

---

Research Papers

---



## WOMEN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN TAMIL NADU

**Dr. C. NADARAJAN**  
Associate Professor,  
Department of History  
Annamalai University  
Annamalai Nagar – 608 002.

---

### Abstract

*The right of women to vote, throughout the later part of the nineteenth century, was an important phase of feminism. It was first seriously proposed at Seneca Falls on July 19, 1848 in a general declaration of the rights of women prepared by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and several others. The early leaders of the movement in the United States were Susan B. Anthony, Mrs. Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Abby Kelley Foster and others. The National Women Suffrage Association led by Anthony and Stanton was formed in 1869 to agitate for women suffrage. Another organization, American Woman Suffrage Association led by Lucy Stone was organized to work through the state legislatures. The two societies were united in 1890 as the National American Women Suffrage Association. After continuous effort the Constitution granted nation-wide suffrage to women in 1920.*

---

The election process is a fundamental aspect of political life under a democratic system. In a democracy elections constitute major political activity for the people, perhaps the only one for the illiterate. Election not only provides an opportunity to the people for choosing their representatives, but also it give them scope for participation in the wider political process. Thus, in all modern phase of development, electoral practices have come to be accepted as political participation. Women began got voting right in the last quarters of the twentieth century in the world arena.

Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst, leaders of the British Women's Suffrage Movement emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The void left by the lack of democratic, participatory, political opportunities for women has often been filled by 'wife-ism' or 'first lady syndrome', whereby the wives of political leaders become women leaders as a result

of their martial status. Several accounts of the women's movement in India, which accompanied the nationalist movement in the British Rule, notes the lack of an emancipatory outcome and the enduring subservient nature of women's role in society.<sup>2</sup> Women were welcomed to join the resistance to British colonial rule, but their political activity was encouraged only insofar as to support the traditional gender hierarchy within Indian society. As long as their political activity supplemented, but didn't sacrifice their traditional duties as wives, daughters and sisters, their political activism was encouraged. However, several male supporters of reforms or women's issues supported women's movement.<sup>3</sup>

Indian Councils Act of 1861 was a great landmark in the growth and development of the legislatures.<sup>4</sup> The movement for independence also raised the question of women' suffrage. In India beginning with the Indian Councils Act of 1892, there was a gradual expansion of the

inclusion of Indians in local governance. Women's franchise movement in India was started in 1917. It demanded equal voting rights for women along with men. That was indeed the first attempt made by women for their political rights.<sup>5</sup> In December 1917, Annie Besant and few other women the Montague-Chelmsford Committee, in charge of assessing the state of public opinion about an increased participation of Indians to the government, and demanded that women be given the same voting rights as men.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the first delegation representing women's organizations argued that women's participation on political life would surely improve it. As voters and representatives, they said that women could help the progress of social reform, make politics more moral and the world more peaceful.<sup>7</sup>

Fourteen women from different provinces joined the deputation and presented a memorandum to South Borough Franchise Committee. Kamalabhai Chattopadya, Rukmani Arundale, Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Rukmani Lakshmipathi from Madras Province were the distinguished participants of franchise right of women movement. South Borough Committee primarily rejected the memorandum. Then, the WIA planned to organize meetings all over India to push the demand of franchise right and to send a women's deputation to England.<sup>8</sup> When Montague discussed Indian demands for political representation, women's wings of political parties raised the issue of women's suffrage. The political entry of these women marked the beginning of a new phase in which women started agitations against the British Government. As per the 1919 Act, the right to vote was granted to women with various restrictions. This Act adopted to enfranchise men and women was based on age and property. It empowered provincial legislatures to remove the sex barrier at their discretion. Many of the provinces immediately introduced resolutions to enfranchise women.<sup>9</sup> Madras was the first province to grant at least a limited franchise to women in 1921, followed by Bombay in 1921 but it was not until 1929 that other provincial legislatures gave women the right to vote and admitted them to be elected on the same basis as men.

The Madras Legislative Council was set up in 1921 under the Government of India Act, 1919. Justice Party Government in Madras took the credit of the first state in extending franchise right to women.<sup>10</sup> In 1926 the Government of India gave right to women to stand as candidates for and

sit in the Provincial Legislature. The same issue was taken by Madras Legislative Council in July 1926 and the law was passed.<sup>11</sup> Under this Act, two women in the Province contested the election, but both were defeated by a margin of 500 votes by their male rivals. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya was the first Hindu lady to come forward to contest in an election as independent candidate. But she was defeated by a margin of 515 votes by her male rival. Hawan Angelo jumped to in the arena of election in Madras, but she was also defeated. This development generated a powerful current of enthusiasm among them. The WIA influenced the Government of Madras to nominate a woman in Legislative Council and Government was pleased to nominate Muthulakshmi Reddy. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a Tamil lady got the honour of being the first Indian woman legislator, when she was nominated to the Legislative Council of Madras in 1927 under the British rule. She was also elected unanimously as the Vice-President of this council and in this capacity she became the first lady to hold such a post not only in India but also in the whole world.

