



# Indian Women, Suffrage Campaigns and the Demand for Female Vote (1917- 1940)

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## Abstract

The Indian women's movement entered a progressive phase in the twentieth century when women first demanded female suffrage in 1917. The British Government announced the constitutional reforms in 1919. At this time, Indian women pressed for more extensive political representation in the future constitution of India. Indian women's organisations, such as the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), and the National Council for Women in India (NCWI), played a significant part in the suffrage campaigns and negotiations with the Government. The paper examines the exclusion of women from the constitutional reforms of 1919 based on the social conditions of India. The British Government declared Indian women unfit for the franchise because of seclusion (purdah) and lack of education. Indian women continued to engage with the Government on the franchise question and carried out vigorous suffrage campaigns in India and Britain. The paper aims to reveal the suffrage activities of Indian women from 1917 to 1940. Indian women proclaimed social equality as the basis of their demand for the vote. They wished to have political rights to initiate social reforms for women and children in the legislatures. The paper discusses the women's united stand against the Communal Award and separate electorates for women. In contrast, the Indian women's organisations demanded universal adult suffrage.

**Keywords:** Indian women, suffrage, British Government, reforms, exclusion

## Introduction

Indian women in the twentieth century extensively campaigned for suffrage rights and larger political representation in the legislatures. The interwar period encouraged women to participate in public life and asked for their rights. Women in Western and European countries were already granted the vote with specific qualifications. In 1893, New Zealand became the first country to give all citizens the right to vote. In 1918, British women were given the right to vote by passing the Representation of People Act. Indian women began

to ask for suffrage in 1917 for the first time when the Secretary of State for India and the Viceroy visited India to introduce constitutional reforms. However, the women's suffrage campaigns in the West were mainly associated with militant activities. Indian women, in contrast, used peaceful methods to ask for the vote.

Another significant factor was the support women received from their male counterparts. Indian men encouraged the cause of female vote in India, unlike the British men against giving suffrage to women. Notably, Indian women are classified as 'Suffragettes' in very recent historical writing.<sup>1</sup> The Deputation of Indian women to Montagu-Chelmsford in 1917 was observed as the first historical demand for female suffrage in India. Indian women appealed to be recognised as 'people' in the constitutional reform 1919.<sup>2</sup> Precisely, the women's movement for political rights was an example of the existence of the consciousness in Indian women and men.<sup>3</sup> Women of Western and European countries welcomed the demand of Indian women as a historic step taken in the progress of the Women's Movement. Interestingly, Indian suffragettes based their request to vote on social equality.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning, women stressed the need to have quality women voters in the legislatures who could bring social reforms for women.

In 1918, the notorious Southborough Franchise Committee denied extending the franchise to Indian women. The demands of Indian women were largely ignored by the Committee, which cited social conditions like 'purdah' and 'illiteracy' as significant reasons for exclusion. In the early twentieth century, the British Government resisted the women's question and their demand for political representation in India. It has been argued that the opponents had used purdah as 'the chief weapon in the armory of opposition against the franchise for Indian women'. 'The majority of women were denied rights because the minority women lived in seclusion' (Forbes 1998: 100).<sup>5</sup>

In 1917, the Women's Indian Association (WIA) emerged as Madras's most outstanding regional organisation through the joint efforts of three prominent English women- Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, and Dorothy Jinrajadasa. In 1925 and 1927, two other significant organisations were formed to contribute to the progress of the women's movement in India: The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC). These organisations had branches in all parts of India and aimed to eliminate social evils, such as child marriage, the *devadasi* system, lack of female education, and illiteracy.

A White Paper recommending an increase in the franchise for women was presented to both houses of the British parliament. The Franchise Committee extended the franchise to some 'urban women' by adding wifehood and educational qualifications. Indian women had severely criticised the White Paper as it failed to recognise women as citizens. They thus initiated the enfranchisement of all 'urban' women in their subsequent memorandum.

