CHAPTER IV
POLITICAL LIFE

Till the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, no woman was given the right to become a Member of the Legislative Council.¹ 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.² In this connection, the Madras Council threw open its membership to women for the first time. Kamaladevi was persuaded by Margaret 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.³

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 Reddi. During that
time, Muthulakshmi Reddi had gone to Paris as a delegate from India to
attend an International Conference. 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.

The election for the post of the President of the Council took place
on 14th December 1926. C.V.S. Narasimha Raju was unanimously elected
as the President to the Council. Muthulakshmi Reddi’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. 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 seen

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4 S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, My Experience As a Legislator (Madras: Current Thought Press, 1930) pp.3-4.
5 Stri-Dharma December, 1926, p.17.
but not a Woman Deputy President of a deliberative assembly. History, therefore, was made when the Madras Legislature made Muthulakshmi Reddi its Deputy President. The conferment of this unique honor on her constituted a Kohinoor on the dazzling diadem of Indian Womanhood.⁹ Reddi’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 realizing that no country or nation will prosper without the active support and cooperation of its women”. ¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.

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⁹ Women’s Indian Association Report 1964.
The 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 davadasis were recruited from various castes among the Hindus having different names in different districts like Jogoti, Basavi, Jogta or Jogappa. 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. When a girl became a well trained dancer and singer, she offered herself as a Devadasi and she was adorned as a bride 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. Under this system, young girls were dedicated to the temple and they were nurtured under unhealthy notions of religion and they were brought up to look upon prostitution as Caste Dharma. Unfortunately, this dedication became identical with an evil profession and it grew to the extent of purchasing and adopting young innocent children and training

them for an immoral life, at an age when they could not very well see the future before them. Again, she wanted to save them from Enforced Prostitution and brought home the fact that religion should guard the morality of the people and improve the moral tone of society.\textsuperscript{17}

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”.\textsuperscript{18} They formed part and parcel of the worship of God in the Hindu temples and they were an order of pure virgin ascetics wearing the simplest clothes, partaking only of the food they got from the temples, personal purity, rectitude of contact and a vow of celibacy were the essentials of the Devadasi System.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{17} P.Subramanian, \textit{Social History of the Tamils} (New Delhi: DKPrint World, 2005) p.84.
\textsuperscript{18} G.O.N.O.4079, \textit{Law General} 20, December, 1927.
\end{flushright}
The causes for dedicating girls to the gods were many. In order to obtain a safe delivery, expectant mothers would often vow to dedicate their child if it was a girl to the service of gods. Among the weavers of Tirukalukunram in the Chengleput District, the eldest daughter of every family was devoted to the temples.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{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.\textsuperscript{21} In the mean time, effective steps were taken in Mysore in 1909.\textsuperscript{22} 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, practising of dedicating girls to the temple was made punishable under the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of Mysore.\textsuperscript{23} More over, in 1912, three different Bills to suppress this evil were introduced by Menakji Dahabai, Mudholkor and Madge. Even though there were many supporters for the Bill, it was quietly dropped. The Local Government did

\textsuperscript{20} P. Subramanian, Social History of the Tamils op.cit. p.83.
not send a satisfactory reply to those Bills.\textsuperscript{24} The Indian Penal Code, section 372 speaks about the recruitment of girls for employing as Devadasi to be a punishable offence.\textsuperscript{25} 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, living in the circumstances calculated to lead to prostitution. 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.\textsuperscript{26} Few years later, in 1927, Ramadass 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. 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.\textsuperscript{27} Muthulaksmi Reddi was inspired by Moovalur Ramamiratham 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

\textsuperscript{24} S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, \textit{Why Should Abolish Devadasi System} op. cit. p.6.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Sri-Dharma} September, 1932.
\textsuperscript{27} P.N. Premalatha, \textit{Nationalism and Women’s Movement in South India1917-1947} op.cit. p.261.
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.28 During 1920 and 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddi 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 organized meetings in different places. The Women’s Indian Association and its publication, Stri-dharma, were engaged in propaganda work against the evil through the medium of the press and public meetings. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi was able to garner support even from within the Devadasi Community Organizations such as the Devadasi Women’s Association. The Devadasi Community Men’s Association came forward to help Muthulakshmi Reddi. In 1927, these associations organized Conferences and meetings in different places29 and urged Reddi, Vice President of the Madras Legislative Council, to adopt legislation to put an end to the system of dedication of young women and girls.30 On July 8th 1927, a Conference of Devadasis was held at Chidambaram under the Presidentship of Singaram Pillai31, and on 2nd

