

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO Dr. MUTHULAKSHMI REDDY - A HISTORICAL STUDY**

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Political participation is defined in different ways by different people; political participation is a process by which people voluntarily take part in political activities and affairs. If democracy is the rule by people, the question that arises is who participates in political decisions, which is one of the most fundamental questions of democracy. It is the will of the people, men and women, which decides who should rule and what the goals should be. Citizens use participation as a way to communicate their aspirations and needs, and a technique to strengthen democracy. Lack of ability to participate implies lack of full membership within the system. The government takes important decisions not only on national and international issues, but also on matters which affect women's lives directly, such as maternity and childcare. Politics, the sphere of public life that deals with establishing, interpreting and enforcing the rules of personal and community relations, has not welcomed women.

The concept of political participation encompasses all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and the choice of political leaders at all levels of government. Political participation is concerned not only with the organization of the state and government and the dialectics of the exercise of power, it also seeks to reorganise the lives of the members of society.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Today the political interventions by women in India range from movements for peace and good governance to protests against rape, dowry, domestic violence, food adulteration, the price-rise and deforestation. They are raising their voices against discrimination and injustice in social, economic and political spheres. Politics for them does not mean only the activities of electing representatives and governing. It also includes efforts of raising consciousness and changing the unequal power structure for a just and equal system.

In India many welfare schemes have been implemented for the betterment and empowerment political participation and achievement of women. Because of the implementation of welfare measures and schemes, women have reached important positions in making decision. In spite of number of political achievements taken by central and state governments, the political status of women, still, is found deplorable. Hence an attempt has been made to study the affective implementation of women political awareness in India.

## Methodology of the Study

This is an ex-post facto evaluation study in historical perspective using descriptive and analytical techniques. Where possible attempts have been made to quantify data and present data in the form of statistical tables. Simple statistical tools have been used to analyze data to arrive at logical conclusions.

In order to bring about equality in the status of women the focus has now shifted to empowerment. Political participation of women is very crucial for empowerment of women. Participation provides the vital link between awareness and integration. This paper focuses on political participation as it is an essential condition for the empowerment of women only when women are present in large numbers will they be able to assert and fight for their rights.

In ancient India, during the early Vedic period, women were educated, civilized, enjoyed equal rights to men and they had high status in the society. They actively participated in the decision-making process. But this high status of women started to deteriorate with the advent of Muslims in India. During this Muslim - Mughal period, the Hindu women withdrew themselves from the decision-making process and thus became the worst sufferers. However, during the British rule in India women actively took part in the freedom struggle.

In the modern period, the national movement gave an opportunity for women to participate in the political activities of the country. During this period both men and women participated in the national movement and their unity and sacrifice paved the way for the success of national movement and success of women in political movement. This laid the foundation for the political awareness among women and this served as a natural cause for women to start women's movement which aimed at equal rights for both men and women. Political participation is closely related to the women's franchise and the right to vote enjoyed by the women helps in determining the degree of women's political participation as well as in decision-making.<sup>1</sup> The Indian National Congress had women as its members.

In India the multidimensional national movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi acted as a catalyst for participation of women in politics.<sup>2</sup> The inspiring leadership of Gandhi enabled India women who had hitherto remained invisible to step out of the confines of their homes and take part in processions and demonstrations, and even to court arrest. He encouraged women to take part in the National, Political and Social movements of the nation. According to him, freedom struggle was a struggle for the country's freedom as well as the freedom of women, and he worked for both. From the beginning of his political activities, he associated himself with women's cause and sought their help when necessary.<sup>3</sup> Some of the outstanding women of Gandhian era were Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Manibehn Patel, Rajkumari Armit Kaur, Urmila Das, Durgabai Deshmukh and Suchitra Kripalani. Gandhi's followers consisted of women from all sections of society ranging from poor, illiterate women to the rich and educated. They proved that they were capable of moving independently into leadership roles. Women's involvement in the national movement was significant as it proved that given the opportunity women had the

capacity and the ability to participate in politics. The early twentieth century saw the birth of women's organisations and the beginnings of the demand for political rights. Women's India Association was established under the presidentship of Srimathi Annie Besant, the appealed to women to actively participate in the Home Rule league movement. The main motive of the association was the upliftment of women and the achievement of social equality. In 1917 Margret Cousins led a delegation consisting of Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Mrs. Jinarajadesa to meet E.S. Montague and Lord Chelmsford demanding women's right to vote.<sup>4</sup> They were supported by the all India women's association but the Montague Chelmsford Reforms did not include women's right to vote, this led to a strong protest from women.

Margret Cousins, an Irish lady took important steps towards the upliftment of women in Madras presidency. She wrote to Prof. D.K. Karve at Poona enquiring about the possibility of a deputation to wait upon the Secretary of state and Viceroy. A special team consisting of Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant Heera Bai Mehta and Mitha Tata visited England in 1919 and appear before the joint select committee on the government of India and demanded right to vote to Indian women. They were supported by British women in their demand.

