

Women Freedom Movements of India

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One of the significant recommendations of the Franchise Sub-Committee was the incorporation of right to vote to women over 21 years of age in the Government of Indian Act. 1935. This right gave women an opportunity to be elected to the State Legislatures only 21/2% adult women obtained this right numbering around six million². It was indeed a notable achievement. An effort has been made to assess the relentless efforts made by the women organizations and individuals, despite various hindrances amidst the male dominated society.

Firstly, the concept of complementary sex was so deeply embedded in elite Hindu and Muslim cultures that women were not supposed to easily defy the domestic role as far as their equal rights were concerned. They were not allowed to plunge into politics as this was deemed reserved for the men only. The social reformers like M.G. Ranade B.G. Tilak and many others did not make any advocacy for the equal rights of men and women³. It is significant to note that the women associations were founded by the social reformers and political leaders who had benevolent attitude towards the fledging women's movement.

Many revivalists movement did not make any favourable efforts as far as their multiple roles in the society were concerned. Only the rare examples are therein the classical literature where they tried to play some sort of role in the social order. It was held by some progressive minded people that only education and association would be an instrument for the women to play a constructive role for their social amelioration. The notable were K.C. Sen and D.K. Karve who planned girls school curricula around women's role as wife and mother⁴.

The women's movement in its early days was not designed as a radical onslaught on the patriarchal bases of Hinduism and Islam in India. The social reformers had to face enough opposition from the traditional social elements in the name of religion and social taboos. Some efforts were made for the utilization of traditional ideals of Indian womanhood to justify women's education and participation in public life as reported by Gail Minault⁵.

The strategy being devised by any mind set is not necessarily to work all the time but sometimes opposite forces becomes heavy. Such thing happened in the case of women's movement in India. It may be noted that despite all leanings in compliance with the traditionalism and male domination, the formation of the first women association i.e. Bharat Stri Mahamandal (BSM) took place with the strenuous efforts of a bold woman namely Sarla Devi Choudharani. This association came into

being solely due to her differences with male leaders of National Social Conference (NSC) from Bombay as testified by her own article⁶. It is worth mentioning here that some differences between National social conference and Sarla Devi emerged in 1910 and later on between Gandhi and women leaders in 30s and 40s of the 20 Century.

The most important issue of women was their suffrage taken up by Women's Indian Association (WIA) founded in Madras in 1917 by three theosophist women namely Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Margaret Cousins.⁷ Beside opening of new branches in other cities, their Theosophical Society took a lead in forming the new associations for the well being of their lot. The establishment of the All India women's Conference in 1927 as non political organization showed at most interest in promoting educational opportunities for women and improving their position through the social and legal reforms⁸. They first of all were interested in the question of women's right to vote and were largely responsible for organizing the Suffragette movement⁹.

The Suffragette movement in India (mainly based on the ideology of similar movement in the West, particularly in Great Britain) was initiated through a demand of right to vote to women. In fact, this demand was put forward by a deputation of women organizations to E.S. Montague, Secretary of the State for India who toured India in 1917 to assess the country's needs for the post war reforms. The deputation organized by Margaret Cousins included women organizations like the Seva Sadan, the Mahila Seva Samaj, the Indian Women's University and the Women's Branch of the Home Rule League¹⁰. Fourteen women were included in this deputation with Sarojini Naidu as their principal spokesman. Though the deputation was sympathetically received, but no mention was made in the Montague Chelmsford Scheme of reforms¹¹. Similar was the result of the report of Southborough Committee published in 1919 wherein the same demand was placed before the committee.

The prominent women organizations as mentioned above represented before this committee included the Women's Indian Association along with its representatives of 40 branches across the country, the Women's Graduate Union of Bombay and the Women Branch of the Home Rule League. In addition, the women of Bombay submitted a petition signed by 800 ladies reiterating their demand for vote¹². Their demand, in fact was turned down with the argument that purdah was a practical recommending franchise for women. Moreover, the demand was confined to a 'minority' community of educated Indian Women¹³. It is noteworthy that the two largest political organization i.e. the Congress and the Muslim League supported their demand and endorsed by Nehru Committee Report¹⁴. Sarojini Naidu while giving a witness before the Joint Committee of the Houses of commons for the inclusion of their demands to be included in the Government of India Bill 1919 but in vain¹⁵.

