

DEVADASIS ABOLITION ACT AND THE DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

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The Dravidian ideology based on non-Brahmin upliftment had become a formidable component. It was based on some ideologies, dismantling of Brahmin hegemony, revitalization of the Dravidian languages and social reform by abolition of existing caste system religious practices and recasting women's equal position in the society. The history of women's movement in the state would be incomplete without acknowledging the complementary role of the Dravidian Movement. During the Dravidian period, the self-respect movement was formed by E.V. Ramasamy, the movement was emphasized for Women's Emancipation.¹

In 1916, P. Thiyagaraya Chetty presided over the meeting at a victoria memorial hall in Madras. At the same time, South Indian Liberal Federation renamed as the Justice Party. That movement is considered to be the birth of Dravidian Movement. Women were given the right to choose partners as well as divorce them and remarry. Widowhood was not penalized through religious beliefs. Heterosexual partnership were radically transformed by advocating for the erasure of gender hierarchies and roles, the sharing of domestic work, child-rearing were all paths to love through equality and service to society.² These ideas attracted several women from all walks of life to the movement. Women included former prostitutes, former devadasis, wage labourers, doctors and teachers. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was one among them who fought against the devadasi system. She was the first pioneer in the fight for women in India. This article attempts to highlight the Devadasi Abolition Act and the Dravidian Movement.

Objective of this Study

- To understand the origin and the growth of Devadasi system.
- To estimate the role of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy.
- To highlight the Devadasi Abolition Bill and the Dravidian Movement.

The Devadasi is a Sanskrit term which means "Servant of Deva (God) or Devi (Goddess)".³ Devadasis were the female servants of God. Devadasi system is a kind of religious practice carried on basically in the southern part of India. In which a girl in her pre puberty period was dedicated to worship and service of deity or a temple for the rest of her life by their parents. In the ancient Indus Valley Civilization of India evidences show the worship of women as the Mother Goddess.⁴ During the Rig Vedic period, it is believed that the position of wife was honoured and women's position was acknowledged especially in the performance of religious ceremonies.

The Sangam literature uniformly glorifies the womanhood of Tamil Nadu while describing the cultural attainment and living. Women have been glorified in Tamil Literature of the Sangam and post-Sangam periods.⁵ They are also described as the heroines

of women in Purapporul Venbamalai. Sangam rulers and society patronized fine arts like dance, drama and music. Dance and drama could not be functional without music. The Sangam works like Silappadikaram gave a clear description of the art of dance. Madavi was well-versed in dance. She even received a royal award of 1008 kalangies of gold for her excellent performance in dance. Adimandi's husband Attan Atti was also a well dancer. Thus both men and women performed dances.

The Pallava rulers gave importance to dance. The dance developed in this period was closely associated with palace and temple. The Muktesvara temple at Kanchi and the Tiruvorriyur temple maintained a large number of dancing women for the performance of singing and dancing at the time of divine worship and services and during festivals. The women during the Pallava period dedicated themselves to the temple and thus there were seven types of dancers namely Dattai, Vikrutai, Pirattiyai, Bhaktai, Hridai, Blangarai and Rudrakanigai. These dances were held in high esteem in the pallava court.⁶

The Chola empire supported to the Devadasi system. They were developed the tradition of music and dance employed during temple festivals. Tiruverriyur Inscription indicate women were performing the functions like adorning the images of deity tirumeypuchu teykkavum, cleaning the temple floors, dancing, making garlands etc. Eighteen inscriptions of Chola's period, record the assignment of temple women to menial functions associated with cleaning and food preparation. In half, the woman can be identified as slaves, having been sold or as in the first of the two proceeding inscriptions given to the temple. These colourful, young, attractive girls were used to promote cultural entertainments and to raise funds. They were expert in music, dance and other arts. They also participated in Santhikoothu, Ariyakoothu, Kakkakoothu and Tamilkoothu in temples.⁷

Devadasis were drawn from the non-Brahmin castes that followed the tradition of one daughter to the temple. Sometimes parents would offer a daughter to the temple in fulfillment of a sacred vow. The beautiful and talented girls were groomed to become dancers and singers. The dedication ceremony of the devadasi consisted of a ritual called pottukattal (tying of the sacred tali or thread around the neck as in a conventional marriage ceremony). The girl there-after referred to as devaradiyal and was believed to be sacramentally married to a diety. She became a Nityasumangali and was specially sought after during marriages to bless the bride.⁸ Devadasis were expected to participate in all the rituals of the temples. Dance was the main occupation of the Devadasis in the temple. They were taught to dance at an early age of the five. Other girls, when they adopted the profession were also taught to dance. For teaching the art of dance to Devadasis, special dance masters were appointed in temples.⁹ The devadasis were asked to dance in the temple on all auspicious occasions. Especially the devadasis performed dances during installation of shrines, diparadhana and street procession of image on festival days. They conducted a kind of dance by name Sandikkunippam during installation of new shrines in the temple.¹⁰

