospital, Visagapattinam. He conveyed his wishes to Dr. Muthulakshmi's parents to get married to her. After verifying Dr.Sundra Reddi's character and conduct, Dr.Muthulakshmi's father gave his consent for the marriage.<sup>25</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddi stipulated certain conditions for marriage. The conditions were equal respect for each other and to allow her to work independently. After getting married, Dr. Reddi served at the Pudukkottai Government Hospital as Chief Medical Officer, and Muthulakshmi Reddi also joined him. There they worked together for three years. Then Dr. Sundra Reddi joined the Madras Medical College as an Assistant Professor. Muthulakshmi Reddi stayed at Madras where she had already established her practice. Women Doctors were so few in those days even in the City of Madras. Hence her service was very much in demand and she built up a good practice amongst women and children. She had two sons. In 1914, her first child was born after a long and difficult labour. It was the famous Dr. A. Lakshmanaswami Mudaliar who delivered her first child. His name was Ram Mohan who became the Director of Planning Commission. Her second, son Krishnamurti was born in 1919. He became the Chairman of the Adayar Cancer Institute and Avvai Home at Chennai. She received an offer of Scholarship from the Government of India for post graduate study on the diseases of women and children in England in 1925. On her way back, she attended the Paris International Congress of Women as an Indian Delegate. In the midst of her professional and family responsibilities, she found time for social work with women and children. She also found time to publish many books in English and the vernacular on the care of pregnant women, child birth and feeding of infants. Dr. Muthulakshmi's sister took her B.A. Degree in the Queen Mary's College, and her M.A from the Presidency College, Madras. She was appointed as a first Indian Principal of the same college.<sup>32</sup> She was the first woman to attain such a position in India. She also had the fortune and privilege to work in the League of Nations. But her other sister was not so studious. Her brother, Ramaiah, was an advocate in the Madras High Court and he was a popular social worker for the uplift of Harijans. Dr. Muthulakshmi

Reddi was influenced both by Indians and Foreigners. Among Indians, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, and among Foreigners, Swedish Missionaries, Josephine Butter, Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant, were the chief sources of influence. She was also a close friend of Standford, a Theosophist from South Africa. Muthulakshmi Reddi came under the influence of Gandhi and participated in the National Movement. She also fought for the rights of women with other leaders. (Raja Mohamad 2004) Muthulakshmi Reddi had contact with national leaders. She met Subramania Bharathi at Dr.Nanchunda Rao's residence in Madras in 1908. Subramania Bharathi at that time was the Editor of a news paper called, India. He requested Muthulakshmi Reddi to write essays on women's rights. Muthulakshmi Reddi was a freedom fighter and a patriot. She was one of the women leaders of the PreIndependence Era who stood for the cause of liberating India from the clutches of the British Regime. In December 1933, when Gandhi visited Madras, the Women's Indian Association organized a meeting which was attended by all leading women social workers and middle class women. They gave their gold bangles, rings and other valuables as their contribution to the Freedom Struggle. Gandhiji addressed the gathering, and his speech was translated into Tamil by Muthulakshmi Reddi. She went as a Woman Delegate to the Third Round Table Conference at London, with Gandhi and attended the First International Conference of Chicago in 1934. The Women's Indian Association was started on 8th May 1917 at Adayar, Madras, by Dorothy Jinarajadasa, with the assistance of Dr. Annie Besant, who was chosen its First President and remained so till her death. (Radhakrishna Sharma 1981) After Annie Besant's death, Muthulakshmi Reddi became the President of the Women's Indian Association.<sup>40</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddi, during her tenure as President of the All India Women's Indian Association, never missed an opportunity to honor eminent personalities who visited Madras City. She accorded reception to Hellen Keller, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the then President of the UN General Assembly, Rajendra Prasad, Dr.Radha Krishnan, Jawaharlal Nehru, the former British Prime Minister Lord Atlee and Lady Atlee, and many others. As the President of the Women's Indian Association, she did commendable work for the nation. The aim of All India Women's Conference was to promote education among women and to deal with questions affecting the welfare of women and children. (Ram 2004) The All India Women's Conference was not formed with any political purpose. It concentrated on issues such as early marriage, polygamy, purdah, dowry, and widow remarriage and property rights for women and prepared the ground for suitable legislation. Some leaders of the All India Women's Conference took the initiative in Women's Franchise Movement as early as 1917. Though from the beginning the All India Women's Conference proclaimed that it would keep away from politics and work only for the social progress of women, the circumstances of Colonial India inevitably guided it towards politics for it was the British Government whom they tried to impress and move to gain rights for Indian Women. (Kanak Mukherjee, 1989) In 1929, the All India Women's Conference demanded that their representatives should be called to the Round Table Conference in London and suggested the names of Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddi and Rameshwaram Nehru as Delegates. But the British Government rejected their demands. But the Government relented later and the All India Women's Conference was asked to send three women