In 1930, with Mahatma Gandhi's call for independence, many women participated and joined agitational protests. The organised Indian women, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Muthulakshmi Reddi, were all dedicated to nationalism and Gandhi. Significantly, they developed a more nationalistic

<sup>1</sup> Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Margret Cousins and James H. Cousins, *We Two Together*, Ganesh & Co. (Madras) Ltd, 1950, p.311.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret E. Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1941, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Geraldine, H. Forbes, 'Votes for Women: The Demand for Women's Franchise in India 1917-1937', in Vina Majumdar, ed., *Symbols of Power: Studies on the Political Status of Women in India*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 100.

approach towards suffrage demands. The Indian Women's Organizations maintained a universalistic position against the Communal Award introduced in 1932, which had provisions of separate electorates for women. Women, in response, pressed for 'universal adult suffrage'. Interestingly, 'the prioritisation of universal franchise, rather emphasising on women's franchise, placed women's demands in consonance with the nationalist demand for citizenship'.<sup>6</sup> The paper examines the communal tensions that emerged within the Indian women's organisation on the reservation of seats and separate electorates.

The paper focuses on the vital significance of Indian women's contribution to the cause of suffrage and demanding universal adult franchise in India. It particularly examines the role of Indian Women's Organizations in channelising the support of various local and global institutions for suffrage demand. The Government never genuinely intended to bring any reform scheme which could favour the political representation of Indian women on a larger scale. For instance, they resisted vote for women in India from its inception. Firstly, they blamed social backwardness for the exclusion of Indian women from the reforms of 1919. Secondly, in the 1930s, the Government restricted the franchise to only a few educated and property-holder women. Despite the restrictions imposed by the colonial state, Indian women marked a symbolic contribution to the political advancement of women in India. Often challenged by the nationalist forces in the 1930s, Indian Suffragettes never turned down their efforts to bring more women onto the electoral roll. The discourse around women's political struggle in India is associated with other social and economic struggles. In this paper, I focus on unravelling these contentious discourses on women's suffrage, colonial forces, and influencing nationalist forces.

### **Indian Women's Demand for Female Franchise: The Reform of 1919.**

In 1917, a newspaper in Madras announced the arrival of Secretary of State, Lord Edwin Montagu, to India to join the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford. The Government planned to introduce constitutional reforms and expand the self-government in India. To read this, Dr. James Cousins asked his wife, Margaret Cousins, 'What about votes for women?'<sup>7</sup> Margaret Cousins, an Irish Suffragist, prepared a first letter, an appeal for the extension of primary and secondary education for girls. It was rejected on the grounds that the Reforms were limited to political objectives, not educational. Cousins then drafted another letter, which was circulated among organised Indian women and signed by many women, demanding female franchise:

'We pray that such a franchise is being drawn up, women may be recognized as 'people,' and it may be worded in such terms as will not disqualify our sex but allow our women same opportunities of representation as men.'<sup>8</sup>

Margaret Cousins had a vision for India and Indian women; soon after her arrival in India, she began engaging with women's issues and actively participated in nationalism.<sup>9</sup> Sarojini Naidu led the Deputation to the

<sup>6</sup> Anupama Roy, 'The 'womanly vote' and women citizens: Debates on women's franchise in late colonial India,' *Sage Publications*, New Delhi, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Margret Cousins and James H. Cousins, *We Two Together*, Ganesh & Co. (Madras) Ltd, 1950, p.309.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

<sup>9</sup> To read more on the life and activism of Margaret Cousins in India and Ireland. See Jyoti Atwal, 'Global Lives: Margaret Cousins', *Century Ireland*, September 2019, Dublin.

