

Socio-Political Status of Women in 20th Century India :A Historical Review

AJEET KUMAR

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

As we know women constitute an important part in any society. Therefore, it is expected that they should participate with men in all political activities. If we glance through pages of history we will find that during the feudal political system, women were not given any political rights. However, it was at the advent of modern democratic political system that it became incumbent upon every man and women to participate in the political process. But even when the development of democratic political system was being shaped they were not given equal right with men. This article is exploring above things in historical context.

Key Words : Political Position of Women, Indian Society, Historical Analysis, Twentieth Century, Indian Women

INTRODUCTION

In India the chief of the social reformers during the nineteenth century was limited to strengthening women's position in the field of education and right to property. The question of women's political power or equality between the sexes was not made an issue.

By the first decade of the twentieth century Indian women had provincial women's associations were started by women who had acquired experience in local women's associations. To begin with Bharat Stri Mahayana (BSM) was founded in 1910 by Carla Devi Choudhurani.¹ It branches existed in Calcutta, Lahore and Allah bad and later in other Indian cities. Women's Indian Association (WIA) was founded in 1947 jointly by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinardasa and Margaret cousins.² The Association was centrally located in Madras with branches

established in other cities. It was 1918 that Lady Tata and others founded Bombay Presidency Women's council (BPWC).³ This Association coordinated the activities of women's Association in Bombay and Later joined National council of women in India. (NCWI), founded by Lady Aberdeen of the International Council of women, Lady Tata and others from BPWC.⁴ This organization Linked the BPWC, the Calcutta women's League of service, and provincial councils formed in Bihar Orissa and Delhi. The All India Women's Conference (AIWC). Was found in 1927 by Margaret cousins and others.⁵

An important factor contributing to this new stage in the organizational development of the women's movement was the existence of communications networks coop table to the idea of provincial and National women's Association. Reformers of the NSC established a communication work with the founding if the Bharat

1. J.K.Chopra (1993), *Women in Indian Parliament*

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

Mahila perished in 1904. Six year later, Sarla Devi Choudhurani drew on this network when she set up a new national organization, Bharat Stri Mahamandal. In 1917 another women's association, the women's Indian Association was founded in Madras by Three European women, Dorothy Jinarapadasa, Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins.⁶ All the three women were Theosophists. The theosophist society provided a means of communication about the new association and women Theosophists started branches in other cities. Another association which facilitate communication among women was the senate of the Indian women 's university.⁷ This Association contributed to both the success of the WIA its early stages and to the establishment of the All India women's conference in 1927.

Among other women organizations of national importance the AIWC became a permanent organization by organizing Local conferences and annual sessions. It was founded as an educational conference but from its first session it focused on both social and educational questions. The AIWC formally established an educational and social section in 1929 although Sarla Devi and Laxmi Menon objected because they thought this might lead to political and thus, prove divisive.⁸ In 1930 a constitution was written which established a standing committee as the least twice a year and set the general police of the AIWC. The office bearers were elected by the constituent conference and standing committee members. Among the most important office- bears was the president who largely enjoyed symbolic position with standing committee members as actual policy makers were behind the scenes. It was the presidential speeches; however which were quoted in the press. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya was the organizing secretary until, her arrest in 1930. The first standing committee members also included Margaret Cousins, Sarojini and Abala Bose.⁹

The social Reforms concentrated their energies on the spread of education among women and the reform

of such social customs as purdah, child marriage, denial of property right to women. However , the demand for the right to vote was, for the first time, advanced in 1917.¹⁰ Veena Mazumdar considers this move as an "offshoot of the British suffragist movement rather than any widespread awareness among Indian women."¹¹

In 1947 , the first women's deputation to demand women's political set up, waited on Mr. E.S. Montagu, the then secretary of state for India, at madras when he visited India to assess India's claim to home-Rule. The crux of their demand was that when franchise conditions for India were being drawn up, women be recognized as people. The deputation was composed of Sarofini Naodu as the leader, and 14 women leaders drawn from all over the country. Mrs. Margaret Cousins who initiated the move acted as secretary. Mrs. Cousins, Irish by birth, had been one if the founders of the Irish women's suffrage movement and Later as an active suffragist in England, had courted imprisonment After setting in India she had become an ardent supporter of the Indian women's right.

