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Muthulakshmi Reddy –  
A Legend unto Herself

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# Muthulakshmi Reddy – A Legend unto Herself

Dr. Muthulakshmi hailed from a socially handicapped environment in an era when girls were born only to be married. Born in 1886 in the small princely state of Pudukottai, she faced numerous challenges. It was not just destiny, but her indomitable spirit and courage that defied the odds.

She had to struggle against an environment that was not just unfavourable, but also hostile. She passed the matriculation examination (having been educated at home) as a private candidate and qualified for college admission, which was the news of the day in Pudukottai town. The Principal and Professors of the Maharaja College heard in stunned silence that Muthulakshmi had filed her application for admission to the intermediate class. No girl had been admitted to Maharaja college in all its history. There was a crescendo of protests from the Hindu orthodoxy. To quote from the Pudukottai gazette, 'It must be said to the credit of the vision and independence of the Martanda Bhairava Thondaman, then Raja of Pudukottai that he overruled all objections and permitted her admission.' Little did he realize that the girl he was helping get admission to the college was to later become the first woman medical graduate of Madras University, the first woman medical graduate in India in 1912, and in time, the first Indian woman member of a Legislative Council in 1927.

She was a pioneer in the fight for social and political upliftment of women in India, an inspirational force for generations of helpless women and children. Her achievements as a legislator and social reformer had an everlasting impact on the lives of women.

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\* Lecture delivered at the India International Centre by Dr. V. Shanta on 16 March 2012.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy worked against social discrimination, realizing that this was the underlying cause of social degeneration. It was her passionate conviction that no woman, rich or poor, should remain uneducated.

Shri R. Venkataraman, Vice President of India in 1985, inaugurating the bust of Dr. Reddy in the centenary year said that Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy can be said to have broken the time barrier for women of India. She telescoped into her lifespan a sequence of endeavour and achievements that would have ordinarily taken generations.

### **As a Legislator**

Her work in the Legislative Council between 1927 and 1930 was very fruitful. She was able to pilot into laws many acts of social reform dear to her heart. The legislation to abolish the iniquitous *devadasi* system that was widely prevalent in Tamil Nadu (also Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh) faced stiff resistance from the Congress lobby led by Satyamurthi Iyer. The Immoral Traffic Control Act, the Act to Prevent Cruelty to Children, raising the age of consent of girls for marriage and many other acts of social reform were enacted into laws during this period, entirely due to her efforts. As a legislator and activist for women's empowerment, she believed that 'laws and legislation are there only for sanction. It is up to us women to energize these and implement them into action'.

### **Welfare Activities**

Other welfare activities included the organization of the first Vigilance Association in Madras and the establishment of the first Rescue Home for Women (*Stri Sadana*). Dr. Reddy was the secretary of the Association for a long time. She was the life behind the Children Aid Society, a home for delinquent children.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy worked against social discrimination, realizing that this was the underlying cause of social degeneration. It was her passionate conviction that no woman, rich or poor, should remain uneducated. She was referred to as the great saint 'Avvai', who taught that men and women might go without food but never without education.

She escaped child marriage, and refused to give up her studies. When the time was right, she stipulated that hers would be a marriage in which the wife and husband are equal in every way. In this she was successful, but at every step, she fought her battles alone.

## **Important Assignments**

Dr. Reddy was nominated by the Nationalist Women's Organization of India to represent Indian women and give evidence at the Third Round Table Conference in London (1930) and the World Women's Congress in Chicago (1932). During the same period, she was nominated by the Viceroy to serve on the Sir Philip Hartog Education Commission which was formed to review educational projects in India and Burma. She resigned from the Legislative Council and the Deputy Presidentship when Mahatma Gandhi announced and began the Salt Satyagraha campaign in 1930.

In April 1966, *The Hindu* reported:

'In the history of women's movement in India, in the struggle for women's rights and in the campaign for the eradication of some of the social evils of which women had been victims, Dr. Reddy's name will find honourable mention.'

As a tribute to the services of Dr. Reddy to the welfare of women, the government of Tamil Nadu has instituted the 'Dr. Muthulakshmi Maternity Benefit Scheme' which provides financial benefit to pregnant women for improving their nutrition and health status. This scheme has been in force since the 10th Plan and continues to date.