The Congress also supported their demand by passing a resolution at the Calcutta session under the presidentship of Annie Besant. The Bombay special session of the Congress and the Delhi session of the National Congress supported the cause. The Muslim League also supported women's enfranchisement in September 1918. Saraladevi Chaudhurani (an educationalist and political activist who founded Bharat Stree Mahamandal in Allahabad in 1910) presented the resolution supporting the vote for women. She also told her audience that women had as much right to chart their own destinies as men for this was the age of human rights, justice, freedom and self determination.<sup>5</sup> As a result the joined select committee recommended that there should not be any disqualifications on the basis of sex. However the government of India act, 1919 empowered the provincial legislature to consider the demands. The Madras legislature was the first to grant women the right to vote in 1920. Other provincial legislatures also granted enfranchisement to women by 1929.

In 1932, elections to Provincial legislative Council was held, a number of women not only contested elections but also won in the elections. Rukmani Lakshmipathi was Deputy Speaker in 1937 -1939 in the Madras Legislative Assembly. Later on she became the Minister of Health in the Ministry formed by Shri. T. Prakasham in 1946. During this period voting Right was based on educational qualification and property, hence only a limited number of women could vote. The Constituent Assembly of India was constituted in November 1949, though the total number of women elected was only eleven, there were three women from Madras Province - Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dakshyani Velayudhan, and Mrs. G. Durga Bai.<sup>6</sup> The Constitution of India in 1950 gave rights to vote to every citizen of India who has attained 21 years of age which was later reduced to 18 years of age irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex etc.

### Political Contribution of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the eldest daughter of Narayana Swamy Iyer and Chandrammal, born in a middle class family of Pudukkottai of the then Madras Presidency on August 1886. She was the first girl student in the state to seek education and complete all her studies on state scholarship. In 1912 she completed her Medicine and she was also the first woman to have obtained the degree of M.B.C.M from Madras Medical College. Then she worked as the House Surgeon in the government hospital for women and children in Chennai. From her very childhood she was entertaining the idea of her becoming a social worker. As she was the honorary medical officer for Widow's Home and Social Service League she was often visiting those institutions. She was an active member of Women's Indian Association. Later she acted as the Secretary and President of Madras branch of Women's Indian Association. In Lahore Session of All India Women's Conference, she gave evidence before the Lothian Committee and pleaded for right to vote of women. She could ultimately succeed in that effort. 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. In this connection, the Madras council threw open its membership to women for the first time. Kamaladevi was persuaded by Margret 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. Hence she lost narrowly to 515 votes to her opponent.<sup>7</sup>

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 Reddy. During that time, Muthulakshmi Reddy had gone to Paris as a delegate from India to attend an International conference.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

The election for the post of the president of the Council took place on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1926. C.V.S.Narasimha Raju was unanimously elected as the President to the Council. Muthulakshmi Reddy's name for the Deputy President was put to the Council. Muthulakshmi Reddy's name for the Deputy President was put forward by P.T.Rajan of the Justice Party, and it received the unanimous support of the whole House. She was elected as a Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council in 1927.<sup>10</sup> On that day, the Madras Legislative Council presented a new picture of a solemn assemblage of Men of status. Princes and Scholars presided over by a shy, small figure of a frail lady; sinking deep into the soft cushioned seat of the speaker's Chair, presented a strange spectacle. It was unheard of in the world and unprecedented in history. Women Mps, Women Ministers, Women Governors and Women Warriors the world has been but not a Woman Deputy President of

a deliberative assembly. History, therefore, was made when the Madras Legislature made Muthulakshmi Reddy its Deputy President. The conferment of this unique honour on her constituted a Kohinoor on the dazzling diadem of Indian Womanhood.<sup>11</sup>

Reddy's inaugural speech made her pro feminist stance clear to her male colleagues. "I am the only lady member in this assembly, even though one half of the populations are women. You know, sir that our position in our society is still backward and we have many grievances one of which is that only two out of every hundred are able to read and write. So you will side with me in all my attempts to ameliorate their condition realising that no country or nation will prosper without the active support and cooperation of its women".<sup>12</sup> On the same day, she spoke about Grants for the Girls' Education and improvement of the hospitals for women and children in the Madras Presidency.<sup>13</sup> She continuously fought for women and children in the Legislative Council. Her major work in the Madras Legislative Council was the Abolition of the Devadasi system in the Presidency.

### **Devadasi System**

Devadasi means the Temple Dancer and Songstress. The term, Devadasi was used frequently in the controversy concerning the tradition of dedicating women to temples as religious objects. It is a well known fact the devadasis were recruited from various castes among the Hindus having different names in different districts like Jogoti, Basavi, Jogta or Jogappa.<sup>14</sup> The system was started for religious purpose, and they were considered as the wives of the deities. The Devadasis were experts in Fine Arts. They performed in front of the idol.<sup>15</sup> When a girl became a well trained dancer and singer, she offered herself as a Devadasi and she was adorned as a bribe and taken to the temple where she was symbolically married to the deity. The custom of putting yellow mark on the forehead of the bridegroom could be traced to such a marriage with a deity because it left no chance of widowhood since the deity was immortal.

