

## CONTRIBUTION OF EMINENT WOMEN FOR THE WELFARE OF WOMEN

**K.Rajeswari**

*Ph.D .Research Scholar, Dept of Historical Studies & Tourism, Mother Teresa University, Kodaikanal*

### **Abstract**

*Dr. Annie Besant, Margret E.Cousins, Jinarajadasa who were responsible for the formation of feminist movement. They were born in western countries. They dedicated their lives to women's movements with a full belief in the power of womanhood. At that time, the Indian women appeared completely submerged. For the cause of Indian women, Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and others come forward with the name juniors. Annie wood popularly known as Annie Besant was born in London, in the year of 1847. After her arrival in India in 1893, she associated herself with Education, politics, religion and theosophy. For offering life to her political thought, the weekly newspaper commonweal was started by her in January 1914. She started Home Rule League. In May 1917 she started women's Indian Association. An important step in Indian public life came up due to the appointment of M.E.Cousins as Honorary special Magistrate on the saidapet Bench. She was aware of the nature of Indian women and freedom and it in turn enabled her to work as an efficient Magistrate. She expressed her thoughts that those who desire to serve India and who have seen what may be the fullness of women's lives in other civilizations both East and West in Burma, Japan, America and Europe, no movement connected with the freedom of India seems more fundamentally necessary than the freedom for women movement. Sarojini Naidu the Nightingale of India. Gradually, she grew into a renowned poetess, orator, social reformer and patriot. Among her varied roles, the contribution made by her to the women's movement for equality of rights with men is remarkable. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a great reformer in Indian politics. She was one of the founder members of AWC in 1926. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, she was arrested and imprisoned. In the History of women's movement in Tamilnadu, many personalities rendered their valuable social service for the liberation of women from various social evils. S.Muthulakshmi Reddy was one of the outstanding personalities in the sphere of social reform movement.*

**Keywords:** *Women, Quit India, feminist, Union movement, social evils, Security*

### **Contribution of Eminent Women for the Welfare of Women**

Dr. Annie Besant, Margaret E. Cousins, Jinarajadasa, who were responsible for the formation of feminist movements. They were born in Western countries. They dedicated their lives to women's movements with a full belief in the power of womanhood. At that time, the Indian women appeared completely submerged. For the cause of Indian Women, Sarojini Naidu, Lady Sadasiva Iyer and a few others come forward with the name juniors. There were also well-loved leaders like S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, Dhanvanthi Rama Rao and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya.

### **Annie Besant**

Annie Wood, popularly known as Annie Besant, was born on 1 October, 1847 in London to William Burton Press Wood and Emily Roche Morris, an Irish Lady. Annie Besant's

maternal grandfather Roch Morris hailed from Ireland. When Annie Besant was hardly five years old, she lost her father. After the demise of her husband, it was a trying time for Annie Besant's mother to make both the ends meet. She had to take care of little Annie, her brothers Hendry and Alfred. In 1867, she was married to Rev. Frank Besant and got separated at 1873 with two children. Slowly, she started the work of social reform in many directions. She served as the Secretary of the London Trade Council. As a result of her sustained work, she was hailed as the "Strongest woman of Trade Union Movement". After Annie Besant's arrival at India in 1893, she associated herself with Education, politics, religion and theosophy. In 1875, Col. Olcott and Madam Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York and in 1882 the headquarters of the society was shifted to Adayar in Madras. Annie Besant had joined the society on 21 May, 1889. Because of her dedication and administrative talents, the land possession was extended from 27 acres to 253 acres. She was so keen on promoting the possibilities of community development by utilizing the members of the Theosophical Society. The various properties of the individual members became the property of the society due to their voluntary contributions. She was the major contributor in many ways such as lectures, pamphlets and books and in organizing and consolidating the Theosophical Society. Annie Besant, who was attracted towards the philosophy of the society, proclaimed it as a spirit of Hindu ideals, readiness for sacrifice, a burning passion of patriotism and of devotion to Mother land. She also condemned the seclusion of women and held the firm view that both womanhood and manhood are the essential needs for the strength, stability and freedom of India. She discouraged widow remarriage in case of elderly widows and she unhesitatingly encouraged young widows to remarry. In 1898, she established the Central Hindu College at Benaras and formed the nucleus of the Benaras Hindu University.