representatives to place their views before the Parliament. The three representatives, Begum Hamid Ali, Rajakumari Amrit Kaur and Muthulakshmi Reddi, went to London and placed their views before the Select Committee. They also contacted the British Women's Organization and International Alliance of Women.<sup>45</sup> On her return from abroad, she was welcomed by the Women's Indian Association. Everyone was anxious to hear her personal account of what was done by our representatives, of whom she was, one before the Joint Select Committee in London and also her impressions of America where she represented Indian Women at International Congress of Women at Chicago. Muthulakshmi Reddi gave an interesting account of her various experiences about her visit. She had travelled half round the world. It was most encouraging to hear of the keen and earnest interest that both England and America had for their sisters in India. The Fifth Conference of the All India Women's Conference was held at Lahore in 1931 under the President ship of Muthulakshmi Reddi. This Conference emphasized provision for more schools, hostels and adult education centers for Women in the Presidency. It also decided to observe the First Day of March as 'Women's Day' and the holding of meetings in almost all the constituencies on that day. To explain and popularize the work of the Conference was another noteworthy innovation. Vigorous and well – timed propaganda was carried on with a view to safeguarding the Sarda Act. (Rajkumar, et al, 2003) Muthulakshmi Reddi was selected by the Government as one of the members of the Hartog Committee to review the condition of women's education in the country. (P.N. Premalatha, 2003) Muthulakshmi Reddi was the Editor of Stri - Dharma, an official organ of the Women's Indian Association from 1931. (Susila Nayar and Kamalamankar, 2003) After taking over the Editorship during 1930, Reddi placed her own stamp on Stri-Dharma by using it as a Political Forum. (Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, 2003) Protesting over the arrest of Gandhi during Non Co-Operation Movement, Reddi resigned her post in the Council on 8th May and directed her energy towards serving as a Propagandist for the Nationalist Cause. Muthulakshmi Reddi, owing to reasons of health, resigned from the Secretary ship of Women's Indian Association and Editorship of Stri-Dharma in 1933. Muthulakshmi was deeply religious and she observed all the Hindu Festivals scrupulously but she was not an Orthodox Hindu. Her mind was philosophical. She thought that all religions were connected with Brahma Samaj and did not believe in any cult but believed in the equality of all religions. She regarded Service to Humanity as service to God. She did not believe in the Caste System. None of her people had any faith in it. Her parents had entered into an inter-caste marriage, and so had Muthulakshmi Reddi and her brother and sisters. She believed in the dictum of Avvai, the well known woman bard of Tamil Nadu that there were only two castes those possessing high character and those with no characters. (K.R. Narendra Singh 2001) Muthulakshmi Reddi was one of the women pioneers in her profession in South India. She married a Doctor. She sacrificed a lucrative medical practice for the sake of service to women and children. She was meticulous in studying texts on Social Reform Legislation. It annoyed her that women in public life did not read news papers sufficiently to be up to date on topical subjects. She rarely used to go to cinema or seek any entertainment. (E. Margaret Cousins, 1941) Muthulakshmi Reddi inspired many men and women in India and outside. She was also a source of inspiration to Sarojini Vardappan and

the famous film actor, Gemini Ganesan. When Sarojini Varadappan spoke about the memories of Muthulakshmi Reddi, she said, "It is a great privilege for me to have known this great lady from my father's time; he was former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Bhaktavatsalam. She was neighbour of our home in Purasawalkam in Chennai. She was also our family doctor. She expected sincerity, discipline, efficiency and perfection. At the same time she used to encourage young workers like me. Many times she used to pat me on my back and say you spoke very well".