29 G.O.N.O.4079, Law General Department 20, December, 1927.
30 G.O.N.O. 149, Law General Department 17, January, 1928.
November 1927, the Manimegala Sangam, a Devadasi Women’s Association, organized a meeting at Coimbatore under V.Konnammal, a Devadasi of Thanjavur and Mayavaram. The Sengundar Mahajana Sangam in Coimbatore also organized such meetings and conferences supporting the abolition of the system, and so did similar associations in Andhra Pradesh. Enlightened people and their associations got together in various places like Conjeevaram and Trichinopoly and in many other places in the Presidency. On November 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddi 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. Dorai Kannammal, Secretary of the Madras Presidency Devadasis, took the lead in the protest solidarity and sent Memorandum to the authorities concerned, with signatures. They stated that the Devadasis were not prostitutes and the fundamental principle of their lives was to render service to God, their life was like that of saints, the abolition of that system would be a danger to a religion, the whole community should not be condemned for the sins of a few, their property

32 G.O. N.O.626, Local Self Government Department 08, February, 1928.
33 S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Awakening: Demand for Devadasi Legislation op.cit. pp.2-5.
34 Ibid.pp.5-7.
35 G.O. N.O. 3863, Law Department 3, December, 1927.
would be affected and indeed, even the country’s cultural heritage was in danger. They also insisted that the Government should offer Devadasis educational facility by which they could gain access to better prospects in life. A significant aspect of the Devadasi System was the permanent and hereditary nature of their work in temple’s land or some times, cash was set apart for different functions to be performed by them. Once a Devadasi was appointed for a particular chore such as dancing before the god in the temple during the procession, festivals of waving fly whisks etc, not only her post became permanent but also the right to do the particular work was assigned to her and a certain endowment was set apart for her upkeep and it became hereditary. Thus the main obstacles in weeding out the Devadasi System were the endowments and perquisites these women received from temples as a hereditary right in lieu of service in the temples. In the absence of a daughter, a Devadasi would go to the extent of securing an heiress either by way of adoption or purchase. These adoptions and purchases led to immoral life. Hence the Government decided to amend Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926 for granting these lands permanently. On September 5, 1928, Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council to amend the Hindu Religious Endowment Act 1926 and the Bill became

37 S. Ram, Women through Ages op .cit. p.57.
38 Ibid. p.62.
an Act called the Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1929\textsuperscript{40}, with a new section, 44A, added to section 44. 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\textsuperscript{41}. 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. The Local Government was empowered to make rules in accordance with which enfranchisement shall be effected.\textsuperscript{42} Another class of the Act specifically laid down that there should be no enforcement of obligation to render any service to any temple to which a girl is dedicated by reason of the grant of land. In other words, all the dedicated girls were freed and declared independent citizens who could enjoy complete liberty to follow any calling according to the bent of their mind or to educate themselves and be useful to society in ways other than the one marked out by their status.\textsuperscript{43} The Government then directed the Revenue Department to frame set of rules to grant and assess the lands for fixing the rent. The Revenue Department submitted its Drafts Rules in 1929,

\textsuperscript{40} G.O.2820, Law General Department 22, August, 1928.
\textsuperscript{41} G.O.N.O.4042, Law Department 26, November, 1928.
\textsuperscript{42} Indian Ladies Magazine Vol.II, March, 1929.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid
which the Government ratified. According to them, Collectors were empowered to administer the provisions of the Act and Rules by which they could by notification, direct the Trustees of Temples and the Devadasis to inform as to the inam held in connection with a temple.\(^{44}\) This Act was applied only to women and not to men who were of assistance to the Devadasis. The Devadasi Service was a joint performance of both men and women. Even though the functions of women were chief, it consisted partly of dancing by women and partly fiddling and drumming performed by men. Hence the Devadasi Reform Associations sent many representations to Muthulakshmi Reddi to insist that unless the whole inam enjoyed by both men and women for their joint service were enfranchised, the evil custom could not be eradicated by liberating them from the obligation of service in the temple, and that they would train only women for that service for fear that they might lose the benefit of these Inams.\(^{45}\) This Act dealt with Inam Holding Devadasis only. There were other Devadasis who dedicated a large number of girls to Hindu temples by going through the pottu kattu or similar ceremony in the Hindu temples even after the age of eighteen.\(^{46}\) There was a class of Devadasis outside the temple who dedicated their girls not for the service in the temples but for the sole object of flesh trade. The Hindu Religious Endowment Act also did not include certain temples within its operation.

\(^{44}\) G.O.N.O.2597, Revenue Department 13, December, 1929.

\(^{45}\) P.N.Premalatha, Nationalism and Women’s Movement in South India, 1917-1947 op.cit. p.220.

\(^{46}\) Kudiyarasu 30, March, 1930.
For example, the Madras temples getting a very small income of Rs 300/- or so on.\textsuperscript{47} Hence it was realized that there was an urgent need for another legislation to eradicate the practice among the above group.