For offering life to her political thought, the weekly newspaper *Commonweal* was started by her in January 1914. In June 1914, she purchased the *Madras Standard* and renamed it *New India*. She led an intensive campaign for Home Rule for India and became a member of the Indian National Congress in 1914. In 1915, she announced her plan of Home Rule League. Her firm belief was that India should have freedom but should remain in the British Commonwealth. In 1915, in Bombay at a meeting called by her, she explained her plan for the establishment of Home Rule League. In 1916, this work intensified. Annie Besant equally concentrated on social problems. As a staunch advocate of female education, she propagated the matter by organizing conferences and committees throughout the country. She gave lectures in different parts of the country. She insisted that the poor girls in the villages should be given priority to education. The Home Rule League was started on 1 September, 1916. In 1917, with G.S. Arundale and B.P. Wadia, two of her principal workers, she was interned at Ootacamund. In the same year, women's interests in the movement for Home Rule were deeply stirred and stimulated by the internment of one of their own sex, Mrs. Annie Besant. The branches of Women India

Association took active part in obtaining her release. In 1916, she was interned for her political statements at the Cuddalore Political Conference. Such an act widened her popularity in different foreign countries. As a result of the ever increasing public indignation she was released. In August 1917, she was honored by making her the President of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta.

The Madras Presidency Theosophical Society encouraged the functioning of 63 branches of the Home Rule League. The involvement of Theosophists in the Home Rule League was a substantial one. The members of the society assisted the promotion of the Home Rule League. While *Common Weal*, a weekly Journal edited by Annie Besant, stressed the creation of a free India, her *New India*, the daily newspaper, pointed out the need for promoting the concept of fraternity and obliteration of all racial privileges and promotion of cooperation in all possible ways. Annie Besant took up all the measures with all effectiveness to stir up the National Movement. The *Sons of India* was used to guide the energies of the youth. By speech and writings, she criticized the British bureaucracy. She condemned the government for the exploitation of the peasantry. The Press Act was also brought under severe criticism by her. The Home Rule League and Home Rule agitations too favored her activities effectively. When she was arrested for her movements and her activities, she fearlessly championed the cause of Indian National Movement. In the Madras Presidency Congress Committee meeting held on 3 and 4 August, 1918, she along with the other nationalists and moderates rejected the Mont Ford Reform Scheme. She also disagreed with the formula of diarchy in the provinces. She circumvented that the political reforms were unworthy of England to give and take. When her acts were not approved and put into criticism, she unhesitatingly resigned from the Madras Province Congress Committee.

Between 1922 and 1924, in consultation with colleagues such as Tej Bahadur Sapru, C.P. Ramaswamiyer, P.S. Swamiyer, V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, Purshothamadoss Thakurdar, Hari Singh Gour and others, she drafted the Commonwealth of India by Mr. George Lansbury in December 1925. But it did not go beyond the first reading stage. In 1915, she established the National College at Mandanpalli in South India. In 1917, she started the Society for the promotion of National Education, and in 1918, she established the National University at Adayar in Chennai. The Chancellor of the University was Rabindranath Tagore, the Vice-Chancellor, S. Subramaniyalier, and the Principal was G.S. Arundale. She also started a number of schools for boys and girls. In May 1917, she started the Women Indian Association to which she gave her powerful support. She was assisted in this by Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first Women Legislator in India, and by Margaret E. Cousins.

By her inspiration, the Association started its work in favor of removing sex disqualification for the franchise in all schemes of reforms. In reply to requests made by the Association, the Muslim League and the National Home Rule League supported women suffrage. Other than an active politician, she concentrated on other areas of women's

interests also. "Annie Besant was a lover of Indian art and culture. As a token of sympathy on Indian culture and fine arts, she established the Kalakshetra, the seat for traditional Indian dance in the world". A woman from Ireland with her selfless service to humanity reserved special privilege in the pages of Women India Association and in the history of India. She passed away peacefully on 21 September, 1933. As she desired, her epitaph contains only the simple words "She tried to follow truth". Her whole life was a striking vindication of the determination. In the words of Mrs. Avabai, B. Wadia in her *Recollections and Reminiscences*, apart from the founder members, there were leading women nationalists who had also lent their service to womanhood through Women India Association. She offered a new approach and new leadership which brought unity by eliminating the assorted discontents in Indian politics. Besant was able to adjudge the qualities of others and so she associated herself with Gandhiji's Non Co-operation movement.

