CHAPTER – III

WOMEN MOVEMENT
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The women's movement in India is a rich and vibrant one, which has taken various forms in different parts of the country. The movements and efforts for gender equality in political arena launched by feminists since the closing years of the nineteenth century, symbolized the beginning of women empowerment and their socio-political transition. The women's movement does not stand in isolation and it is an integral part of other social movements.\(^1\) Women's movement in India has grown in phases and it is associated with national trends. They are (1) the social reform movements during the freedom movement, (2) the movement from 1947 to 1975 and (3) the movement emerging during and after the International Women's Decade.\(^2\) On the basis of the ideological paradigm, Gail Omvedt classifies women's movements into two types: (1) women's equality movement and (2) women's liberation movement. The former does not directly challenge the existing economic or political or family structure, but rather aims at attaining an equal space for women in it, and also abolishing the most offensive remnants of feudal patriarchy, whereas the women’s liberation movement directly challenges the sexual division of labour itself.

Women in Tamil Nadu have been deprived of power within the family by the religious and social traditions. They have been powerless over their own lives because of forced subservience to fathers, husbands and in-laws, as also due to violence within the family and limited educational opportunity. They have lived

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in a social set up in which power and authority in both domestic and political spheres have been ‘built around a hierarchy of males’.

The women’s movement has its origin in the social reform movement in the early nineteenth century that attempted to ameliorate the condition and status of women, particularly those from higher castes. Social reformers were the first to challenge the traditional subordination of Hindu women. They fought to grant women some degree of dignity and status but within the framework of Hindu revivalism. They continued to emphasize the patriarchal ideals of Hindu women as self-sacrificing, selfless and submissive wives and mothers. Only a few progressive thinkers, such as Jyotiba Phule and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar perceived oppression of women as a traditional instrument for maintaining social inequality and the dominance of high castes in Indian society.

Women Legislations in the Colonial Era

In response to the Indian agitation for representative government, the British government set up a committee headed by Montague and Chelmsford in 1919 to work out a proposal for constitutional reforms aiming at the inclusion of some Indians in the political process of governance. Many groups presented their case for representation before the committee. Among the delegations, the delegation led by Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins demanded that women should be granted the same rights of representation in legislatures as men. Under the pressure of social reformers, the British rulers were forced to pass a series of legislations making various inhuman practices illegal. As a result, Sati was outlawed (1825), Widow Remarriage was made legal (1856), Special Marriages Act passed to allow inter community marriages (1870), age of consent was

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revised to 12 years (1891), women obtained the right to vote in Madras Province (1921), and women received limited right to property (1937). From the late nineteenth century, the situation began to improve. By the Married Women’s Property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, the married women achieved the right to own property.

In Tamil Nadu, a movement against devadasis was organized in 1892. Slowly it spread to other parts of the country. The question of devadasis was taken up by Muthulakshmi Reddi when she became a member of the Legislative Council in Madras Province in 1926. With her efforts, the Prevention of Devadasi (Dedication Bill) 1929 was passed. The Bombay Government followed the example set by the Madras Government and passed a similar Act in 1934.

Gandhi’s Philosophy for Women’s Movement

Gandhi supported the notion of women’s movement and he emphasized the need for unity and solidarity against the British rule. Gandhi consistently used the Hindu goddess, Sita, as the symbol of a supportive and sacrificing wife and in the process, “Gandhi was constructing a new ideal for Indian women that rewrote passivity and self-suffering as strength”. Vina Mazumdar, Devaki Jain and others viewed Gandhi as a great liberator who adopted a revolutionary approach in raising the status of women. Malvika Karlekar argues that Gandhi invented the

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8 Government of India passed an Act in 1956 whereby traffic in women and children was prohibited and the law came into force in 1958; Janaki Nair, Women and Law in Colonial India, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1996, p.166.
9 Mammoohan Kaur, op.cit., p.23.
‘tradition’ of a new feminity. The Gandhian method of self-questioning and analysis is now being picked up by the women’s movement which denies the universality of incarcerating stereotypes.\(^\text{13}\) Gandhi, the leader of India’s non-violent freedom struggle, played an important role in channelising the energies of the emerging women’s movement into the nationalist movement. Gandhi synthesized the Hindu ideology on women with liberal western ideology on equality in the public sphere. Gandhi opposed social customs that subordinated them. He envisaged a significant role for women in Indian society and advocated gender equality in legal, educational, social and political spheres. Gandhi in his own way facilitated the possible involvement of women in politics. Hence Gandhi reaffirmed their traditional role in the family as wife and mother and did not assign any significance to women’s productive role within the economy. According to Gail Pearson, these were not mere extensions of household activities, but were intrinsic to the type of movement Gandhi had envisaged in which such constructive work performed by both men and women had an extremely valuable role to play.\(^\text{14}\) Thus, Gandhi projected women as the potential vanguard of the non-violent process of social and political transformation without questioning fundamental structures of patriarchy. Many Indian and Tamil Nadu political leaders were western educated and had their education in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge at London. Although Gandhi favoured female education for all sections of society, he too advocated women’s education to improve their traditional roles as wives and mothers in the patriarchal family.\(^\text{15}\)

Madhu Kishwar, the editor of *Manushi*, a women’s journal and an activist-scholar, also emphasized the need to look into traditions thus: “Our cultural

\(^\text{13}\) Malvika Karlekar, *Hinduism Revisited: Relevance of Gandhi Today*, Centre for Women’s Studies, Delhi, 1991, p.46.


traditions have tremendous potential within them to combat reactionary and anti-
women ideas if we can identify their points of strength and use them creatively”.16

Women’s Political Struggle

The leading social and religious reformers in the nineteenth century were males whose principle objective was to cleanse and reinforce family life. For those early pioneers, women were, at first, objects of their emancipatory efforts. But in the course of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they became more and more subjects in the political and social spheres as it is clear from the examples of women’s political struggle around a variety of issues. Yet, the basic understanding of the leaders of the national movement on women’s issues continued to be filtered through the existing patriarchal system.

