



Role of Press to the Abolition of Devadasi System

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, Tamilnadu had to face plentiful social hazards. In each and every sphere of the society, the male community dominated its counter part. The women were not independent. The western education created a change among women in Tamilnadu. They started fighting with the male made hazards. The press rendered them its full fledged support to fight effectively. The Indian liberal press exposed the matters of social legislations related to women issues such as Child Marriage Restraint Act, Abolition of Devadasi Act and Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in favour of the Indian women. The important thing done by the press was the creation of public awareness on women's problems such as widows problem, prostitution, devadasi system, unhygienic condition, child marriage, infant female mortality, and male chauvinistic attitude in the society. It is inevitable making the public accept the reforms than supporting legislature the reforms. The press in Tamilnadu did both the aspects in favour of social legislations for women. This paper focus the role of press to the abolition of Devadasi system.

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Abolition of Devadasi System

'Devadasi' is a Sanskrit word that can be split into '*deva*' means God and '*dasi*' means female slave. It gives literal meaning 'a female slave or servant of God'. It was a religious practice found among the Hindu especially in Southern parts of India; whereby at puberty, a girl was married-of to a deity of a temple. After the dedication ritual, the girl becomes acolyte at the temple. The institution was called as Devasasi system and the women in the profession were called *devadasis*, *dasis* and *devaradiyars* in Tamilnadu. From generation to generation this was their profession and a daughter of a devadasi had to become a devadasi. Every temple of repute in South India had its troop of these women. Every day they had to attend *deeparadhana* in front of the deity at sunset, singing hymns in praise of the deities, dancing before the idol and follow with the processional deity carrying the holy light and by singing and dancing.

For dedication, the girl before puberty had to go through several rituals in the temple. The priest would tie the *tali* around her neck on behalf of the God. This ceremony was called as *pottukattuthal* Symbolically she was bonded in marriage



with a God and it was her chief duty to dance and sing before him to please him. The dedication of girl to the god was justified for the following reasons: a) if the parents were childless, they vowed to dedicate their first child, if it happened to be girl, b) if there were no sons in the family, the girl child was dedicated and could not marry, as she became a son for the family (earning the family's livelihood), c) another economic reason contributed to the dedication is that if the girl's family had some property, the family ensured that it stayed within the family by turning the girl into 'son' by dedicating her.

The *dasi* could never become a widow, she was considered as *nithyasumangali*. Devadasis were the only women in India who enjoyed the privilege of learning to read, to dance and to sing. They were given high respect at the society in the beginning. For their duties, they were paid by the temples depending on the wealth of the temple. In certain cases they were awarded *inams* in the form of land and revenue.

Originated with the noblest motives, the institution had gradually degenerated into something, highly objectionable. Because of the inadequacy of the emoluments, the devadasis started practicing prostitution. It constituted a significant source of income to the families of their origin. Priests, brokers and other groups had vested interest in the continuation of the system. The orthodox Hindus paid much interest in the survival of the system for their selfish motives. The government tried to put some restrictions by enforcing the new laws at the end of the nineteenth century. But it was not able to stop this practice.

Role of Muthulakshmi Reddy

Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council decided to wage war against the devadasi system. She introduced a resolution on 5th November 1927, demanding the Government of Madras to recommend the Government of India to craft legislation at a very early date to put an end to the practice of the dedication of young girls and young women to Hindu temples for



immoral purposes under the pretext of caste, custom or religion. The *Non-Brahmin Youth* wrote in support of the Bill. It said that the Bill would evoke much discussion. It added that her enthusiastic campaign for ending the Devadasi system met with splendid success. More harm was done to people and to God by the persistence of the old order than by the traditional stage to which the office of the dancing girl was abolished. It conveyed its heartiest congratulations to her on the passing of the resolution. Gandhi rendered his whole hearted support to her attempts through his weekly *Young India*. The liberal press in Tamilnadu carried the news of Gandhi's support to capture the mass support for the reform.

As said by the paper, the resolution was supported by many members of the council. It was considered as a clear verdict and right path for the abolition of devadasi system. But the orthodox leaders like S. Satyamurthi tried hard to save the existing system. Satyamurthi propagated anti-bill feelings among the conservatives. He argued against the Bill that the devadasis were the custodians of the traditional Indian Arts. To reply the argument of Satyamurthi, Muthulakshmi Reddy spoke in the Legislative council "such a caste was indeed necessary and since the *Isai Vellalas* (devadasis) had done it for so long, why don't the Brahmin women take over from then on?" The *Stri-Dharma* wrote in support of her argument and the Bill that the men who sinned with the devadasis were often honoured and respected members of society, the women were the sufferers. It called the devadasis as innocent.

The *Kudiyarasu* blamed the orthodox people for their conservative attitude against the good cause. It strongly asked a whipping question that if the Brahmins such as Satyamurthi believed this evil as religious oriented and a blessing, should it be impossible for them to hand over this blessing to the women of their own community. This question shattered the entire province. It also condemned the conference organized by the orthodox section against the



abolition of the Bill held in Tiruchirappalli in order to make the people aware of the evil.