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The following except of the Memorandum submitted by this delegation throws some light on their demands:- "The women of India understand and support the broad claims of their people for self- Government within the empire, and they press for its bestowal as urgently as do their brothers. They have in large numbers signed the petition organized in favor of the scheme of reforms drawn up the National congress and Muslim League. They Have also held large meetings of ladies and it many ways worked towards obtaining the measure of self government suggested in this scheme of Reform ." Our interest , as one half of this country's population , are directly affected by the demand that. "The franchise should be broadened and extended directly as 'people and it may be recognized as not to disqualify our sex, but allow our women the same opportunities of representation as our men."¹³ The memorandum elaborated other vital

6. Modern Review(1994), 'A Women's Movement'

7. Ibid.

8. Sushma Sen (1971), *Memoities of an Octogenarian*

9. J.K.Chopra, op.cit.

10. K.N.Jehangir(1991), *Muslim Women in West Bangal*

11. Veena Magumdar, *Symbols of Power : Study on the Status of Women*, p.9

12. Kamala Devi Chatopadhaya(1985), *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom*

13. Ibid,P.95-96.

demand such as education, training in skills, Local self government, social etc. It is revealing as well as amusing to read the following impression of this event recorded by Mr. Montagu in his diary: “ We had an interesting deputation from the women asking for education for girls, more medical colleges, etc”.¹⁴ Thereafter, public meeting were held, and petitions and deputation were presented to prominent officials and organizations to support these demands of the women.

The India National congress approved of these demand at its session in Calcutta in 1947 presided over by Mrs. Annie Besant.¹⁵ In 1999 when the south Borough commission came to deal with the question of franchise, a women’s deputation led by Mrs. Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu appeared before it to further press for Indian women’s franchise on the same terms as men. The commission however, rejected this on the plea that the social disabilities under the India female sex labored, rendered the experiment premature.¹⁶

The Indian National congress therefore, stated as its Calcutta sessions in 1917 that, Women should not be disqualified on account of sex, that tests be applied to women as are applied to men with regard to franchise an eligibility to all elective bodies. Our members earnestly request you include this principle in clear terms in the Bill which you are drafting and submitting to the parliament and to leave the safe of one of the Indian people to any subordinate Franchise committee.¹⁷

Leaving the granting of franchise to women to the Indian Legislatures did word for they rose to the occasion and granted the women the suffrage spontaneously and with the greatest ease one province after another enfranchised the women. Madras Legislative council took the lead in 1932 and demonstrated an overwhelming support to the cause.¹⁸

By 1929 all the provincial legislatures had given he women the right to vote on the same terms as the men. On this achievement Mrs. Margaret Cousins who had

initialed the demand for women’s suffrage, made the following comment.¹⁹

“The vote is one of the links marking Indian womanhood as a vital unit in the life of the single nation of India. What an experience it was for me who ten years before. I had to undergo imprisonment because of the protest by four of us Irish women then made in Dublin, against the omission of votes for women like myself who had suffered from the cruelties, the injustices of the man Politicians. The men who controlled the press, the men in the stress in England, In Ireland, where we waged our militant campaign for 8 years after having tried all peaceful and constitutional means for 50 previous years, could fully appreciate the wisdom, Mobility and the Indian legislators.” Mrs. Cousins then went on to pay warm regards who showed great statesmanship, understanding of democratic values, a sympathetic vision of the aspirations of the women and courage to take a step unknown to their previous political history.²⁰

Thus when a committee on Indian political reforms was set up in 1932 with Lord Lothian as chairman, nine women appeared before it, reiterating once again their earlier demands. Nevertheless this committee remained obdurate, ruling out adult franchise as administratively impossible and submitting the following alternative which the paper subsequently incorporated wives and widows of voter to qualify for franchise, for only property owners could exercise the vote and this right was now to be extended to their spouses which the women through their several organizations totally rejected as unworthy their fundamental right as human and citizens of the country.

