

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ELECTORAL PROCESS

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During the period under review the Indian women simultaneously fought on the two fronts. They fought for political freedom from the British tutelage, they also fought the battle for the ballot and on both the fronts they achieved marvelous success. "With one hand they grasped passive resistance and with the other the vote. In twenty years (1917-1937) women in India passed from apathetic indifference to eager activity and an acute awareness of their responsibility as citizens."

Mrs. M.E. Cousins along with her husband came to India in 1915. On 20th August, 1917 the British Government announced its policy of introducing responsible government in India by stages. Then it was announced that the Secretary of State for India, Mr. E.S. Montague would visit the country to study conditions with a view to political expansion in India. Dr. James Cousins read the news and handed the newspaper to his wife Mrs. M.E. Cousins. Mr. Cousins asked the question about the female franchise-what about votes for women in India? Mrs. Cousins wrote to Prof. D.K. Karve at Poona enquiring about possibility of a deputation to wait upon the Secretary of State and the Viceroy. She got an encouraging reply from Prof. Karve. On 31st October 1917 a letter signed by 5 members of the senate of the Indian women's university was sent requesting the Secretary of State to receive a Deputation from the Women of India. Permission was given on 28th November and a wire was received communicating that a deputation of ladies on the subject of women's suffrage would be received. A copy of the address to be presented by the Deputation was prepared on the 1st December. It was Mrs. Cousins who drafted the address. The deputation waited upon Mr. Montague the Secretary of State of India and Lord Chemsford, the Governor-general and viceroy of India in Madras city on the 18th December, 1917. The Deputation, led by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, consisted of 14 members² who represented almost all the provinces of India.

The main demand was concerning the right of women for vote. It was said in the memorandum that "when the franchise is being drawn up, women may be recognized as `people and that it may be worded in such terms as will not disqualify our sex but allow our women the same opportunities • of representation as our men."³ It was a very bold and courageous step on the part of leading Indian women. For the first time they demanded officially the right to vote and gave public expression to their political feelings and aspirations. This event marked a distinct stage in the rise of modern Indian womanhood. To

Mrs. Naidu, it seemed very enterprising that a deputation of women should approach such high personages as the viceroy of India and the Secretary of State for India.

The Deputationists had assured Mr. Montague that the Congress was in sympathy with their demand. The Congress showed and proved its sincere sympathy by passing a resolution at Calcutta under the president ship of Dr. Annie Besant herself. It was resolved that "the same tests be applied to women as to men in regard to the franchise and the eligibility to all elective bodies-concerned with Local government and Education."⁴

The Bombay special Congress in September and the Delhi National Congress in December 1918 again endorsed the resolution for women's equality with men in matter of franchise. "Women possessing the same qualifications as are laid down for men in any part of the scheme shall not be disqualified on account of sex." It may be noted that the Congress was a representative body of all India. In 1917 the social reform conference also had passed a resolution, "that sex shall from no disqualification to women entering any position or profession for which she shows herself capable."⁵ Even the Muslim League supported the women's demand for franchise in September, 1918.

Moreover, in towns like Bombay and Madras women were already enjoying municipal franchise and felt no difficulty in exercising their right of vote. The British Government appointed a committee called the Southborough Committee⁶ to examine the question of franchise. Among the members of the committee, there was only one Indian Sir C. Sankaran Nair. Fortunately, he was a stout champion of the women's cause and eminent public worker. The committee visited India and when it was at Bombay requisition signed by 800 educated women as a sex should not be excluded from the franchise scheme. Several other requisitions expressing Indian women's claim to be included in the franchise scheme were also sent by the members of the former All India Women's Deputation, all the 40 branches of the Women's Indian Association, Women's Graduates' Association of Bombay, Women's Branches of the Home Rule League, Bharat Stri Mandal and other women's societies⁷ The committee itself had reported early in 1919 that it had received numerous petitions from women of the educated classes urging some form of female suffrage.

But without considering all aspects of the question, the committee rejected the demand for female franchise. The women as a class were totally excluded from franchise. In its opinion the Indian women were subjected to many social evils and disabilities, so it considered the grant of female franchise as a premature political experiment. The committee thus observed:

"In some provinces the municipal franchise includes women, but the evidence placed before us showed that it is sparingly exercised, except perhaps in Bombay city. We are satisfied that the social conditions of India make it premature to extend the franchise to

Indian women at this juncture, when so large a proportion of male electors require education in the use of a responsible vote. Further, until the custom of seclusion of women, followed by many classes and communities is relaxed, female suffrage would hardly be a reality."