#### **POLITICAL LIFE**

Till the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, no woman was given the right to become a Member of the Legislative Council. (Padmini Sen Gupta 1974) In 1921, the Madras Legislative Council passed a Resolution, with the help of Women's Indian Association, regarding Voting Rights for Women in all Provinces. The Government of India went a step further and granted for women representation in the Legislative Council. (S.Vats Shakunthala Mudgal, 1999) In this connection, the Madras Council threw open its membership to women for the first time. Kamaladevi was persuaded by Margaret Cousins to contest the election to the Madras Legislative Council. Kamaladevi hesitated as she did not belong to any party and she had no time to canvass. (Shakunthala Narashimhan, 1999) Hence she lost narrowly to 515 votes to her opponent. Then Women's Indian Association asked the Government to provide representation for women by nomination. Hence the Government of India nominated women candidates to the Madras Legislative Council. Therefore, Women's Indian Association sent a list of leading women social workers, including the name of Muthulakshmi Reddi. During that time, Muthulakshmi Reddi had gone to Paris as a delegate from India to attend an International Conference. After her return to India, she was nominated as a Member of the Madras Legislative Council. She was not prepared to accept the nomination because she felt that her medical profession would be affected by the nomination. But the Women's Indian Association compelled her to accept the membership.

#### **LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS TO ABOLISH THE DEVADASIS SYSTEM**

The agitation against this evil custom was launched since 1868. The British social worker, Josephine Butler, fought against prostitution in British India. In the mean time, effective steps were taken in Mysore in 1909. They ordered that whatever be the original object of the Institution of Devadasis, the state of immorality in which the temple services were found, fully justified the action taken including the removal of the Devadasis from every kind of service in the temples and further, practising of dedicating girls to the temple was made punishable under the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of Mysore. Moreover, in 1912, three different Bills to suppress this evil were introduced by Menakji Dahabai, Mudholkar and Madge. Even though there were many supporters for the Bill, it was quietly dropped. The Local Government did not send a satisfactory reply to those Bills. The Indian Penal Code, section 372 speaks about the recruitment of girls for employing as Devadasi to be a punishable offence. In 1922, Hari Singh Gour proposed a Resolution for recommending legislation to prohibit the traffic of minor girls for immoral purposes, ostensibly intended as Devadasis. It was adopted by the Assembly. As a result, in February 1924, a Bill amending Section 372 and 373 of Indian Penal Code was introduced to

rescue and protect young girls, less than 18 years, living in the circumstances calculated to lead to prostitution. This Bill became Act XVIII of 1924. It prohibited selling and buying or hiring of any person under the age of eighteen for the purpose of prostitution or illicit intercourse or for any unlawful and immoral purposes.<sup>26</sup> Few years later, in 1927, Ramadass Pantulu moved a Resolution in the Council of State of Simla for introducing a legislation to prohibit the practice of dedicating minor girls to temples as Devadasis. Her relatives forced her to become a Devadasi but she did not yield. Moreover, she thought that every Devadasi should enter married life and this is the only way to abolish the social evil. She organized the first Issai Vella Conference at Mayavaram.<sup>28</sup> during 1920 and 1930; Muthulakshmi Reddi took a lead in abolishing the Devadasi System. Her membership in the Madras Legislative Council gave opportunity to uphold her views against the system. She took a vow that she would never rest till she got the pernicious custom eradicated from this land. At the same time, she organized meetings in different places. The Women's Indian Association and its publication, *Stri-dharma*, were engaged in propaganda work against the evil through the medium of the press and public meetings. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi was able to garner support even from within the Devadasi Community Organizations such as the Devadasi Women's Association. The Devadasi Community Men's Association came forward to help Muthulakshmi Reddi. In 1927, these associations organized Conferences and meetings in different places and urged Reddi, Vice President of the Madras Legislative Council, to adopt legislation to put an end to the system of dedication of young women and girls.<sup>30</sup> On July 8th 1927, a Conference of Devadasis was held at Chidambaram under the Presidentship of Singaram Pillai<sup>31</sup>, and on 2nd November 1927, the Manimegalai Sangam, a Devadasi Women's Association, organized a meeting at Coimbatore under V.Konnammal, a Devadasi of Thanjavur and Mayavaram. Muthulakshmi Reddi put forward the Motion in the Madras Legislative Council, proposing that the system of dedicating girls and young women to Hindu temples for immoral purposes should be stopped by the legislation at an early date. But some of the Devadasis opposed the Resolution vehemently. Soon the Devadasis in Madras and other areas in the Presidency also began organizing protest meetings and submitting Memorandum to the Government. Dorai Kannammal, Secretary of the Madras Presidency Devadasis, took the lead in the protest solidarity and sent Memorandum to the authorities concerned, with signatures. They stated that the Devadasis were not prostitutes and the fundamental principle of their lives was to render service to God, their life was like that of saints, the abolition of that system would be a danger to a religion, the whole community should not be condemned for the sins of a few, their property would be affected and indeed, even the country's cultural heritage was in danger. They also insisted that the Government should offer Devadasis educational facility by which they could gain access to better prospects in life. A significant aspect of the Devadasi System was the permanent and hereditary nature of their work in temple's land or some times, cash was set apart for different functions to be performed by them. Once a Devadasi was appointed for a particular chore such as dancing before the god in the temple during the procession, festivals of waving fly whisks etc, not only her post became permanent but also the right to do the particular work was assigned to her and a

