



# Role of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy in Contribution Against the Social Evils in Tamil Society

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**Abstract:** The modern history of Tamil Nadu is globally recognized as one of the most remarkable social transformation movements in the world. Unlike regions where social reform was driven primarily by religious revivalism, the struggle against social evils in Tamil Nadu evolved into a distinct political and socio-cultural movement centred on rationalism, self-respect, social justice, and the dismantling of the caste hierarchy.

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy stands as a towering figure in the history of Indian social reform, renowned for her relentless crusade against systemic injustices and gender-based discrimination in Tamil Nadu. Her primary contributions targeted deeply entrenched social evils, most notably the Devadasi system—a traditional practice that institutionalized the exploitation and prostitution of young girls under the guise of temple service. Through fierce legislative advocacy, she spearheaded the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, successfully criminalizing the practice despite intense conservative backlash.

**Key Words:** Devadasi System, Madras Devadasi Act, Social Reformer, Women's Rights, Child Marriage, Avvai Home, Adyar Cancer Institute, Madras Legislative Council, Gender Equality.

## 1. Introduction

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886–1968) was a pioneering physician, social reformer, and legislator who played a monumental role in eradicating deep-rooted social evils in Tamil society. As the first female medical graduate in India and the first female legislator in the country, she dedicated her life to championing women's rights, child welfare, and marginalized communities.

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy was a pioneering physician, fearless social reformer, and visionary legislator who played a monumental role in eradicating social evils and championing women's rights in Tamil Nadu and British India. Breaking numerous gender and caste barriers throughout her life—becoming the first female medical graduate from the Madras Presidency, the first woman legislator in British India, and the world's first female Deputy President of a Legislative Council—she dedicated her entire existence to fighting systemic oppression.

Operating at a time when patriarchal norms, rigid caste hierarchies, and orthodox traditions deeply subjugated women, Dr. Reddy utilized both legislative platforms and grassroots activism to dismantle deeply entrenched social vices. Her multifaceted contributions laid the bedrock for modern social welfare, gender equality, and public healthcare reform in South India.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

- The total eradication of the Devadasi system.
- Elimination of child marriage and child protection.
- Suppression of immoral traffic and women's exploitation.
- Universal female education and empowerment.
- Democratization of healthcare and cancer eradication.

### 3. Methodology

The narrative and analytical method has been used for the present study. It critically examines the works and contributions made by the social reformer and educationist for the upliftment of downtrodden people and dancing girls. Dr. Reddy's approach to social reform was multi-pronged, systemic, and deeply pragmatic, combining institutional power with grassroots mobilization.

### 4. Major Contributions against Social Evils

#### 1. Abolition of the Devadasi System

**The Struggle:** The Devadasi system involved dedicating young girls to Hindu temples, which often resulted in them being subjected to institutionalized exploitation and prostitution.

**Her Role:** Dr. Muthulakshmi spearheaded a relentless legislative and social campaign to outlaw this practice. Despite facing fierce opposition from conservative elements in society, she introduced a bill in the Madras Legislative Council in 1930.

**The Outcome:** Her tireless efforts culminated in the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act, commonly known as the Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Act, which legally abolished the system and gave these women the right to marry and live with dignity.

#### 2. Raising the Age of Marriage for Girls

**The Struggle:** Child marriage was widespread, leading to high maternal mortality rates, severe health complications, and the denial of education for young girls.

**Her Role:** She strongly advocated for raising the legal age of marriage to protect young girls from physical and social subjugation. She actively supported and campaigned for the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sarda Act) and lobbied for stricter regional enforcement to ensure girls could pursue education and health.

#### 3. Advocacy for Women's Education and Health

**The Struggle:** Women in early twentieth-century Tamil society were largely confined to domestic spheres, denied formal education, and lacked access to proper healthcare.

**Her Role:** Believing that education and economic independence were the ultimate antidotes to social exploitation, she pushed for widespread female literacy.

**Key Milestone:** She played a pivotal role in establishing the Avvai Home in Chennai in 1930, a sanctuary and educational institution for destitute girls, orphans, and victims of social evils.

#### 4. Healthcare Reforms and Cancer Treatment

**The Struggle:** Healthcare access for women was severely limited due to social taboos restricting them from being treated by male doctors. Furthermore, specialized cancer care was virtually non-existent.

**Her Role:** After losing her sister to cancer, she vowed to build a dedicated facility. Her vision materialized as the Adyar Cancer Institute (WIA) in 1954, which became one of the premier cancer treatment and research centres in Asia, providing compassionate care regardless of socioeconomic status.

### 5. Legacy and Honors

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy broke numerous glass ceilings to dismantle systemic oppression:

- First female medical graduate in India (1912).
- First female member of the Madras Legislative Council (1926) and its Deputy President.
- Awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 1956 for her exceptional social service.

