

Engendering Democracy: Dakshayani Velayudhan and the Politics of Representation

ANIMOL JACOB, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, SRLC ACHUTHA MENON
GOVT.COLLEGE, THRISSUR, KERALA

Abstract

Women, even in today's world remain subject to gender bias and inequality as against men. Consider then the plight of Dalit women who belonged to a community exploited by the caste Hindus. Under such circumstances, those women deserve kudos, who came forward in this men's world, stood up for a cause and struggled to improve the lot of their community. When we discuss about those women behind the Constitution-Smt.Dakshayani Velayudhan, one of the youngest and the only Dalit woman who helped to shape the Constitution of India, deserve special mention. This paper discusses a detailed life sketch of Dakshayani Velayudhan, highlighting her contributions ,challenges ,and significance as a female figure in the power structures of her time.

(Keywords: Gender representation, Constituent Assembly, Article 17, Dalit, Harijan)

Women, even in today's world remain subject to gender bias and inequality as against men. This gender bias was prevalent in a great extent in the past. Women in general were subjected to several prejudices by men and were a plaything to men folk. Consider then the plight of Dalit women who belonged to a community exploited by the caste Hindus. Women of such a community, without doubt were open to excesses of higher castes. They were exploited sexually and otherwise without any protest. Under such circumstances, those women deserve kudos, who came forward in this men's world, stood up for a cause and struggled to improve the lot of their community, rubbing shoulders with men as equals. They fought against odds and worked to improve the condition of their community. There were many more who fought their battle against society of upper castes. ¹

Popular narratives of history have led us to believe that it was men alone who were architects of the Indian Constitution. Among the 299 members of the Constituent Assembly, 15 were women. Very little is known about them. They came from different walks of life—lawyers, freedom fighters, politicians, and

suffragettes.² Led by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar they discussed, debated and put forth their opinions while defining the principles that would guide the then recently Independent India. When we discuss about those women behind the Constitution-Smt.Dakshayani Velayudhan, one of the youngest and the only Dalit woman who helped to shape the Constitution of India, deserve special mention.

This paper discusses a detailed life sketch of Dakshayani Velayudhan, highlighting her contributions, challenges, and significance as a female figure in the power structures of her time. It aims to identify the barriers women face in achieving positions of power and the opportunities that have facilitated women's empowerment and representation.

Born in 1912, in Mulavukad, a small island off the coast of Kochi, Dakshayani has several 'firsts' to her credit –she was the first Dalit girl to wear upper garments, the first dalit woman to get a degree, the first and only dalit woman in India's constituent assembly etc.³ Dakshayani's life and politics was influenced and defined by the rigid caste system in Kerala. She belonged to the Pulaya community, which was subject to acute discrimination by the upper caste in the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, in pre-Independent India. According to Ashly Mathew's thesis "*Labour Participation and Social Mobility Among the Pulaya Women of Rural Kerala*", the Pulayas were mainly agricultural labourers. Severe restrictions were imposed on them. They were prohibited from walking on the public road and drawing water from the public well. Pulaya women could not wear an upper garment. They were permitted to wear bead-necklaces to cover their breasts.

According to Report on Slavery by Indian Law Commissioner in 1841, societal restrictions imposed on them were so stringent that whenever members of the community went out, they had to make their presence felt by uttering a particular cry at every four or five paces. If answered by someone, belonging to a superior caste, the former had to turn back. K.P Karuppan, who fought for their rights, wrote a report in 1934 about the conditions of Pulayas in the beginning of the 20th century: "I saw them only in a dirty mundu. The women were all half-naked. Some of them covered themselves with grass." They could not cut their hair. They were not allowed into government schools. They had no access to the public roads and markets of mainland Ernakulam. They had to slink away and make way for an upper caste. They could not enter hospitals. They were untouchable and unapproachable. In the violent, vicious codes of discrimination that dictated the movements of Malayalis just 100 years ago, a Pulaya had to keep 64 paces from a Namboodiri.⁴

By the time Dakshayani was born, movements against this virulent casteism had begun. Pulaya reformers like Ayyankali had emboldened the community, but it was a still long road ahead. They organized civil disobedience movements that defied restrictions on movement and entry to school for the depressed classes. At that time Cochin had begun to give free education to children of depressed classes. Growing up at a time of radical social change, and into a family that spearheaded many of these changes, the right to wear

an upper cloth was just the first in a series of firsts in her life. She was part of movements that called for the democratization of public spaces, education, work security, equality and abolition of caste slavery.⁵

Her life was shaped by these upheavals in Kerala society in the early 20th century. She was born in 1912.⁶ Her father was a school teacher and also used to grow coconut trees in his land. Little Dakshayani was admitted to school at the age of 6. The bright Dakshayani took a ferry and walked a couple of hours to the school and back. She went on to do her bachelor's in chemistry from Maharaja's College in Ernakulam. She completed her degree in 1935 and she was the only girl student in the entire Science Department. Dakshayani recalls that one particular Professor who refused to let her touch the lab equipment. She had to watch the experiments from afar. That didn't stop her.

