



Madras Devadasis Prevention and Dedication Bill 1938 – A Study

KEYWORDS

Initial Attempts Against the Devadasi System, Madras Devadasis Prevention and Dedication Bill -1938, Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy.

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ABSTRACT *The aim of this paper is to highlight the Madras Devadasis Prevention and Dedication Bill 1938. The British Government hesitated because the abolition of such practices would offend the religious feelings of the Hindu. But the Government of India had to sign the International Convention Against Prostitution in 1906. In 1912 the Indian Penal Code was amended with a view to abolish the Devadasi system and to encourage legal marriages among the members of the Devadasi Community. The English educated Hindus, carried on an agitation in the teeth of fierce opposition by the orthodox section, to remove this evil. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy took an active interest in the abolition of Devadasi System, when she was the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council.*

Introduction:

Many felt, but some came forward to condemn this system. Christian missionaries were the first to develop public opinion against this system. Social Reform Movements like Brahma Samaj took up the work. P. Anandacharlu, a social reformer remarked, "Our temples cannot improve unless the dancing girls be first kicked out". Anti notch memos were collected from the adults by the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association.¹

Chronic evils of this system was not unknown to the authorities and the public. The British Government hesitated because the abolition of such practices would offend the religious feelings of the Hindu. But the Government of India had to sign the International Convention Against Prostitution in 1906. In 1912 the Indian Penal Code was amended with a view to abolish the Devadasi system and to encourage legal marriages among the members of the Devadasi Community.

The English educated Hindus, carried on an agitation in the teeth of fierce opposition by the orthodox section, to remove this evil.² Muthu Lakshmi Reddy took an active interest in the abolition of Devadasi System, when she was the Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council.

Muthu Lakshmi Reddy moved a resolution in the Madras Legislative Council³. 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 promiscuity, a life leading to the disuse of the mind and body"⁴

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."⁵ 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 1929.⁶

The Act of 1929

The Act of 1929 was limited in its scope and application. The object of the mover, Muthu Lakshmi Reddy was to put an end to this glaring evil. of course, the legislation had freed themselves from the obligation of service. But in some cases. 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.⁷

So Muthu Lakshmi Reddy drafted a Bill to further amend the Madras Hindu Religions Endowment Act Of 1926.⁸ She moved to substitute the sub-class 44 (A) (1) and (5) found in the Bill as amended by the Select Committee. "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."⁹

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 the condition of service in the manner herein before provided".

But Muthu Lakshmi Reddy was of the 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 took upon prostitution as their caste-duty or dharma. 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.

Further Amendment

Dr. Muthu Lakshmi 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.¹⁰ 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.

Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy said: I think, it is high time, that we who are aspiring to a higher and freer life should put-down this iniquity going on in the name of religious tradition and custom. We, the Hindus, who have before us such noble ideals of chastity, purity and devotion between husband and wife as exemplified in the lines of Rama and Sita, Nala and Damayanthi should encourage immorality through our temples is neither consistent with our past culture nor with our present desire to lead a healthy and happy life. Some interpret that this legislation aims at persecuting honest people who desire to perform religious service in our temples but my intention as you know, is far from it. I only want to dissociate our religion from immorality, because I feel most strongly that the State or Religion should guard the morality of the people, should improve the moral tone of the society, not by any means whatsoever regulated and tolerate a holier and purer atmosphere in our holy temples and thus remove the plot on the Hindu religion that the temples by allowing dedication encourage immorality in our men and women.¹¹

Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy wanted that power must be given either to the trustees or to the Government to prohibit them from doing service; otherwise eventhough 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.

The Government issued orders to the Collectors in the districts to enfranchise the various Devadasi inams. Thus they were freed from the obligation of services from the temples. The Raja of Panagal challenged the rights of the temples and enacted "Hindu Religious Endowment Act", to control and direct the management of the temples for the good of the public.¹²

In spite of all the precautions and preventions, Bills and Amendments, the temple authorities allowed Devadasis who, did not hold any inams and did not render any service in the temples to dedicate girls as a matter of question and hereditary right solely for the purpose of prostitution. The Act of 1929 was neither prohibitive nor penal. It was only a permissive legislation and left the option of service in the temples to the Devadasis themselves from the obligation of service. It also did not apply to all the temples in the Presidency.¹³

Madras Devadasis Prevention and Dedication Bill -1938

The efforts of Muthu Lakshmi Reddy for the abolition of Devadasi System yielded desired effects gradually. The Bill called Madras Devadasis Prevention and Dedication Bill was introduced in the Legislature in 1938. The Bill was passed and came into effect. A large number of women were liberated from the evil. The Bill of 1938 removed the century old social evil. This was the result of Muthu Lakshmi Reddy's consistent efforts to achieve her goal.

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