

**GENESIS OF WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION AND ITS KEY CONTRIBUTIONS
- WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DR.MUTHULAKSHMI REDDY**

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Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, women occupied an abject status in the Indian society. Customs such as sati, child marriage and polygamy were widely prevalent. A women's place was strictly within the family, and she was ruled over by her husband, elders and in-laws with an iron hand. Denied education, vocation and social, economic and political rights, she was wholly confined to the four walls of the house. The social structure allowed men greater freedom and liberty. The dawn of British regime brought changes in the socio-economic educational, cultural and political scenario of Indian society. The present status of Indian women improved because of colonial experience, social reform movements of mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Nationalist struggle. The first man to speak out publicly against the injustices perpetrated on women in the name of tradition and religion was Raja ram Mohan Roy who, in 1818, wrote a tract condemning sati. By the end of the nineteenth century, women were gathering courage to challenge the authoritarian society which accorded them their low status. Many hailed from reformist families and they formed their own organizations.

Formation of Women's Indian Association

In fact, the emergence of a rudimentary women's movement in India can be traced to this period. As Geraldine Forbes points out, "Indian women wrote and spoke about women's condition and formed organizations to secure the desired changes, and eventually had an impact on the institution of their society. The women organizations emerged from the early part of the twentieth century, much to the annoyance of some of their male relatives and well wishers.

Objectives of Women's Indian Association

The Women's Indian Association was started with certain objectives aiming at the elevation of women in society:

- To sensitize women about their responsibilities as daughters.
- To secure for every girl and boy the right of education through schemes of compulsory primary education including the teaching of religion.
- To secure the abolition of child marriages and other social evils.
- To secure for women the right to vote for municipal and legislative councils.
- To secure for women the right to vote and to be elected for the Council of State.
- To secure adequate representation of women in Municipalities, Local Boards, Legislative Councils and Assemblies.
- To establish equality of rights and opportunities between men and women.

- To help women to realize that the future of India lies largely in their hands, for as wives and mothers they have the task of training, guiding and forming the character of the future rulers of India.
- To bring women into groups for the purpose of self-development and education and for the definite service of others.

Membership

Women, who agreed to co-operate with the objects and organization of the Association, became members of the Women's Indian Association. Groups of women who had the same aims were affiliated to Women's Indian Association. Local branches were self-governed and made their own arrangements. Margaret Cousins, one of the founding members of the Women's Indian Association, had a good track record as a social activist. She was also the founder member of the Irish Women's Franchise League. From 1906 to 1916, she was one of its prominent speakers and campaigners.

Meetings of the Committee

The Executive Committee met at least once a month to transact business of the Association. Any five members of the Committee were allowed to request the Secretary to convene a special meeting of the Committee to consider urgent and specific matters of importance and the Secretary, in such cases, convened a meeting for the purpose after giving at least three days' notice.

In the absence of the Chairman, a member present was elected to preside over the meetings of the Committee. Each member was given one vote including that of the Chairman, and in case of tie, the Chairman registered an additional or casting vote. Five members constituted a quorum.

Works of Women's Indian Association and its Leaders

After the formation of the Women's Indian Association, she went from door to door requesting women to become members of the association. Prominent among those who first joined were Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Kamaladevi Chattopadyaya and Lady Sadasiva Iyer. It was the first organization to create an overall awakening among women and to train them to shoulder their responsibility in public services and to bind them together for mutual service and the good of the country. The association was mainly concerned with influencing government's policy on women's suffrage and issues relating educational and social reforms. It established orphanages and rescue homes. The members of the Women's Indian Association accepted the necessity of political freedom to accelerate social actions.

The Women's Indian Association adopted a non-sectarian approach as the basis of its service. Besides its active involvement in the political field, the association conducted adult education classes for women and arranged lectures on general subjects. It developed international outlook and maintained link with developed international organizations like the British Common Wealth League, Women's International League for Peace and others for financial and other kinds support. It sent delegates to the Congress of International Women suffrage in Rome in 1923. Thus the Women's Indian Association remained active and took up the cause of women at the Indian and International forum.