But it was a peculiar argument; it wanted that all disabilities should exist permanently. It was a strange piece of logic for, far from righting a wrong it invoked the assistance of one wrong to perpetuate another."⁸ So in the Mont Ford report, desire was expressed for broad franchise but it also contained a warning against any such inordinate and sudden extension of franchise as might lead to a breakdown of the machinery through sheer weight of numbers. Sri Sankaran Nair did not agree with the proposal of the committee and expressed his dissent. Mr. Hogg, another member was also sympathetic but their views could not prevail.

The decision of the Southborough Committee led to wide spread discontent and resentment. Several meetings were organised and resolutions were passed. Cablegrams and telegrams were sent to England. Protest was vocal and voluminous, serious and stiff. At a largely attended meeting of the women of Bombay held on the 12th July, 1919 the following resolutions were passed unanimously and sent to England for sympathetic consideration and support:

"Public meeting of the women of Bombay protest against the recommendations of the Southborough Committee and the government of India disqualifying women for franchise in Reform Scheme on grounds that social conditions in India make it premature and impracticable to grant it, This meeting begs to draw attention to the fact that women in Bombay Presidency and other parts of the country already exercise franchise intelligently in municipal and other elections. It urges there is no reason to consider it premature and unpractical for qualified women to exercise higher vote and requests that their sex should not disqualify them. The meeting considers the postponement of this question a distinct grievance and the denial of due rights to women likely to deter their progress. It earnestly urges the government of India and the British Parliament to reconsider the question removing sex disqualifications."⁹

Towards the end of July, 1919 the women of Bombay learnt that the Southborough Committee wanted to create wrong impression before Joint Select Committee that the Indian women themselves had no desire for franchise. The Bombay 1922. Men and women, brothers and sisters both were addressed by the candidates in their manifestoes.⁷ Thus the process of enfranchising women in British India was completed between 1921 and 1929:

"Indian men showed great statesmanship, understanding of democratic values, sympathetic vision of the aspirations of the woman, half of humanity, and courage to take a great progressive step unknown to their previous political history."¹⁸

Various congratulatory messages were received from women's organizations all over the world by the women's Indian Association for its grand victory in the women's suffrage movement. Some organizations from abroad financed the Indian women Franchise Movement in response to Mrs. Cousin's appeal for funds. Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt had sent to the extent of 3000 Dollars. Women were getting franchise but they could not be elected or nominated to the provincial legislative councils or the Imperial legislature and they disliked this restriction also and expressed their resentment against it. Mrs. M.E. Cousins moved heaven and earth to secure the entry of women into the Legislatures. A large meeting was held at the Senate House of Madras under the joint auspices of the application to the authorities concerned. This was regarded as an impracticable task.

Meanwhile, the Karanchi Congress held in 1931 in a resolution on the Civil Disobedience sufferers especially congratulated the women of India who rose in their thousands and assisted the nation in its struggle for freedom, and respectfully assured them that no constitution will be acceptable to the Congress that discriminated against the sex in the matter of franchise.³⁷

But the publication of White Paper announcing Communal Award showed that the efforts made by the women representatives to get the status of equality in 1931 and 1932 went unheeded. Now a second memorandum was drawn up in June, 1933 to be submitted to the Joint Select Committee of Parliament. Three elected women representatives soon left for London. They appeared before the Joint Select Committee and insisted on equality with men in matter of franchise. These representatives were- Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Dr. (Mrs.) S. Muthulakshmi Reddi and Mrs. Sheefat Hamid Ali. They again insisted on adult franchise. No favour but free field was their motto. It was considered opinion of the leading women of India. The representatives were firm and resolute and they spoke soberly but distinctly'. At a largely attended gathering in the Friends, House on July 12, 1933. Mrs. Hamid Ali said, "We have come to tell you what we want, and not to hear from the committee or from even friendly English women, what they want."³⁸ To her the women's franchise proposals in the White Paper were nothing but nonsense.

So far, in many cases women were successful in contesting, on terms of equality with men, elections for seats on municipal corporations and academic bodies of Universities. In Madras Mrs. R. Lakshmipathi, Mrs. R.V. Shastri and Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan were elected to the corporation by overwhelming majority of votes defeating their male rivals, Dr. (Mrs.) S. Muthulakshmi Reddi was elected by the Elected Municipal Council as the First Alderwomen. The Simon Commission recommended the ratio between female and male voters at 1:2, The Lothian Committee reducing the ratio fixed at 1:41/2 and the White Paper further reduced the ratio at 1:7. But the Select Committee increased the proportion.

References:

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3. Ibid
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5. Women's Work in Madras: Reminiscences, Madras, Women's Indian Association, p. 7
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9. Reddi, Dr. (Mrs.) S., Mrs. M. Cousins Her Work in India PP- 15-16
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