When Muthulakshmi Reddi spoke about the Devadasi Bill in the Madras Legislative Council, she maintained that Madras had earned the honor to become of the First Province in the British India to undertake social and religious legislation of this kind. 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 a major.\textsuperscript{48} Muthulakshmi Reddi 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.\textsuperscript{49} Again Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a Bill in the Madras Council\textsuperscript{50} to declare dedication of Hindu Women in temples as illegal.\textsuperscript{51} She insisted that they could contract valid marriages. Persons, who permitted or performed or participated in the Ceremony of Pottukattu or

\textsuperscript{47} S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, My Experience As a Legislator op.cit.p.114.
\textsuperscript{48} Stri-Dharma September-1932, p.610.
\textsuperscript{49} G.O.N.O.476, Law Legislative Department 16,October, 1929.
\textsuperscript{50} G.O.N.O.2147, Law Department 17, May, 1930.
Gajipuja 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 Reddi argued that the Bill should be passed immediately, due to short tenure of the House, this was not done and so it lapsed.  

When Muthlakshmi Reddi introduced a Bill in the Madras Legislative Council for the Abolition of the Devadasi System by seeking on amendment to the Hindu Religious Endowment Act, the Justice Party, though sitting in opposition, rendered whole hearted support and cooperation for her Bill. She was opposed by the Devadasi Association, under the leadership of Jeevaratnammal and they passed a resolution to protest against the introduction of the Devadasi Abolition Bill. They emphasized that this Bill would affect the ancient customs and religion. She faced opposition not only from the Devadasi Community but also from famous Congress Politicians like Satyamurti and Rajaji. When she initiated the debate on the Devadasi Abolition, Rajaji was the President of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee and he refused to take up this issue for

54 G.O.N.O. 626, Local Self Government Department 8,February,1928.
Sathyamurti opposed the Bill on the grounds that the Devadasis were the Custodians of traditional Indian Arts. Hence the system should be retained and every Devadasi should dedicate at least one girl to be a future Devadasi. The liberation of women from the clutches of cruel customs and tradition was one of the declared principles of the Justice Party and it vehemently opposed dedication of girls to temples. When Muthulakshmi Reddi introduced a Bill in the Local Legislative Council for the Abolition of the Devadasi System, the Justice Party gave whole hearted support and cooperation. In the mean time, as a protest against the arrest of Gandhi in the Salt Sathyagraha, Muthulakshmi Reddi 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 Reddi’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 favorable Report. Reddi 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. After Independence, the

60 M.Sundraj, Prostitution in Madras Presidency op.cit.p.132.
Government of India moved a Resolution to prohibit dedications. On October 1947, P.Subbarayan introduced the Madras Devadasi Act (Prevention of Dedication Bill). The Madras Legislature suggested reference to the Select Committee.\textsuperscript{61} In the discussion that followed, the majority of the members supported the Bill but some members argued that no legislation was needed since the system had faded out. They also objected to the statement that the Devadasis were prostitutes as implicit in the object and reasons of the Bill\textsuperscript{62}. However, all the lady members of the House supported the Bill.\textsuperscript{63} The Bill finally became the Act No XXXI of 1947 and came to be known as The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act.\textsuperscript{64} The Act not only prohibited the practice of dedicating girls or women to idols or anything subjected to worship\textsuperscript{65} but also permitted the Devadasis to marry. Another notable feature of the Act was that it prohibited the performance of dance by women in a temple or religious institution or in any procession carrying a Hindu Deity or any festive or ceremonial occasion connected with worship and violators of the Act were liable for punishment with simple imprisonment for a term to extend up to six months or with fine of five hundred rupees or with both.\textsuperscript{66} Thus the system of dedicating minor girls to idols was wiped out in Tamil Nadu. Muthulakshmi Reddi dedicated her whole life for the

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. pp.645-646.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid. pp.644, 648.
\textsuperscript{64} Madras Administration Report Part-I, 1948.
\textsuperscript{65} Jayanthi, “Abolition of Devadasi System” Tamil Nadu History Congress 16\textsuperscript{th} Annual Session, C. Balakrishnan, ed., 9\textsuperscript{th} to 11\textsuperscript{th} October, 2009, Tiruchirappalli.
\textsuperscript{66} Madras Act 1947 Act No.XXXI, Legal Department
liberation of Devadasis from the clutches of old customs and reformed them in such a way to help them to earn a living by honorable means. It is doubtful whether any other woman did so much for the liberation of a section of Tamil women from immorality as Muthulakshmi Reddi did. Thanks to her tireless efforts, the year 1947 witnessed not only the Independence of the Nation but also the Liberation of Women. What is more significant is the fact that this was achieved inspite of the opposition of stalwarts like Rajaji and Sathyamurthi.

**Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act**

Due to the abolition of the Devadasi System in the Madras Presidency, many young girls and women were saved from the evil custom. They led immoral life because they needed the money for their survival. This immoral life led to the degradation of Devadasis into prostitutes. In some parts of Bombay and Madras Presidency and in a few Native States in southern parts of the country prevailed a cruel notion in the uncultured minds of some ignorant and superstitious persons that their object of worship required the services of women for performing singing and dancing and other sundry duties. As married women were either not prepared or could not conveniently be employed to do such services, unmarried girls were dedicated for this purpose. There were certain castes which alone dedicated their girls to these services. Once such girls were dedicated to these temple services, they must remain unmarried through
out their lives. No wonder young unmarried girls, who were dedicated to
gods, carried on the most immoral trade of prostitution\textsuperscript{67}. There were
more than 600 brothels in Madras City alone and hundreds of minor girls
were forced to live in such brothels. Because of the absence of any
control by legislation and the consequent increased supply of young girls
and women from the neighboring villages by pimps, the brothels were
filled up.\textsuperscript{68} These brothels in the City openly advertised vice, allured
young men and encouraged depravity among them. Venereal Disease,
which claimed a large percentage of people as victims, had its origin only
in the brothels.\textsuperscript{69} In some cases, innocent children of about eight or nine
years of age were being dragged into brothels, and made to live in the
most harrowing conditions. The diabolical treatment meted out to them in
the brothels was heart rending and blood curdling.\textsuperscript{70} The main cause for
this evil was poverty. Enquiries conducted by the League of Nations from
time to time in different countries as well as the Madras Vigilance
Associations Survey supported the same fact.\textsuperscript{71} Other contributory causes
were the Devadasi System, society’s indifferent attitude towards girls,
child widows and absence of widow remarriages and denial of property to
women.\textsuperscript{72}

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{itemize}
\item[68] \textit{Sri-Dharma} May, 1931.p.298.
\item[69] Ibid. p.300.
\item[70] S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, \textit{My Experience As a Legislator} op.cit. p.218.
\item[71] P.N. Premalatha, \textit{Nationalism and Women’s Movement in South India 1917-1947} op.cit. p.224.
\item[72] Women’s Indian Association Report 1937-1938, p.22.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotes}
Due to the investigation by the League of Nations, a meeting was held at Madras on 13\textsuperscript{th} December 1924 under Edith Gray of Chicago on the theme of “Traffic in Women and Children”. It inspired many people to better the condition of these women. She traveled all over the world to investigate traffic in women and children and gave valuable lectures to the people.\textsuperscript{73} The Madras Vigilance Association under the direction and guidance of Rev. E.H.M. Waller, Bishop of Madras, carried on intensive study and investigation on the condition of brothels in the City of Madras.\textsuperscript{74} As a result, the Vigilance Association paid interest towards women and children to eliminate this evil. They carried on rescue and preventive work in the Madras Presidency to suppress traffic in women and girls, especially the protection of girls less than eighteen years of age. It strove to establish and maintain Rescue Homes to work for the abolition of brothels, prostitution, to promote the enactment of laws that would further morality, and to oppose legislation on regulation of brothels in segregated areas or compulsory examination of women, to prevent the publication and sale of indecent and obscene books or pictures or the display of objectionable cinemas, films, theatrical performances and advertisements and to suppress such evils. Above all, it aimed at educating the public through meetings, publishing and distributing literature and by any other possible means.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{73} Stri-Dharma January, 1925, p.34.
\textsuperscript{74} S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, My Experience As a Legislator op.cit. p. 193.
\textsuperscript{75} Stri-Dharma March-May, 1929.
The Madras Vigilance Association and the Women’s Indian Association met frequently to spend considerable time to prepare a Draft Bill for the suppression of brothels and immoral traffic of women in Madras. But the Government did not send a reply to their Draft. Disgusted over the indifferent attitude of the Government, the Association waited for an opportunity to renew their efforts. Soon after the combined deputation of Vigilance Association and Women’s Association met the Law Member, Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, it was agreed that the Draft might be introduced in the Council as a Private Bill. Since Reddi was in charge of the Devadasi Abolition Bill, she requested another member, K.R. Venkatarama Iyer, to introduce it in his name. It proposed to give more power to the Police to stop this practice. Muthulakshmi Reddi wrote a letter to the Government to introduce her Bill and obtained sanction. K.R. Venkatarama Iyer made a few changes in his Bill as per the advice of the Select Committee. At that juncture, Reddi got the Reports of the League of Nations regarding immoral traffic in women and children through the Legislative Council. She took pains to publish them in the Local Press. In the mean time, a number of meetings were held in the Madras Presidency under the auspices of the Madras Vigilance Association, Women’s Indian Association and other social service