Stri-Darma

The Women's Indian Association which was started in 1917 progressed along reforms in education, social reform, self-development and service to others. Not only in Madras, but also in several other countries, it carried out tremendous work. The adequate representation of women in local boards, taluk boards and municipalities was insisted. *Stri-Dharma*, the organ of Women's

Indian Association was run for many years. The Women's Indian Association took up the franchise question at first and considered it, very much important. It had taken great interest in the enforcement of the Act to control Immoral Traffic in Women and Children and on the Sarada Act which raised the age of marriage. The Association was also concerned with child welfare. The memorandum of the Women's Indian Association that was presented to the Government of the Madras Presidency resulted in starting of Children's Aid Society in March 1926. The Children's Aid Society though primarily started for children was also open to young widows, deserted and discarded wives and destitute mothers. By 1925-1927, there emerged about 80 branches of Women's Indian Association from Cape Comorian to Kashmir consisting of nearly 4000 members. The members also participated in the deliberations connected with the passing of the Sarada Act in 1929.

Avvai Home

Another area in which the work of Women's Indian Association deserves credit was the establishment of 'Avvai Home' in Madras, in 1930, to protect women especially young girls and children from evils of poverty and destitution. The Home itself deserves its name from Avvai, a popular poetess who lived in the Tamil country more than 2000 years ago. Avvai Home felt that women also need protection from undesirable associations and surrounding, and they are also to be educated and trained to a useful and independent person.

Women's Indian Association also formulated programmes to involve women in politics. With the advance of self-government, women demanded equal privileges with men. The inclusion of women at the round table conference was demanded. Protests against the new ordinances and emergency powers were organized. *Stri-Dharma*, the monthly magazine of the Association carried the news items and the aims of Women's Indian Association.

Extent and Scope of Women's Indian Association

From its inception, the Association aimed at working for the whole India and not merely to one province or to any one community, caste and language. The Association was the pioneer organization of women in India with its headquarters at Madras. Consequent on the shifting of the Avvai Orphanage and Hostel from 'Everest' in Mylapore to Adyar, the office and the library of Women's Indian Association were also moved to Pantheon Gardens on the Pantheon Road at Egmore in Madras. It had a library which owned many valuable books dealing with all current topics and particularly the progress of women's movement in other countries and a free reading room with numerous periodicals both inland and foreign in all languages.

Round Table Conference

The Women's Indian Association, from its inception, worked for self - government and sent its representatives to take part in the discussions which drafted the "Common Wealth of India Bill" under the leadership of Annie Besant and Tej Bahadur Sapru. The bill contained the rights and duties of citizenship which ensured equality of sex. This inclusion of gender equality was largely the result of the effective representation by leaders of Women's Indian Association. The Viceroy announced in November 1929 a Round Table Conference. The Association immediately demanded that women should be amongst the delegates. The Association was the first of its kind in India to present a memorandum at the Round Table Conference on the enfranchisement of women and to ensure their place in the future Constitution for India. They submitted a memorandum through a delegation to the Minister of Education and the Director of Public Instruction when the government

withdrew fee concession and fee remissions to poor girls and backward communities. As a result of the representation, the G.O. was repealed. The Association had been constantly agitating through deputations and public meetings for the provision of greater facilities for the education of girls and women.

Child Welfare and Child Protection

The Avvai Home, which was associated with Women's Indian Association, gave shelter and protection to the orphans, the destitute, and girl minors irrespective of caste. It also provided free board, and suitable education so as to make them useful and able citizens. Deserving young women and widows were trained as midwives and nurses.

Cancer Hospital

The Association realized the need for a separate hospital for patients suffering from cancer, the most painful of all human ailments in Madras Presidency and organized public meetings to recommend to King George-V Memorial Fund Committee to utilize their collections for the establishment of such a hospital. It also sent an appeal to the committee, signed by all the women associations in the city, emphasizing the urgent need for a hospital for cancer patients.

Key Contributions of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy

Early Life

Muthulakshmi was born in 1886 in a middle class family in the former princely state of Pudukottai in Tamilnadu. Her father S.Narayanasami was a Brahmin and Principal of Maharaja's College, mother Chandrammal born to the Isai Vellala Caste, whose women danced and sang in temples. Narayanasami broken the tradition and sent Muthulakshmi to school. She married Dr. D.T.Saudara Reddy on demand that he promised to, "always respect me as a equal and never cross my wishes".

Muthulakshmi Reddy moved a resolution in the Madras Legislative Council. She remarked, "It is a piece of injustice, a great wrong, a violation of human rights, a practice highly revolting to our senses of morality and to our higher nature of countenance and to tolerate young innocent girls to be trained in the name of religion to lead an immoral life, to lead a life of promiscuity, a life leading to the disuse of the mind and body".