(a) “We the women wish to be citizens in our own rights, independent of any of our male relations. We consider that the psychological effect of this will have a far-reaching value even to get rid of the prevailing superiority and inferiority complex the sexes.

“We do not think that women are right as a citizen should depend upon her marriage, which in the majority

14. Kamala Devi Chatopadhyay (1985)op.cit.

15. Ibid

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid,P.96

18. Kamala Devi Chatopadhyay (1985), op.cit.

19. Ibid

20. Ibid,p.97

of cases in India at present is not entirely under her control.

(b) "We do not wish that the votes of the propertied class should be doubled by giving the vote only to the wife of the properties qualified man as it will place the poor labouring class at a disadvantage, and will place poor power at the hands of the rich and the capitalist classes."²¹

It is significant that twice the National Congress was headed by women, between 1917 and 1925. When Mrs. Besant with her colleagues started the Home Rule League, it set up special women's branch. The National Liberal Association also a political body, had woman members actively participating. All these women's bodies were strictly non-communal and included women from all faiths, including the Muslims.²²

It is, therefore, not surprising that when the viceroy of India announced in 1929 Round Table Conference in London to discuss and resolve the Indian demand for independence, the women's conference speaking for women of the country, asked that women be named. Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Madhu Laxmi Reddy and Rameshwari Nehru were suggested. The association reiterated that women's collaboration with the deliberations was absolutely essential at every level while the new constitution was framed. The India Government however, ignored their plea for representation and nominated Radhabai Subramanyam and Begam Shah Nawaz as delegates, both associated with moderate political opinion and likely to follow the British line.²³

The All India Women's Conference which met in Madras in 1932, in an atmosphere of grave concern, avidly discussed the status of women in the new constitution now on the anvil and reiterated its previous demands in relation to: fundamental rights, franchise, and representation of women on various bodies on the same terms as the men.²⁴

As the second Round Table Conference approached

the leading women's organization waited on the viceroy to one again press on them that only women recommended by their organization should be named delegates.²⁵

Later under pressure when a few more general delegates were added to the second Round Table Conference, Sarojini Naidu was also included, but not a representative of the women which the women had so ardently asked for. She however, did present a memorandum on behalf of the women stressing the demands for (1) Adult suffrage (2) Joint electorate and (3) No reservation of seats for women.²⁶

Soon a National gathering of women organized by the women's conference in collaboration with other national women's bodies like the National Council of Women prepared a memorandum to be presented to the second Round Table Conference. For finally in response to their persistent demand to the Government for direct representation for them at the conference, they were asked to send three representatives to place their views before the Joint Select Committees of the British Parliament discussing the proposed reforms.²⁷ The Memorandum prepared by the Bombay meeting stated the women's continuing adherence to adult suffrage as the only logical and desirable method of enfranchising the people. It also reiterated its total refusal to accept communal electorate and their solid determination to prevent the communal virus from entering their ranks. The women wished to be supported and voted for purely on merit alone, and they were perfectly confident that they would find their rightful place in the legislatures.²⁸

They also expressed their opposition to reservation of seats for themselves, and wholeheartedly favored joint electorates by which alone they felt that the country to her full status. They wanted specific recognition of women's inherent right full citizenship and equal opportunities with men. Therefore, the fundamental Rights should clearly state that sex shall be no bar to any office,