Montagu-Chelmsford Reform Committee, requested that women be allowed the same representation opportunities as men and asked for equal educational facilities for girls. In their Memorandum, Indian women requested better educational facilities, improved health and maternity services and franchise rights on the same terms as men.<sup>10</sup> Cousins recalled the Deputation as the first demand for votes for Indian women based on the desire for service in their country.<sup>11</sup> *The Tribune* of Lahore commented: 'Women in India will not even wait until men have been enfranchised. They want the franchise on the same terms as men.'<sup>12</sup> Indian women understood the importance of participating in the country's political life to represent the interests of the nation and womanhood. They, therefore, wished to be recognised as people and citizens in the future constitution of India. Gail Pearson has argued that the value of women's political participation in the memorial Cousins wrote in 1917 emphasised the importance of nurturing a sense of national responsibility and political understanding among women. It proclaimed their abilities to be well-developed and drew on women's experience in running women's associations.<sup>13</sup> Indian women, from the beginning, intended to include more educational reforms concerning girls in their Deputation. They stressed the fundamental need for Free and Compulsory Primary Education for all boys and girls as the keystone to all successful political reforms.

The demand of Indian women for political rights was welcomed by many, both nationally and globally. The *Mahratta*, an established paper, supported the women's deputation and pointed out that women were not excluded from participating in public life in ancient times. Women participated equally in the panchayat system. It further maintained that women were as good as men in every department of public work.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Indian women's demands found a place in some well-known British newspapers and journals. For instance, *The Vote*, the official journal of the Women's Freedom League (WFL), remarked that the Indian women's deputation was a historic step in the direction of worldwide progress of the women's movement.<sup>15</sup>

Notably, in India, the demand for female franchise did not turn into a sex war but resulted in the symbol of equality. Naidu proclaimed the equality between men and women in India. She believed that Indian women were equal in the past and needed to regain the lost inheritance.<sup>16</sup>

Naidu claimed to speak for all women and insisted that women wanted the vote to serve the nation. She also emphasised the role of the mother and household in nurturing children's futures. Ironically, Naidu and Begum Shan Nawaz, both women in the 1930s, declared that they were not feminists and that women in India did not need a feminist movement as there was enormous cooperation between men and women.<sup>17</sup> While making their demand for the franchise, Naidu argued that women have a right to be part of the emergent state because it is our right by historic tradition. Naidu linked the concept of citizenship with the domestic sphere, virtues of home and motherhood. As Pearson demonstrates, 'linking home and motherhood with the emergent national state represented women as citizens with equal rights who would exercise virtuous responsibilities.

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret E. Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1941, pp. 32-33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> 'India,' *The International Woman Suffrage News*, April 1, 1918, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Gail Pearson, 'Tradition, Law and the Female Suffrage Movement in India' in Louise Edwards and Mina Rocas, ed., *Women's Suffrage in Asia: Gender, Nationalism and Democracy*, Routledge, 2004, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup> 'Indian Women's Demand for Equality,' *The Vote*, May 10, 1918, p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Begum Shah Nawaz Proceedings of Sub-Committee Part II, Franchise Sub-Committee Meeting, 30 December 1930, *Indian Round Table Conference*, 12 November 1930-31, p. 260.

But the suffrage movement remained based on a 'tradition' and the preserve of educated elite women' (Pearson, 2004: 214).

### **Indian Women and the Report of the Southborough Franchise Committee, 1918.**

Indian women felt betrayed when their demands were ignored by the Southborough Franchise Committee in 1918. The Committee cited 'purdah' and 'illiteracy' as the main obstacles in the path of women's franchise and called it 'premature' for women to have a vote. Hence, the Government of India Act 1919 did not mention any reform on Indian women's franchise. The exclusion of women led to widespread outrage across India. The WIA responded by holding protest meetings against the decision of the Committee. In July 1919, Herabai Tata proposed a resolution demanding the removal of sex disqualifications.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, the question of Women's suffrage in India had attracted considerable public attention, and women asked themselves why they were excluded from the vote. Interestingly, there was no opposition from the whole of India on the question of female vote, and the country's men showed much sympathy for this matter. For instance, the Deputations of men who visited England in 1919 to plead for India urged the extension of the franchise to Indian women on the same basis as men. *The Vote*, in 1919, published an article by Tata and criticised the decision of the Committee. Tata stated, 'How can Indian women be called 'unfit' when the opportunity to exercise their votes and to show their capacities is not given to them'.<sup>19</sup> Indian women claimed that the demand for suffrage could not be called 'premature,' as women in Bombay and other parts of India already had the municipal vote. The Committee, however, proposed the disqualification of women, even though there was keen demand on the part of women to be on the electoral roll supported by men and that the women practised vote in municipal councils.