78 S. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Papers, Speeches and Writings Vol. II, Part-I.
institutions to canvass public support for the Bill in the Legislative Council. On 1st September 1928, a huge public meeting was held at Gokhale Hall, Madras, in which Mrs. Arya, Mrs. Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Swaminathan and Mrs. Patwarthan spoke. The speakers pointed out that brothels in Madras were on the increase and continuously supplied with fresh recruits, with a regular stock of importers, procurers, managers and land lords involved in enticing and bringing young girls to a life of shame. The meeting also passed a Resolution conveying their whole hearted support to the Bill for the suppression of brothels and immoral traffic, to be introduced in the Madras Legislative Council. Later she proposed an amendment to the Bill, by which the word Prostitute was used to either sex who used the body for promiscuous sexual intercourse, under condition of hire. She applied the term to both sexes. Then it was referred to a Select Committee. The Women’s Indian Association and the Vigilance Association appealed to the public to lend their support to pass the Bill. Owing to the constant agitation set up by both the Associations through the Press and Platforms, the public became convinced of the need for the control and suppression of this commercialized vice through Law. Finally, the Bill was passed by the Madras Legislative Council in 1930. While congratulating Muthulakshmi Reddi’s efforts in getting the Bill passed into a Law, the Maharaja of Pithapuram said that this Act,

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79 G.O.N.O.329, Public (police) Department, 11, June, 1930.
80 Ibid
81 G.O.N.O. 517, Judicial (Confidential) Department 22, October, 1928.
sponsored by Muthulakshmi Reddi, was one of the crying needs of our Province because in some cases, innocent children about eight or nine years of age were dragged into the brothels and made to live in the most harrowing conditions. It was known as the Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act. Muthulakshmi Reddi and Dorothy Jinarajadasa had worked for the successful passage of the Bill. As per the Act, prostitution meant indiscriminate sexual intercourse for hire. This Act was applicable to the whole of the Madras Presidency and it was intended to make better provision for the suppression of brothels and of traffic in women and girls. It made it an offence to keep, manage or assist in the management of brothels and gave power to a Magistrate to order entry into a brothel and remove all minor girls from the brothels. The work of the Madras and the Bombay Women’s Indian Association, in cooperation with the Vigilance Association, had been valuable in securing legislation for the Abolition of Brothels and Establishment of Rescue Homes.

This Act was supported by members of the Self Respect Movement as well as the Moderates in the Congress and they were all praise for the Act. They requested the Government to establish Rescue Homes to protect women from brothel houses. The Self Respect Movement raised the question, “why is prostitution attributed to women alone? This showed the practice of permanent subjection of women by men in

83 Stri-Dharma, June, 1930.
society”. It added that “The word, prostitution, has been used to mean that women are pleasure objects to men, hence slaves. This is an impediment to women’s liberty. This should go. Does the society brand men as prostitutes”?

The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act was passed and it came into force in 1930\(^{85}\). In spite of all these efforts, the Act was not put into practice. The Government refused to shoulder the responsibility for setting up Rescue Homes for young girls rescued from brothels. It was impossible for those women to re-engineer themselves as devadasis because they were discarded from their earlier position due to their immoral practices.\(^{86}\) Fortunately, many organizations in the City were interested in the welfare and vigilance activities. The Madras Vigilance Association and the Women’s Indian Association collected funds to construct Rescue Homes and thereby shared the responsibility of rescuing girls and women from brothels.\(^{87}\) The Salvation Army, a Non-Governmental Organization, came forward to admit such girls irrespective of caste and creed. The Madras Children’s Aid Society gave shelter and suitable training to those women to make them self reliant.\(^{88}\) The Government of Madras did not enforce the Act and decided to amend the Act to confine its laws of enforcement only to Madras City.

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\(^{84}\) Kudiyarasu 18, May, 1930.  
\(^{85}\) G.O.N.O.3477, Home Department 28, November, 1944.  
\(^{86}\) Swadesamitran 07, February, 1930.  
\(^{87}\) Sri-Dharma November, 1930.  
\(^{88}\) Sri-Dharma May, 1931.
The proposed amendment was subject to severe criticism both by the Press as well as by all leading women’s organizations such as the All India Women’s Conference and the Women’s Indian Association. If the Act was applicable to the City alone, the prostitutes and procurers would move to adjacent cities and this social evil could never be eradicated. In order to prevent the amendment, a deputation of the Women’s Indian Association, consisting of Muthulakshmi Reddi, Ms. K.C. Acharya, Margaret E. Cousins, Rajivi Bai, Ms. Shiva Rao and Visalakshi met the Home Member and requested the Government to apply the Act to the entire Province. They also promised their help for the successful operation of the Act and wanted its immediate enforcement.