Abolition of Devadasi System

The system of Devadasi had been an ancient tradition attached to the service of the temples. It had its origin in the Pancharatra Agamas of Hindu scripture which sanctifies the practice of Devadasis in the temples. It led to the dedication of a girl as Devadasi which meant a life of nunnery. The words Dasi and Dasa are Aryan inventions to denote a girl and a boy born of intercaste marriages. The word Dasa denotes a slave in Sanskrit. The feminine gender of the word Dasa, namely Dasi indicates a slave girl. As these slave girls served gods as handmaidens in the temples, they were well-known as Devadasis or Devaradiyal. This system led to the origin of a caste named Devadasis. There had been certain reasons behind the system of Devadasi to which it owed its origin. The Devadasi system mostly had its background due to inter-caste and illegal marriages. Sometimes, a girl was dedicated in a temple on the belief that such dedication would be a panacea to the ill - health of her family members. The Devadasi who underwent the *Pottukattu* ceremony was never allowed to have any more legal wedlock with anybody. They had to remain as

'Nithyakalyanis'. They were called so as they never used to attain the status of widowhood throughout their lives. The devadasi was also called 'Nitya Sumangali', i.e., an ever auspicious woman.

The Devadasis were not permitted to marry which signified that they should lead a strict celibate life. They were also given a fixed grant or inam from the temple, so that there may be no necessity for them to work for a living. They acquired a high proficiency in the aesthetic arts of dance and music. She took and interest in the abolition of Devadasi system when she was the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council. The Legislators like Muthulakshmi Reddy in Madras Legislature attempted to abolish devadasi system with the intention to liberate women from the vicious circle.

The Act of 1929

The Act of 1929 was limited in its scope and application. The object of the mover, Muthulakshmi Reddy was to put an end to this glaring evil. Of course the legislation had freed them from the obligation of service. But in some cases the Devadasis persisted to continue their hereditary association with the temples while in others the temple authorities forced them to continue and even persecuted them if they refused to serve.

Hence, Muthulakshmi Reddy drafted a Bill to further amend the Madras Hindu Religions Endowment Act of 1926. She moved to substitute the sub-class 44(A) (1) and (5) found in the Bill as amended by the select committee. For sub-class (1) (a) (i) she wanted the following to be substituted, "Where the remuneration for any service to be performed by a Devadasi in a temple consists of lands granted or continued in respect of or annexed to, such service by the government, the Local Government shall enfranchise the said lands from the condition of service, by the imposition of quit-rent. For sub-class (5) she moved to submit the following: "No devadasi who is bound to render any service in a temple by reason of any grant of land or assignment of land revenue or melvaram of land in her favour, shall be allowed to perform such service in such temple and from the date on which the land in question shall have been enfranchised or freed from the condition of service in the manner herein before provided."

But Muthulakshmi Reddy was of opinion that the Bills, Resolutions and amendments were not comprehensive enough because the option or choice was with the women who had been brought up or rather nurtured unhealthy notions of religion, and who had been taught to look upon prostitution as their caste-duty or dharma. We could not expect them to take full advantage of this measure; unless the educated section of the Hindu community enforced its will upon these backward people we could not expect them to give up their century old practices. The Resolution read, "The Council recommended 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 to the Hindu temples which has generally resulted in exposing them to an immoral life. The high object of the resolution was appreciated and applauded by the members of the Council. The motion was unanimously adopted and it became an Act in 1929.

Reddy tabled the amendment to put down or eradicate the pernicious custom of dedicating young girls to an immoral vicious life under the cloak of religion. The evil profession had grown to the extent of purchasing and adopting young innocent children and training them to an immoral life at an age when they could not very well see the future before them.

Muthulakshmi Reddy wanted that power to be given either to the trustees or to the Government to prohibit them from doing service, otherwise even though they were given lands or paid free of any obligation of service; still a few might persist in their old habits. They must be allowed in temples to

worship as other Hindus, but not to sing and dance. It was to achieve this Reddy moved this amendment. Women today are reaping the benefits of the work done by the great reformers, both women and men. Today the path seems very clear and smooth towards the ultimate goal of progress and emancipation. The great reformers of Tamil Nadu had to traverse in order to prepare the path for the women of today to be surefooted.