## **Two Living Tributes**

The living tributes to her memory are the Avvai Home, Orphanage and Schools. Founded in 1930, this is the first home for destitute women and orphan children without any class barriers. The Cancer Institute (WIA), the first specialized centre for cancer treatment in south India, was founded in 1954, the second such after the Tata Memorial in Bombay sponsored by the giant financiers.

## **Birth of the Avvai Home, Orphanage and Schools**

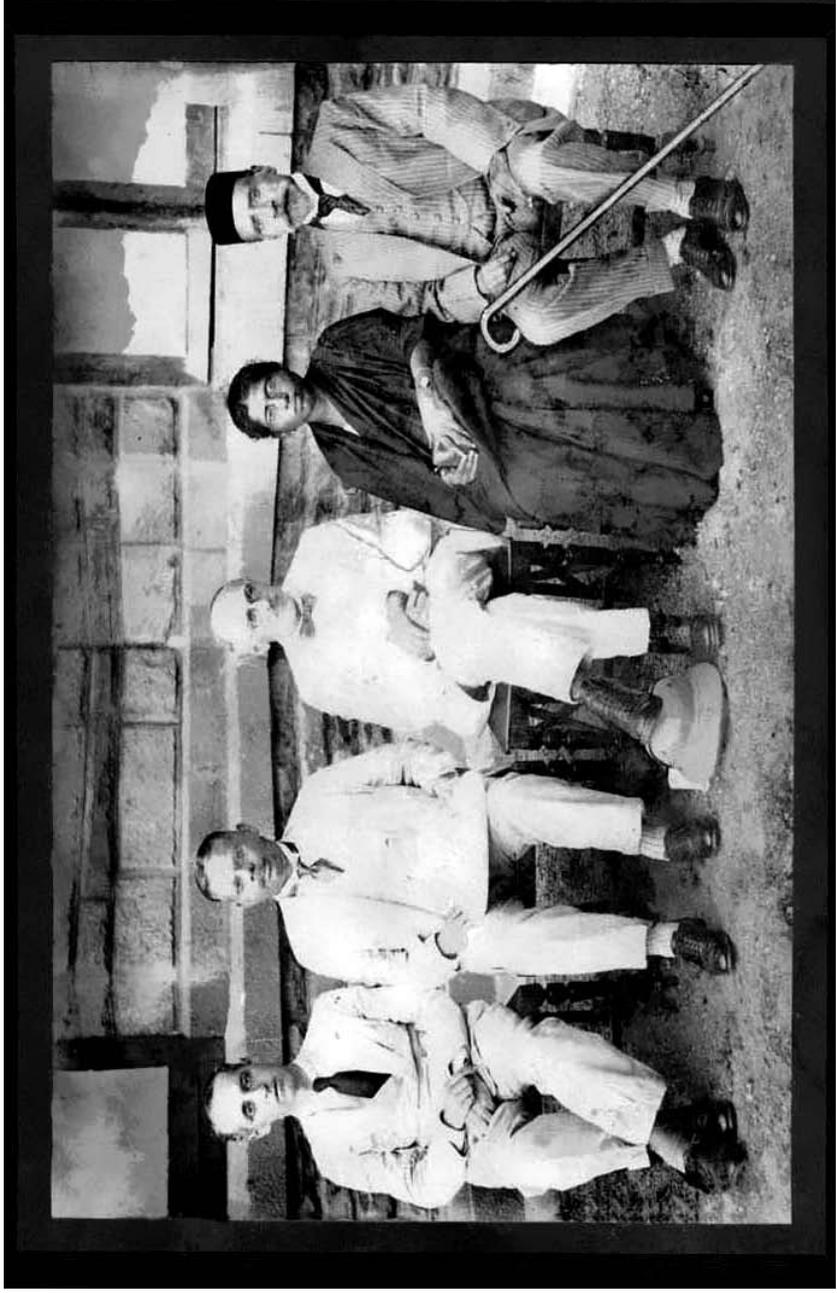
In 1930, the only shelter for Hindu girls were two hostels in what was then Madras—one for Brahmin and the other for non-Brahmin women, an unacceptable divide. Dr. Reddy's abolition of the *devadasi* system liberated women from the pernicious shackles of dedication at temples. One evening, somewhere in June of 1930, three young girls arrived at her house, seeking



*Muthulakshmi as a young girl with her family*



*Muthulakshmi, the medical student*



*Dr. Reddy with the Hartog Commission*



Muthulakshmi Reddy and staff of the Avvai Home



*The 2nd National Cancer Conference organized by the Cancer Institute (WIA), 1964*



*Dr. Reddy's bust unveiled by R. Venkataraman, Vice President of India on her centenary year at the Cancer Institute, Chennai, 1986*

protection. They had nowhere to go; their relatives would not take them in. Dr. Reddy referred them to the correspondent of the hostels, of which Dr. Reddy herself was the Medical Officer. They were subjected to the worst verbal abuse and returned the same night to Dr. Reddy, traumatized and weeping.