certain endowment was set apart for her upkeep and it became hereditary. Thus the main obstacles in weeding out the Devadasi System were the endowments and perquisites these women received from temples as a hereditary right in lieu of service in the temples. In the absence of a daughter, a Devadasi would go to the extent of securing an heiress either by way of adoption or purchase. These adoptions and purchases led to immoral life. Hence the Government decided to amend Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926 for granting these lands permanently. On September 5, 1928, Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to amend the Hindu Religious Endowment Act 1926 and the Bill became an Act called the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929, with a new section, 44A, added to section 44. In accordance with this Act, all the lands assigned to the dedicated girls as a reward, stipulated in return for service performed by them, shall be freed from the conditions of the service and the Local Government imposing a Quit-Rent in lieu thereof. Similarly, all assignments of land revenue shall be freed from the conditions of service and a Quit rent imposed, in case of Devadasis herself being the owner of the lands in respect of which the assignment has been made. The Local Government was empowered to make rules in accordance with which enfranchisement shall be effected. Another class of the Act specifically laid down that there should be no enforcement of obligation to render any service to any temple to which a girl is dedicated by reason of the grant of land. In other words, all the dedicated girls were freed and declared independent citizens who could enjoy complete liberty to follow any calling according to the bent of their mind or to educate themselves and be useful to society in ways other than the one marked out by their status. The Government then directed the Revenue Department to frame set of rules to grant and assess the lands for fixing the rent. The Revenue Department submitted its Drafts Rules in 1929, which the Government ratified. According to them, Collectors were empowered to administer the provisions of the Act and Rules by which they could by notification, direct the Trustees of Temples and the Devadasis to inform as to the inam held in connection with a temple. This Act was applied only to women and not to men who were of assistance to the Devadasis. The Devadasi Service was a joint performance of both men and women. Even though the functions of women were chief, it consisted partly of dancing by women and partly fiddling and drumming performed by men. Hence the Devadasi Reform Associations sent many representations to Muthulakshmi Reddi to insist that unless the whole inam enjoyed by both men and women for their joint service were enfranchised, the evil custom could not be eradicated by liberating them from the obligation of service in the temple, and that they would train only women for that service for fear that they might lose the benefit of these Inams. This Act dealt with Inam Holding Devadasis only. There were other Devadasis who dedicated a large number of girls to Hindu temples by going through the pottu kattu or similar ceremony in the Hindu temples even after the age of eighteen. There was a class of Devadasis outside the temple who dedicated their girls not for the service in the temples but for the sole object of flesh trade. Muthulakshmi Reddi did not always trust men as protagonists of women's freedom. In fact, she expressed the hope that the British Government would continue as Political Rulers till such time when women were fully relieved of their Social Disabilities. In her budget speech in 1927, she said, "let me

also impress upon the Government that we want their help and guidance for some time .We, women, fear whether the unjust divorce and inheritance laws will not be cancelled or modified without their help.” Again after she had resigned from the Legislature in protest against the incarceration of Gandhi in 1930, she said in a Conference in 1933, that “it is the State and State alone that can effectively break down the traditional customs that are harmful to the individual and to society”. Despite this distrust of men as supporters of women’s freedom, Reddi thanked them in the book that she published after resigning from the Legislature. One of the objectives of writing the book, she said, was ‘to demonstrate to the outside world how much Indian men honour and respect their women colleagues, how deeply they sympathise with all their legitimate aspirations for equal rights, for equal political and social status and how much they value our help and cooperation in the administration of the State”.

