

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 Women's Movement in India contributed immensely to the regeneration of the country suffering under multiple ills of foreign domination, poverty, ignorance and entirely outmoded social order of which women themselves were the worst victims. Anachronistic customs like Sati, Child Marriage and Polygamy, Social Prohibition against Widow Remarriage, Lack of Franchise for women, Purdah and a host of other abominable practices like Devadasi System, reduced women to the bottom of degradation and slavery under male domination. Under the Patriarchal system they were ruled by their husbands, elders and in-laws with an iron hand. Denied education, vocation, and social, economic and political rights, women were wholly confined to seclusion inside the four walls of the house. The great pioneer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, for the first time, came out in 1818 against the savage customs of Sati and Polygamy, highlighting the degeneration of Indian Society due to the pathetic

condition of women and pleaded for their Property Rights as a way to their emancipation. He mobilized Hindu Reformist Opinion against Sati and facilitated the enactment of a law in 1829 to ban this inhuman custom. Subsequently, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was also enacted. Attempts at more reforms continued.

In 1917, the Women's Indian Association (WIA) was started by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Margaret Cousins, together with a group of Indian women which included Muthulakshmi Reddi, its Life Member. They took up the issue of Voting Rights for Women with the Secretary of State, Lord Edwin Montague who had come to India to discuss the demands for political reforms. Due to sustained campaign by the political parties, the Southborough Franchise Committee reluctantly permitted the question of Women Franchise to be decided by the Provincial Legislatures. Madras, from where Muthulakshmi Reddi hailed, was the first Province to grant Franchise to Women in 1921. As the first Medical Graduate and one of the Founding Members of the All India Women's Conference, Muthulakshmi Reddi was nominated to the legislature by the Government and it was indeed an immense honor those days.

In her Presidential Address at the Lahore Session of All India Women's Conference in 1931, Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddi highlighted the need for girls' education for generating Social Awareness among the female population and ensuring their self respect and self reliance. She pointed out the expenditure on men's institutions to be almost seven times that of women's institutions.

“Women should find representation in legislative councils, local bodies, senates, syndicates and educational boards and councils, so that they could control all stages of education. The problem in girls' schools was that students dropped out quite frequently and regularly either due to the custom of purdah and early marriage or the absence of women teachers and the inefficiency of schools.”

Hence the members of All India Women's Conference initiated efforts to implement their Resolutions at the 1927 and 1931 Sessions of the Conference and the request was the mushrooming of Women Training Centers and Hostels in every Province. The Movement for Girls Education and Women's Awareness were gaining momentum. In due course, goaded by Muthulakshmi Reddi, a National Committee on Women's Education was set up, with Durgabai Deshmukh as its

Chairman. She was responsible for the founding of the Central Social Welfare Board.

Muthulakshmi Reddi, a pioneering legislator and India's greatest Woman Social Reformer of the time, fought relentlessly to abolish the Devadasi System and for the enactment of laws for the Control of Immoral Traffic in Women and Children, for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and for the Prevention of Child Marriage and the establishment of Equality of Women's Rights.

On 8th January, 1929, a deputation on behalf of the All India Women's Conference waited on the Age of Consent Committee at Patna. The deputation on behalf AIWC emphasized that the Age of Consent within the marriage should be 16 years and outside marriage 18 years and that Age of Marriage should be raised to 16 years for girls and 21 for boys.

As soon as the Sarda Bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly, the AIWC started mobilizing support for its passage. After the Sarda Act was passed, women leaders, happy at this piece of legislation as their victory, were soon disillusioned over the fact that the Act, in practice, was not of any practical value.

Muthulakshmi Reddi, presiding over the Fifth Session of AIWC in 1931, moved a Resolution that Members of the Central Legislature should be urged to take early steps to amend the Hindu Laws relating to women in order to make them more equitable. It was passed unanimously.

At the 1933 Session of the AIWC, with the support of Muthulakshmi Reddi, a Resolution for the Amendment of Hindu Law was passed to remove existing discrimination against the Right of Women in the matter of Divorce and to make the same more equitable and just. They further urged the appointment of an All India Non-Official Commission to consider the removal of legal disabilities of women regarding inheritance and marriage.