Devadasis of Trivancore had a new more responsibilities. It was the common practice of the Maharaja of Trivancore to visit temples with the family members on festivals and other occasions. During the visit the devadasis had to entertain Maharaja and the member of the family. The devadasis were also obliged to do personal service to the kings in times,

when their wives were pregnant or away.¹¹ The first effective step for abolishing the system was undertaken by the Princely Family of Mysore in the year 1909. The *inams* and *miraslands* which the devadasis enjoyed from the immemorial bound them to be in regular duty in the temple. As a consequence of it, when a devadasi desired to dissociate from the traditional profession, she had to make an alternative arrangement for her livelihood. The Legislative Council of Madras “provided that where a grant of land has been made to dancing girls or Devadasis for the performance of any service whatever in any temple, such service inam land shall be enfranchised to the present holder thereof and she shall not be required to perform any service in the temple”.¹²

Mr. Ramdas Pantulu moved a resolution in the Council of State in the year 1927. At that time Hon. Law Member asked Mr. Ramdas Pantulu to bring in a Bill.¹³ The Madras Council adopted the principle and having passed legislation to dispense with the services of the inam-holding devadasis in temples, should accept this Bill without any further delay. Sir M. Krishnan Nair as the Deputy Leader of Justice Party had heartily supported the resolution of 5th November 1927 which recommended immediate legislation to Government to put down the evil custom moved to the bill from the Government bench. The Congress members excepting one or two members supported her work in the Council. The bill had been sent out for circulation for eliciting public opinion had returned with a full measure of public support. The most remarkable event that happened at that time was the courageous act of Her Highness the Maharani of Travancore in abolishing the Devadasi system in her State Temples.¹⁴ The Devadasi system had been abolished in Cochin in all the State Temples on 25th October 1930.

Bombay Devadasi Protection Act 1934 was passed by the Bombay High Court to protect existing Devadasis and to prevent the dedication of woman in this system. The act extended to the whole state of Maharashtra. The Government stopped all the privileges and the funds. So they started to depend on the local rich men and the Brahmins. They were disconnected from the temple activities and become the concubines of the rich men and the Brahmins. In later days, they became an entertainment object to fulfill the lust of the men. They started to do prostitution publically, sexual diseases spread them though there were lots of action taken against the devadasi system. It was uncontrollable in medieval period.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the eldest daughter of Narayana Swamy Iyer and Chandrammal, born in Puthukottai State.¹⁵ Being a girl child, she developed a close relationship with the maternal side of her family. This closeness made her perceptive of the devadasi community and their issues. In the Madras Presidency, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the forerunner in the transformation of society. The Dravidian Movement has long claimed the mantle of progressive politics. Among their claims in support of women’s emancipation.

Moovalur Ramamirtham was another political activist of the Dravidian Movement. She worked for the abolition of the Devadasi system in the Madras Presidency. Moovalur Ramamirtham belonged to the Vellalar caste, one of the castes from which devadasis were drawn¹⁶. She was brought up in a devadasi family, and was initiated into the devadasi system at a young age. Writing in Kudi Arasu in 1925, she noted, ‘I was born in a traditional

non-devadasi family. My uncle and aunt persuaded my father to force me into prostitution, through the devadasi custom. They also advised not to marry me away, since I would fetch a handsome amount for the family through the profession, given my talents in music and dance. So my parents forced me into this custom'. She organized a conference to reform women and breaks the devadasi system. Sengunthar Social Reform Conference held at Puthukottai in 27th March 1933, she discussed how pottukattum tradition and prostitution will be charged on women through religious faith and God.¹⁷ She was an active member of Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, extended her whole-hearted support to Muthulakshmi Reddy in her fight against the Devadasi system.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was part in passing the Devadasi Abolition Bill but owing to strong protects from devadasis across Madras Presidency. The elections to the Madras Presidency under the new diarchy system in 1920, saw the Justice Party won a comfortable majority. In 1921, the Justice Party government passed the Communal Government Order No 613 to Legislative reservations for various communities. The Justice Party amended the government of India Act to enable India's Woman Legislature. After that Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was passed by her colleagues at the Women's Indian Association, to accept a nomination to the Legislative. She was elected as the first Women Legislature in British India in 1927. At that time Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was not interested in medicine but also in politics. She dedicated herself to the cause of removing the cruel practice of Devadasi system from Tamil Nadu. When she was elected as the Deputy Chairperson of the Legislative council, she became the first Woman in the world to become the Vice President of a Legislature. She was the prime mover behind the legislation to abolish Devadasi system and played a keen role. She brought the Bill to abolish the devadasi practice in 1930.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy gave notice of a resolution and was waiting for the ballot result. The ballot was successful and the resolution appeared under her name in the agenda of the 4th November. As usual, the vested interests became alarmed at her move and tried all their influence to dissuade her from moving the resolution and she was adamant and took a vow that she would never rest till she get the precious custom eradicated from this land. The resolution did come up before the Council and she had the honour of moving it and making a long speech.¹⁸K.R. Karant, C.V. Venkataramana Aiyangar, Muthuranga Mudaliar, Anjanayulu of the then Congress Party, A.B. Shetty, Syed Ibrahim, V. Munisamy Pillai, S.N. Dorai Raja of the Ministerial Group, M. Krishnan Nair, Deputy Leader of the Justice Party made most eloquent and telling speeches in support of her motion but the Law Member C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar on behalf of the Government, while appreciating the very high object of the mover, pointed out certain difficulties in giving practical effect to the resolution. Most of the members were accepted this resolution. Mahathma Gandhi, Panagal Raja, the Leader of the Justice Party, E.V.R. Periyar, Tamil Thendral Thiru. V. Ka. were gave their support to this resolution. Messrs. S. Venkaiah, R. Nagan Gowda, Rao Bahadur, Dr. C. Natesa Mudaliyar, A. Ranganatha Mudaliar, K. Uppi Sahib voted against this resolution. Mr. Sathiyamoorthi, the colleague of Dr. Reddy, who was the best orator and the national leader, opposed this resolution vehemently. Dr. Reddy explained that Hindu Gods gave importance to their wives. Mr. Sathiyamoorthi noticed that the devadasi system reflect