#### **Margaret E. Cousins**

An important step in Indian public life came up due to the appointment of M.E. Cousins as Honorary Special Magistrate on the Saidapet Bench. It was an honor to an Irish Lady for her selfless service towards the cause of women. It was evident from the following words: "Mrs. Cousins is honorably known in most of the provinces of India through her work for women, especially in connection with women's suffrage, a cause for which she underwent imprisonment twice in Ireland. She has been a non-official visitor of two Indian jails, and takes a keen interest in penal reform. Coming of a family, which is linked up with the ways of the law and her sympathetic and artistic nature, which shows itself so clearly in her musical ability will bring that added truth of humanity to legality which is the aim of the combination of honorary with official paid Magistrates. Her many friends in India, Great Britain and Ireland especially the members of the Women Indian Association will be much pleased to hear of their recognition by the authorities of the capable services of Mrs. Cousins in all causes. Margaret E. Cousins was aware of the nature of Indian women and freedom and it in turn enabled her to work as an efficient Magistrate. She expressed her thoughts that "those who desire to serve India and who have seen what may be the fullness of women's lives in other civilizations both East and West in Burma, Japan, America and Europe, no movement connected with the freedom of India seems more fundamentally necessary than the freedom for women movement. Not all the governments in the world can give India true Swaraj if Indians themselves, men and women, do not remove the chains of outdate.

It is inevitable to recollect some of her experiences as the first Magistrate. It is legitimate that the Indian public should wish to hear about the impressions which its first women Magistrate has received on undertaking a form of public service hitherto closed to her sex in India and, indeed, in Asia. It was the East in its best traditions regarding

womanhood and hospitality to the stranger within its gates. "Where women are honored there the Gods are pleased", wrote Manu, the law giver. Woman's point of view was to be limited to causes affecting women only. Here is a common sense. It has proved her invaluable advice in setting many problems that has come up for home judgment. It will be an asset in matters needed for human touch in public courts of law. The human question will loom larger in women's view than the business equation in men's. This is natural, and the reasons are necessary for man and woman, should act on decisions, which have resulted from a consideration of both points of view. Women will aim primarily at the idea of reforms, not punishment; at prevention, not retaliation; and at improvement, not by fear, but by instructions, understanding, warning and supervision. On us women the responsibility of our treatment of first offenders will lie heavily, for we know that the accused are like little children. The neglected woman must be relieved to save the world today. In the long run, it is not the hugeness or the immensity of things that matter, but their intrinsic worth. It is the passive element that always builds and constructs. No woman must rise to her full dignity and claim the world for her own and save it from ruin. After scanning through some of the remarkable aspects of Cousin's activities, one gets convinced that she was the one who worked for the betterment of women.

#### **Sarojini Naidu**

Sarojini Naidu was born on 13 February, 1879 in Hyderabad. She was the eldest daughter of Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, a Scientist and Educationist. She passed her matriculation at Madras at the age of 12 and went to Cambridge for three years on a scholarship given by the Nizam of Hyderabad. On return from England, she married Govindarajulu Naidu who had just returned from Edinburgh after studying medicine. After the age of 26, her first major collection of poems *The Golden Threshold* (1905) was published. This was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1913). Gradually, she grew into a renowned poetess, orator, social reformer and patriot and came to be known as *Bulbul-i-Hind*, i.e., the *Nightingale of India*. Her performance as an orator at mammoth political gatherings was breathtaking. She came into contact with leaders and gained inspiration in political work from leaders like Gokhale, Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah and Tagore. Her Presidential Address at the 1925 Kanpur Session of the Indian National Congress, the convocation address at the Luck now University (9 December 1947) and Presidential address at the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi (22 March 1947) were her famous speeches.

