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#Thread

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy - An Inspirational Women

Muthulakshmi Reddy was born in 1886 in the princely state of Pudukottai in Tamilnadu. Her father was Narayanswami Iyer. Her mother was a Devadasi who, In case you don't know, were women...





who were ostensibly “dedicated” to temple deities tasked with passing on the baton of the art of dance to the next generation. The grim reality was different. They were often subjected to exploitation and were considered prostitutes by the

British government...

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It was actually worse than prostitution- no one chose to be a devadasi. The prepubescent girl was initiated into the system by a religious ceremony which ensured her permanent status as a concubine. She would have a male patron, but no rights to his surname or inheritance.

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Devadasis needn't marry and were called, "Nityasumangali" - meaning immune to widowhood. It was a crass euphemism - after all, you can't become a widow if you aren't married. Luckily for Muthulakshmi, her father was an academician and a school principal.

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A sole oasis in an otherwise barren desert. He gave her the power of education. The class in which she studied had 40 boys and 3 girls separated by a screen. Even then the parents of the boys objected, fearing their "innocent" sons would be ensnared by a prepubescent femme fatale.

This may sound absurd, but this was a common trope in those days. One of the teachers resigned in protest. But her father stood with her and provided her a plank. After attaining puberty, she was home schooled, as was the tradition in those days.

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She wanted to change not just her destiny, but also those of others. She asked the Maharaja of Pudukottai for funds to study medicine. The stunned Maharaja gave her a princely sum of Rs.150 which was the much needed escape velocity that changed her trajectory.

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She became the first woman to enter Madras Medical College. She was studious and bagged several medals. When she wanted to take obstetrics and become a surgeon, the professors were shocked. Surgery with its blood and gore, was considered a man thing then.

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Nevertheless, with characteristic persistence, she became an obstetrician. She started catering to the elite professionals first. However, a turning point happened soon. Her sister developed rectal cancer and eventually died.

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Back then, cancer wasn't known to the public as the emperor of maladies. Those who were unlucky enough to get it were considered doomed. No one wanted to spend on a lost cause. So Dr Muthulakshmi took it upon herself to go to the UK & get trained in Royal Marsden hospital..

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to manage cancer patients. She had a rare combination of strong roots & powerful wings. She came back to Madras, but faced painful apathy about cancer. She turned to Women's India Association - which helped fund, the first cancer hospital in Madras - the Adyar Cancer Institute. ■

One day, three girls from Namakkal ran away from the Devadasi system and asked her, "Now what will happen of us? Where will we stay?" She realized the dire problem and set about the long journey that would culminate in their emancipation.

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She sheltered them, but not just them. She started the Avvai home. She met Sarojini Naidu and became a nationalist. Realizing the importance of political power, she went on to become the first woman to join the legislative council in British India.

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She was also the first woman in the world, to become the deputy President of a legislative council. She met and married Sundara Reddy, with the condition that they will be equals.

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Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, faced two simultaneous battles: (i) finding land and funding for the cancer hospital, and (ii) liberation of the devadasis. For the latter, she had to fight against the likes of Dr Rajagopalachari.

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In a meeting when a speaker expressed solidarity with her "fallen sisters", she famously thundered, "How dare you call them fallen sisters ? Female chastity is impossible without male chastity. The men who exploited them were older and should be held responsible.

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She knew they weren't "fallen" but "pushed". To Rajagopalachari and S Satyamurthi, she roared, "If you need someone to preserve the arts and culture, why don't you leave the devadasis and send the women in your home?".

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The stiff resistance would have wilted a lesser woman, but she was forged in fire. Her efforts bore fruit in both the issues. The cancer hospital, grew slowly but steadily. She asked everyone who would listen for funds, including King George V.

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Today it's a world class institute, giving life to many. Her statue stands there, like a guardian angel of the cancer patients. On December 5, 1947, at long last, the Madras Presidency passed the bill preventing the dedication of young girls as devadasis.



The laurels followed. She was awarded Padma Bhushan by the Indian government. The Tamil Nadu government has named the pregnancy benefits scheme after her. There is a road in Chennai named after her.



Her story is the triumph of grit over fate. It's a reminder that we can script our own destiny, regardless of where we start. Neither social ostracism, nor the strictures of colonial India could conquer her will.



She turned life's proverbial lemons into a lemonade spring, that continues to give even today.

She's the hero, that our daughters need to know about.

Credits : Purnima Ranganath ■