### **SOCIAL REFORM**

The impact of higher education among women made them realize how education was important to improve their rights. Madras was one of the progressive Provinces of India and the home of the great Muthulakshmi Reddi. She was widely respected as a devoted social worker. Under her able leadership, the women of this State, who were advanced in education, took a very active part in public life. (R.K. Dutta, 2003) In our society, many young girls and women faced serious problems such as neglect and ill-treatment in their homes and they migrated to the city and wandered about aimlessly as they were unable get admission into any Home for abandoned women. A good number of them were misguided by others.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Reception Homes for these girls had to be established as an attachment to Vigilance Homes or the Women’s Welfare Department where, through investigation of each case, they could be restored to their relations or admitted to a place of safety in any institution.

### **THE MADRAS SEVA SADAN**

Muthulakshmi Reddi was one of the Founders of the Home and she took great interest in the development of the Home. The Home gave scholarship to students from the funds collected from the public and members of Women’s Indian Association. The students were taught lessons in Vernacular and English. The courses were based on vocations such as lace making, embroidery, weaving and spinning. (R.K. Rao2000), In 1928, when a demand for an Industries Home was put before the Council, Muthulakshmi Reddi informed the Council that an Industrial Home already existed for women at Mylapore. It not only gave shelter to widows and destitute women but also gave them training. Women from various castes and creeds were admitted to this Home.( S. Muthulakshmi Reddi,1930)

### **MADRAS CHILDREN AID SOCIETY**

The establishment of the Madras Children Aid Society was an important step taken by the Women’s Indian Association towards Child Welfare in the Madras Presidency. Under the guidance of Dr.Annie Besant, Muthulakshmi Reddi did much for the improvement of Juvenile Offenders who were taken to the Madras Children Aid Society by the police. It was a Training School where they were reformed so that they might become useful and good citizens. She continuously fought with the Government for rescuing children from undesirable surroundings. Also this institution became a model for the

whole of India. It concentrated on matters like children’s diet, health, and discipline.

### **THE CHILDREN’S ACT**

The Madras Children Act was passed in 1920, and the main objectives of the Act are:

- To prohibit imprisonment of juvenile offenders under sixteen years
- To provide for the reception of youthful offenders less than twelve years of age and those of 12 and 16 in junior certified schools
- To empower courts to commit a juvenile offender to the custody of his parent, guardian or any adult relative and to place him under the supervision of persons named by court, and
- To provide for children who are likely to drift into crime being sent to certified schools or committed to suitable custody.

### **AMENDMENT OF THE MADRAS CHILDREN ACT IV OF 1920**

The Madras Children’s Act did not contain any provision for the prevention and punishment of offences against children. Under our present Act, only the vagrant and youthful offenders were tried and sent to the Children’s Aid Society, Madras. A few cases of children rescued from brothels on information supplied to the police by social workers and well-intended neighbours, were sent there. Muthulakshmi Reddi’s Bill was intended to amend the Madras Children’s Act so as to bring it on line with the Acts of other Indian Provinces and the English Act. Further, there was a clause in her Bill to prevent the training of girl children by Devadasis for a life of concubinage or prostitution.

### **REMAND HOME FOR DELINQUENTS**

The Children Act passed in the Madras Legislative Council in 1920 made provision for the treatment of young delinquents by establishing Reformatory Schools. But their operation provided meagre and insufficient facilities. The Women’s Indian Association pressed for an amendment of the Children’s Act 1920 for creating Separate Remand Homes for Children during the pendency of their cases and Separate Children’s Court with Women Magistrates. Muthulakshmi Reddi, as the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council, fought for these provisions inside the Council and the members of the Women’s Indian Association, outside the Council. (Anup Taneja Gandhi, 2005)