Reddy clearly worked up to the expectations of both the nationalists and the women's groups, remaining with the realm of what may broadly be termed "Social feminism." This consisted in welfare of women and children and argued that such issues could be understood and represented by women alone. As far as Indian is concerned, Madras was the first state and Bihar was the last to enfranchise women in 1921 and 1929 respectively. Women got enfranchisement in equal terms with men.<sup>12</sup> Women now voted and were elected or nominated to Provincial Legislature. Indeed the Act enfranchised less than one per cent of the total female population in Madras. The proportion of female electorate to adult female population was less than one per cent, i.e. Bombay 0.8 per cent and Bengal 0.3 per cent. In 1926, the Government of India gave right to women to stand as candidates and sit in the Provincial Legislature. Gandhi said as early as 1929, "Women must have votes and equal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation."<sup>13</sup>

At the Karachi Session of the INC (1931), Nehru piloted the "Fundamental Rights Resolution" which accepted the principle of complete equality of men and women in political life.<sup>14</sup> INC declared at Karachi session that in free

India, there would be no discrimination on ground of sex.<sup>15</sup> The spread of women's suffrage over the subsequent four and a half decades was most rapid. As per the Government of India Act 1935, elections were held in the provinces in 1937. It was part of a process of constitutional reform which yielded more and more political space to sections of Indian society of which women formed an important part. Kumudini Basu, a Bengali suffragist, who was then a councilor in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, expressed in a letter written in October 1935, addressed to the Lothian Committee, thus: "Women suffrage was sought, fourth for and obtained all over the world for a distinct purpose and principle. It was found after long experience that many vital questions of social, domestic and public welfare affecting the home and women's sphere of activities were entirely neglected and often opposed by male legislators. It was then that women took to the fight and got the franchise.<sup>16</sup> It is also pointed out that Indian women were granted equal rights to suffrage without any sustained political struggle. However, the Government of India Act of 1935 incorporated that woman over 21 years of age could vote, provided they were literate and were owners of property or wives and widows of men who had property, and allowed women to participate in elections to the Central Assembly. Thus, it appeared that this act enfranchised six million women, one woman to every five men. It is quite evident from the qualification stipulated that his Act also did not enfranchise all the adult women.<sup>17</sup>

#### Conclusion

These rights were not donated to women by male leaders, but arose spontaneously as demands from the women themselves. Women's advocacy came mainly from the upper echelons of society, from those who had a close rapport with the leaders of the Indian national movement. Nevertheless, various factors like improvement in education, exposure to mass media, effectiveness of local and parochial socialization agents and growing political consciousness had influenced women voters' turnout.<sup>18</sup> Jana Everett identifies broadly two phases in the struggle for the vote for women; the first from 1917 to 1928, when female enfranchisement and eligibility for female representation in legislatures was sought and the second until 1937, when attempts were made to broaden both the terms of enfranchisement and representation in legislative bodies.<sup>19</sup> Eventually equal voting rights for women with those of men

were activated only in Independent India. The Constitution of India particularly its preamble established liberal democratic philosophy. It ensured to all its citizens, equality, liberty and fraternity. When the Constituent Assembly was set up in October 1946, a number of women like Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray and Hansa Mehta were elected to the Draft committee to frame the Constitution for free India.<sup>20</sup>

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Abdela Lesley, 'From Palm Tree to Parliament: Training Women for Political Leadership and Public Life', in *Gender and Development*, Vol. 8, No.3, November, 2000, p. 17.
2. R. SureshBald, 'The Politics of Gandhi's "Feminism": Constructing "Sitas" for Swaraj', in Ranchod-Nisson, Sita, and Tetreault, Mary Ann (ed.), *Women, States and Nationalism: at Home in the Nation*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 81-97.
3. Carole Spary, *Female Political Leadership in India*, Paper presented at BASAS Annual Conference, University of Leeds, 30th March-1st April, 2005.
4. Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Review, Legislative Assembly Department., Fort St. George, Madras, May 1980, p.2.
5. K. Kuppaswamy, 'Women and Political Awakening', in *Roshni*, July-September 1987, p.8.
6. Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, 'Fluctuating, Ambivalent Legitimacy of Gender as a Political Category', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 17, 28 April – 4 May, 2001, p. 1436.
7. Geraldine Forbes, 'Votes for Women: The Demand for Women's Franchise in India 1917-1937', Vina Mazumdar, (ed.), *Symbols of Power*, Allied Publishers, Mumbai, p.4.
8. Fort Nightly Report from January 1918 to 16 December 1918.
9. Lakshmi Menon, *The Position of Women*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1944, p. 27.
10. Aparana Basu, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference 1927-1990*, New Delhi, p. 20.
11. G.O. No. 309, The Government in Law (Legislature) Department, dt5 August 1926.
12. A.I.W.C's procedure, p.1.
13. Usha Narayanan, Key Note address of "Women and Political Participation: Twenty-First Century Challenges" at New Delhi organized by UN, 24 March, 1999.
14. Niroj Sinha, 'Women as Marginals in

Politics', in Pramila Dandvate (ed.), *Widows Abandoned and Destitute Women in India*, Randiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p. 69.

15. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Indian Women*, Devaki Jain (Ed.), Publication Division, Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1975, p. 32.

16. Letter from Kumudihi Basu, Counsellor, Calcutta Corporation, Q/IDC/12, India Office Library and Records, London.

17. Vijaya Agnew, *Elite Women in India Politics*, New Delhi, 1979, p.25.

18. Ravindra Kumar Verma and Dayanendra Kr. Yadav, 'Women in Bihar Politics,' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 15, 13 April, 1996, p. 935.

19. Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in Indias*, Heritage Publications, Delhi, 1985, p. 101.

20. Trara Ali Baig, *India's Women Power*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 218.