the art of a nation. So, every devadasi create a devadasi girl to protect this system. She became every sad and argued with Mr. Sathiyamoorthi and asked him that you should allowed to your wife and sister to tied pottu to became devadasi.¹⁹ Hearing this, all the members were applauded her. But the Sathiyamoorthi keep silent.

At last, the original motion slightly amended was unanimously adopted by the Council. This Council recommends to the Government to undertake legislation or if that for any reason be impracticable, to recommend to the Central Government to undertake legislation at a very early date to put a stop to the practice of dedicating young girls or young women to Hindu temples, which has generally resulted in exposing them to an immoral life. The Council was apparently moved her speech and all parties most enthusiastically supported her motion. The full text of her speech has been already published in pamphlet form both English and Tamil. The Local Government without trying in any manner to solve the problem simply communicated the resolution to the Central Government. Therefore, with the help of a lawyer councilor she drafted a Bill to dispense with the Devadasi Service in the temples and after getting the Government of India sanction for the same, she introduced it into the local Council, the very next year.

It took a year almost for her to obtain sanction to introduced this bill into the local Council. Then it was referred to the selected committee and it finally emerged in a satisfactory form with many workable provisions. Even though there have been provisions in the Indian Penal Code sections 372 and 373 to punish dedication of minor girls to the temples it was made inoperable in most cases because of the temples continuing their service.²⁰ Therefore the object of her bill was to totally abolish the system.

When the Congress entered the Legislature in the year 1937 under the new reform, the Congress party was successful in the election in seven provinces of India - Madras being one of them. C. Rajagopalachari was then elected as the Chief Minister of Madras. Though the Prevention of Dedication Bill which was circulated for eliciting public opinion, returned with full support and inspite of Gandhiji's appeal Rajagopalachari delayed in introducing it, as he was not very much in favour of abolition of this system. The Congress Ministry resigned in the year 1939, hence the final consideration of the Bill was postponed. It was taken up finally in 1947 during the Omandur Ramasamy Reddiyar Ministry when Dr. Subbaroyan was the Home Minister.²¹ When the Bill was passed during the Omandur Ministry the public welcomed this piece of legislation and very soon it was put into operation. This legislation was completed in the year 1947 by the Madras Act XXXI of 1947 by which dedication of Hindu women to temples was declared illegal.²² Thus, millions of young girls have been saved from a life of degradation and have settled down in a honourable life.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy instrumental in abolishing the immorality on women and under her able guidance the Women's Indian Association started the Avvai Home. The Avvai Home was started in Mylapore, Madras with ten girls.²³ The main aim of the home was to protect all women especially young girls and children not only from the evil of poverty and destitution but also from the association to educate and train them to a useful profession. The institution depended on public support and the Government grant was a

merge one. With determined efforts of Muthulakshmi Reddy, the home had grown into a multipurpose centre with many sections catering to more than eight hundred beneficiaries and had spread its activities on one acre land in Adayar, Madras. The Avvai Home treated all the girls on equal footing without any caste distinctions.

Muthulakshmi Reddy spent her whole life for the development of the home, which trained girls for useful occupations such as midwives, nurses, teachers and her sincere service was appreciated by all the social reformers including Mahatma Gandhi. The young girls kept in temples got abolished. In temple celebration, the dancing of girls were cancelled. They have qualified themselves either as teachers, nurses or even doctors. Almost all of them got married and settled into a respectful life. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was inspired by the ideas of Vivekananda and Gandhiji. Devadasi abolition law leads the awareness of women against the social evils. Because of this, the leadership quality of women increased in the society.

Thus, the Dravidian Movement has long claimed the progressive politics in Tamil Nadu. Among their claims in support of Women's emancipation was their contribution to the passing of the Devadasi Abolition Act. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced the Devadasi Abolition Bill in the Legislative Council. The Bill had to wait for over 15 years to become an Act. In short, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy took an active interest in the abolition of Devadasi system. When she was the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council, also this is portrayed as a change brought about by the sustained campaign of the Dravidian Movement towards ending this practice.

End Notes

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