### **Home for Widows**

Sister Subbalakshmi Ammal, herself a child widow, took up the cause of Hindu Widows and established a Widows’ Home at Madras. As an Educationist, Sister Subbalakshmi devoted her whole life for the educational attainment of Hindu Widows and introduced them to a new life. Subbalakshmi’s successful career itself showed them that a widow’s life need not be an end of fruitful activities. Muthulakshmi Reddi pleaded with the Government to take up the building of a Hostel for Widows. She was instrumental in getting scholarship for all students. The Seva Sadan opened a branch at Madras and trained the widows as teachers and midwives. Muthulakshmi Reddi appealed to the Government on several occasions for liberal grants to the Home. She not only helped in getting financial assistance but also sent girls to the Widows’ Home. These

girls came from the Devadasi Community. In 1912, the Sarda Ashram was started by Sister Subbalakshmi and it provided a Home for Child Widows. Another institution was started by her in 1926. It was called Sarda Vidyalaya .It was a boarding school for girls. In 1936, the Sarda Union and the Sarda Vidyalaya merged with the Ramakrishna Mission.

#### **THE AVVAI HOME**

Right from her adolescence, Muthulakshmi Reddi was fond of babies and children. Even in her teens, she enjoyed caring for babies and looking after the children in her neighbourhood. The International Women's Conference in Paris inspired her to work for the welfare of abandoned children and women. In 1936, Muthulakshmi Reddi leased a piece of land in Adayar Village from the Arunachaleswar Temple, Tiruvannamalai, for a permanent building for the AVVAI HOME. The Home was the first Non – Christian institution in the Madras Presidency though it was initially intended for the protection of liberated girls of the Devadasi Community. In 1940, when the Japanese invaded Burma, hundreds of Tamil children and women lost their families on the “Black Road” and were stranded. Muthulakshmi received news from the British camp accepted the children and women. The Avvai Home soon became more than an orphanage. It was transformed into an Universal Refugee Camp for all helpless children and women. Avvai Home provided not only asylum but also vocational training. It had a Senior Basic School for Women. Muthulakshmi Reddi was the Director. There was an industrial section run by the Avvai Home, and they gave admission to girls who had passed Third Form. These students were trained as dress makers.

#### **SREE SARDA NIKETAN**

Sree Sarda Niketan was a residential institution for girls. It was located in Guntur. It provided higher education, under both literary and vocational streams. The Local Government sanctioned grants to this institution but grants were not regularly released. When Muthulakshmi Reddi heard this news, she asked the Minister for Education and Local Government to sanction enough grants regularly.

#### **INDIAN LADIES SAMAJ**

The Indian Ladies Samaj was established by Lady Sadasiva Iyer who was inspired by Muthulakshmi Reddi. The main aim of this institution was to protect minor girls from undesirable associations and guardianship and to educate and train them for an independent and honorable profession.

#### **EXEMPTION FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FEES**

Muthulakshmi's name is also associated with the Scheme of Exemption from School Fees for Poor Girls. A Resolution in this regard was moved by Rao Sahib Guruswamy on behalf of Muthulakshmi Reddi. The request to the Government to sanction fees remission for II and III form pupils helped all parents to send their children to school. The Resolution was accepted by the Government.

#### **WOMEN POLICE**

Muthulakshmi Reddi wrote an article on Women Police in civic service in the Calcutta Gazetteer in 1930. There were in the Statute Book a number of laws for the protection of women and children like Sarda Act, and Act for the closure of brothels and prevention of immoral traffic. She felt that if the help and cooperation of women was secured for working these Acts in a humane spirit, these acts could be easily implemented. For

this purpose, the employment of Women as Police Staff was suggested. She was a little in advance of her age. Polices Stations with Women Constables were unthinkable in her days. Only recently All Women Police Stations have come into existence.

#### **GIRLS PROTECTION BILL**

A Girls Protection Bill was introduced by Ragubir Singh for the safety and protection of minor girls from evil practice in the society. Regarding this Bill, Muthulakshmi Reddi expressed her views; “This bill should be amended not only to include cases of selling of minor girls in marriage to old men for money and other consideration, but should also include cases where parents and guardians allowed their daughters to become prostitutes for profit and the punishment in the later case should be deterrent. It was in 1953, that the Central Social Welfare Board was set up by the Government of India, 90 under the Chair of Durgabai Deshmukh. She requested Muthulakshmi Reddi to take the Chair of the State Social Welfare Board. Due to her interest in social activities, she accepted the offer. As the Chairman of State Social Welfare Board, Muthulakshmi Reddi organized welfare activities throughout the Madras Presidency from 1954-1957.91 Muthulakshmi Reddi believed in the importance of education for women. She emphasized that people should give more importance to educational development than food. She tried to encourage girls from Backward Communities to take to Higher Education. Education should be organized in such a manner as to promote their physical and mental growth.