21. Kamala Devi Chatopadhyay(1985),op.cit.

22. Ibid

23. Kamala Devi Chatopadhyay,op.cit.

24. Ibid

25. Ibid

26. Ibid

27. Ibid

28. Kamala Devi Chatopadhyay(1985), op.cit

employment, power, honour etc.²⁹ The gathering nominated Begum Hamid Ali, Raj Kuamari Amrit Kaur and Dr. Mudhu Laxmi Reddy as the spokeswomen for them before the British Parliamentary Committees.³⁰

When the white paper on the impending reforms was published, the Indian women who had stood valiantly for National rights which were to embody their own demands were dismayed by what was proposed. Begum Hamid Ali characterized the reforms envisaged for India as 'timid, halting and inadequate'. Dr. Madhu Laxmi Reddy, the other representative, who had left for America in disgust at the rude rebuffs of the Joint Select Committee, but was brought back when the full committee finally agreed to meet them, felt most disheartened.³¹

By now the women in India were completely convinced that freedom would have to be achieved by the Indian People through their own effort in their own country and it was a colossal illusion to expect it to come from the rulers. Thus a part from powerful draw of Gandhiji's personality, this conviction led larger numbers of women from all walks of life and levels of society into the salt Satyagrah movement which now followed in the wake of the failure of the Round Table conference.³²

Gandhiji's entry into politics and his launching the Khilafat and Non-cooperation campaigns (1918-1922) encouraged the growth of the women's movement. Gandhiji's ideology was very respectful to women and supportive to their uplift, but this was strictly in terms of complementary sex roles. He admired women's qualities of self suffering and spirituality. But he did not always support women's participation in Public life. The opponents of women's movement used his statements to criticize efforts to improve the status of women. To Gandhiji "Equality of the sexes did not mean equality of occupations.. Nature had created he sexes as complementary to each other."³³

On the subject of women's rights, Gandhiji certainly reinforced the non-revolutionary orientation of the Indian women through utilization of religious symbols. Paradoxically, this appeal to religion enable more women to achieve a certain amount of emancipation of participate in public but also strengthened religious values which prevented further emancipation. For example, the wife of Hasrat Mohani spoke to many women's meetings during the Khilafat Campaign, where she asked women to support and make contributions.³⁴

There were several elections held during the women's suffrage campaign although women's turnout increased over the period, the women's organizations themselves did not play an extensive role in electoral mobilizations, as they lacked the necessary organizational structure. The 1930 elections were held during the congress civil Disobedience Movement and in most provinces female turnout was lower than in 1926. The exception was Madras, where the Justice Party was the strongest Party and did not support civil disobedience.³⁵ The following Table shows the male and female turnout in the 1930 elections³⁶ (Table 1).

Both the male and female turnout fell most sharply in Bombay where the civil disobedience campaign was vigorous. In the 1934 elections of the Central Assembly the female turnout was higher in all cases than the comparable figures in 1926, while he male turnout did no increase in the United Provinces and the Punjab. This can be seen in the Table 2.³⁷

Female turnout was still below male turnout, and the female electorate was miniscule. However, the rate of voting among women was gradually increasing.

In the 1937 elections to provincial legislature, both the male and female electorates were greatly expanded so that approximately 43 percent of the adult males and 9 per cent of the adult females were enfranchised. In

29. Ibid

30. Ibid

31. Ibid

32. Ibid

33. Ibid.

34. Ram Lakhan Shukla,(1987) *Bhartiye Swatantrata Sangram* (Hindi)

35. J.K.Chopra(1993),op.cit.p.17

36. J.Matson Everett(1979) *Women and Social Movements in India*,p.116

37. J.Matson Everett(1979), *Women and Social Movements in India*,p.136

Table 1 : Turnout in 1930 General Elections

Provinces	Provincial Councils		Indian Assembly	
	Total	Females	Total	Female
Madras	43.1%	18.1%	31.0%	41.5%
Bombay	16.5	6.5	7.4	3.2
United Provinces	24.6	3.9	14.2	3.3
Punjab	38.5	5.6	55.4	7.4
Central Provinces	33.3	8.8	33.3	-
Bihar and Orissa	33.2	5.4	21.4	3.0
Assam	28.3	6.5	-	-