To the objection that purdah custom prevailed, Aga Khan argued in a letter to the *Times* that 'the great majority of Indian women of the well-to-do classes are not in seclusion'.<sup>20</sup> He countered the views of colonial officials that very few women would go to the polling booths by maintaining that purdah ladies fought in courts for their family property rights. As land and other property owners, purdah women played a part in the country's affairs. He maintained that the regressive views of Lord Southborough about Indian women would take away from them the rights of property and equality before the civil law they had enjoyed for centuries. However, a dissenting view was expressed by Cornelia Sorabji, who believed women in India were not yet eligible to practice suffrage rights. On the issues of the female franchise in India, Sorabji argued that most women were still illiterate and ignorant, and it would be dangerous to extend the vote to those 'left behind'.<sup>21</sup>

Indian women received immense help from the British women, who offered funds for the suffrage campaigns and, as Members of Parliament (MPs), supported their demands in the British Parliament. Cousins and Besant had close links with Irish and British Suffragettes, and they wanted their feminist friends to bring the matter of Indian women's suffrage to the House of Commons. Cousins frequently exchanged letters with women abroad to discuss the status of Indian women. She wrote to Millicent Fawcett, a prominent feminist and British

<sup>18</sup> 'Votes for Women,' *The Times of India*, 16 June 1919, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> 'Eastern Women and the Vote,' *The Vote*, October 3, 1919, p. 345.

<sup>20</sup> 'Votes for Indian Women,' *The Vote*, August 22, 1919, p. 299.

<sup>21</sup> From an Indian Correspondence, 'The Position of Women II,' *The Common Cause*, May 9, 1919, pp. 36-7.

suffragist, regarding the demands of Indian women. Fawcett's husband, Henry Fawcett, was an MP who often voiced Indian issues in the British Parliament. Fawcett sent a letter to the members of the Imperial Conference on behalf of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). She urged the Government to recognise the principle of allowing a share for women in national and political life. Indian women, she argued, practised medicine and law and conducted schools with skill, and to leave such women out of the 'progressive realm of responsible government in India would be an omission which could produce a sense of grievance leading to unrest and discontent among women.<sup>22</sup>

The 45 WIA branches emphatically protested the Southborough Committee's refusal to extend the franchise to women, and they appealed to British women to urge MPs to set aside the committee's decision. The WIA contended that 'there is no present social condition which forms an impassable barrier to Indian women exercising the right of voting.'<sup>23</sup> The WIA even came up with a solution to the purdah difficulty and suggested that it could be overcome if the colonial officials recorded the votes of such women at their homes by special election officers for the purpose. Another suggestion by the WIA asked for separate entrances for men and women at the polling booths in India.

Education, according to Indian women, was the only way women's status improved. The WIA's Madras Branch had achieved a blaze of glory in socio-economic reforms for women and children. Soon after its foundation, the WIA was seen as dedicated to securing the right to education for every girl and boy through schemes of compulsory primary education. The reason behind the establishment of women's organisations in India was that Indian women wanted a feminine space to represent the interest of the female masses, discuss social issues like purdah, illiteracy, child marriage, etc., and propose concern reforms. The claims of the Southborough Committee, which described 'illiteracy' among Indian women as a sign of backwardness, could be challenged by the fact that organised women already took up the cause of education in 1917 with the arrival of the WIA. Margaret Cousins, along with other educated Indian women, started campaigning for women's education.<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, only two Southborough Committee members had favoured extending the vote to women, Malcolm Hogg and Sir Sankaran Nair. Nair, the only Indian member, was most fitted to voice Indian opinion to the Government. He opposed the views of the Committee and pressed for the removal of the sex disqualification. He advised the Bombay Women's Committee on the Franchise to send a delegation to give evidence before the Joint Select Committee (JSC).