#### **HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES**

After completing her study in England, she was nominated as a Member of the Madras Legislative Council. Muthulakshmi Reddi requested the Government to make provision for Medical Inspection for Girls in secondary and elementary schools. Moreover, she suggested that Medical Inspection of boys and girls should be made compulsory. As a Medical Practitioner, Muthulakshmi demanded that provision should be made in the budget for the establishment of more hospitals, dispensaries, for the appointment of venereal disease specialists, for the equipment for the nose and ear department and for many other things. Legislation, Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced Compulsory Medical Inspection in all schools, and she asked the Government to appoint Lady Doctors to give medical aid to girls students. She also worked for bringing Children's Hospitals in Madras. In the Madras Presidency, the children and adults were admitted to the same hospital and the children were given less attention in medical treatment. Ultimately the Government accepted the request of Muthulakshmi Reddi and set up a separate Children's Hospital in Madras. Children's Hospital in Madras the Resolution for the establishment of a Special Hospital for Children came up for discussion. She pointed out the death rate of infants in the Madras Presidency was high and hence a separate Hospital for Children was an urgent need. In the Women and Children's Hospital, there were only a few beds for children and no special attention was given to them. There was no Child Specialist and special equipment was also not available for the treatment of children in the hospital. The cure for Infantile Tropical Diseases had not been found and many children died due to this disease every year. Indian children had been suffering very much for many decades due to the lack of a Separate Hospital for their medical treatment. In England and

Wales, special facilities provided made to take care of children and many facilities were provided to Researchers to carry on research and conduct experiments on Children's Health Care. In London, many Special Children's Hospitals and Children's Homes were established. But there were no such facilities in India. When compared to other studies, Child's Study was a different one. Hence Child Study should be made a separate science and a special place should be given to them in the medical curriculum of the students. The Motion was put to vote and thirty five members voted in favour of it and fourteen remained neutral. The Government gave a suitable answer to this Motion. Two experienced Medical Officers, Dr.Lakshmanaswamy Mudaliar, Assistant Superintendent of the Government Maternity Hospital and Mary John of the Government Victoria Hospital who had specialized in diseases of children in the West, opened the Children's Special Sections in the two hospitals under their charge.

#### **COMPULSORY MEDICAL INSPECTION FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN**

As a Doctor, Muthulakshmi Reddi was very much interested in providing Medical Inspection through legislation to School Children. Muthulakshmi Reddi subsequently paid attention to Women and Children's Health. She informed the Minister for Education and Local Self -Government that the students complained against their treatment during Medical Examination. Then she spoke about the necessity of Children's Hospitals. "Without the help of such hospitals, adequate treatment for children's ailments would not be possible. As there are diseases in children peculiar to cold climate, like scurvy and typhus, so there are diseases peculiar to tropical climates like jaundice, etc. It is possible to carry on research work only in hospital and find remedies for such ailments. In 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddi requested the Government to improve the Government Goshen Hospital. This Hospital was used for laboratory and clinical work by the women students of the Lady Wellington Medical School. During that time, students suffered from inadequate lab facilities. Moreover, the Hospital's Labour Room was located near a public road, and so when a woman cried with labour pain, the people on the road felt troubled. The Hospital lacked out patients' facilities. Hence Muthulakshmi Reddi asked the Government to take sufficient steps to rectify these lapses. Muthulakshmi congratulated the Government for making provision for Compulsory Medical Inspection for boys and girls in primary and secondary schools. She suggested that Medical Inspection could be conducted by specially trained staff and proper facilities for inspection and treatment could be created by the employment of lady doctors for girl students whenever possible. She further suggested the establishment of School Clinics to make the system more effective. During the Budget Session in 1929-1930, Muthulakshmi Reddi discussed the appointment of Women Medical Officers in Maternity Hospitals in the Madras Presidency. Majority of the women patients wanted to be attended by Women Medical Practitioners, both during prenatal and post natal period.