Source : J. Matson Everett (1979). Women and Social Movements in India, p.116

Table 2 : Turnout in 1939 Provincial Assembly Elections

Provinces	Electorate	Turnout	Women enrolled	Female Turnout
Madras	6,436,760	51.6%	1,584,784	31.5%
Bombay	2,609,457	51.7	3,35,890	42.2
Bengal	6,695,483	58.3	5,20,380	19.3
United Provinces	5,335,309	63.7	189,105	33.6
Punjab	2,686,094	59.2	229,044	7.9
Bihar	2,412,229	-	-	-
Central Province	1,741,364	54.8	2,63,044	24.5
Assam	8,15,341	71.4	45,366	29.2
NWFP	2,46,609	72.8	4,895	71.4
Orissa	5,20,225	58.9	79,205	6.6
Sing	6,39,043	54.2	32,668	34.7

Source : J. Matson Everett (1979). Women and Social Movements in India, p.136

general the female turnout was higher than before in provinces where women had been enfranchised in 1926. This is obvious from the above table. Female turnout was lowest in the educationally backward provinces of United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa but was high in other backward areas where few women were enrolled, such as in the NWFP and Sindh. As a result of the 1937 elections, 56 women entered the legislatures as there were 41 seats reserved for women in the Provincial Legislative assemblies, ten women won unreserved seats, and five were nominated to Provincial Legislative Councils. A majority of women who won were Congress candidates. The party affiliations of those who won the election were as 36 Congress candidates, 11 Independents, 3 Muslim League and Unionist follows.³⁸

Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay met Gandhiji, who was on his march to Dandi to break the salt law, at one of the villages where he was halting for the night. She

explained that to her the movement he was launching was a very great opportunity for the Indian women to liberate themselves in the process, that she was keen that they should join it in large numbers and actively make themselves felt. She therefore, asked Gandhiji to make a special appeal to them by saying that, "they have been confined so long within their four walls, they seem hardly aware of the world which lies outside". In response Gandhiji wrote out a few lines addressed to them.³⁹

This led the women from all levels and walks of life to come into the battle area. As the men being put behind bars, the women stepped out, providing mature, considered leadership initiative, resourcefulness beyond all expectations. They flocked just as eagerly to the task Gandhiji had specially reserved for them and turned quiet picketing into high though peaceful battles. No wonder that at the close of the movement Gandhiji commended them in these words: "The role of women played in the

38. J.K. Chopra(1993),op.cit.

39. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay(1985), op.cit.

freedom struggle should be written in letters of gold".⁴⁰

The Karachi Congress in 1931 passed a historic constitution guaranteeing the following rights:⁴¹

The Indian National Congress declares that any constitution agreed to for free India should provide the following:-

- 1) Fundamental rights of the people, including:
 - (i) Freedom of association and combination,
 - (ii) Freedom of speech and of the press.
 - (iii) Freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion, subject to public order and morality.
 - (iv) Equal rights and obligations of all citizens, without any bar on account of sex,
 - (v) No disability to attach to any citizen by reason fo his or her religion, caste or creed or in regard to public employment, office of power or honor, and in the exercise of any trade or calling,
- 2) Religious neutrality on the part of the state.
- 3) Adult suffrage
- 4) Free Primary Education
- 5) A living wage for industrial workers, limited hours of labour, healthy conditions of work, protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment.
- 6) Protection of women workers, and especially adequate provisions for leave during maternity period.