### **Indian Women, the Joint Select Committee and the Provincial Councils: Madras Took the Lead in 1921.**

In 1919, a special delegation of Indian women comprising Naidu, Besant and Herabai Tata, along with her daughter Mithibai Tata, visited London to present evidence before the JSC. The main objective of this delegation was to urge the Government to remove sex disqualification that excluded women from the

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Henry Fawcett, 'The Political Position of Indian Women' *The Common Cause*, July 5, 1918, p. 144.

<sup>23</sup> 'Indian Women Demand the Vote,' *The Vote*, June 27, 1919, p. 238.

<sup>24</sup> Aparna Basu and Bharti Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All-India Women's Conference 1927-2016*, Third Edition, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2018.

franchise. Herabai Tata, who had been working effortlessly for some years for equal suffrage rights for Indian women, was asked by the Bombay Women's Committee to proceed to England along with Mithibai Tata. Sankaran Nair also joined them in London. Mother and daughter prepared a memorandum to submit to the Committee as representatives of the Bombay Committee and the WIA. Tatas presented a Statement, 'Why Should Women Have Votes?' to the Indian Office on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1919, expressing various reasons to support the vote for Indian women:

"It has been recognised now in all countries that the sex barrier has been a grave mistake, is out of date, unworthy of the time, a relic of past days when might was above right. ... Why should India lag behind others in this respect and create sex barrier where one does not exist."<sup>25</sup>

Annie Besant, in 1919, in England, addressed a meeting arranged by the Women's Freedom League (WFL), a British women's organisation. Besant urged the claims for emancipation on behalf of the women of India. Besant, in 1919, moved a resolution that 'Indian women possess the same qualifications as are laid down for men in the Montague-Chelmsford Scheme, shall not be disqualified on account of sex'.<sup>26</sup>

Indian women claimed the participation of women in the Indian National Congress to justify their demand for the vote. Both the Congress and the Muslim League, by 1918, passed a resolution supporting female suffrage and the removal of sex disqualification. The WIA sent these statements of support from Indian men to the Committee. Indian men had proved to the Government that they believed citizenship should be based on equal political rights. However, despite providing evidence of support, various petitions, and intense lobbying on the part of women, JSC, in its final report, agreed to remove the sex disqualification but left it to the men in the Legislative Councils to decide women's presence on the voting register. At this moment, Indian women faced two crucial challenges- Firstly, they had to lobby the provincial Councils to pass a resolution removing sex disqualification. Secondly, they had to find a solution to the property qualification, which allowed an individual to vote. The WIA effectively took up the responsibility of lobbying the Councils and arranging support of Indian men to pass resolutions removing sex disqualification. The WIA worked hard to influence public opinion, and Cousins personally appealed to the men in the legislative councils. In Madras, every candidate for election to the Reformed Council was approached by the WIA so that their pledges be given to help women obtain the vote. In this way, the ground was well prepared for the effective passing of resolutions on sex disqualification. For instance, WIA gathered the support of Diwan Bahadur Krishna Nair, under whom Madras in 1921 had the honour of being the first Council to enfranchise its women on terms of exact equality with men. He moved a resolution that:

'This Council recommends to the Government that the sex disqualification prescribed in the Madras Electoral Rules for registration on the electorate roll be removed in respect of women'.<sup>27</sup>

Diwan brought forward a supportive argument for his resolution on Indian women. However, in the Madras Council, the debate ended in the historic step of removing the sex disqualification. In this regard, Madras

<sup>25</sup> 'Why Should Women Have Vote?' Statement, Indian Office Records, IOR/L/PJ/9/8, The British Library, London.

<sup>26</sup> 'Votes for Indian Women', *The Vote*, July 18, 1919, p. 258.

<sup>27</sup> 'Votes for Women: What Madras Has Done,' *The Times of India*, April 21, 1921, p. 10.

