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## MUTHULAKSHMI REDDY –A WOMAN CRUSADER FOR WOMEN’S CAUSE

**Dr. G. Rengaraju**

**Assistant Professor of History, R.V. Government Arts College,  
Chengapattu, Tamil Nadu.**

### ABSTRACT

*S.Muthulakshmi Reddy was not only a woman leader but also one of the social reformers Tamil Nadu ever produced. She was one of the founders of the Women’s Indian Association, a first of its kind in Tamil Nadu. She also served as the editor of Stri Dharma, the women magazine. Even though she was nominated to Madras Legislative Council during the rule of the Justice Party in the Madras Presidency, she was nationalist and hence she resigned her post of Legislative member when Gandhi was arrested in 1930. She was associated with all the women organisations of her times. By her dedicated services to the cause of the women, she was ranked one of the all-India women leaders and she represented the cause of the Indian women at the International conferences in various nations. Her remarkable struggle in her life mission was the abolition of the Devadasi System which in her days was marching towards immoral system spoiling the status of the women to degradation and hence women were in total despair.*



**KEY WORDS:** *Muthulakshmi Reddy, Devadasi, Gandhi, E.V. Ramasami, Madras Legislative Council, Rajaji, Satymurthi.*

### INTRODUCTION:

S.Muthulakshmi Reddy was born to a Brahmin father and a devadasi woman. Her mother was Chandramma, a devadasi for the Pudukkottai State. As the daughter of a devadasi, she personally well known about the odds of the devadasis in the male dominated society. To her devadasis were synonymous with prostitutes.<sup>1</sup> She was the first woman medical graduate from the Madras Presidency in 1912. She was also the first woman to be nominated as a member of the Legislative Council in British India and she served in that capacity from 1926 to 1930. She was the first woman ever to become the Deputy President of a Legislative Council world over. As a legislator and woman crusader, she was able to campaign for the cause of the women and brought in legislative measures to abolish the evil practices of devadasi and child marriage. She had also undertaken various steps favouring the upliftment of the women in society. These steps included of the medical inspection in girl’s schools, exemption of poor girls from the payment of school fee, maternity and child welfare, and medical aid to women. She started her political career by joining the women’s movement in 1917 and struggled for the attainment of the voting right to women.<sup>2</sup>

Drawn to the politics, Muthlakshi Reddi always took the interests of the women in her career. She utilized political power, for the upliftment and enhancement of the women in the male dominated society. In 1926, when the Madras State Provincial Legislature included women among its members for

the first time, Margaret Cousins persuaded Kamaladevi to stand for election to the Legislative Council. Kamaladevi was insecure and vacillating as she belonged to no party and had no time to campaign, thus narrowly lost 55 votes to her opponent.<sup>3</sup>

The Government of India then gave women's representation a chance through nomination to the Legislative Council. The Women's Indian Association had sent a list of prominent names of women social workers, including S. Muthulakshmi Reddi. The government had nominated Muthulakshmi Reddi as a member of the Legislative Council. When she was nominated, she did not accept as she felt her medical profession would be affected by that nomination. Due to the request of the Indian Women's Association, she accepted the appointment.<sup>4</sup> The following day, she was elected Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council. Her first speech was regarding the launching of the Children's Hospital, for the extension of the compulsory medical examination in girls' schools, for the sanctioning of liberal grants for women's institutions and for the appointment of women doctors in hospitals and for police women.<sup>5</sup>

### ABOLITION OF THE DEVADASI SYSTEM

During her tenure on the Legislative Council she had been concerned with the welfare of women and children. It was through her efforts that the practice of dedicating girls to temples such as Devadasi was stopped by the Act of 1929, and another Act was passed a year later for the suppression of brothels and immoral trafficking.<sup>6</sup> As the Devadasis led an adulterous and enamoured life in the passage of time, the devadasi institution was degenerated into a great social evil.

Muthulakshmi Reddi, a strong advocate for women's causes, was fully aware that such pervasive practices could only be prevented through legislation and she jumped at the opportunity presented to her as Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Council.<sup>7</sup>

Muthulakshmi Reddi observed that she had spoken all the time and had felt very indeed that it was a great injustice, a great mistake, a violation of human rights to practice highly repugnant to the sense of morality, to the higher nature to consider and to tolerate innocent young people being raised in the name of religion to lead a life of promiscuity, a life that led them to sickness of mind and body.<sup>8</sup>