### 6. Major Acts, Legislation, and Institutional Schemes Initiated by Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy utilized her role as a pioneering legislator (as the first woman member and Deputy President of the Madras Legislative Council) and an active social reformer to draft, sponsor, and champion several landmark legislative acts and public welfare schemes.

#### 1. Eradication of the Devadasi System

**Resolution and Legislative Push (1927–1928):** Dr. Reddy introduced a historic resolution in the Madras Legislative Council to completely ban the dedication of young girls to Hindu temples.

**The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act:** Her continuous advocacy, introduction of temple-land amendments (aimed at stripping the religious justification and economic power behind the custom), and drafting of bills laid the foundation. This eventually materialized into the historic Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication Act (the Emancipation of Devadasis Act, passed later in 1947), which outlawed the system and granted Devadasis the legal right to marry.

**Avvai Illam (Avvai Home) Scheme (1931):** To support the implementation of her reform agenda, she established this institutional scheme/home to shelter, protect, and provide formal education and vocational/nursing training to girls rescued from the system or coming from destitute backgrounds.

#### 2. Combating Child Marriage

**Support for the Sarda Act (1929):** She actively mobilized the Madras Legislative Council to endorse and pass resolutions

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supporting the central Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sarda Act, 1929).

**Advocacy for Minimum Legal Age:** She officially proposed and lobbied to raise the statutory minimum age of marriage to 16 for girls and 21 for boys within the presidency to prevent child widowhood and protect adolescent health.

### 3. Suppression of Immoral Traffic and Protection of Women

**The Immoral Traffic Act / Suppression of Brothels Act (1930):** She successfully piloted and passed a pioneering legislative act in Madras to criminalize brothels, human trafficking, and the commercial sexual exploitation of women and minors.

**State-Supported Rescue Homes Scheme:** Alongside the legislation, she pushed for the creation of government-backed protective custody and rehabilitation shelters (such as rescue homes) to safely house women fleeing trafficking or abusive environments.

### 4. Educational Reforms and School Schemes

**Free Primary Education Scheme for Girls:** As a legislator, she introduced and secured approval for a scheme providing free primary education up to Class VIII for girls in municipal and local body schools.

**Fee Concessions:** She successfully championed financial relief policies to reduce or exempt school fees for economically disadvantaged and low-income female students entering secondary education.

**Compulsory School Medical Inspections:** She introduced a mandatory policy enforcing systematic health and medical check-ups for students across all schools and colleges run by municipalities and local governance bodies.

### 5. Public Health and Modern Legacy Schemes

**Adyar Cancer Institute (1954):** Moved by the lack of specialized infrastructure and her personal loss, she spearheaded the anti-cancer movement that led to the establishment of the Cancer Institute in Adyar, Chennai, which stands today as one of India's premier oncology centres.

**Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Benefit Scheme:** Though conceptualized and expanded in its modern format by the Government of Tamil Nadu later on, this monumental state welfare scheme—which provides financial cash assistance and nutritional kits to pregnant and lactating mothers to lower maternal mortality—was officially named in her honour to commemorate her lifelong dedication to maternal and child healthcare.

## 7. Other Social Reformers and the Fight against Social Evils in Tamil Nadu

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy did not fight against social injustices in isolation; she was part of a powerful, broader socio-political awakening in Tamil Nadu (then part of the Madras Presidency). This movement was shaped by visionary leaders, rationalist thinkers, and social reformers who targeted caste oppression, untouchability, child marriage, and gender subjugation.

### 1. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (The Self-Respect Movement)

**Core Focus:** Total eradication of the caste system, abolition of religious orthodoxies, and the liberation of women.

**Perspective on Social Evils:** Periyar viewed the caste system and patriarchal traditions as the root causes of all social evils. He fiercely attacked the subjugation of women, arguing that religious scriptures and cultural practices were designed to keep women in perpetual servitude.

**Alignment with Dr. Reddy:** While Dr. Reddy worked largely within and through legislative channels to pass specific laws (like the Devadasi abolition), Periyar provided the radical ideological foundation that challenged the very religious and social structures upholding those evils. Both strongly advocated for women's right to property, education, and divorce.

### 2. Thanthai Periyar and the Anti-Devadasi Movement

While Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy led the legislative battle in the Madras Legislative Council to outlaw the Devadasi system, reformers associated with the Self-Respect Movement (including various women leaders like S. Meenakshisundarammal and Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar) provided massive grassroots support.

Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar, herself born into the Isai Vellalar community, was a fiery activist who worked alongside Dr. Reddy. She mobilized public opinion through conferences and writings, directly exposing the exploitation hidden behind the veil of temple rituals.

### 3. Ayothee Thass Pandithar

**Core Focus:** The spiritual and social emancipation of the "Untouchables" (Dalits/Scheduled Castes) and the challenge against Brahmanical hegemony.

**Perspective on Social Evils:** Ayothee Thass identified caste discrimination and untouchability as the most heinous social evils. He advocated for education and self-identity as the primary tools for liberation, urging marginalized communities to reject degrading labels and reclaim their human dignity.