Among her varied roles, the contribution made by her to the women's movement for equality of rights with men is remarkable. A deputation of 15 women led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Sarojini Naidu as delegates of the Congress met the Viceroy Lord Irwin and impressed upon him regarding the need to give adequate representation of women at the Round Table Conference. In 1938, nine members gave evidence before the Indian Franchise

Committee presided over by Lord Lothian. The demand for adult franchise was once again put forward. But the same was ruled out and reservation of seats for property-owned women was recommended. As early as 1930, on behalf of All India Women's Conference (AIWC), Sarojini Naidu along with Margaret E. Cousins attended the International Congress for Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship in Berlin, where more than 1,000. Representatives from 42 countries had assembled. The women delegate from India created a favorable impression of Indian women and removed the false impressions held abroad of Indian orthodox. The AIWC, with enthusiastic support and co-operation of Sarojini Naidu, was organized at Lahore in January 1931. For a while, All Asian Women's Conference was attended by delegates from Afghanistan, Burma, Cylon, Japan and Persia and observers from Britain, New Zealand and the USA were also present at the conference. As a President of the AIWC in 1930 and as Governor of United Provinces till 1949, she left indelible impressions of her all-round organizational and administrative ability, as a leader, rebel, soldier and statesman. Due to her contact with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and others, she achieved a unique position and redeemed the pledge of loyalty to the national cause till her death in 1949.

#### **Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay**

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was born on 3 April, 1903 at Mangalore and was educated in Bedford College and London School of Economics. Her mother, an outstanding social reformer, could not stand in opposition to the worn-out age-old traditions of child marriage of her daughter Kamaladevi, who, however, became a widow while still in her teens. Being a beautiful woman, she aroused fervour in the idealistic and romantic Indian youths who campaigned for her. The extent of their feeling for her can be seen in the name they gave themselves, the knight of the blue lotus. She was one of the founder members of the AIWC in 1926 and its most active Secretary, setting up branches all over India. In 1929, she represented the AIWC at the International Congress of the women's league for peace and freedom in Prague. In 1930, she resigned from the AIWC to become a full-time activist in the Civil Disobedience Movement and was responsible for planning the raid on salt fields in the precincts of Bombay city. At her trial, Kamaladevi tried to sell salt in the court room and asked the Magistrate to resign his position and join the Satyagraha. She was awarded a nine month imprisonment and a fine of Rs.170. When she was released in 1931, she was put in charge of organizing the women's wing of the Hindustani Seva Dal, started in 1924. In 1932, Kamaladevi was arrested again and sentenced to one year imprisonment. During the period, she joined the Socialist Party. She presided over its first all India Conference at Meerut in 1935. During the Quit India Movement of 1942 also, she was arrested and imprisoned for her participation in Bangalore.

### **S. Muthulakshmi Reddy**

In the history of women's movement in Tamil Nadu, many personalities rendered their valuable social service for the liberation of women from various social evils. S. Muthulakshmi was one of the outstanding personalities in the sphere of social reform movement. Muthlakshmi was born on 30 July, 1886 in Pudukottai State as the eldest daughter of Chandrammal and S. Narayanaswami Iyer whose marriage was intercaste one. Her father was the principal of the Maharaja College in Pudukottai. Her grandparents were cultivators. She belonged to a middle-class Hindu family. When her father retired prematurely due to differences of opinion with the ruler of the State, she and her family suffered great financial hardship. As she was the first girl student in the State to seek education and as she was intelligent, she succeeded in completing all her studies on State scholarship. Though her parents intended to give her only a little education, she was adamant to become a Doctor of Medicine. She was the only girl who took to English education in Pudukottai State and passed Matriculation in 1903. Then breaking all conventions, she became the first girl student to be admitted to the Maharajah's College for men where she passed her Intermediate examination in 1905 with a first class. In 1907, she became the first and the only girl student to join the M.B.C.M., course in the Madras Medical College on a State scholarship. In five years, she finished her medical studies and passed with distinction in 1912. She stood first and won several gold medals and merit certificates in medicine, surgery and midwifery. She then served as a House Surgeon in the Government Maternity Hospital for some time. Then she set up her own hospital and very soon became a popular and successful doctor.

