

ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE: ITS CONTRIBUTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS FOR UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN IN TAMIL SOCIETY

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Women in Tamil Nadu were socially weak, economically dependent and politically powerless till the end of 19th century. But the phase of transition with an awareness of the need to remove social disabilities of women could be seen more evidently. Though the doors of education for women were thrown open as early as the closing decades of 19th century, a more favourable climate and an increased involvement to avail the opportunity could be traced from the early decades of this century particularly due to a number of social legislations and increased political participation of women. In 1932, All India Women's Conference met at Madras to discuss about the franchise rights of women, their representation in the future constitution and upliftment of Women in Tamil Society.

Annual Conference of AIWC

The Women's Indian Association, Madras, moved towards the formation of All India Women's Conference in 1927. The aim of the conference was to promote education among women and to deal with the questions affecting the welfare of women and children. The first conference was held at Poona in 1927. The Annual Conference of All India Women's Conference held at Madras from 28 December 1931 to January 1932. Mrs. P.K. Roy was the president and Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was one of the vice-presidents. Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan represented Madras. In the standing committee of Madras was represented by Miss. C.N. Nallamuthuammal and Tamil Nadu by Mrs. Jesudas. The conference was held at Senate House, Madras. In the welcome address, Mrs. Nasir Hussain proudly remarked, the women of this province are advanced in education and tool as a very active part in public life.¹ A number of resolutions on education and social reforms were passed on the conference. Among other things they made an appeal to the government to appoint women in all the committees dealing with the education of women and caste distinctions should be removed from the application forms of educational institutions and abolition of caste distinctions in the school and college hostels. Among the Resolutions on special reforms, the conference condemned the amendment of Sarda Act,² appealed to the Provincial Government to enforce Devadasi abolition bill, extension of maternity and child welfare. It also condemned the practice of untouchability and the prevalence of professional begging. It protested against the legal disability of women in the case of inheritance of property and condemned the traffic on women and children.³

Aims and Objects of the AIWC

The following are the aims and objects of the All India Women Conference: a) To work for a society based on the principles of social justice, personal integrity and equal rights and opportunities for all. b) To secure recognition of the inherent right to every human being to work and to the essential of life such as food, clothing, housing, education, social amenities and security, in the belief that these should not be determined by accident of birth or sex but by planned social distribution. c) To support the claim of every citizen to the right to enjoy basic civil liberties. d) To stand against all separatist tendencies and to promote greater national integration and unity. e) To work actively for the general progress and welfare of women and children and to help women utilize to the fullest the Fundamental Rights conferred on them by the constitution of the Indian Union. f) To co-operate with people and organizations of the world for the implementation of these principles this alone can assure permanent international amity and world peace.⁴

Propagation against Polygamy

The leaders of All India Women's Conference tried their level best to propagate against the evils of certain social customs, which hindered the progress of women. These leaders supported the bills of social reforms supporting monogamy and women's right to property. Muthulakshmi Reddy supported all the social reforms relating to monogamy. The members of Women's Indian Association held meetings throughout the presidency and educated women on the purpose of legislations pending before the legislatures.⁵ The Association presented a memorandum favoured monogamous principle in regard to the Hindu Sacramental Marriage. Miss. Vilasini Shenoy, advocate of Madras explained the objectives of bills in all the conferences. Giving evidence before the Hindu Law Committee Ambujammal, H.A. Janaki, B.T. Chokkammal gave evidence in favour of monogamy. Radha Bai Subbrayan, a member from Madras to Central Assembly piloted a bill on monogamy and succeeded in her efforts due to the efforts of enlightened women of the province.⁶

Propagation against Dowry System

The other social evil which made the marriage of a girl of middle and poor classes an intolerable burden to the parents was the dowry system. Through the system prevailed in many parts of Tamil Nadu, it was predominant in the Madras Presidency. Unless parents of girls were willing to give away as dowry to their daughters much more than what they could actually afford, it was not possible to get bridegrooms. Even the educated people did not have done away with this pernicious practice.⁷ The Sixth Session of All India Women's Conference was held at Madras in 1931. In this conference the members requested the parents to educate their daughters so that they would gain self confidence and would enable them to take decisions in personal matters like marriages. Muthulakshmi Reddy firmly believed that the spread of education among women alone could drive away this sort of evil from the society. They propagated in favour of inter-caste marriages to discourage the dowry system. With the growth of education among boys and girls, their outlook and vision

were being widened. In higher educational institutions like colleges and universities, coeducation prevailed. So boys and girls got an opportunity to decide their future. The educated women also began to enter government services and this employment of women proved injurious to the dowry system.⁸

