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Muthulakshmi Reddy: India’s First Woman Legislator

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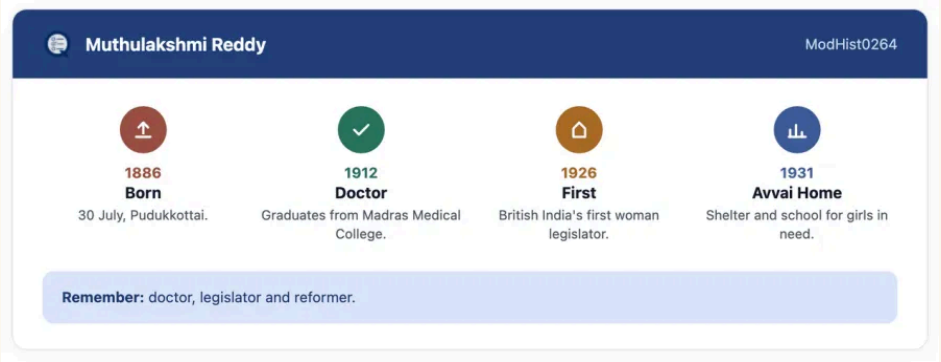
Muthulakshmi Reddy: India’s First Woman Legislator

A schoolgirl was told her presence might “demoralise” the boys. A screen was put up in the classroom to hide her. She went on to become a doctor, a lawmaker and the founder of a home for girls.

Muthulakshmi Reddy broke barrier after barrier in Madras. She is remembered as British India’s first woman legislator. This lesson follows her path from Pudukkottai to the Madras Council.



Muthulakshmi Reddy as a medical student, around 1912. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four turning points in the life of Muthulakshmi Reddy.

Born. 30 July 1886, Pudukkottai.
1912. Graduated, Madras Medical College.
1926. Joined the Madras Legislative Council.
1930. Devadasi bill; resigned in protest.
1931. Founded Avvai Home.
Died. 22 July 1968.

Devadasi system: a custom that dedicated girls to temples. Reformers said it left them open to exploitation.

House surgeon: a junior doctor who works in a hospital after qualifying.

Madras Legislative Council: the lawmaking body of Madras Presidency under British rule.

1 Who was Muthulakshmi Reddy?

Muthulakshmi Reddy was born on 30 July 1886 in Pudukkottai. Her father, S. Narayanaswami Iyer, was the principal of Maharaja's College. Her mother, Chandrammal, belonged to the Devadasi community.

Her parents' marriage was unusual for its time. Her father faced anger from his own family for it. He still sent his daughter to school.

She loved learning. When she reached puberty she had to leave school, but home tutoring continued. She spoke up against the idea that only boys needed an education.

Her family's background shaped her later work. She felt the pain of the community her mother came from. That gave her cause a personal edge.

Why does this matter? Her life's work grew from her own family story. It was not a distant cause for her.

- Born **30 July 1886** in **Pudukkottai**.
- Father: principal of **Maharaja's College**.
- Mother belonged to the **Devadasi** community.

> **Quick check 1.** Muthulakshmi Reddy joined the Madras Legislative Council in 1926 and became British India's first woman legislator. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did she become a doctor?

After matriculation she applied to Maharaja's College. The principal and other parents did not welcome her. The Maharaja of Pudukkottai overruled them and gave her a scholarship.

She was admitted on strict terms. A screen separated her from the boys in class. The bell rang only after she had left the room.

In 1907 she joined Madras Medical College. Women had been admitted there since 1875, so she was not the first. She graduated in 1912 with several gold medals.

She then worked as a house surgeon at the Government Hospital for Women and Children in Madras. She was among the earliest women doctors of India. She was not the first Indian woman ever to earn a medical degree, since Anandibai Joshi had done so earlier.

In 1914 she married Dr Sundara Reddy. She asked that he treat her as an equal. She took his surname.

Why does this matter? Each barrier she crossed opened the way for women after her. Exams ask the dates and the “firsts”.

- Joined **Madras Medical College** in **1907**; graduated **1912**.
- Became a **house surgeon** in Madras.
- Married **Dr Sundara Reddy** in **1914**.
- Read about Anandibai Joshi.

3 What did she do in the Council?

She joined the Women's Indian Association in 1917. Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and others had founded it in Adyar. It pressed for women's education and a public voice.

In 1926 she was nominated to the Madras Legislative Council. She became British India's first woman legislator. The Council also chose her as its Deputy President. Some sources give 1927 for her entry, so the year varies.

In the Council she spoke for women and children. She argued for better medical care and for school health checks. She also urged action against child marriage.

In 1930 she introduced a bill to end the dedication of girls as Devadasis. It did not become law then. The same year she resigned from the Council in protest at Mahatma Gandhi's arrest during the Salt Satyagraha.

Why does this matter? A bill and an Act are different. Her 1930 bill came first, and the law came years later.

- Joined the **Women's Indian Association** in **1917**.
- Nominated to the **Madras Legislative Council** in **1926**; **Deputy President**.
- **1930**: Devadasi bill; resigned after **Gandhi's arrest**.
- Read about Civil Disobedience and the Salt March.

4 What did she build?

Girls from the Devadasi community came to her for shelter in 1930. Out of that need grew Avvai Home. It is dated to 1931. It gave shelter and schooling to girls and women in need.