In spite of all these efforts, the Act was amended and passed in October 1931, to make it enforceable within Madras City alone. The Government defended the amendment by saying that there were no separate courts for trying young girls rescued from brothels and there were no Rescue Homes or other facilities required in this connection. It left the matter to the public charitable institutions. To Muthulakshmi Reddi goes the credit of the suppression of brothels and immoral traffic. Girls, who led a disgraceful life, were helped to change over to a normal

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89 India 30, July, 1930.
90 Stri-Dharma May-June, 1931.
91 Dravida 16, February 1932.
way of life.\textsuperscript{92} Rescue Homes were demanded by her and she also insisted that no discrimination should be made in the matter of the enforcement of a law among the public. Moreover, special powers were conferred on the Police under the Act.\textsuperscript{93} When the All Asian Women’s Conference met at Lahore in 1931, Muthulakshmi Reddi spoke about the need for suppression of immoral traffic in women and children and a large number of trained women social workers were required for this purpose. Legislation for the protection of minor girls and for the suppression of immoral traffic in women and children was not adequate. The Indian Social Reformers and Social Workers had to combat against not only poverty and ignorance of the masses but also struggle against these inadequate and imperfect laws made by an Alien Government. The British Government cited strict religious neutrality even in matters concerning the moral and spiritual welfare of innocent minor children.\textsuperscript{94} She wanted some urgent steps to be taken to eradicate this evil custom. Suitable legislation to suppress traffic in women and children and to protect minors and to punish the third party living on the earning of a prostitute, supported by educative propaganda and liberal financial support from Government alone can solve the problem. It was also necessary for the training and employment of Women Probation Officers and Women Police to eliminate brothels and to strictly carry out the

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{India} 22, April, 1932.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Tholilalan} 23, April, 1932.
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{All-Asian Women’s Conference Report} 1931.
provisions of the existing Law, Children’s Courts, Women Honorary Magistrate and Women Juries to deal with these offences.95

**Child Marriage Restraint Act -1929**

There had been opposition to Child Marriage and the consummation of marriage of girls below the age of puberty since the Nineteenth Century. Moral issues, problems of health, birth control and ill-treatment of women were associated with Child Marriage. Social Reformers argued that Child Marriage did not exist in Ancient India and it was not sanctioned by the Sacred Texts.96

In 1921, more than sixty three lakh girls were married between the ages of ten and fifteen. Among them, three lakh girls became Child Widows before fifteen years due to Child Marriage. Hence the Sarda Act was passed by the Indian Legislature in 1829. After the introduction of the Bill, it was circulated for eliciting the public opinion. In the Madras Presidency, the majority of Brahmin Community opposed the Bill by stating that the Bill interfered with their religious and social customs which were hallowed by a long tradition. Prominent among them were T.R.Ramachandran and Vardacharya, a High Court Vakil. At the same time, leading High Caste Hindus supported the Bill. Among them were

95 Ibid
Manikka Mudaliyar and T.A. Shanmugam Chettiyar\textsuperscript{97}. Muthulakshmi Reddi tried to introduce the Child Marriage Restraint Act because many bills were defeated until 1927. The Women’s Indian Association also wanted to put a stop to the practice of Child Marriage. It organized meetings periodically in different parts of the country and urged the Government and the Legislatures to enact laws to eradicate this evil. The Women’s Indian Association and its branches together sent a Memorandum supporting the Bill. Sir Hari Singh Gour’s legislative attempt in the Imperial Legislative Council to raise the age of consent for girls to fourteen within marital relation and fifteen outside. Along with the Women’s Indian Association, Women Graduates Association and Seva Sadan of Madras supported the Bill\textsuperscript{98}. But the Government did not support though the whole Assembly was in favor of it. In the next year itself, Sir Hari Singh Gour decided to bring a Bill under a better title, Child Protection Bill'. It was designed to protect infants below the age of fifteen, and to protect the Girl Wife against her husband’s injurious approaches up to girls below the age of fourteen.\textsuperscript{99} The Bill extended the definition of rape to girls not exceeding thirteen years of age. Sexual intercourse with a girl below fifteen was made punishable with one year imprisonment, with or without fine.\textsuperscript{100} It aimed at protecting girls against unlawful intercourse even by their husbands. When the proposed Bill

