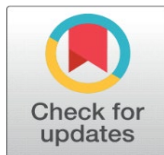
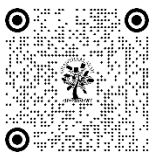


THE 'DAUGHTER OF THE NILGIRI MOUNTAINS': A STUDY ON THE SOCIAL SAGA OF DARING WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Akkamma Devi was born on 5 September 1918 in a small village tucked away in the hills of Nilgiris. She was educated at different schools in Coonoor, Tamil Nadu and she went on to do her BA in Economics at St Theresa's College, Ernakulum. Here she took an active part in the Quit India movement of 1942 with her close friends and classmates and she was arrested and detained. Her humble beginnings notwithstanding, she won the 1962 General Election with a thumping majority and became the first lady Member of Parliament from the Badaga community and the Nilgiri Constituency. She was the first woman to graduate from the Badaga community of the Nilgiris. She was a prominent social worker from the Nilgiris who provided outstanding services to rural womenfolk of the Nilgiris. She was a champion of women's cause. She was sure women could achieve laurels in any field and compete with men if given the correct guidance and education. She was able to mobilise the women in remote areas. Surely, she was worthy to be called the 'Daughter of the Nilgiri Mountains'.

Keywords: Nilgiris, Quit India Movement, AIWC, Badaga Community, Coonoor

1. INTRODUCTION

The name 'Nilgiri' means blue hills. The first mention of this name has been found in the Tamil epic 'Silapathikaram'. The district of Nilgiris marks the western border of Tamil Nadu. This area was long occupied by the indigenous tribal peoples of Todda, Kotta, Kurumba, Irula and Badagas. The Badagas were also indigenous people to the Nilgiri district but never a tribal group (Grigg 23). It had significant role in the Indian freedom struggle like the South Indian Revolt of 1800 -1801. After 1930, during the Civil Disobedience movement when Gandhi became more active in achieving his goals, many people from the district of Nilgiris took part in the 'individual Satyagraha' and 'Salt Satyagraha', toddy shop picketing and foreign cloth boycott. In 1942, when 'Quit India' movement was gaining momentum, many nationalists had participated from the district and were arrested. In the opinion of Rajjayan, there were more than 153 freedom fighters from the district who were very active participants in the various freedom movements against the British from the nineteenth century onwards. Akkamma Devi was one of the pioneers representing the district in the freedom movement (108).

Akkamma Devi was born in 5 September 1918 in a small village named Aravankadu near Coonoor town in the district of Nilgiris, Tamilnadu. Akkamma Devi's primary education was at St. Joseph's Convent school, Coonoor and after that, she passed with high grades in both her Junior Cambridge and Anglo -Indian High school examinations. She then joined for BA in Economics at St. Theresa's College Kochi, Kerala. During this period she actively participated in the Quit India movement of 1942 and was arrested and detained. After her academic studies, she served as the president of the AIWC, Coonoor branch for about 40 years. As a social worker, she was able to mobilise the women and children who were residing in the remote villages of Nilgiris and she was very popular because of her ardent social works. She entered into politics and became the Member of Parliament representing the Nilgiri constituency. She was an active leader of the Indian National Congress. She was sent to many international conferences and seminars on behalf of the government and the All India Women's Conference. 'Service to humanity is service to God' has always been her motto. She was the first woman to graduate from the Badaga community of Nilgiris. She was given the 'Life Time Achievement' award hosted by the AIWC. Surely, she was worthy to be called the 'Daughter of the Mountains of Nilgiris'

Raman opinioned that when Akkamma Devi was a student of St. Theresa's College in Kerala, along with her classmates and friends and she actively participated in the Quit India movement and her best comrade in this endeavour was Leela Menon, a very famous social activist with exemplary oratory skills and leadership qualities. Akkamma Devi also participated in the co-curricular and extracurricular activities of the College (68).

The Nilgiri branch of the All India Women's Conference was started by Akkamma Devi in 1956. She served as the president and as the Standing Committee member of AIWC for nearly 40 years. As its president, she constructed some buildings for the welfare of the women and children in the deserving areas. She was able to mobilize the women in remote rural areas and her centers became very popular. She was the Chairperson of the State Project Implementing Committee for the welfare of Women and Children. She came from a good family having mutual understanding and her parents were very encouraging. Her husband seemed to be very understanding and cooperative. Even in those days she was very popular among her community in particular and the people of Nilgiris in general. She achieved these attributes through her good deeds and service minded nature.