Later did Teacher's training in 1938 from Madras University. She was given scholarship for her education from the Cochin state government. She served as a teacher under the Cochin government service. She was teacher in the Govt. high schools at Peringottukara (Thrissur) and Thrippunithura. She had bitter experiences on account of untouchability when she was a student as well as a teacher. she was posted in a government school in Peringottukara in Thrissur. The backward caste Ezhavas dominated the place, which meant there weren't many upper castes who would be offended by a Dalit teacher in the classroom. But Dakshayani, who was given accommodation in the house of a rich Ezhava, was not allowed to draw water from the well. Dakshayani wrote: "One day when I was going to the school which was a two-three-minute walk from the house, a Nair woman met me on the way. On either side of the road were paddy fields. The Nair woman asked me to step down on to the fields to make way for her (as she considered a Pulaya unapproachable). I told her, if you want to go, you may get down onto the field and go. As I did not concede to her demand she had to do as I said. She remarked that the time had come when she had to walk over night soil. She however faced it boldly.

Dakshayani felt to struggle against the inhuman institution of untouchability and liberate the Dalits. She believed that politics could be a useful means to serve the community and the nation. Disillusioned by the prejudice and determined to contribute to her community, she decided to seek a nomination — reserved for Scheduled Castes — to the Cochin Legislative Council. Accordingly, she urged the Cochin government to give her an opportunity to serve as a member of the legislature and the govt conceded her demand. There upon she resigned her job as a teacher. She got nomination by the erstwhile Cochin government to the Cochin legislative council in 1945. Thereafter she was elected to the constituent assembly by the Cochin legislative council. On August 2, 1945, Dakshayani spoke for the first time in the council - in English. Pointing out that the funds allocated for the uplift of depressed classes were dwindling, she called for proportionate reservation in panchayat and municipality and lashed out at untouchability as inhuman. Dakshayani said as long as untouchability remained, the word "Harijan" was meaningless, it was like calling dogs "Napoleon".

She was member of the constituent assembly and also the provisional parliament of India from 1946-1952.⁷ She was of course the only Dalit woman representative of the constituent assembly. At 34, she was also one of the youngest members of the assembly. She married R. Velayudhan, a prominent Dalit leader in Kerala. Her marriage was performed in Gandhiji's ashram Sevagram at Wardha, in a ceremony officiated by a leper and attended by the Mahatma and Kasturba. Meera Velayudhan, her daughter recalls an anecdote that when Dakshayani grew tired of the jaggery and chappati in the ashram, Gandhi asked her to cook fish in her hut and have it. Velayudhan became a MP in 1952, which makes them possibly the first Dalit parliamentarian couple of India.

Dakshayani was the President of the Depressed classes Youth's Fine Arts club, Madras from 1946-49. She was managing editor of the Common Man, an English weekly published from Madras during 1946-49. She contested in 1971 for Lok Sabha from Adoor (SC) constituency as an independent but lost. Later She did not actively pursue electoral politics. And quit active politics "She was more comfortable working in the slums of Munirka (Delhi) among sweeper women. After holding one of the early national conference of Dalit women in Delhi, mainly Ambedkarites, she formed a women's organisation, Mahila Jagriti Parishad (1977)" says Meera Velayudhan. She was the founder President of Bharatiya Mahila Jagriti Parishad, a Dalit women's group in Delhi and worked among poor slum dwellers. She breathed her last in July 1978.⁸

Dakshayani's political, social and personal realm was dotted by independent thought and opinion. Though a staunch supporter of Gandhiji, her Constituent assembly speeches are proof that she had independent opinions that were neither supportive of Gandhiji nor Ambedkar. Her belief was that "a Constituent Assembly not only frames a constitution, but also gives the people a new framework of life." A staunch follower of Gandhi, she strongly opposed untouchability but believed that as long as it was practised, the word *Harijan* (popularised by Gandhi) would remain irrelevant. She refused to view Dalits as minorities and believed that "the Harijans are Indians and they have to live in India as Indians and they will live in India as Indians." She placed the struggles of her community ahead of her gender, unmistakably evident in her impassioned speech at the Constituent Assembly where she didn't speak as a Pulaya woman but hoped to see "no barriers based on caste or community" in the Indian Republic. She was vociferous in her support for Article 17 of the Constitution of India that abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice in any form. Most importantly, she argued in favour of Article 11 of the Draft Constitution (Article 17 of the Constitution) that abolishes Untouchability and makes it punishable by law: "We cannot expect a Constitution without a clause relating to untouchability." But she believed that a new dawn would rise: "The working of the Constitution will depend upon how the people will conduct themselves in the future, not on the actual execution of the law (punishment). So, I hope that in course of time there will not be such a community known as Untouchables." Often told by other members that she asked too many questions, Velayudhan's presence

among other female members in the Constituent Assembly, like Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, many of whom came from privileged classes, was a telling sight in itself.⁹