\textsuperscript{97} G.O.2542, Law General Department 01, August, 1928.
\textsuperscript{98} Sri-Dharma June, 1924, p.113.
\textsuperscript{99} Sathyagrahi 8, July, 1929.
\textsuperscript{100} Ooliyan 30, July, 1929.
reached the Women’s Indian Association, it brought the matter to the
notice of international associations such as the World Young Women
Christian Association and the International Suffrage Alliance.\(^{101}\) This
time, though the orthodox members opposed the Bill, the Government
passed an amendment to the Indian Penal Code, raising the Age of
Consent within the marriage, to thirteen and outside, fourteen. Women
Organizations did not stop with this success. They demanded that the
Age of Consent should be raised to sixteen. Even the Women’s Indian
Association passed a Resolution to that effect.\(^{102}\) Again in 1927, Hari
Bilas Sarda introduced the Child Marriage Bill\(^{103}\) in the Legislative
Assembly. It proposed to make marriage of a girl under twelve and a boy
under fifteen, invalid.\(^{104}\) The primary object of the Bill was to put a stop
to Child Widows. The Bill was first sent to ascertain public opinion and
then referred to a Committee.\(^{105}\) In the mean time, Muthulakshmi Reddi,
the Deputy President of Madras Legislative Council, wrote to the
Government for sanction to introduce her Bill.\(^{106}\) But the Government
sent it back with the remark that her Bill might wait till the fate of Hari
Bilas Sarda’s bill was decided in the Assembly. But Muthulakshmi Reddi
was eager to achieve her object by some other means. She drafted a

\(^{101}\) Stri-Dharma June, 1924.
\(^{102}\) P.N. Premalatha, Nationalism and Women’s Movement in South India 1917-1947
\(^{104}\) Yasodami, “Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi- A Study” Tamil Nadu History Congress 15\(^{th}\) Annual
Session C.K.Sivaprakasam, ed., 19\(^{th}\) to 21\(^{st}\) September, 2008, Thanjavur.
\(^{105}\) G.O.N.O.3971, Law Department 12, Decemver, 1930.
\(^{106}\) G.O. N.O. 544, Law General Department 15, February, 1928.
Resolution signed by a number of Brahmin and Non Brahmin members in support of Sarda’s Bill moved in the Madras Legislative Council on March 1928, which was duly seconded by Kesava Pillai. The following Resolution was moved by Muthulakshmi Reddi.

“This Council recommends to the Legislative Council that they may be pleased to communicate to the Government of India that the opinion of this Council Legislation raising the marriageable age of boys and girls to at least 21 and 16 years respectively is necessary”. In the course of her speech, Muthulakshmi Reddi cited a number of instances of the miseries of Child Wives she had come across as Medical Practitioner. She also quoted observations of renowned Lady Doctors of that time like Dr. Kugler and Dr. Ida Scudder of Vellore and Dr. Macphail etc. She added that ‘the saddest consequence of all this was the presence of a large number of child widows”.

The motion was put to vote and it was declared carried. As soon as the Bill for the Prevention of Child Marriage was published in the Local Press, a few among the conservative section of the Hindu Public began to attack Muthulakshmi Reddi, both in open meetings and through the Press. She faced stiff opposition from the University Graduates also. They

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108 Stri-Dharma Vol.XI, April, 1928.
opposed the Bill by sending a petition to the Government.\textsuperscript{110} Hence she wanted to make the best use of Mahatma’s visit to Madras in 1928 and requested him to speak to the people during his South India Tour about the social evils which were disgraceful to the society. Mahatma did accede to Reddi’s request and freely and courageously expressed his views on social evils which were listened to with much respect by millions of people.\textsuperscript{111} Ultimately the Government also supported the Bill and the Legislative Assembly passed it on 20 September 1929 by an overwhelming majority. It got the approval of the Council of States on 1 October 1929, and it was made applicable to all communities, penalizing parties to marriage in which girls were below 14 and boys were below 18 years of age. The Act came into force on 1 April 1930\textsuperscript{112}. Orthodox Hindus and Muslims wanted to be excluded from its operation\textsuperscript{113}. This Act got a lot of support from different sections of the people. After the enactment of the Act, the Government gradually implemented its provisions because it would affect the religious sentiments and social life of the people. In Tamil Nadu, the Act was implemented by punishing people. For instance, Ramaswamy Ayyangar, a Vakil, was fined Rs 10 for having conducted the marriage of his daughter who was below fourteen years of age.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. pp.159-160.
\textsuperscript{113} New India 19, Septemper, 1929.
\textsuperscript{114} Dravidan 13, July, 1932.
When Mahatma Gandhi was arrested by the Government in 1930, many resigned their membership in the Legislative Council and Muthulakshmi Reddi was one among them. She resigned her membership as well as her Deputy Presidentship in the Madras Legislative Council. It was a tremendous sacrifice, the magnitude of which is hard to measure. Muthulakshmi Reddi developed an inordinate and passionate love towards Mahatma Gandhi and she instantly obeyed his dictates. Merely as a mark of protest and as a demonstration of India’s self respect, her resignation might be applauded and admired.115