Presidency was the first to confer suffrage on its women in 1921. Bombay was the second to enfranchise its women and passed the resolution in the same year. However, the intention to bring women into the legislature was different in all the provinces. Bengal met with severe opposition from the men in the Council. The opponents of women's participation in political and public life based their arguments on women's inferiority and argued that women's political involvement would neglect the home and family.<sup>28</sup> A resolution concerning the enfranchisement of women in Bengal was decisively defeated in 1921. It was only in 1925 that women were given the vote in Bengal. Barbara Southard has argued that nationalist debate dominated public discourse in Bengal and elsewhere in India. Indian women, Southard examines, were able to win votes for women without mobilising mass support because they successfully linked their cause to nationalist issues.<sup>29</sup>

Women, however, formed only 5.03 per cent of the electorate in Bombay and 8.46 per cent in Madras. For the first time in history, Indian women exercised democratic rights and voted in the 1923 Elections. It was remarkable that more women came to the polls, and 75 per cent of the qualified women recorded their votes alone in Madras.<sup>30</sup> Notably, the WIA campaigned vigorously to generate awareness among Indian women. It had a women's voter's campaign before the election and ran various successful meetings. It visited the women in their homes and encouraged them to step out and vote and worked as helpers and volunteers to the voters at the polling stations.

In 1926, two women stood for elections for the Imperial Legislative Councils. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Hanneh Angelo were the first women to contest elections. The WIA supported both, but they were unsuccessful. Kamaladevi stated that 'there were only a few weeks left for election, and the question was who would have the temerity to contest with so little time to prepare'<sup>31</sup>.

However, it was only in 1926 that women were granted the right to be elected or nominated to the local Council. There was no other alternative for women but to be appointed to the Council through nomination. The WIA decided on a few names of well-known social workers (including Muthulakshmi Reddi) to be sent to the Government for nomination to the local Council. The WIA was mindful in selecting Reddi for this work because of the social cause she had dedicated to. Reddi became the first woman legislator appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. Soon, Reddi was elected Deputy President of the Council by her colleagues. Reddi accepted the nomination to represent "my sisters' cause in the Council."<sup>32</sup> This was an achievement for the women's organisations as now they have an educated and socially enlightened member in the Council capable of initiating social reforms for women. Reddi introduced various Bills concerning the abolition of the *devadasi* system, child marriage and other legal rights for women and, most importantly, establishing children's hospitals. As Forbes demonstrates, 'the demand for women's suffrage and political participation had consistently been justified in terms of 'social feminism' women needed to be in politics because only they could represent women's opinion and deal with the problems affecting women and children'. 'Social feminism' has been used to define women's demand for political participation (Forbes,

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Southard, 'Colonial Politics and Women's Rights: Woman Suffrage Campaigns in Bengal, British India in the 1920s', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 2, 1993, p. 414.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>30</sup> 'Indian Womanhood at the Polls,' *The Vote*, November 30, 1923, p. 379.

<sup>31</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces, Memoirs*, India International Centre, p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddy, *My Experience as a Legislator*, Current Thought Press, Madras, 1930, p. 4.



1979:8). Women endorsed the notion of 'social feminism' and based their demand to vote on the 'reformation' of the social status of women. Indian women, though recognised as Suffragettes and globally known for their struggle to get into politics, realised at some point that social reforms were equally needed to improve the condition of women in India. And the need for women to take the initiative to remove social inequalities from society. For instance, Reddi said, 'Women should take an interest in passing legislation to provide good housing, nutritious food, like milk to children, for prevention of disease, education, employment and establishing homes for destitute women'.<sup>33</sup>

### **Indian Women Rejected Communal Award: Demand for Adult Suffrage**

In the 1930s, a shift had been noticed in the women's movement as Indian women developed a more nationalistic approach. The organised Indian women were seen as dedicated towards the national movement. In 1927, the Simon Commission was appointed to further the constitutional reforms in India. However, the absence of any Indian on the Commission led to widespread protest. The WIA had joined Congress in the boycott against the Commission. In March 1930, Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience movement along with his famous Dandi March. Naidu and other nationalist women actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930. At this juncture, Indian Suffragettes prioritised the national demand for Swaraj over women's rights. The demand for women's suffrage was extensively linked and influenced by the nationalist agenda for Independence. For instance, Congress passed the fundamental rights resolution with a 'universal adult franchise' provision at its Karachi session in 1931. Eventually, the demand for women's suffrage became the universal demand for adult suffrage.