The Government of Madras without trying to solve the problem simply communicated the resolution to the Government of India. It was then referred to a select committee. It took almost a year for Muthulakshmi Reddy to obtain sanction to introduce the Bill at the Madras Legislative Council. In the mean time, she made several efforts regarding the abolition of the devadasi system. As the resolution, Muthulakshmi Reddy symbolically appeared more or less similar to the resolution that was moved by V. Ramadoss Pantulu earlier in the Central Legislative Assembly on 12 September 1927, the Government of India kept it aside as a further step in the same direction. The Government of Madras also felt that it was an all India issue.

Devadasi Bill

During the time, V. Ramadoss Pantulu withdrew his resolution on the abolition of Devadasi system from the Central Legislature. The press in Tamilnadu continuously cried to abolish the evil enduringly. The *Kudiyarasu* exposed wretchedly about a marriage procession where the devadasi ladies sang and danced. It also pointed out how a number of Brahmin women joyfully: watched their performances and the paper questioned, "Why were these Brahmin ladies not in a position to understand the pains of devadasis? Which *sastra* allowed such sadist attitude?" These whipping questions touched the sentiments of the people. This paper stated that such incidents would create opportunities for people like Miss Mayo to write about India decisively.

The *Stri-Dharma* urged that nothing less than burning sympathy for the victims, the devadasis and their offspring-would win victory in such a cause. The reformers should need the chivalry of soul in men and women if the society was to win in this struggle. It also published the article of Muthulakshmi Reddy on devadasi system in support of the Bill.



Boosted by the public opinion in favor of the abolition of the devadasi system, Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced Prevention of Dedication of Hindu Temples Bill in Madras Legislative Council on 24th January 1930. After making certain modifications by the Select Committee the Bill was circulated for the purpose of eliciting public opinion. At this juncture, the press in Tamilnadu was involved in propoganda for creating awareness and generating public opinion in favor of the Bill. The *Kudiyarasu* pointed out that it was funny to seek public opinion for a long time debated Bill. Apart from that it published and circulated the leaflets, which contained the articles of Muthulakshmi Reddy. It published also the supporting stands of various organisations and associations for the Bill regularly to seek others support and boost up the passing of the Bill.

This paper published a matter under the headline 'Opinion of E.V.R. in support of the Bill' that the devadasis were suffering a lot from the venereal diseases, the forthcoming act would block the means of prostitution and the government should not give up its aim fearing of the *sastras*. It endorsed its full-fledged support to the Bill. It published art article based on spiritual research, which it revealed how Sundaramurthy Nayanar, a Sivate leader of the past times himself recognized the abolition of dedication of women to the temples, and it raised a question why were the modern Sivates not ready to accept the reform. Thus, the article created an overwhelming response among the public.

At the same time Margret Cousins, Secretary of Women's Indian Association observed that there was no need for the circulation of the Bill. In support of this Bill, *The Indian Ladies Magazine* made public the resolution passed in the fifth All India Women's Conference meeting held at Madras in November 1930 pleading the people to boycott these temples where the devadasi service was still admitted and to prevent the dedication of girls to temples by punishing the culprits. The announcement for boycotting the temples was a revolutionary move.



The efforts of the press created full fledged support among the public for the passing of the Bill. Knowing that, the government was prompted to take an urgent and effective step expeditiously. In the mid-half of 1930, the Government of Madras issued an order to the effect that the dedication of women to the temples was abolished by the law. The dedication of minor girls to the temples was considered as a crime. In the same year, Travancore State also abolished the evil system. It was observed that the order of Madras Presidency was unable to root out the devadasi system thoroughly. With the support of, the Brahmins and the temple trustees the evil found its survival. Before the issue of the order, Muthulakshmi Reddy resigned from the council due to the arrest of Gandhi. Despite that, she continued her works off the council for the above purpose.

All India women's Conference appealed to the Hindu Religious Endowment Board of Madras to call upon all trustees of the temple under its jurisdiction totally to eradicate the devadasi service and the ceremony of dedication of girls in such temples by issuing an order. The *Stri-Dharma* published this matter in order to root out the system thoroughly. Even the *Anandha Bodhini*, one of the conservative papers of Madras expressed its positive observation regarding this matter. It observed how the devadasi system was found to be a bad omen for Hinduism, the existence of the evil would result in moral degeneration of the youth and a disgrace our country in the international arena.

Even after the resignation from the Council, Muthulakshmi Reddy didn't renounce her efforts. She wrote a letter to C. Rajagopalachari, the leader of Tamilnadu Congress Committee, expressing vividly how the dedication of girls to the temple was found to be so bad a social sin as that of growing palm trees for the production of toddy. The *Anandha Bodhini* generously allotted its columns for publishing this letter. Rajagopalachari wrote to Muthulakshmi Reddy that he was over burdened with other matters and had no time to take up the question of devadasis, which sounds how he was not interested in such efforts.



