

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN INDIA: THEIR WORK AND STRUGGLE FOR UNIVERSAL ADULT FRANCHISE FOR WOMEN IN TAMILNADU

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After the end of the election the women's organizations in India started their work for universal adult franchise energetically. They utilized the use of their own papers for the purpose of universal adult franchise. Representatives of various women's organizations in India met in Bombay in April 1931 under the leadership of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu and drafted a memorandum demanding no reservation of seats for women or special nomination and it emphasized women to contest in the elections on equal terms with men in mixed general election as in European countries. This memorandum was presented to the Viceroy of India and the Members of the Second Round Table Conference. The Stri-Dharma published the zeal of memorandum and insisted the demand for the equality of citizenship among men and women of India.¹

Eleven Female Members

When the idea of Round Table Conference was conceived, the women organizations urged for the representation of women. They submitted the list of eleven female members for the consideration. The names were, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Brijal Nehru, Hamid Ali, Kamaladeve, Shave, Rani Rajwade, Rastunji Faridoonji, Lazarus, and Muzuruddin. The Stri-Dharma insisted that the women's co-operation was as essential and as precious for the solution of political problem as it was for social, economic, and educational problems. The paper emphasized that two or three women out of hundred members at the Round Table Conference could not sufficiently represent half of India's population. The paper called on every political party in the country for securing adequate representation for women. But All India Women Conference was asked for three of its representatives and the Women's Indian Association the much older organization would share one seat from the former.²

Selection of Women Representatives for 2nd Round Table Conference

Radhabai Subbarayan, Begum Shah Nawas and Sarojini Naidu were the selected women representatives for the Second Round Table Conference. The Anandha Bodhini published the message from Sarojini Naidu about the Round Table Conference. In it, the paper emphasized that the people of India should not feel themselves as Muslims and Hindus but Indians. It asked the women of India to render their support to attain success in the Round Table Conference.³ The Tamilagam felt in discontent that the government was

against the development of women, particularly in the field of women franchise. It added that the women of India should support the mission of Sarojini Naidu in the Round Table Conference.⁴ It was said that Sarojini Naidu was selected only to represent on general issues. Women's organizations in India and papers like the *Stri-Dharma* demanded the authorities concerned that Sarojini Naidu would be their representative in all matters pertaining to their status in the forthcoming new Constitution.⁵ In spite of these efforts, the demand was rejected by the authorities.

Special Franchise for Women and Age of Voting

In the conference Radhabai Subbarayan from Madras demanded special franchise for women and age of voting should be lowered to the age of twenty one to be consistent with the age of men.⁶ But the women's organizations did not go with her line; they stood on the line of the joint memorandum. They considered wifehood qualification as objectionable on the ground that it placed a premium on marriage and perpetuates the idea of women's dependence on men and did not recognize their independent right of suffrage. So there were two opinions among the women on adult franchise one was the idea of gradually increasing the franchise and special representation and the other was demand for universal adult suffrage and equal rights. But both demanded the reduction of disparity between the voting strength of men and women. The paper *Vote* registered its view in its editorial that it didn't agonize about the methods recommended by the franchise committee. But it urged strongly that the terms of the franchise should be the same for women as for men, and that those terms should be such as to enfranchise as nearly as possible the same number of women as men.⁷ It also said that it was unthinkable that in a great country like India, there should be any inequalities in the franchise of men and women more especially as Ceylon was enjoying equal franchise for men and women at that time. Because of the repeated demand of the women's organizations with the backing of the press, the Franchise Sub-Committee of the Round Table Conference met at London to enquire about the reduction of disparity between men and women voters.⁸

Lothian Committee

Women demanded to remove the provision of making the application for the special qualification in the election to the authorities. Even though the demand was showed through continuous protests, the committee was not for removing the application condition. Then another Franchise committee called Lothian Committee was appointed to solve the problem of women's franchise in India. It visited India twice in 1931 and 1932. It circulated a questionnaire to various women's organisations. The *Stri-Dharma* published the questionnaire for the discussion among women.⁹ The leaders of the Women's Indian Association and the All India Women's Conference circulated the questionnaire and answers to their members for approval. Some members were chosen to meet the committee to articulate their opinion. The Lothian Committee received documents from women supporting universal franchise; but they also heard from women who favoured

reservations.¹⁰ After analyzing the questionnaire and documents, the franchise committee realized that it was necessary to increase women's franchise. They aimed at the proportion of 1:4. Apart from the wife or widowhood qualification the committee proposed mere literacy as a qualification for vote.¹¹ But they rejected the plea for universal adult franchise. By covering the news of Indian Ladies conference at Triplicane held in July 1932, the Swadesmitran expressed its opposition to Lothian Committee for not giving adult franchise.¹²

The Stri-dharma uttered its dissatisfaction strongly on the report that Indian women wanted no reservation of seats; but would fight their way into the councils and local boards. As laid down in the memorandum, Indian women wanted equal opportunities to serve the country with men, and therefore every woman of twenty one years and above should have franchise and the committee's report would perpetuate caste system.¹³ It also condemned the report particularly the reservation for women clause through the resolutions made in the Madras Ladies Conference in October 1932. In 1933, the Joint Parliament Committee's Report known as the White Paper incorporating the recommendations of Lothian Commission was published. In it, no attempt was made to remove the gender disqualification in franchise. All efforts made by the women organisations ended in futile. The Indian Ladies Magazine accepted the property qualification as recommended in the white paper for eligibility to vote in the elections to the Provincial and Federal Legislatures.