Achievements

Dr. Muthulakshmi was the first and only woman candidate in the Medical College in 1907. She was the first woman House Surgeon in the Government maternity and Ophthalmic Hospital. She was the first woman legislator in British India; She became the first Alderwoman of the Madras Corporation in 1937, She was made the first Chairperson of the State Social Welfare Advisory Board in 1954; She was the first woman Deputy President of the Legislative Council. Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968), a pioneering social activist, was a trend setter in several ways. She was the first Hindu woman to acquire a medical degree in Madras Presidency, and she won accolades in her lifetime for her dedicated service in the cause of female and child health care. As one of the founders of the Women's Indian Association (W.I.A.) in 1917, and an early champion of female educational, economic, sexual, and suffrage rights, she was a delegate to the All-India Women's Conference (A.I.W.C.), the International Suffrage Conference of Women in 1926, and the Congress of Women in Chicago in 1933. She was one of the prominent leaders of Tamil Nadu who worked for the emancipation of women. She of Madras was hailed as a pioneer in many fields including initiating social legislation for eradication of social evils suffered by women. Her main area of activity has been in ameliorating the problems of women and children. She could easily be ranked along with Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, etc.

Under her able guidance the Council initiated useful legislation for women like the abolition of Devadasi system, prevention of child marriage, abolition of immoral traffic in women and promotion of women's education. Within a short span of three and half years, she achieved many things and passed more momentous motions than any other legislature had done during its lifetime. She was ceaselessly agitating for the establishment of a children's hospital, for the introduction of compulsory medical inspection for boys and girls, for the exemption of girls from the payment of fees and emerged successful. She spoke and wrote strongly in favour of providing women's institutions in Madras with liberal grants and her efforts were crowned with success. She moved resolutions made representations and ultimately succeeded in having seats reserved for women in local bodies. Above all the act for the suppression of brothels for which, though not moved directly by her, she can claim the fullest credit. Along with being a busy and active legislator, all through the year she attended conferences - All India, Provincial, district and all women. She has also attended All Asian Women's Conference. She takes credit for attending most of them either as president or distinguished visitor. No women's Conference in India seems to be complete without her ennobling and distinguished presence.

While a member of the Council, she served on several committees, such as health, welfare, temperance, vigilance, social hygiene, social reform and social service. In addition she served on women's associations such as the Women's Indian Association, the Seva Sadan and the Children's Aid Society. Besides, she was a member of the Hartog Committee on Indian Education. She represented India at the Paris Congress of the Women's International Alliance, as a delegate from India. In 1933 she visited America and attended the International Women's Conference in Chicago. In 1930 she was selected as President of the All India Women's Conference.

Muthulakshmi Reddy's views on women and their activities were praiseworthy. She did not

advocate University education for women, but wanted that primary and higher education should be within the reach of every girl. She appeals through her speeches to such of those women who had education, experience and knowledge to enter into legislative bodies and render service to their country. Her Council speeches were enlightening as repository of knowledge, informative, thought provoking and models of oratory. Muthulakshmi was one among those who registered their protest against the arrest of Gandhi by resigning their place in the legislatures in 1930. She resigned her Deputy President ship as well as her membership in the Madras Council.

Muthulakshmi's life was a noble and selfless one dedicated to the service of her downtrodden sisters. It was given to her to inaugurate the political emancipation of women and exemplify the same in her own life. She was one of the guiding forces of women's movement in India. She was elected to the President ship of Women's Indian Association, the All India Women's Conference and the Indian National Congress.

Conclusion

Historically women played a very significant role in the growth and development of democratic politics in India particularly in Tamil Nadu. The Women's Indian Association established and initiated so many reforms for the up gradation of women in the Pre- Post Independent era. The organization created a lot of innovative and daring efforts in order to emancipate women from the cultural orthodoxical shackles. Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy created a stir among various communities and number of women leader started to pay attention to the voices of the association. In the same way leaders like Ambujammal, Ammusaminathan, Soundram Ramachandaran, Kothainayaki, *etc...* performed a great role in social development. The developments experienced in the life of women of today are possible only because many struggled in the past to elevate the status of Tamil women. Tamil society was cleansed of many evil customs and practices thanks to the legislations they helped to pass and the untiring efforts of devoted woman leaders.

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