In the mean time, Maharaja of Bobbili, the Premier of the Madras Presidency attended a public meeting, in which the devadasi women performed dance feast. Muthulakshmi Reddy criticized this occurrence. Krishna Iyer, the orthodox leader targeted her for her positive efforts through reports. He maintained that the system should be in vogue until other girls would be trained to perform the dances. Hearing this, she criticized his view by asking a question if he was willing to transform other girls to devadasis. The *Anandha Bodhini* supported her efforts by publishing this virtual conversation between the two and requested the public to support her efforts. This paper further requested the parents not to force their girls to plunge into the evil. Even though there should be a punishment, the temple trustees did not care for the law, they conducted such *pottukattuthal* ceremonies freely in the rural areas. The paper advised the public to get rid of the evil, which was hated by Gandhi too. It further added that strict measures should be taken against the evil in order to prevent the venereal diseases.

The *Kumaran* published a Tamil song in 1931 entitled 'which is Hindu religion?' It criticized the Hindu religion for the prevalence of the devadasi evil. In the same issue, the paper published a Utopian story in which how the Hindu Devars, Hindu Nayanmars, Maulavis of Islamism and the Christian Saints assembled in a conference in Heaven and passed the Abolition of Devadasi Act. The paper finally asked a question why the orthodox people were not ready to accept the reform, which was accepted by the Gods too.

The *Kudiyarasu* gave vivid advertisement for the book in order to propagate awareness. In an article in the paper, she asked a question whether there the dances and songs would be necessary for Gods in the Temples. The orthodox Brahmins argued that such ancestral jobs should not be left out. She condemned the views of Brahmins and asked them why did they leave their ancestral job of cattle rearing? The conservative arguments were waned by her question. The



paper further advised the people to write their supportive opinions to the editor in support of the reform, which created public support for the abolition of the evil.

The *Stri-Dharma* revealed how the Princely State of Pudukottai abolished the devadasi system by amending the Hindu Laws of Inheritance so as to benefit the female heirs in the family. It wholeheartedly welcomed the abolition and it insisted that its readers might know that a similar Act was passed at Madras Legislative Council as an amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, but it was very regrettable that even in the city temples, service by the devadasi maids was allowed to go on owing partly to the non-interference policy of the government, and partly to the ignorance of the mass and the apathy of the so-called educated class among them. Thus the paper asked its readers to be aware of the use of the existing laws regarding female emancipation.

The above paper reproduced the presidential address of Muthulakshmi Reddy in the *Andhradesa Kalvanthula* Conference held at Tenali on 13th August 1932. Her address elaborately discussed about the evils and the devadasi system, the Legislative efforts taken to abolish the evil and the role of the public to be played in this issue. Further she strongly suggested that without the public support, a reform could not be made. She appealed to the mothers not to dedicate their female children to the Hindu temples. The paper published this for raising the public support in favor of abolishing the devadasi system.

The *Grihalakshmi* was continuously insisting in its articles about the abolition of devadasi system. On 7th August 1939 a new Bill related to the abolition of devadasi system was introduced in the Madras Legislative Council by Mrs. Ammanna Raja. She requested the government to send the Bill for the consideration of the select committee. But C. Rajagopalachari, the Premier of Madras Presidency announced that the Bill should be circulated for gathering



public opinion. The said paper strongly condemned his announcement and negative attitude towards the emancipation of women.

The *Giruhalakshmi* registered its thanks for the papers which supported the Bill. It also published the letter of Mumulakshrni Reddy regarding devadasi system. She pointed out how the dedication of girls over the age of eighteen years was performed secretly; it exposed the failure of reform acts. She sought the support the parents of girls until the evil was thoroughly abolished. She noted that the legislations would create the external changes only when the internal changes should take place only by the awareness. In the same issue, it published a photo of devadasi female children with the caption "Oh, Society, Protect us", which created sympathy among the readers.

It also published a photo of a devadasi young girl with news about her. She was 17 years old. She was forced to *pottukattuthal* ceremony and then to prostitution. She was affected by a number of venereal diseases. After escaping from such premises she was admitted into the hospital. After three years of continuous treatment she was rescued and then admitted in an orphanage. The photo and the news about the devadasi girl created strong opinion against the evil.

Most of the people expected that the bill would be passed earlier; but the Second World War put a hurdle on the way. All the efforts ended in vain. During the Ministry of O.P. Ramasamy Reddiyar, another Bill was introduced by Dr. Subbarayan on 9 October 1947 in the Madras Legislative Assembly to abolish the devadasisystem. The Bill was sent to the Select Committee under the chairmanship of Mrs. Ammannaraja. After the committee stage, the Bill became Law on 17th January 1948 and called as Act No. XXXI of 1947. It was also known as Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947. According to the Act, all forms of devadasi system were abolished in the Madras Presidency.



The *Ananda Bodhini* observed an important thing “The government should stop the inhuman activities in the society even though it assured not to interfere in the social matters. Why doesn't the government go for abolition of the evils which has humiliated the children and the women for a life time? Our leaders must pass the resolution and send them to the authorities by which the government should be stimulated.” This observation exposed the positive dimensions of the press regarding the liberation of women in Tamilnadu.

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