Propagation in Favour of Prohibition

The evil practice of drinking alcohol was prevalent in almost all the parts of the country and in Tamil Nadu the revenue from excise was very large. In the Madras Council Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy pleaded with the Government to enact legislation to put an end to this evil toddy shops and drove their womenfolk from their houses to earn their living. She requested the Government to introduce prohibition in two or three districts as a first step towards the goal of total prohibition in twenty years. Again in the Sixth Session of All India Women's Conference, Madras, 1931, resolutions were passed in favour of prohibition. During the freedom struggle, women politicians like Ambujammal, Lakshmi pathi and Mrs. Sankara Iyer picketed the liquor shops and courted arrest for the same.⁹

In 1937 the Madras Government under the leadership of C. Rajagopalachariar introduced prohibition in Salem District and in 1938 it was extended to Cuddalore and in 1939 to North Arcot District. This step brought relief to the poor to a certain extent. But in the next year the government decided to re-open toddy shops. Protest meetings were held by women of the province. Ambujammal, a true Gandhian addressed a number of meetings and pleaded with the government to reintroduce prohibition to preserve the health of the society. She called upon the women of the province to undertake propaganda from village to village and also led delegation from each district to the authorities to cancel the order of suspension of prohibition. Though total prohibition was effected late in Tamil Nadu, the efforts put forth by the women of the province in the earlier dates were quite remarkable.¹⁰

Propagation of Birth Control

In view of the immense increase in population of country and having regard to the poverty of the people and low physical standard of women, educated women supported the idea of Birth Control at Sixth Session of All India Women's Conference, held at Madras, in 1931. Resolutions were passed in favour of appointing a committee of medical women to study and recommend ways and means of educating the public to regulate the size of their families. Muthulakshmi Reddy spoke about the Birth control policy in the Lucknow conference in 1932-1933. She observed that strict enforcement of Sardha Act would postpone the age of marriage for the boys and girls and it would help in a way the problem of increasing number of children. She wrote continuously in the press propagating birth control in the face of opposition from the orthodox people who felt that the birth control propaganda was against their religious practices and also the will of God.¹¹

Encouragement to Inter-Caste Marriages

Women's Indian Association and Women Conference on 1931 encouraged the inter-caste marriage. Dr. Hari Singh Gaur's Bill permitted marriage among Hindu and allied faiths, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. In 1933 Mr. Bhavan Das tried to introduce a bill to widen the scope of inter-caste marriages but he was not successful due to orthodox opposition. Education enlarged the vision of the public. The social enactments enabled women to attain economic independence. Moreover co-education gave them an opportunity to free mixing and enabled them to take decisions on personal matters like marriages. Moreover they gained self confidence due to their educational attainments. Again the teachings of Mahatma against caste distinctions encouraged them to push back their caste to a secondary place.¹²

Achievements of AIWC

The AIWC of 1931 made great contribution in the enlightenment of women under the illustrious leadership of eminent women like Margaret Cousins, Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, kamala Devi Chattophadhyaya and such others.¹³ AIWC was responsible for starting the first Home Science College in India at Delhi in 1932, which is popularly known as the Lady Irwin College. AIWC saved the children's fund in 1942, which later became the foundation for the Indian Council of Child Welfare. AIWC also succeeded in getting the following laws passed by the Government of India. They were, the special Marriage Act, 1954, The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, 1955, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Children Act, 1956 and the Dowry Act, 1961. It also succeeded in helping working women to get equal pay and facilities for equal work with men.¹⁴

Women's Indian Association is the mother of all other women's organizations in Tamil Nadu. The working condition of the women's organizations proves that they are working, earning money and doing some help for the economic development for women. The history of Women's Indian Association shows that hundreds of women received social and political training only through it. 90% of the elite women all over India were trained only by this women organization. These organizations have now restricted their activities only to social welfare of women and children. In short, the roles played by women's organization are not as effective as they were before independence.

References

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