Regarding the Origin of the Devadasi custom, Annie Besant wrote that "there was a band of pure virgin devotees attached to the ancient Hindu temples. They used to preach religion like other religious teachers to the common people that resort to the temple for their daily worship. In those days they were held in high esteem and respect and they were very well looked after. They would spend their time in doing religious service to the gods and devotees of the temples as the word 'dasi' itself signifies. They would follow the procession of Gods dressed in the simplest sanyasi garbs and singing pious hymns suitable to the occasion."<sup>16</sup>

### **Legislative Efforts to abolish the Devadasi System**

The agitation against this evil custom was launched since 1868. The British social worker, Josephine Butler, fought against prostitution in British India.<sup>17</sup> In the mean time, effective steps were taken in Mysore in 1909. The State 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, practicing 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.<sup>18</sup>

The Local Government did not send a satisfactory reply to those Bills.<sup>19</sup> The Indian Penal Code, section 372 speaks about the recruitment of girls for employing as Devadasi to be a punishable offence.<sup>20</sup> 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. 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>21</sup> Few years later in 1927, Ramadas 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.<sup>22</sup>

The Government did not accept the Resolution as it stood. The Government argued that before introducing any Resolution, public opinion must be sought and therefore he withdrew the Resolution. Muthulakshmi Reddy was inspired by Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammal who was born in 1883 at Thiruvarur and she too belonged to the Devadasi Community. 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>23</sup> During 1920 and 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddy 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 organised meetings in different places. On November 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddy 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<sup>24</sup>

On September 5, 1928, Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to amend the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929, with a new section, 44A, added to section 44.<sup>25</sup> Based on the amendment, Devadasis were now enfranchised in the respect of lands held by them on condition that they continued with the temples they served.<sup>26</sup> 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 devadasi herself being the owner of the lands in respect of which the assignment has been made. This Act dealt with Inam Holding Devadasis only.

The Devadasi Bill in the Madras Legislative Council, she maintained that Madras had earned the honour of the First Province in the British India to undertake social and religious legislation of this kind by spoken in Muthulakshmi Reddy. She was certain that due to changes in the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, no expenditure could be incurred by Temple Trustees for procuring the Devadasi service of singing and dancing. No dedication should be permitted within the temple, whether the girl is a minor or major.<sup>27</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddy also brought an amendment to Children's Act of 1920, according to which adoption of girl children by Devadasi Women should be prohibited and guardianship over such adopted children should be stopped because such adopted children were being led to immoral life by Devadasi women.<sup>28</sup> Again Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced a Bill in the Madras Council to declare dedication of Hindu Women in temples as illegal.<sup>29</sup> She insisted that they could contract valid marriages. Persons, who permitted or performed or participated in the Ceremony of Pottukattu or any other similar ceremony, could be punished with imprisonment which might extend up to one year and would also be liable for fine. The Bill was circulated to the Secretary of State for India and the Government of India for eliciting opinion. Even though Muthulakshmi Reddy argued that the Bill should be passed immediately, due to short tenure of the House, this was not done and so it lapsed.

Muthulakshmi Reddy has introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council for the Abolition of the Devadasi System by seeking an amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, the Justice Party, though sitting in opposition, rendered whole hearted support and cooperation for her Bill.<sup>30</sup> In the meantime, as a protest against the arrest of Gandhi in the Salt Sathyagraha, Muthulakshmi Reddy resigned her Membership of the Council in April 1930. After her retirement many other members tried to abolish the Devadasi System, deriving inspiration from Muthulakshmi Reddy's attempt. In 1939, Srimathi Ammana Raja introduced a Bill during the First Congress Ministry in the Province. This Bill was sent to a Select Committee which submitted a favourable Report. Reddy appealed to the Government to pass the Resolution without any delay. But the Bill was not passed because of the resignation of the Ministry in 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War.<sup>31</sup> After Independence, the Government of India moved a Resolution to prohibit dedications. On October 1947, P.Subbarayan introduced the Madras Devadasi Act (Prevention of Dedication Bill).<sup>32</sup> The Bill finally became the Act No XXXI of 1947 and came to be known as Madras Devadasis Act.<sup>33</sup>

The Act not only prohibited the practice of dedicating girls or women to idols or anything subjected to worship but also permitted the Devadasis to marry. Muthulakshmi Reddy dedicated her whole life for the liberation of Devadasis from the clutches of old customs and reformed them in such a way to help them to earn a living by honourable means. Tamil women from immorality as Muthulakshmi Reddy did. Thanks to her tireless efforts, the year 1947 witnessed not only the Independence of the Nation but also the Liberation of Women.

Thus, it can be concluded that women in India particularly in Tamilnadu were the first to get their political rights in the form of right to vote. There was also active participation of women in the Freedom struggle as well as in the Constituent Assembly. The level of political participation of women has increased after Independence. In spite of reservations for women in local bodies the number of women members in the Legislative Assembly and Parliament has shown significant improvement.

### Foot Notes

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