The commitment made solemnly in 1931 was embodied in the constitution of free India and adopted by the Indian Constituent Assembly in 1949. in this context, the long years of continued effort and vigorous struggle by the women towards this goal should not be minimized as it often is.⁴²

In 1946 with the country at the threshold of freedom the cabinet mission invited the President of the women's conference to place the views of the women before it.⁴³

In the same year, to secure for women their due rights in the new constitution of the country, the conference prepared a charter of women's rights and duties and a Memorandum of planning for National Welfare which were circulated to the Provincial and Indian states and the Central Government. The Conference was greatly encouraged by an acknowledgement from the Vice-President of the Interim Government, Jawaharlal Nehru who said, "I am personally anxious to do everything in my power to advance the cause of women in this country."⁴⁴

Even after the advent of independence, women had to lobby in the Parliament. In fact, when the ruling party was holding its meetings, women sat waiting in the ante-room after pressing for the inclusion of the Hindu Code measures in the coming session. They only left the premises after being assured that the measures would be taken up in the ensuing session.⁴⁵

A vigorous campaign was launched in this direction. A special pledge was presented to every candidate to the ensuing Lok Sabha elections to support the Bills covering the Hindu Code proposals. House to house canvassing was done. The candidates were told in no uncertain terms that unless they pledged their support, no women would vote for them. The large support these Bills received in the debates and their repaid adoption conclusively proved that the effort had been effective.⁴⁶

While the Indian women's campaigns for property rights attained success with little opposition in the West, the Indian women's campaign provoked much opposition and initial failure in 1951. this was because of the significance of personal law in India that many Hindus would not accept the application of equal rights principles in the field of inheritance.

The women's movements in both the west and in India, have been unable to mobilize large numbers of people. However, Indian women's movement enjoyed greater access to political elites than either the British or

40. Ibid ,op.cit.p.107

41. Ibid,p.109

42. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay(1985), op.cit.

43. J.K.Chopra(1993),op.cit.

44. Ibid

45. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1985),op.cit.

46. Ibid

American women's movement. The Indian women's movement favored the politics of elite representation over the politics of mass mobilizations.

The first accomplishment of the Indian women's movement is the passage of women's rights legislation. The Indian constitution guarantees equality of the sexes before the law, equality of opportunity in employment and adult franchise. Indian Courts have upheld this constitutional provision. Among other achievements are the Hindu Code Bill which prohibits polygamy, allows divorce, and grants equal inheritance rights, dowry prohibition and child laws.⁴⁷

The second accomplishment of the Indian women's movement can be seen in the access of women's leaders to Government, in positions in parliament and in the bureaucracy. The Central Social Welfare Board has been set up under the First Five Year Plan to coordinate voluntary efforts in the social welfare field, and several women leaders are working on it to promote women's interests.⁴⁸

A third accomplishment can be seen in the creation of organizations among one class of women, which under certain circumstances can work effectively towards broad social goals. The Indian women's movement contributed to the acceptance of middle class women working outside the home and of higher education for women. No Indian woman went to the office before II World War and none went to the college before 1880.⁴⁹

The Indian women's movements illustrate not only the accomplishments but the limitations of bourgeois in feminist movements. The narrow legalistic outlook of the Indian women's movement during its equal rights phase overlooked the problem of implementation of reform strategies. Several scholars have pointed out the lack of implementation of existing laws, and this has been recognized officially. In 1971 a National Committee on the status of women was established to suggest more effective programmes to achieve sex equality. The committee submitted its report in 1974.⁵⁰

The lack of efforts to reach the masses and expand the narrow social base of the women's movement has limited its effectiveness in promoting social change in

poverty stricken nation. The position of woman workers and peasants has probably deteriorated over the past 30 years, as population pressures have increased. Women laborers' have been displaced by men because of industrial rationalization and women have been dismissed by employers trying to avoid payment of maternity benefits. Few women are in trade unions. Most women are employed in the agricultural sector or in the lowest paying areas of the industrial sector. Existing equal pay legislation does not improve the situation; as women characteristically do different work than men. Only a microscopic minority of Indian woman attend college. Female illiteracy will remain much higher only when the standard of living of the Indian masses is raised substantially and the status of women will markedly improve.

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47. J.K. Chopra(1993),op.cit.p.29

48. Ibid

49. Ibid

50. Ibid

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