This was indeed an emergency and needed an immediate decision. The girls had sought asylum and protection to lead a normal life. Dr. Reddy not only accepted the challenge but demonstrated her total commitment to the cause of women. The Avvai Home was born in her own residence. One of the girls later became a teacher, another a doctor and the third a staff nurse. Avvai Home moved to a rented building in Mylapore and in 1936 shifted to Adyar where it continues to function today.

Although it was initially set up for the protection and education of the liberated girls of the *devadasi* community, the Avvai Home transformed into a refuge for all women and children who sought protection and education: young widows who refused immolation, deserted wives with their little children who had nowhere to go, orphaned destitute girls, deserted babies and unwed mothers. It was a home to provide protection, food and accommodation without social or caste barriers. It was virtually an 'open house'. Most of the women and girls who came had very little education and 'mother' (Dr. Reddy) educated them in local schools.

In tune with Mahatma Gandhi's programme of basic education, the Avvai Home later grew to be a large educational unit, catering to the most underprivileged. The basic education school at Avvai Home was established in 1950, marking the beginning of the Home's own educational complex. Innumerable women were trained as nurses or teachers till they were economically viable.

The facility gradually evolved over the years in keeping with the changing paradigm of national education into pre-primary and primary school. In 1952, a Teacher's Training Institute was established under the aegis of the National Council of Teacher's Educational Research and Training (NCTERT) which awarded a diploma in teaching.

In 1964, through a munificent donation from Mrs. Nallamuthu Ramamurthy (Dr. Reddy's sister and the first Indian Principal of Queen Mary's College), the TVR High School was established which was later upgraded to a Higher Secondary School in 1978.

Over the years, there has been a continuous and progressive enhancement in all its activities. In 2004-05, computer science was introduced in classes XI and XII, followed by the introduction of activity-based learning in primary school.

In 2006-07, the English medium section was started. This seemed necessary to provide better and more remunerative job options after completing the course. A full-fledged computer lab was established in 2008-09. A student's performance is carefully attended to and quality standards ensured.

The Avvai Home was chosen as a model school for ABL, the method of teaching in the Adyar region in 2008-09. In 2010, the primary school received a 'best school' award and the Principal the 'best teacher' award from the education department of the Government of Tamil Nadu. The school has done well in sports and secured the 1st prize at the zonal level in Kabadi. This has resulted in government sponsorship for higher education. The brightest among the girls are sponsored for higher studies.

### **Avvai Home Today**

The Avvai Home and schools house 165 girls who receive boarding, lodging and education free of cost. On completing their education, every effort is made to find employment for them. Some of them get absorbed into one of the schools.

In addition, there is a large educational complex catering to the underprivileged. The Primary School has 390 students; the Secondary School has 1,100 students; a basic educational school; Teachers Training Institution; and the TVR Higher Secondary School. Quite a few of the students who pass out are employed in software companies in major corporates, some of them continue as teachers in their parent school.

### **Cancer Institute (WIA)**

The story of Dr. Reddy will be incomplete without tracing the history of her courage in establishing the Cancer Institute (WIA).

It was as a young medical graduate that Dr. Reddy was witness to the agony, pain and ultimately the death of her sister as a result of a misdiagnosed case of rectal cancer. India was then under British rule, and there were no facilities for treatment

**The Avvai Home and schools house 165 girls who receive boarding, lodging and education free of cost. On completing their education, every effort is made to find employment for them.**

The Cancer Institute (WIA) today is a comprehensive centre for cancer, comprising a 450-bed hospital, a Research Division, the Dr. Muthulakshmi College of Oncologic Sciences (the first one in the country), and a division of Preventive Oncology.

of cancer at that time. The cancer institute is the consummation of her dream born in the corridors of the Royal Marsden Hospital, London: to establish a cancer hospital where care would be provided irrespective of social or economic class. Here too she had to face the challenges of total public ignorance about cancer and governmental apathy. When she approached the Government of Tamil Nadu for land, the then Minister queried: 'Why a Cancer Hospital? People only die of cancer'. The administration in 1949 of the newly independent India exhibited a degree of ignorance and arrogant indifference that was amazing; all that the WIA received was a communication from the Health Secretary informing them that the government could not afford the new institute at the moment, and wished the WIA good luck, with grave doubts about the venture.