In 1914, she married T.Sundara Reddy, whom though a brilliant doctor, had to struggle to establish himself. Her financial problems continued even after marriage. She carved out a successful career by sheer merit and hard work. She always sympathised with the poor, the young, the sick and the downtrodden and lent them a helping hand. Her parents, especially her father, encouraged and inspired her a great deal. She was influenced both by Indians and foreigners. Among Indians, Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi and among foreigners, Swedish Missionaries in her youth, Josephine Butler, Margaret E. Cousins and Annie Besant in her later life were her chief associates. She was a close friend of Mrs. Stanford, a theosophist from SouthAfrica. S. Muthlakshmi Reddy played a prominent role in the development of the Women's Indian Association. As an active member in it, her tireless work for the women's folk changed her as a champion in the sphere of social reform movement. As a result of her untiring work, she gradually became the Vice President, its Secretary and the President of the WIA. Madras was the first province to remove the sex disqualification of women for franchise in April 1921. Then the women's organisations asked the Government to give women the right to sit in the Legislative Councils. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay was the first woman who bravely stood as an independent candidate in South Canara in 1921.<sup>12</sup> she was defeated by a male

candidate by 515 votes. So women were appointed to the Legislative Council through nomination. In the Madras Presidency, the WIA persuaded Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy to become a member of the Legislative Council and nominated her to the Madras Legislative Council. She became the first women legislator in the whole of British India. She was duly elected as the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative

Council and on 27 January, 1927, she assumed charges. 1927 to 1930 was the period of her greatest contribution in the field of social service and national activity. As a legislator, she successfully piloted certain important measures of social and moral reform and also secured facilities for the promotion of girls' education, health of school children and extension of maternity and child welfare work in the presidency. She was responsible for establishing children's hospital, introducing compulsory medical inspection of school children and opening of children welfare centers with the appointment of a woman Director of Health. She was one of the organisers of the Madras Vigilance Association and was its Vice-President for many years. She was responsible for establishing the first rescue home. For promoting girls education, she obtained liberal grants from philanthropic institutions and from women's institutions in Madras. She secured the exemption of poor girls from payment of fees and was responsible for the establishment of a hostel for Muslim girls. To her goes the credit of introducing Government scholarships for Harijan girls and providing facilities for alternative courses of Home Science with the appointment of an expert in science.

#### **The Avvai Home**

While most of the institutions then existed were particular about the castes and creeds of the girls, S. Muthulakshmi Reddy founded the 'Avvai Home' at Santhome in 1930, later shifted to Adayar Besant Road. Due to her affinity for "Avvai" the Tamil poetess S. Muthulakshmi named the home as 'Avvai Home'. It helped the neglected vagrant and destitute children and protected the young girls and children from the evil of poverty and from undesirable surroundings and associations. The Avvai Home served as an educational center comprising Primary school, High school, Teacher Training Institute, Mid-day Meals Centre and Small Scale Industries. It has trained hundreds of women as teachers, midwives, nurses, health visitors, grama sevikas and home makers. The Home also offered E.S.L.C. and S.S.L.C. condensed course where instructions were imparted for qualifying them for entering into any professional training and they were given training in weaving, book binding, needle work, dress making, home science, etc.

The Home provided shelter for orphan children and all of them had equal footing without any caste discrimination. Education was imparted to all according to their ages and requirements. S. Muthulakshmi felt that nobody should remain without education because it was essential for all developments. The home spread its activities all over the Madras Presidency. Funds for this home were collected from philanthropists of various districts.



Soundaram Ramachandran and G. Ramachandran offered money to Muthulakshmi for the running of the “Avvai Home”. She conducted marriages to the girls in the Home. T.V. Ramamoorthy also donated to this home. With his name, a high school was started. S. Muthulakshmi’s sister, Mrs. Nallamuthu Ramamoorthy helped to start this school. In 1950, S. Muthulakshmi’s daughter-in-law, Manthagini Krishnamoorthy took up the responsibility of running the Home. During 1990-91, there were 300 orphans and destitute resident children in the Home. There are 60 members in the Teacher Training Institute, 80 members in adult destitute women section and 2200 were other beneficiaries as day students studying in this school.

### **Women’s Education**

S. Muthulakshmi Reddy worked for the progress of Women’s education, because she felt that education was essential for women. She was one of the members of the Hartog Education Committee of 1929. As a member of this committee she travelled to different parts of India and studied the advancement of education among the people in Burma and India. She encouraged the backward class people to take up higher education. In India, many educated men later became social reformers and worked for the benefit of women’s education. Though the Missionaries had encouraged women’s education, the custom of child marriage that existed in the society affected the education for women. They believed that education alone could remove all the social evils in the society. She was of the opinion that the primary aim of education was to train women as good and efficient citizens.