Dakshayani's term in the constituent assembly was defined by two objectives, both inspired and molded by her time with Gandhi and Ambedkar. One was to make the assembly go beyond framing a constitution and to give "people a new framework of life" and two, to use the opportunity to make untouchability illegal, unlawful and ensure a "moral safeguard that gives real protection to the underdogs" in India. Her idea of moral safeguards rested on the idea that an Independent India as a "socialist republic" would give equality of status and guarantee an immediate removal of social disabilities that would enable the Harijans to enjoy the same freedom that the rest of the country enjoyed. The other notable part of the discussion is her take down of Churchill's promise to safeguard the scheduled castes in an independent India and her remark that the communist party was only exploiting the Harijans. She held strong to the conviction that only an Independent socialist republic can help uplift the Dalits and give them the liberties exercised by every other citizen. Dakshayani's admiration for Gandhi and his vision for India was only matched by her respect for Ambedkar and his mission to raise the status of untouchables in India. Their antithetical position regarding the status of minorities, and her own views on how the minorities should be represented was one of her most defining speeches during the assembly.

Delivered on the 28th of August 1947, after Sardar Patel submitted his Minority report, her arguments against separate electorates in any form and her censure of the reservation system was in support of a nationalist narrative that sought economic and social upliftment rather than looking to politics as a means to eradicate the system of untouchability. She noted in her speech on 28th August 1947 "As long as the Scheduled Castes, or the Harijans or by whatever name they may be called, are economic slaves of other people, there is no meaning demanding either separate electorates or joint electorates or any other kind of electorates with this kind of percentage. Personally speaking, I am not in favour of any kind of reservation in any place whatsoever." Her dismissal of the separate electorates and reservations was in keeping with the notion that an Independent India should work towards creating a stronger, common national identity rather than maintain practices that would further the social fissures that the British left behind.

Her concern as evidenced through her speeches was not the political safeguarding of minority rights, but the breakdown of integrity and stability of a nation that would push back the advancement of Harijans, economically and socially. She saw an independent, united India as being more beneficial to the abolishment of castes, rather than a measured divvying up of electoral politics. Her speech in support of a system that would use economic and social means to create an equal and just society coincidentally came 15 years after the Poona pact of 1932 was signed. The fruit of Gandhi's fast against the suggested separate electorate of the Communal

Award and the Poona deal that Ambedkar would pillory time and again went on to set the tone for the Government of India Act of 1935 that would become the basis for Independent India's constitution.¹⁰

Her biggest criticism was reserved for the draft constitution presented by Ambedkar. She stood up on 8th November 1948 to declare that she found the draft constitution "barren of ideas and principles".¹¹ The blame she pointed out had to be shared by all members of the constituent assembly who in spite of their lofty ideals, illustrious backgrounds and prodigious speeches could not come up with an original constitution. Her criticism like many others centered on the idea of maintaining a strong Centre without much decentralization and the idea of a slightly reworked adaptation of the British India government act of 1935. She expressed dismay about carrying over the idea of governorship and centrally administered areas from British system and in the lack of originality in the framing. She spoke against the centralization of power as envisaged in the Constitution and said there should be decentralization." She also argued against governorship as she presciently saw "friction" emerging between a state government and a governor appointed by another party at the Centre. One fascinating idea that she suggested was to have the draft constitution put to vote during the first general elections and to test its mettle with the people who would ultimately use it. A democratic test of the document that would make India a republic, she felt would ensure the process of constitution making was fair. Unlike many of her peers and fellow women members, she moved away from direct electoral politics into creating groups that worked towards the upliftment of Harijans. She saw untouchability being abolished by a constitutional article and lived to see reservations last longer than the 10 years the members agreed upon.

When her daughter Meera would slouch, Dakshayani would ask her to sit erect. She would remind her of how the early years of stooping before the upper castes had given her a slight hunch. What she didn't let on was that when she straightened her shoulders and looked at the world, Dakshayani Velayudhan shattered to smithereens the cast-iron ceiling of caste. All those who feel that women don't belong in politics need to take a long, hard look at history.

ENDNOTES

1. Sanjay Paswan & Paramanshi Jaideva, *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India* (ed), Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2004, p.3
2. <http://15fortherepublic.wordpress.com/2016/01/26> accessed on 26/12/2017.
3. "Gandhiji adored her and Ambedkar sought her advice". The Times of India, dt 13/05/2017.
4. <http://15fortherepublic.wordpress.com/2016/01/26> accessed on 26/12/2017.
5. www.livemint.com accessed on 06/1/2018.

6. Sanjay Paswan &Paramanshi Jaideva, *op.cit.*, p.284

7.Ramachandra Kshirasagara, *Dalit movement in India and its leaders*, M.D Publications Pvt,Ltd, New Delhi,1994,p.362

8. Ibid., p.363

9. www.genderrepository.in accessed on 16/1/2018.

10. www.genderrepository.in accessed on 16/1/2018.

11. www.livemint.com accessed on 06/1/2018.