But it strongly disapproved of the proposed special condition under which women may be enfranchised, namely being the wife or widow of a person possessing the property qualification at present entitling him to vote for the Provincial legislatures. It considered that the women's rights as citizens should not depend on marriage. Therefore it recommended that the women of twenty one years of age in all urban areas should be enfranchised.¹⁴

Joint Select Committee

The magazine insisted that more women's voice should be raised in question of urgency and importance of this matter. Thus, it tried its best to build public opinion in favour of adult franchise.¹⁵ In March 1933, the women representatives prepared an alternate proposal for an intervening stage. Three women representatives, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Hamid Ali were sent to London to give evidence before the Joint Select Committee.¹⁶ The Stri-Dharma expressed its happiness that its readers would be glad to know that Muthulakshmi Reddy who prevailed upon to go to England and give evidence, on behalf of all the organized women's associations in India, before the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the question of women's franchise and their status in the new Constitution.¹⁷

Initially Muthulakshmi Reddy was not ready to accept the invitation on the grounds of personal sentiments and principles. The women organisations and the papers like the Stri-Dharma convinced her to go and give evidence for the wellbeing of the women in India. Even though the women's organisations continuously insisted on adult suffrage, they had an alternative option. They opted for at least adult suffrage in the urban constituencies.¹⁸ The Stri-Dharma criticized that the women representatives from India had not been given a

proper opportunity to put their case before the full committee and the press in England was not as sympathetic and helpful as it might have been.¹⁹ It also marked that it was proud of the firm and courageous stand taken by Indian women representatives in the course of their evidence given before the Joint Select Committee. It added that the courage, fine sense of proportion, honesty of purpose, and a true all India spirit were the characteristics of the Women's movement, and the three veteran representatives were fully worthy of the trust that was put in them. They had added dignity and honour to the women's cause. It offered them its warmest and most sincere appreciation and gratitude for what they had accomplished.²⁰

The representatives of All-India Women's Organization also met the Joint Select Committee. They were sided with the committee. The Stri-Dharma criticized the organization as conservative and communal.

It exposed its sadness that it could not understand why the Joint Select Committee had failed to show the women's organisations the same courtesy and concession as they did to the communal, the die-hard and to the ultra orthodox groups from India and the later evidence was more to their taste than that of the women's.²¹ But finally, the Joint Select Committee did not alter its report. All leading women's organisations vehemently opposed the committee's stand. The Stri-Dharma exposed vehement opposition of the Indian women and showed its unhappiness on the report whereas The Indian Ladies Magazine wrote that even in the most advanced countries, absolute equality had not been attained yet; but the government's work had benefited in India by the growing influence of women. The magazine felt slight happiness about the increasing of women's franchise.²² In the round table conferences, it was decided to grant increasing women franchise and special representation to them. It was decided that from ten percent to twenty five percent of the total population of women should be given the right to vote. Even though women were disappointed with the report, they didn't renounce their struggle. During the time a by-election in the Madras city was announced in October 1934. Muthulakshmi Reddy organized a meeting in Madras and requested the women voters to support any candidate who would promise to work for the betterment of the women community. This message was carried to the women voters of Madras through the columns of the Stri-Dharma.²³

Rukmani Lakshmipathi

The Women's Indian Association requested its members to support the candidature of Rukmani Lakshmipathi of Congress party, because she was ready to follow the manifesto of the association and she was also a former member of the Women's Indian Association. The women candidate was supported by the major daily of the province, the Hindu. It wrote that Rukmani Lakshmipathi had a record of service and sacrifice to her credit which entitled her to the unstinted support of all who placed national interests before communal and sectional ends.²⁴ With the support of the women's organisations and major newspapers, she won the election in a thumping majority. She made a record that she was the first elected woman member of the Legislative Council of Madras.²⁵ The Stri-Dharma praised her

triumph not for anything; but she was a women.²⁶ It added that she was known for her diligence in public work and for the courage with which she had undertaken difficult causes in which she did not shrink from likely defeat. It was so nearly impossible to get any of the political groupings to put forward the women candidates for the government of local or party election that women would know that RukmaniLakshmipathi was receiving encomiums for her work.²⁷

The women enfranchisement had very peculiar pages in the history of Tamilnadu. It was given not on the pity of men folk; but by the protracted struggle of womenfolk. The role played by the press in Tamilnadu was one of the main reasons for the women's rising and they broke the custom, usage and also the legal ban. When the Constitution of India came into force on 26 January 1950, the sex disqualification of franchise was legally removed, women were provided with adult suffrage. Thus, the adult suffrage was incorporated in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution.

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