Indian women insistently included the universal adult franchise in their new Memorandum, which they prepared to submit to the Franchise Committee at the Round Table Conference (RTC). Two Indian women, Begum Shah Nawaz and Subbarayan, made their way to speak at the First RTC, held in London in 1930, with personal connections.<sup>34</sup> The appointment of Begum Nawaz and Subbarayan to the RTC caused a feeling of resentment among the majority of Indian women. Both women favoured the reservation of seats for women, which opposed the ideal of universalism.<sup>35</sup> Indian women responded with their demand for equality and professed 'fair field, no favour'. Interestingly, 'one by one, women who had previously supported the nomination and reserved seats added their voice to the demand for equality and no privilege. Women placed the nationalist position above their desire for wider female enfranchisement' (Forbes, 1998: 107). The first RTC, however, recommended a Franchise Committee, chaired by Lord Lothian, to increase franchise to women. The Lothian Committee extended the franchise to a limited number of women by adding 'wifehood' and 'educational' qualifications to the existing requirement of age and property. A wife and widow of a man enfranchised under property qualifications, over 25 and graduated women over 21 could now be eligible to vote.

<sup>33</sup> 'What Woman's Vote Stands for,' Reddi's Papers, Nehru Memorial, Museum & Library, New Delhi.

<sup>34</sup> Sumita Mukherjee, 'Radhabai Subbarayan: Debates on Indian Female Franchise in the 1930s', *Women's History*, 6, Autumn, 2016, p. 10-14.

<sup>35</sup> Radhabai Subbarayan, *A Statement on the Political Status of Women under the New Constitution*, Madras Publishing House, Madras, 1933.

The Committee, thus, intended to bring more women voters onto the electoral roll but was severely criticised. All vocal women's opinion in India was unanimous that the White Paper proposals for women's franchise were 'inadequate.' All three leading women's organisations protested and proposed an alternative that the Government should enfranchise all adult women in 'urban' areas.<sup>36</sup> Indian women emphasised the significance of getting 'urban women' enfranchised because they actively pressed for 'social and educational reforms. 'An urban vote, according to them, would ensure a more independent and well-organized vote'.<sup>37</sup> They were less interested in increasing quantity but stressed quality voters with educated, enlightened minds to initiate progressive legislation.

The Communal Award 1932 introduced separate electorates and reserved seats for women on communally divided lines. Indian women were seen united against the Award and claimed to represent the interest of all women. It has been argued that 'organised women were committedly opposed to communal politics, but this could result in insensitivity to minority perspectives, and many Muslim women gravitated towards separate organisations' (Rosalind Parr, 2021). Significantly, Indian women's organisations claimed to be non-political. Still, their linkage with Congress put them under suspicion of ignoring women's franchise and aligning with the mainstream agenda of nationalism. Communal tensions were being aroused within the AIWC in the 1940s. Organised women, such as Naidu, claimed communal harmony and professed Hindu-Muslim unity, but the reality differed. The tensions began manifested in the AIWC, and many Muslim women members left the organisation (Kumar, 1993: 92). Indian women's preference for nationalism sharply undermined the question of special reservations for minority women. 'The introduction of the minority women as differentiated women problematised both the unitary identity of women as well the nationalist patriotism of women citizens' (Roy, 2002: 482). Shareefah Hamid Ali found the idea of communal electorates and specially arranged seats as 'unpleasant.' She argued that it would be most degrading for her to get elected as a 'Muslim' and not as an 'Indian'<sup>38</sup>. Contrary to this, the dissent was expressed by Begum Shah Nawaz. She supported communal electorates for Muslim women and suggested that Muslim interests had to be protected by separate electorates. She argued that separate electorates were necessary to ensure the election of Muslim women.<sup>39</sup>