As a Legislator, in November 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a resolution to ban the dedication of girls at temples altogether. A number of members supported the resolution. Among them were They were S.N.Durai Raja, Basheer Ahamed, P.Anjaneyulu, C.V. Venkataraman Ayengar, A.B.Shetty, K.R.Karant, C.N. Muthuranga Mudaliar, V.I.Munusamy Pillai and Sayed Ibrahim. The resolution observed that this council recommended the Government to adopt legislation or recommended the Government of India to adopt legislation very soon to end the practice of dedicating girls and young women to Hindu temples, which generally resulted in exposing them to a life immoral under the pretext of caste, a custom of religion.<sup>9</sup>

The resolution provoked a complex response when people found out about the bill, they had started sending countless letters of sympathy and support to Muthulakshmi Reddi asking her to continue her work. She received sympathy and support from the press, platform and public. Numerous public bodies, such as district municipalities and the local board and mass gathering of men and women sent their approval. Devadasi associations in the Madras Presidency held meetings calling for legislation to end the dedication of girls to Hindu temples. When Muthulakshmi Reddi met with Satyamurthi, a Congressman, to get his support, he did not support the resolution.<sup>10</sup> When Muthulakshmi Reddi initiated the debate on abolishing devadasi, Rajagopalachari, as the President of the Tamil Nadu Congress, raised the issue for discussion. Sathyamurthi, on the other hand, went so far as to state that devadasis represented national art and culture, and therefore the system should dedicate at least one girl to be a future devadasi.<sup>11</sup> According to Muthulakshmi Reddi's private records, he approached E.V.Ramasami for support for her bill, when she expressed Sathyamurthi's views on her bill. E.V.Ramasami said to her can she ask a question, since Issai Vellalas had been doing this for so long, why Brahmins were not engaged in temple service? During her tenure she failed to pass the act. It was because she gave up his membership due to arrest of Gandhi in 1930. At that point, the Justice Party lost its power. Finally, the bill was not passed until 1947.<sup>12</sup>

## HOUSES FOR DELINQUENTS

The Children's Act passed in 1929 in Madras provided for the treatment of juvenile delinquents through the establishment of Reformatory Schools. The Women's Indian Association lobbied for the Children's Act 1920 to be amended to provide separate remand houses for children in the course of their cases and separate children's courts with women magistrates.<sup>13</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddi campaigned for these provisions within the Council and members of the All India Women's Association outside the Council.<sup>14</sup>

## CHILD MARRIAGES RESTRAINT ACT OF 1929

The next achievement of Muthulakshmi Reddi was the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. As many bills regarding child marriage were introduced and rejected till 1927, in February 1927, M. Haribilas Sarda introduced the Hindu Child Marriage Bill in the Legislative Assembly. The bill provided for it to be extended to all of British India and for the marriageable age for a girl and a boy to be set above 12 and 15 respectively. The marriage of girl under the age of 12 must be valid only her guardian had obtained a licence. The main goal of this bill was to put an end to widowed children.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, Muthulakshmi Reddi had sought approval from the Central Government to submit her bill to the local council. It called for raising the marriageable age for girls and boys in the Madras Presidency. In her bill, she noted that Mysore and Baroda States had already passed laws to prevent child marriages under the age of 14 and 18 for girls and boys respectively.

Muthulakshmi Reddi garnered local council support for the Sarda bill in the Assembly. She passed a resolution to prevent early in the Madras Legislative Council. Accordingly, the Council recommended that the government be happy to communicate to this council legislation that raised the minimum marriageable age for boys and girls to at least 21 and 16, respectively, if necessary.<sup>16</sup>

In 1930, during the period of Civil-Disobedience Movement after the Second Round Table, she resigned from the Madras Legislative Council in protest against Gandhi's arrest on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1930.<sup>17</sup> As she was no longer a member, the Madras Legislative Council dropped her bill temporarily.<sup>18</sup> Outside the Council, Muthulakshmi Reddi, however, continued her campaign against what she felt was an encouragement by the temples.<sup>19</sup> In 1952, Rajaji became the Chief Minister of Madras, where she was invited to join the Madras Legislative Council. She declined due to her old age. Then she agreed on the condition that the Government must provide the land for the construction of the cancer hospital in Madras.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude, as a political activist and social crusader, S.Muthulakshmi Reddi gave foremost concern for the upliftment of the women. She was an active member and leader of Indian women organizations. She held various positions in those organizations. She vehemently attacked the beliefs of the orthodox society which was patronized by the orthodox members of the Madras Legislature. She strongly opposed the stand of S.Satymurthi and Rajaji over the issue of the abolition of the devadasi system. She did not subscribe to any political party and hence all the political and social leaders appreciated her service to the women society. As she strongly opposed the stand of Rajaji and Satyamurthi, she was denied seat for contesting election for the Madras legislature. She maintained good relations with E.V. Ramasami Naicker and Gandhi.

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**Dr. G. Rengaraju**  
Assistant Professor of History, R.V. Government Arts College, Chengapattu,  
Tamil Nadu.