After persistent campaign by the AIWC under the Stewardship of Reddi, Hindu Code of Law came into force in 1954-56 as a series of Acts relating to Intestate Succession, Marriage and Divorce, Minority and Guardianship and Adoption and Maintenance. This was a victory for the successful efforts of Women's Movement in India. The participation of women in the Civil Disobedience Movement won them the admiration of the Nationalist Leadership and they, in turn, passed the Fundamental

Rights Resolution at the Karachi Session in 1931. This further strengthened the women's demand for Equal Franchise.

Muthulakshmi, along with Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Begum Hamid Ali, went to England and gave evidence before the Franchise Sub-Committee and the full Joint Parliamentary Committee. The Delegation to England repeated its demand for Universal Adult Franchise and gained active support from British Women Organizations. A liaison group of British Women's Organizations was formed, with Grace Lancaster as Liaison Officer and it worked persistently to press for the Conference's Demands and strove to educate public opinion in England in favour of Gender Equality. During its annual session in 1933, the All India Women's Conference demanded Right to Franchise and Equal Status for Women in the future Constitution of India. Universal Adult Suffrage granted by the Constitution of Independent India was the request of the collective efforts of Women in India. Muthulakshmi Reddi thereafter, demanded that without Women's Political Empowerment, the grant of Right of Franchise to Women was of no practical utility. If women were denied a place in the decision making process in the polity, Women's Franchise did not have any practical value.

For the Prevention of Traffic in Women and Children, Reddi seconded a Bill for the Suppression of Immoral Traffic introduced in the Madras Legislature by K.R Venkatrama Ayyer. This Bill was passed into Law in January, 1930 but it was limited to Madras. Similar Acts were passed subsequently by the Bombay and Bengal Legislatures.

Moved by the plight of the Devadasis, Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislature in 1929 for the prohibition of the Abominable Practice associated with this Community. After the Passage of this Bill, the Government issued orders to the various District Collectors to liberate the Devadasis from the obligation of service to the temples. The Madras Brothels Bill and Prevention of Devadasi Dedication, and all other Bills on similar lines were soon followed by similar legislative measures in Travancore in the year 1931. Reddi gave a call for building a strong public opinion against the Immoral Traffic in Women and Children.

In 1939, the Madras Legislature passed a Bill amending the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1930. A provision was added for punishment of men who lived off prostitutes. An unrelenting crusader against the custom of Purdah, Muthulakshmi Reddi believed that Purdah was a “relic of war when women needed protection but had persisted

because men were distrustful, suspicious and jealous of women and had wrong notions of modesty and safety. Men saw women as reproductive machines only to cater to their physical needs and women capitulated due to ignorance. There were no rational arguments for Purdah, founded as it was by the baseless fear that women would abuse freedom granted to them and become unchaste and disloyal. The Freedom Movement brought out women, specially Hindu Women, out of their seclusion and their participation in political activities dealt a blow to Purdah System. WIA (founded by Annie Besant), of which Reddi was a Life member, started Child and Maternity Welfare Activities in early 1920s, through Baby Welcome Center. After the Presidential Address of Reddi at the All India Women's Conference in 1931, child and maternity welfare became the center of attention of the Conference Activists. Reddi argued that the Central and Local Governments should initiate legislation in India on the model of Maternity and Child Welfare Act of 1908, which was in force in England. These suggestions were approved in the form of Resolutions by the All India Women's Conference, with special emphasis on the need to have better midwives. Reddi, at the 1931 Session of All India Women's Conference, emphasized the need to provide medical aid to children and women by constructing more hospitals and maternity and health centers. She followed it up with ceaseless campaigns towards that end. Muthulakshmi Reddi, while in London along with Rajkumari Amrit

Kaur and Shah Begam as Members of the Indian Women Delegation to the Round Table Conference, renewed links forged earlier with the Liaison Committee of the British Women's Council, and created a favorable impression of Indian women and removed to some extent, the false impressions held abroad of the Indian Orthodoxy.

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.