**Women’s Institutions** S. Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced a resolution in the Legislative Council demanding the Government to sanction a special and liberal grant to the Women’s Home of service which was imparting adult education on national lines. The WIA started the Women’s Home, which also served as a hostel. The public gave funds to this home. The women in the home were trained in weaving, book-binding, needle work, etc. From the special grant sanctioned by the Government to this home, women were trained as teachers, midwives, musicians and vocational inspectors. Later on, the home had been developed into Seva Sadan. She urged the authorities for building a good hostel which would serve as a model for future hostels in the Presidency. In addition to WIA, she worked in different organizations and institutions. From 1924 to 1936, she was the Honorary Secretary and Organizer of the Madras Children’s Aid Society. She assisted in Sri Dharma, a journal of Women’s Indian’s Association. In 1930, she became the President of the fifth All India Women’s Conference held at Lahore and continued to be its President and Vice-President till 1935. She was the Chairman of the ‘All Asian Committee’ of the All Asian Conference of Women and was its Liaison Officer till 1935. She took part in different international conferences as a delegate and proved her talent in keeping the WIA glowing.

### **Abolition of Child Marriage**

The practice of child marriage prevalent among the so-called higher caste- Hindus was a deep-rooted custom existed in Tamil Nadu. The parents conducted the marriage of their children at an early age and that caused the increase of child widows, which was a burning problem of the community. The movement against child marriage was started first by the social reformers. The practice of child marriage affected the mental and physical health the child and the child had to face many distresses as the early age. This practice was responsible for a large percentage of illiteracy. The WIA through organized meetings urged the Government and Legislators to enact laws to eradicate child marriage. In 1921, a bill was introduced in the Central Legislature to rise the age of consent of the girl from 12 to 14 by amending section 375 of Indian Penal Code. The bill got wide support of all sides. Dr. S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, to abolish this system, wrote an article about child marriage in Sri Dharma of the WIA'.

On 1 February, 1927, M. Harbilas Sarada, an enlightened social reformer, introduced the Hindu Child Marriage Bill in the Legislative Assembly. "The Bill proposed to make invalid the marriage of a Hindu boy under 15 year of age and Hindu girls under 12 years subjected to this exception that the marriage of a Hindu girl under 12 years but not less than 11 years of age would be valid if her guardian had been granted a licence for the girl's marriage under the provisions of the Bill". The bill was to put an end to the custom of child marriage. The bill referred to the select committee, it demanded to rise the marriageable age of girls and boys to 14 and 18, respectively. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy garnered the support of the local council for Sarada's bill in the Assembly. She passed the child marriage resolution in the Council. It is as follows: "The council recommends to the Government that they may be pleased to communicate to the Government of India. That in the opinion of this council legislation rising the marriageable age of boys and girls to at least 21 and 16 years respectively is necessary".

Although her resolution was accepted by the Council, she received opposition from outside. She conducted public meetings and sent a joint Memorandum of the Women's Associations to the Viceroy and the members of the Assembly to pass the bill into law. Great Indian Leaders gave a strong support to this bill. Mahatma Ganthi and Motilal Nehru wished that marriageable age of girls and boys should be 18 and 25. In 1929 the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed and it came into force on 1 April, 1930. This act was extended to the whole of India. It rised the marriageable age of boys and girls to 18 and 14 and those who violated this act were made eligible for three months imprisonment and a fine extending to Rs.1000. Women were not imprisoned under this act for any crime. It was one of the most important contributions when she was a member in the Madras Legislative Council.

### **Abolition of the Devadasi System**

The Devadasi system was an age-old system and its origin was obscure. The practice of dedicating girls to God was followed in different parts of the world. It existed in Egypt, Syria, Rome, Greece and other parts of the world. The word Devadasi means slave or servant or maid of the God. By custom, she was a perpetual sumangali and never became a widow. During the early period the Devadasi had high respect among the rulers as well as the ruled. Their presence in the marriage ceremonies and other functions was considered an auspicious one. During the latter part of the nineteenth century and early parts of the twentieth centuries, they involved in open prostitution. The Government tried to put some restrictions on the Devadasis not to adopt girls for prostitution by enforcing the existing laws.