In 1933, women's representatives of the WIA, AIWC and the NCWI, namely, Begum Hamid Ali, Muthulakshmi Reddi, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, visited London to present evidence of franchise to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC). All three women met the JPC, reiterating their demand for 'adult suffrage.' While addressing a meeting of the London Branch of the WIA on July 25, 1933, Kaur stated, 'Indian women are greater nationalists than men'. While asking for adult suffrage, she argued that 'if women's franchise were not enlarged, they would not be in the picture of India's voting'.<sup>40</sup> Indian women, at this time, perceived that universal adult suffrage would not be possible or was a 'dead issue'. Eventually, the Government of India Act was enacted in 1935, but it did not accept the demand for adult suffrage. The Act of 1935 extended the

<sup>36</sup> 'A Note on Women's Franchise Under the New Indian Constitution,' Bulletin, *National Council of Women in India*, Vol. IV, No. 1, June 1934.

<sup>37</sup> Mary E. John, 'Alternate Modernities? Reservation and Women's Movement in 20<sup>th</sup> Century India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 43/44, October 21- November 3, 2000, p. 3825.

<sup>38</sup> Shareefah Hamid Ali to Eleanor Rathbone, October 29, 1932, 7ELR/18, The Woman's Library, London.

<sup>39</sup> Jana Everett, 'All the Women were Hindu and All the Muslims were Men: State, Identity Politics and Gender, 1917-1951', *Economics and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 23, Jun. 9-15, 2001, p. 2073.

<sup>40</sup> 'Women's Franchise,' *The Times of India*, July 25, 1933, p. 11.

franchise to more than 30 million people and a fifth of the adult population. A small number of them were women.<sup>41</sup> Ornit Shani has argued that the notion of conferring the right to vote and bringing women genuinely onto the electoral roll was beyond the purview of the bureaucratic colonial imagination.<sup>42</sup>

The remarkable fact about this period was that Indian women marked their presence in the Indian legislatures through nomination and election. Although they were few, at least now they had a voice in the legislatures which could represent women's interests in policymaking. The post-independence era brought significant changes in the social and political life of Indians. Remarkably, fifteen Indian women helped draft the constitution, including Ammu Swaminathan, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Hansa Mehta, Durgabai Deshmukh, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sarojini Naidu, Renuka Ray and others. With the Constitution of India coming into effect, India adopted the universal adult franchise in 1950. Indian women were granted the vote with the universal adult franchise in 1950.

## Conclusion

Indian women were consistently excluded from the reform scheme of the British Government. The struggle for political representation of Indian women became the most significant part of the women's movement in the twentieth century. Indian feminists were making their demands heard by negotiating with the government. The WIA and the AIWC were the two most influential organisations engaged in petitioning and lobbying the Government and provincial councils. The British Government resisted the effective measures to expand the franchise to women. It excluded women from the franchise scheme, calling it premature and based its objection on the prevailing social conditions in India.

Indian Suffragettes were 'strategic' in their universal demand as they effectively placed it within the nationalist agenda of Independence. Women based their demands on the notion of equality with men. There was a quest among these women to be recognised as 'citizens.' Therefore, Indian women consistently rejected any special treatment proposed to them. The proposed colonial schemes of reservation of seats and separate electorates and wife votes for women seriously attacked their 'individualism.'

It is significant to ask why Indian women demanded the vote. In many instances, women proclaimed their desire to eliminate social backwardness from society. They wanted to initiate social reforms to transform the status of women from 'oppressive' to 'progressive.' In a nutshell, women understood that they needed more educated women in the legislature to influence public policy concerning women and children. Thus, Indian women emphasised bringing 'urban' women onto the electoral rolls. The focus of the women's movement in India remained on social progress while pressing for a larger political representation of women.

<sup>41</sup> 'Did the British Empire resist women's suffrage in India,' *BBC News*, 22 February 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Ornit Shani, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and the Making of the Universal Franchise*, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 49.

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