Dr. Reddy was born into a humble family; no challenge was too hard to overcome. The answer is the Cancer Institute (WIA), Chennai, alive and vibrant, founded in 1954, the second specialized cancer centre in India after the Tata Memorial Hospital in Bombay.

The Cancer Institute (WIA) today is a comprehensive centre for cancer, comprising a 450-bed hospital, a Research Division, the Dr. Muthulakshmi College of Oncologic Sciences (the first one in the country), and a division of Preventive Oncology. It is a centre of national and international stature with many firsts to its credit:

- The first Comprehensive Cancer Centre in the southern peninsula, 1955.
- The first centre in Asia to install a Cobalt 60 unit, introducing the Super Voltage era in Asia, 1957.
- The first centre to establish a separate pediatric oncology unit, 1960. The ethos in pediatric care today is, 'They shall always have a tomorrow'.
- The only centre in India to build a teletherapy unit and installed (Tele Caesium), 1962.
- The first institution to introduce the concept of multimodal therapy in oral and breast cancers, raising the cure rate in locally advanced cancer from 19 to 55 per cent, 1964.

- The first centre in India to introduce Medical Oncology as a speciality, 1972.
- The first centre in India to be selected as a 'Regional Cancer Centre' for cancer treatment and research by the Government of India, 1975.
- The first Linear Accelerator in India, a gift from DANIDA, installed, 1976.
- The only centre in India to introduce Hyperbaric O<sub>2</sub> and Hyperthermia as radiation sensitizers in clinical care, 1978.
- The first and only centre to introduce Medical Physics as an independent speciality, 1981.
- The Madras Metropolitan Tumour Registry (MMTR), one of the three Demographic Registries (ICMR), 1982.
- The first centre to introduce the concept of Oncology and establishing the Superspeciality College of Oncologic Sciences recognized by the Madras University and Dr. MGR Medical University, 1984.
- The first Comprehensive Hereditary Cancer Detection Prevention Programme in the country, 2002.
- The Molecular Oncology Division designated a 'Centre of Excellence' by the Department of Science and Technology of the Government of India, 2007.

The story of the Institute is an inspiring one and cannot be narrated within these pages. However, a book was released during the Golden Jubilee of the Institute in 2004 that describes in detail the challenges of a voluntary charitable institute in an environment insensitive to institution-building.

## **Conclusion**

Dr. Reddy's contribution to the upliftment of women and children, especially the underprivileged, was duly recognized in 1947 with the raising of the first national flag at Red Fort which carried her name.

When Dr. Reddy passed away in 1968, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, later Prime Minister of India, said on radio 'that were it not for women like Dr. Reddy and Dr. Sarojini Naidu, we would not be occupying the high positions that we do today'. The finest tribute to her came from the University Women's Association of Trivandrum:

'At the meeting of the University Women's Association of Trivandrum, we express our deep sense of sorrow at the passing away of Padma Bhushan

Dr. (Mrs.) Muthulakshmi Reddy, the pioneer in the fight for social and political uplift of women of India. We wish to place on record our appreciation of this great leader of ours, who won the voting right for the Women of India. She was the President of the Women's Indian Association for over 30 years. We thank God for the full life she lived and for the dedication and sincerity with which she served her fellowmen and her country. May her soul rest in peace.'

Dr. Reddy passed away on 22 July 1968; the world bowed in homage at the passing of this great noble woman who, born to a tradition of ignorance, prejudice and degradation, rose like a sun out of the sea of squalor to light up the souls and bodies of generations of helpless women.

*Om Shanti Shanti Shanti*

Dr. V. Shanta is Chairperson and Executive Chairperson, Adyar Cancer Institute (WIA), Chennai, and is a Padma Bhushan and Magsaysay awardee.





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