She believed a law could end a custom, but a home could change a life. So she worked on both. Avvai Home is still part of her public legacy.

Later she worked for a cancer hospital in Madras. The Cancer Institute at Adyar began functioning in 1954. A group of women workers built it under her lead.

She also wrote a book, My Experience as a Legislator. It records her years in the Council. It shows how much she pushed for women and children there.

Why does this matter? Reform needs both law and care. She built places where girls could study and where patients could be treated.

- **Avvai Home**, **1931**: shelter and school.
- **Cancer Institute**, Adyar, **1954**.
- Wrote **My Experience as a Legislator**.
- Read about Sarojini Naidu and women in the freedom struggle.

> **Quick check 2.** Her 1930 Devadasi bill became law that same year. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 How is she remembered?

The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act is dated 1947. The government of O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiyar passed it. Records give 17 January 1948 for the Governor-General's assent.

That was seventeen years after her 1930 bill. Many people worked on it in between. She started the campaign in the Council, but no single person won it alone.

The law stopped new dedications. It did not remove poverty or caste bias overnight. It also raised hard questions about the lives and art of women from these communities.

She received the Padma Bhushan in 1956. She died on 22 July 1968, aged eighty-one. Avvai Home and the Cancer Institute are the lasting proof of her work.

Why does this matter? Her name belongs in every list of Indian women reformers. Exams love the “first woman” tag and the 1930 bill.

- Devadasi Act: **1947**, assent **17 January 1948**.
- **Padma Bhushan**, **1956**.
- Died **22 July 1968**.
- Read about O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiyar and Har Bilas Sarda.

6 What are the exam traps?

- She was **British India’s** first woman legislator, not independent India’s.
- Entered the Council in **1926**; introduced her bill in **1930**.
- The Devadasi **bill (1930)** and the **Act (1947)** are different things.
- **Avvai Home** is **1931**; the **Cancer Institute** is **1954**.

Remember: medical degree 1912, Council 1926, bill and resignation 1930, Avvai Home 1931, Cancer Institute 1954, Padma Bhushan 1956.

Think it through: Why did she resign her seat in 1930 when she could have kept pushing the bill?

She chose to stand with Gandhi's arrested followers. For her, a protest against the arrest mattered more than the seat. Other campaigners then carried the Devadasi cause forward.

Quick check 3. She resigned from the Council in 1930 in protest at Mahatma Gandhi's arrest. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first woman legislator in British India in which year, when appointed to the Madras Legislative Council?

A. 1935

B. 1919

C. 1926

D. 1947

See answer ↓

2. In 1931, Muthulakshmi Reddy founded which institution to shelter and educate girls rescued from the Devadasi system?

A. Madras Medical College

B. Adyar Cancer Institute

C. Avvai Home

D. Women's India Association

See answer ↓

3. In 1930, Muthulakshmi Reddy resigned from the Madras Legislative Council. What prompted her resignation?

A. A dispute over her Deputy President appointment

B. The rejection of her Devadasi abolition bill

C. Her appointment to found the Adyar Cancer Institute

D. A protest against Mahatma Gandhi's arrest during the Salt March

See answer ↓

4. Muthulakshmi Reddy introduced her Devadasi abolition bill in 1930. The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act was finally passed how many years later, and under whose government?

A. 10 years later, under K. Kamaraj

B. 5 years later, under C. Rajagopalachari

C. 25 years later, under Jawaharlal Nehru

D. 17 years later, under O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiyar

See answer ↓

5. On what date did Muthulakshmi Reddy die, in Madras, at age 81?

A. 9 October 1968

B. 30 July 1968

C. 22 July 1968

D. 15 August 1968

See answer ↓

6. In which year did Muthulakshmi Reddy graduate in medicine from Madras Medical College?

A. 1912

B. 1931

C. 1926

D. 1907

See answer ↓

7. In which year did Muthulakshmi Reddy receive the Padma Bhushan?

A. 1954

B. 1956

C. 1947

D. 1968

See answer ↓

8. In which year did Muthulakshmi Reddy join the Women's Indian Association, founded in Adyar by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and others?

A. 1931

B. 1926

C. 1905

D. 1917

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** She was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1926, and was elected its Deputy President the same year.

   ↑ Q1

2. **C.** Avvai Home began after three Devadasi girls, turned away by schools and hostels on caste grounds, came to her seeking refuge in 1930.

   ↑ Q2

3. **D.** She resigned in protest at Gandhi's arrest during the Salt March. Her Devadasi bill wasn't rejected outright -- it simply lay dormant in the Council once she left.

   ↑ Q3

4. **D.** The Act finally passed on 9 October 1947, 17 years after her original bill, under O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiyar's Madras government. Kamaraj, Rajagopalachari, and Nehru were all real contemporary or later Indian leaders, but none passed this particular Act.

   ↑ Q4

5. **C.** Muthulakshmi Reddy died on 22 July 1968, in Madras, at age 81. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** She joined Madras Medical College in 1907 and graduated in 1912. She then became a house surgeon. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** She received the Padma Bhushan in 1956. She died in 1968. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** The Women's Indian Association was founded in 1917. Reddy joined it that year and later served it as a leader. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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