**Impact:** His pioneering work laid the groundwork for the anti-caste movement in Tamil Nadu, creating an environment where systemic discrimination could be critically questioned and legally challenged.

### 4. Swami Vivekananda and the Theosophical Society Influence

**Core Focus:** Universal education, upliftment of the downtrodden, and raising the status of Indian women.

**Perspective on Social Evils:** Reformers influenced by the Theosophical Society (such as Annie Besant, who was a close mentor

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to Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy) focused heavily on eradicating child marriage, promoting widow remarriage, and expanding female literacy.

**Alignment with Dr. Reddy:** Annie Besant and the progressive intellectual circle in Adyar, Chennai, deeply shaped Dr. Reddy's early outlook, blending modern Western democratic ideals with Indian reformist zeal.

## 8. Comparative Overview of Reformist Approaches

| Reformer / Movement          | Primary Target                                               | Method of Action                                                                  | Key Contribution                                                |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy       | Devadasi system, child marriage, lack of women's health care | Legislative advocacy, law making, institutional building (Adyar Cancer Institute) | Madras Devadasi Act; pioneering women's rights in governance    |
| Periyar E. V. Ramasamy       | Caste hierarchy, patriarchy, religious superstition          | Radical propaganda, Self-Respect marriages, public agitations                     | Ideological dismantling of caste and gender norms               |
| Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar | Devadasi system, social stigma                               | Grassroots mobilization, writing, public speeches                                 | Ground-level agitation supporting the anti-Devadasi legislation |
| Ayothee Thass Pandithar      | Untouchability, caste oppression                             | Journalism, religious/historical reinterpretation                                 | Awakening Dalit consciousness and demanding civil rights        |

## 9. Public Support and Opposition to Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy's crusade against entrenched social evils—particularly the Devadasi system, child marriage, and human trafficking—was met with a complex public reaction. Because her reforms challenged centuries-old religious traditions, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal privileges, her work sparked both intense resistance from orthodox groups and overwhelming backing from progressive segments of society.

### 1. The Opposition: Traditionalists and Conservative Pushback

**Religious and Orthodox Backlash:** Conservative members of society, orthodox religious leaders, and several traditional lawmakers fiercely opposed her legislative efforts. They argued that the Devadasi system was an ancient, sacred part of temple culture and Hindu tradition, framing her reforms as an attack on religion.

**Legislative Resistance:** In the Madras Legislative Council, she faced sharp opposition from prominent leaders and conservative politicians who questioned or voted against her bills. Even some members of the affected community, misled by orthodox narratives or fearful of immediate economic uncertainty, initially organized protest meetings against the legislation.

**Institutional Apathy:** When she attempted to build public infrastructure like the cancer hospital or rescue homes, she frequently encountered skepticism, bureaucratic red tape, and public ignorance regarding modern healthcare and social welfare.

### 2. The Public Support: A Groundswell of Progressive Awakening

Despite strong conservative resistance, Dr. Reddy successfully mobilized a powerful wave of public support that ultimately carried her reforms through:

**Women's Organizations and Reform Networks:** Organizations such as the Women's Indian Association (WIA) (which she later led), the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), and various vigilance associations stood as her strongest organizational pillars. Women doctors, teachers, and social workers rallied behind her to campaign for gender equality and child welfare.

**The Self-Respect and Dravidian Movement:** Periyar E. V. Ramasamy and the Self-Respect Movement extended crucial ideological and grassroots backing to her anti-Devadasi crusade. Activists like Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar actively mobilized public opinion from the ground up, countering orthodox propaganda and exposing the exploitation hidden behind temple rituals.

**Public Opinion and Circulation of Bills:** When her proposed bills were sent out to elicit public opinion, they returned carrying massive endorsement from progressive citizens, civic bodies, and forward-thinking intellectuals across the Madras Presidency.

**Grassroots Rescue and Rehabilitation:** The depth of public trust in her mission was profoundly demonstrated when destitute women and girls sought direct refuge at her doorstep. This community need inspired her to establish Avvai Illam (Avvai Home) in 1931, which evolved into a celebrated sanctuary supported by public donations and philanthropic contributions for vulnerable women and children.

## 10. Conclusion

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy's legacy stands as a monumental pillar in the history of social reform in Tamil Nadu and India at large. By seamlessly bridging the worlds of medicine, legislation, and grassroots activism, she systematically dismantled

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oppressive structures like the Devadasi system, fought against child marriage, and championed the fundamental rights of women to education, health, and dignity.

Her unwavering courage in the face of intense societal resistance transformed the lives of countless marginalized women and children. Institutions such as the Avvai Home and the Adyar Cancer Institute continue to embody her lifelong mission of compassion, empowerment, and service. Ultimately, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy redefined the role of women in public life, leaving behind a progressive framework for social justice that continues to inspire generations.

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