#### **ESTABLISHMENT OF CANCER INSTITUTE**

Muthulakshmi Reddi's sister died of incurable Rectal Cancer. Even though she was a Medical Practitioner, owing to lack of facilities she lost her sister at a young age. In those days, Ranchi was the only place for the treatment of cancer in the whole country. This incident affected Muthulakshmi Reddi's mind. she moved a Resolution for the establishment of a

separate self contained Cancer Hospital for early diagnosis, treatment and research. A Committee was formed and a certain amount was also collected at that time. Subsequently a Memorandum, signed by half a dozen women's associations, was presented to the King George V Memorial Fund Committee for the establishment of a Cancer Institute. The following is an extract of Memorandum. Findings of the Bhoire Committee the Bhoire Committee of 1946 stated that the incidence of cancer in India was probably as high as in western countries and that the problem of prevention and cure must have an important place in the National Health Programme. The medical profession should be more cancer minded and that certain types of irritational cancer such as those caused by tobacco chewing, cigarette smoking, etc. could be prevented and that anti- cancer propaganda to educate the public and the profession on the insidious nature of the disease and the early signs and symptoms should be undertaken in institutions like the Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital, Bombay, for promoting advanced research and teaching in the subject needed to serve the people. In this connection, Muthulakshmi Reddi wrote a letter to the Government to provide for Anti Cancer Propaganda among the people by printing leaflets in Tamil and Telugu Languages for distribution during exhibition, fairs and festivals with the help of a Senior Translator. Women's Indian Association was actively engaged in conveying the message that cancer was not a hopeless disease and it was curable if diagnosed early and treated adequately. Therefore, the Association prepared materials of educative value, costing about Rs 10,000 for Anticancer Propaganda during the All India Khadi and Swadeshi Exhibition at Madras in 1949. A Cancer Exhibition was organized at the Lady Wellington Training College, in connection with the International Conference of Social Work and in the Cottage Industries Exhibition, much to the benefit of the public.

#### **Cancer Institute**

A Cancer Institute was constructed with a permanent health museum, library and pathological laboratory. This Museum had cancer exhibits, posters, diagrams and illustrative literature in all languages to attract the public, distinguished visitors and other individuals interested in Anti Cancer Campaign and also had a Lecture Hall for training of welfare workers from Women's Indian Association. The Women's Indian Association, as a part of Anti-Cancer Propaganda Campaign, requested the Government for monographs and films on cancer caring and anti cancer education among the rural population. Again, it wanted treatment in the hospitals. It wanted beds for weeks and months. The poor patients, mostly rural, who were not in a position to spend for shelter and food in the City, very often returned without any treatment to their villages. But the Government did not take any positive measures to meet their requirements. Again and again Muthulakshmi Reddi asked the Government to provide financial assistance. Muthulakshmi Reddi's second son, Dr.Krishnamurti, worked in a Government Hospital and Muthulakshmi Reddi encouraged her son to take over the Cancer Hospital.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

Born in 1886, Muthulakshmi Reddi became the First Woman Medical Graduate from Madras in India in 1912. She attained prominence by her matchless contributions as a Woman

Social Reformer and fearless Fighter for Gender Equality. The memories of Muthulakshmi Reddi, dedicated to the Cause of Equality of the Rights of Women, and their emancipation from the age old shackles of seclusion and slavery under the male domination, will always be cherished by millions of women, the world over, particularly in the Indian Sub-Continent. The intrepid pioneer gave every moment of her life for the attainment of the cherished goal of Freedom from Foreign Rule and Equality of Women with men in every sphere. She was a very courageous and fearless woman. She never feared any Party or Government. She was a very confident woman and had to face many challenges from her childhood to her last breath. Whatever project she undertook, she came out with success. She never feared defeat in her life. Even at her old age, she was energetic and vibrant. Her human pre occupations took her away from politics. She stuck to her mission and followed Gandhian ways. She could never tolerate any harm or injustice done to women in any corner of the world. She had been the Torch Bearer of Human Rights for Women. Muthulakshmi Reddi was conferred Padma Bhushan in 1956 for her services to the people. She died at the age of 82 in the year 1968.

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