S. Muthulakshmi Reddy passed the following resolution in the council: “This council recommends to the Government to undertake legislation or if that for any reason he impracticable, to recommend to the Central Government to undertake legislation at a very early date he put a stop to the practice of dedicating young girls or young women to Hindu temples, which has generally resulted in exposing them an immoral life”. Majority of the public supported the bill. But T. Doraikammal, the Secretary of the Devadasi Association, Madras opposed the bill by writing a letter to the Law Members of the Government of Madras stating that this bill had badly affected the ancient customs and the usages of the community and especially their religion.<sup>36</sup> The reform associations of the Devadasi community in the Presidency supported the bill. Even though the provisions of the Indian Penal Code sections 372 and 373 gave punishment to those who dedicated the young girls to temples, the practice was continued in the temples. In 1929 the Hindu Religious Endowment Act was amended by which section 44A was added and it was established into law by Raja of Panagal.

The WIA in order to uphold the decision of S. Muthulakshmi Reddy organized conferences and meetings in the different parts of the country. They were done with the co-ordination of other women’s organisations in different places. On 18 August, 1927, a public meeting was held under the auspice of the Indian Ladies Samaj and Ladies Branch of the Southern conference. Madras Women’s Educational Conference and Brahma Samaj was presided over by Sankaran Nair. Then different meetings were organised by the Sarada Ladies Union, Indian Ladies Samaj, Triplicane, Baratha Sahodari Sangam under the presidentship of S. Muthulakshmi Reddy. Meetings were conducted at Nagpur, Calicut, Madurai, Anandapur, Saidapet, Alandur, Rajamundry and Kakinada. In October 1931, in the women’s conference held at Erode, the abolition of Devadasi system was advocated. Then in January 1932, the Sixth All India Women’s Conference was held in Madras. In the conference the members insisted the Trustees of the temple in Madras city to abolish the Devadasi system.

In October 1932, S. Muthulakshmi Reddy addressed in the Kalkavan Thala Vidya Sangam at Kanakarathar Hall in Guntoor. In this meeting, a large number of members of Devadasi community participated and supported S. Muthulakshmi's effort to abolish Devadasi system. 1939 Srimathi Ammana Raja introduced a bill to root out the custom of dedicating girls to temples in the local council. P.Subbarayan introduced the bill on 9 October, 1947 pertaining to the abolition of the Devadasi system in the Madras Legislative Assembly and he asked that the bill be referred to the select committee. When the bill was brought into discussion, majority of the members supported the bill. The Madras Devadasi System (prevention of dedication) Act (Act No. XXXI of 1943) was passed on 26 November, 1947 by which the Devadasi system was ultimately abolished.

#### **Compulsory Medical Inspection for School Children**

S. Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced the system of medical inspection of school children through legislation from the Department of Education. Medical inspection was not conducted in any government girl's schools, but the corporation schools conducted regular medical inspection. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy passed a resolution as follows: "This council recommends to the Government that systematic medical inspection of pupils should be made compulsory in all schools and colleges whether Government or Aided, Municipal or Local Fund, and in the case of girls inspection should be conducted by a lady doctor and wherever possible school clinics should be started". In reply to her resolution, the Minister in charge of education said that the Government had granted an additional sum of rupees 43,700 under grant XIX -31. As a first step, the government Introduced medical inspection to all the middle schools and elementary schools.

#### **Children's Hospital in Madras**

On 31 March, the resolution for the establishment of a special hospital for children came up for discussion. The motion of the Deputy President was moved by B.S. Mallaya. It is as follows: "That this council recommends to the Government that a special hospital for children may be established in the city of Madras, with effect from 1 April, 1927, in a suitable rented building as expeditiously as possible for the accommodation of such a hospital. A sum of rupees was provided in the budget for 1927-28. S. Muthulashkmi Reddy pointed out certain problems about the children. The death rate of infants in the Madras Presidency was high. So a special hospital for children was an urgent need. In the women and children hospital, there were only a few beds for children and no special attention was given to them. Special equipment's were also not available to treat the children in the hospital.

As a suitable remedy, two experienced medical officers were sent to the west to get specialization in treating the diseases of children. The cure for infantile tropical disease had not been found yet and many of the children were suffering for many decades due to

the lack of a separate hospital for their medical treatment and then children's special sections were opened in two hospitals.<sup>43</sup> It was an achievement of victory to S. Muthulakshmi Reddy.