The political life of no other woman was half as crowded and busy as that of Doctor Muthulakshmi Reddi. It was not without justification that she hesitated to accept a seat in the Council when she was nominated thereto. A Medical Practitioner of fourteen years standing, who had just returned from England after specializing in the disease of women and children, can not be deemed to have consulted her interests when she chose politics to the prejudice of her profession. And from a purely financial and professional point of view, it was a tremendous sacrifice that she made. Even Sunday was no Sabbath Day for her. On one occasion, Muthulakshmi Reddi attended the Council and addressed it to support her Resolution on the prevention of Child Marriage, although she

115 Stri-Dharma October, 1934, pp.534-535.
was suffering from a severe attack of “influenza”. That was not all. On the 31st January 1930, the day on which her most cherished amendments to the Suppression of Brothels Bill was to have been moved, a calamity overtook her. Suddenly a close relative of her father was seriously ill and became unconscious. Her presence was most necessary at the bedside. Not less imperative was her presence at the post of her duty. Never was struggle between filial duty and public duty keener than in this case. She had the most painful choice before her. And she chose the only course that a woman of her sincerity and public spirit could be expected to have chosen. She had to tear herself away from his bedside and with an indescribable pain and anguish of heart; she went to the Council that day. Yet she managed to reap the greatest consolation at the thought that she had done her duty by the womanhood and that her father’s spirit would bless her.

The following letter was addressed to Muthulakshmi Reddi on 13th May 1930 by the People of India:-

In resigning position of Deputy President of the Legislative Council so as to help India’s Struggle for freedom, you have conveyed a wireless noble message to every man and woman in the Legislatures in British India at the critical stage to do like wise. The people of India send their warmest congratulations for pointing the way to members of the

116 *Stri-Dharma* October, 1934.
existing Legislatures. And in a farewell address which the Legislatures and Citizens of Madras presented to Muthulakshmi Reddi on the occasion of her resignation, mention has been made as follows:-

“...You had to cut a pioneer’s path. Your task was not an easy one. You had no precedents to follow. You created instead an independent path, a precedent for other women legislators, as the champion of many causes, needs and rights of women and children of all communities.”\textsuperscript{117}

She achieved many things and passed momentous measures that many legislators could not have done during their life time. The establishment of Children’s Hospital for the introduction of Compulsory Medical Inspection for boys and girls, the exemption of poor girls from the payment of fee were some of the causes for which she fought tirelessly. She ceaselessly agitated and became successful. Her resolutions on Child Marriage and prevention of dedication of girls to Hindu temples were equally important. She moved a resolution and put interpellations and succeeded in having seats reserved for women in local bodies. Above all came her act for the suppression of brothels for which she could claim the fullest credit.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{117} Women’s Indian Association Report 1964.
\textsuperscript{118} Stri-Dharma October 1934, p.532.
After a few years later, Muthulakshmi Reddi became the first Alder-Woman in the Madras Corporation, and during her period of office, she moved many valuable resolutions such as the opening of Beggars Home, improvement of the Infectious Diseases Hospital, and extension of the City Limits to remove over-crowding. Then she resigned from the Corporation in 1939 because of ill-health.\textsuperscript{119} In 1937, the Nationalist Congress Party decided to contest election to the Legislative Councils and she was invited both by the Congress and Justice Party to contest election from their platform. However, she gave her political loyalty to Gandhi and chose to contest as a Congress Candidate only to find that the local Congress Leaders such as Rajagopalachari and Sathyamurti denied her a party ticket.\textsuperscript{120} Later in 1952, she accepted the Congress Party’s offer of a membership in the Madras Legislative Council on condition that the Congress Party would offer her a plot of land to build a Cancer Hospital in Madras.\textsuperscript{121}

Muthulakshmi Reddi did not always trust men as protagonists of women’s freedom. In fact, she expressed the hope that the British Government would continue as Political Rulers till such time when women were fully relieved of their Social Disabilities. In her budget speech in 1927, she said, “let me also impress upon the Government that

we want their help and guidance for some time. We, women, fear whether the unjust divorce and inheritance laws will not be cancelled or modified without their help.” Again after she had resigned from the Legislature in protest against the incarceration of Gandhi in 1930, she said in a Conference in 1933, that “it is the State and State alone that can effectively break down the traditional customs that are harmful to the individual and to society”.\textsuperscript{122} Despite this distrust of men as supporters of women’s freedom, Reddi thanked them in the book that she published after resigning from the Legislature. One of the objectives of writing the book, she said, was “to demonstrate to the outside world how much Indian men honor and respect their women colleagues, how deeply they sympathise with all their legitimate aspirations for equal rights, for equal political and social status and how much they value our help and cooperation in the administration of the State”.\textsuperscript{123}


\textsuperscript{123}Ibid