Later she entered into politics. Akkamma Devi's commitment to social welfare made her very popular. Hundreds of women and men suggested and recommended her name for the Parliament seat from the Lok Sabha constituency of Nilgiri. Thus she contested as the candidate from the Congress party and she won the election with a good majority. She made a good impression in the parliament. She was able to present the problems of her constituency and procured many facilities for the people and thus built up her constituency very well. The then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and former Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi appreciated the social and political services of Akkamma Devi. She was sent to many international conferences and visited foreign countries like Japan, Australia, and Greece. She actively participated in seminars and sessions dealing with women's issues. In 1978 Akkamma was made a member of the Coffee Board with its headquarters at Bangalore. In 1980 she was elected as the President of the PTA of the Rao Bahadur Bellie Gowdar Government High School, Hubbathalai, which was started by her father-in-law. She started co-operatives, and tea factories and helped the small tea growers to a large extent. As the president of the AIWC, she started an orphanage for the Tribal children of Gudallur town in the district of Nilgiris. She had very good relations with district Collectors and other higher officials in Tamilnadu. She was a high-quality orator. She was able to convey the right message to illiterate rural women and she was able to change their lifestyle and some of their ill- customs.

She organized a very successful half-yearly meeting of the AIWC at Ooty accommodating nearly 200 delegates from all over India. Similarly, she organized a very successful conference of the welfare officers of the Social Welfare Board at Ooty. Her duties were not specific but as a social worker, she used her common sense and patience to make every project a success. Welfare centres were set-up in the villages in the ratio of one centre for five villages. These villages were all situated at a walkable distance from the centers and accessing them was not a problem for the villagers. She started the setting -up Crèches at the centers where 'Gramasevikas' would look after little children including babies, so that mothers could go out for work. The older ones in the family went to the village 'balwadi' where they started learning the necessary schooling. The children would learn and grow up to find suitable jobs. There was a general feeling of contentment and hope prevailing in the villages once these days - care centers was started. The smaller villages nearby were also allowed to use the centre as well. To raise awareness about these centers, the 'Gramasevikas' would visit the villages in their jurisdiction and explain in simple terms about the benefits of these welfare centers especially on health and hygiene. 'There will be progress if you have the will power' was their favorite saying. In the course of the implementation of the

projects they survived to a great extent. It was perseverance which kept them going. They made a success of it and set a healthy example.

In the year 1957, Akkamma Devi was made a member of the State Social Welfare Advisory Board. In the same year she was also made a member of the State Advisory Board for Small Savings. It was her sense of responsibility and dedication that made her a constant choice for various government bodies and councils. The State Social Welfare Board gave grants to the various branches and the Nilgiris region particularly well with Akkamma Devi's untiring efforts and dynamism. She arranged proper buildings and thereby, more facilities were provided at the centres. Regular meetings were held and the people were asked to give suggestions with regard to improving the facilities.

New schemes were included such as a Special Class for girl students who had failed in the High School examinations. Handicrafts like making Jerseys and woollen articles were an important source of income for housewives. Those who looked incapable of doing anything besides housekeeping were now boldly catching up with new methods of learning, mastering crafts and channelling their energy into useful fields.

The small savings deposit scheme started by Akkamma Devi as part of her cooperative initiative was a blessing for the rural poor women. Previously they kept their money in the bottom of the barrels or vessels in the kitchen. That was the routine of the housewives in the rural areas fearing their husbands and in-laws.

2. CONCLUSION

According to Raman, 'Service to Humanity is the Service of God' has always been her motto. Her untiring work despite her age has surprised many who are much younger. She was the first woman to graduate from the backward community of the Nilgiris. Becoming a woman graduate in those days from a mountainous locality is appreciable and significant. She was given the Life Time Achievement Award for her outstanding service to humanity especially in the marginalized and downtrodden section of the society hosted by AIWC as part of its Platinum Jubilee Celebrations (153). She died on 23 November 2013. Surely she was worthy to be called the 'Daughter of the Nilgiri Mountains'.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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