#### **Exemption of School fees for poor girls**

The resolution for the remission of fees for poor girls in schools was mooted by Rao Sahib L.C. Guruswami. She pointed out that the parents did not give much importance to the education of girls, and they did not want to spend more money on girls' education. It was felt that the system of free and compulsory education for girls should be introduced in the Madras Presidency in order to help the poor girls pursue their education. The Government also was in favour of the education of poor girls.

#### **Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Children**

To suppress this system, a bill was drafted in 1926 by the Madras Vigilance Association in which S. Muthulakshmi Reddy was one of the organizers. The Madras Vigilance Association held numerous meetings in the Presidency and passed a resolution in support of this bill. The committee of the Vigilance Association contributed a lot to eradicate the social evil which affected the women folks. The WIA took interest to popularize the importance of the bill. It organized propaganda meeting in different places. Articles were published in Sri Dharma to highlight the importance of the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic Act introduced in the Madras Legislative Council in December 1927 by K.R. Venkatarama Iyer. In 1930, the bill was passed by the Madras Legislative Council. The bill became the Act V on 30 January, 1930 when it received the assent of the Government of Madras.

The WIA and the Madras Vigilance Association shared the responsibility of rescuing girls and women from brothel. They proceeded to organize meetings in different parts of the provinces. On 21 March, 1939 a meeting was organized in Y.M.C.A. Hall and was presided by Sir. George Stanley, the Governor of Madras. The Governor appealed to the people to give money for starting rescue homes. Though the Madras Vigilance Association was trying to establish rescue homes for the rescued girls from the brothel, its efforts did not reach the expected level due to the lack of financial aid. In addition to this Government also financed the Vigilance Association to help the rescued women. The administration of rescue work was done by the Government agencies as well as private agencies with financial aids from the Government. The Immoral Traffic Act of 1947 was amended by the Government of Madras to make the existing law more effective. The period of imprisonment for offence of solicitation was raised to one year from two months. During her two year period as legislator, she moved many valuable resolutions such as the opening of a beggar's home for the improvement, of the infectious disease hospital and the extension of the city limits to remove overcrowding. In 1939, she resigned from the

Corporation due to her ill-health and subsequently continued her services in the Avvai Home.

S. Muthulakshmi Reddy launched her anti-cancer movement in 1936 and renewed it in 1949. Due to her relentless services, the Cancer Institute came into being in 1954 at Adayar, Madras. She was the Chairman of the State Social Welfare Advisory Board from 1954 to 1957 and gave it a shape in 1956. The Government of India gave her the title of Padma Bhushan in recognition of her services for the women and children in India.<sup>49</sup> S. Muthulakshmi made a study of all religions. She did not believe in a cult and believed in the equality of all religions and respected all religious beliefs. She interlinked religion with social work and regarded service to humanity as service to God. Muthulakshmi Reddy did not have belief in the caste system. She published many booklets both in English and in Tamil on the care of 'Pregnant women', 'Child Birth' and 'Feeding of infants'. She died in 1968. Her death was a great loss not only to the Tamil community but also to the women folk of the whole world. To mark the end of the Centenary Year and on the 70 year of the WIA, S. Muthulakshmi's birth Centenary was celebrated with great pomp and glory on 30 July, 1987. The function took place in the Auditorium of Cancer Institute.

#### Reference

1. Annie Taylor, Annie Besant: A Biography, Oxford, New York, 1992.
2. Annie Besant, An Autobiography, Chennai, 1939.
3. Roger Monvell, The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bredlaugh, London, 1976.
4. C. Jinarajadasa, Golden Book of the Theosophical Society, Adayar, 1925.
5. Annie Besant, India: A Nation, Madras, 1925.
6. G.O.No.744, Home (confidential) Department, June 1917.
7. Fort nightly Report, 20 August 1918.
8. Tarachand, History of Freedom Movement, New Delhi, 1983.
9. Women's Indian Association Souvenir.
1. Some Illustrious Women of India (with special reference of Tamilnadu), Madras 1975.
10. Margaret E. Cousins, the Awakening of Asian Womenhood, Madras, 1922.
11. Padmini Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu, New Delhi, 1974.
12. Geradine, H. Forbes, Women's Movement, New Delhi, 1979.
13. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, My experiences As a Legislator, 1930.
14. Santhosh Chatterjee, Devadasi (Temple Dancer), Calcutta, 1945.
15. Indian Ladies Magazine, Cannanore, January 1939.