The Government of India Bill published in 1919 did not consider the franchise for women, but it did empower Provincial Legislature to remove the sex barrier at their discretion. Consequently, the resolutions were enthusiastically passed in Madras and Bombay in 1921, United Province in 1923, Central Province, Bengal and Punjab in 1926¹⁶. The debate regarding women's franchise in Madras, Bombay and Bengal councils reveals that the proposal was not easily acceded to. In fact, the attitude of the representatives of both Hindu and Muslim communities was vehemently dissuading at the outset of the debate. They favoured maintaining the status quo, as social reforms and legislation indirectly challenged their traditional notions of authority and privilege. The Muslims in comparison to Hindus were more conservative and orthodox as the custom of Purdah and seclusion of women was against the spirit of legislation.

The role of British members was also disgusting in this regard. They voted against social reform legislation, like the Age of Consent Bill and extension of the franchise to women. Margret Cousins who witnessed the debates recalled how the British members emphasized the importance of social customs and conventions¹⁷. However, the proposal was passed in all the above mentioned councils only after long debates and deliberations. The women could now vote, be elected or nominated to provincial legislatures. The promptness with which the provincial governments acted discredited the Southborough committee. The committee, in fact, had reported that "none of the local government advised the extension of the franchise to women. The first election under the Government of India Act of 1919 was held in 1921. However, the women organizations were not satisfied with the minutes of this act as it enfranchised less than one percent of the total female population¹⁸.

The high percentage of voters in Madras and Bombay indicates the level of literacy among its female population and its attitude towards reform referring to women¹⁹. Bengal's attitude towards social reform was liberal but its elite and nationalists resisted legislation sanctioned by the British Government.

The concept regarding the inevitability of the women's franchise was very clear to women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Remeshwari Nehru and others to whom it was necessary in order to counteract the image of downtrodden and the oppressed women. They were of the firm opinion that the vote was a symbol of equality, and not a means of bringing about change in the structure of the society. Moreover, their organizations seemed to have completely subscribed to the idea that legislation would counteract social evils and conventions also. The right to vote would enable women to express their opinion in legislatures and councils and determine the outcome of social legislation. The same ideology is testified in a speech delivered by Rameshwari Nehru at a women's college in England where she had explicitly stated that the women did not want vote for personal or selfish motive but from a desire to discharge the growing responsibility²⁰.

The growing political and social awareness among women is evident by the number and popularity of women's organizations. The addition of one more organization i.e. National Council of Women in 1925 with an aim to provide link among various organizations already working for the advancement and welfare of women within India may be seen as a further step in women's movement. Margaret Cousins while taking the responsibility of establishing contact among the leading women appealed to the newspapers and also wrote to over 500 women who were either associated with relevant organizations or well known educationalists and social reformers²¹. She also proposed to organise provincial committees in order to draw up a memorandum of educational reforms most desired one²². In 1928 the A.I.W.C. proposed the All India Women's Education Fund to finance a college for women i.e. the Lady Irwin College in Delhi. Along with its primary purpose of educational reform, the campaign for other social reforms such as Hari Bilas Sharda's Bill for the prevention of child marriage, the removal of legal disabilities in the law of inheritance and marriage, and the right of women to vote.

The women leaders of A.I.W.C. generally belonged to wealthy and intelligentsia class of India and western countries whereas the illiterate, ignorant and non-vocal women attended their meetings as evident from the statement of Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur (who had been its Secretary, President and Chairperson at various times)²³. Hansa Mehta, Vice President of the organization, expressed similar views²⁴. A.I.W.C. had privilege to be patronized by 12 prominent ladies in the first eight years of its existence. Some women like Abdul Qadir and Ramabai Neelkanth were ardent social reformers. Mrs. P.K. Ray, another name of importance, was the daughter of a prominent leader of the Brahmo Samaj, and wife of a well known scholar of Bengal²⁵. Besides, Prominent Congress women such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylaxmi Pandit and Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay were also members of A.I.W.C.

References:

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