The women’s movement was both a necessary antecedent and a consequence of the changing social and political environment. Educational and social reforms for women formed an integral part of modernizing the country and society. Women had organized themselves in a variety of ways in an effort to improve their position in the society. There were a few organizations outside the realm of social reform as the Bombay Graduate Women’s Union or the Women’s branch of the Home Rule League.17 The women’s movement in India took off in the 1920s, building on social reform movement. The women’s movement progressed during the period of high nationalism and the freedom struggle, both of which shaped its contours. Despite the longstanding and vigorous women’s movement, patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in India, influencing the structure of its political and social institutions and determining the opportunities open to women and men. Firstly, the reformers concentrated on the role of movements and on the role of indigenous male elite in determining tropes of

modernity for women. Secondly, the development of women’s movement in the colonial period ran parallel to the independence struggle. In other words, it was a struggle within the struggle. The social reformers, revivalists as well as liberals, perceived the education of women as an instrument for changing their subordinated status in society. The new urban elite, drawn mostly from the upper castes, imbibed the enlightened western philosophy of individualism and humanism. They perceived barbaric traditional practices against women as a civilization lapse and as recognizable social evils. Thus emerged the social reform movement as an attempt on the part of the new elites to redress, sometimes with and sometimes without British help, the worst features of the old patriarchal order.

Women’s organizations, loosely allied to each other, pursued the struggle for emancipation. Feminism in India is not radical, man-hating and family hating as the feminism of the west. Family in India, on the other hand, “enjoys a place in the high pedestal”.

Involvement of Associations

Social reform movement also became instrumental in the growth of women’s organizations, mostly in urban areas during 1880-1893. The focus of women’s movement during this period was, however, to improve the status of women within the ideological framework of Hindu revivalists and the emerging class of western educated intelligentsia.

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The spread of women's education was accompanied by the growing self-confidence of women which was inspired by the national movement. The first effort to build all-India women's organization was made in 1910s. In 1917, the WIA was set up in Madras, with the help of an Irish suffragette, Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant on non-sectarian basis. It soon developed branches in major cities throughout the country and its primary focus was on seeking an enlarged role for women in public life. Annie Besant was the first alien woman to become the President of the INC in 1917, followed by Sarojini Naidu, the first Indian woman who became the President of the INC in 1925 and followed by Nellie Sengupta in 1933. Because of physical seclusion, Indian women had little contact with the colonial administration except through the experiences of their families, fathers, brothers and husbands. Depending on the location of the annual meetings of the INC, women began to attend as observers and even delegates. They, however, did not participate in the debate.

As president of the INC in 1931, Jawaharlal Nehru accepted equal political and legal rights of women and introduced the concept of equal obligations along with equal rights in the Fundamental Rights resolution passed by the INC in that year. He asserted that "Women must be trained to participate in every department of human activity and play an active part in all professions and sphere. For this purpose, they must fight social institutions like purdah, untouchability, caste system and marriage laws. But above all, they must participate in the struggle against the root cause of political subjugation and economic oppression. The women's movement would suffer set back if it remained isolated from the general political and economic struggle for liberation in the country".

The national movement against British colonial rule in undivided India, spearheaded by Gandhi, was instrumental in bringing women in large numbers

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24 Muniruddin Qureshi, *op. cit.*, p.36.
into the public space. Gandhi played a crucial role in creating a favorable atmosphere for women’s participation in the freedom struggle by insisting that the struggle for women’s equality was an integral part of the movement of swaraj. His choice of non-violent satyagraha as the mode of struggle also allowed women to play a far more active and creative role than the masculine-oriented movements.

After the Jallian Wallabagh tragedy, Gandhi was convinced that without the aid of women he could not successfully continue the non-violent battle for freedom. He wrote, “I expect great things from women. I expect them to do their full share in the struggle. Let government capture every one of our soldiers. I do not mind. Our work is so very easy that even our women can carry it on and without difficulty”.

In such cases, the nationalistic character of the family was clearly influential. A second generation of women reformers, who were advocates of women’s rights, like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Lady Piroj Bai Mehta, Nellie Sengupta were some of the prominent women activists of this period. Several other women were active on causes other than the Independence movement and Prabhavati Mirza (a powerful trade unionist), Kamini Roy (a social reformist) and Aghorekamini Roy (founder of a social welfare women’s organization) came under this category. A number of these reformist and revolutionary women were also eminent writers. Nagendrakala Mustafi, Mankumari Basu, Kamini Roy, Kasibhai Kanitkar, Mary Bhore, Godavribai Samaskar, Kamala Sathianandan, Rameshwari Nehru and Rukmanibai were examples of this stream of women activists who combined activism and writing.

26 Suruchi Thapar-B Jorkert, op.cit., p.54.
27 Shantha Mohan, op.cit., p.5.
Women’s Association

Between the 1820s and 1850s, reformers who favoured legislative intervention by the colonial state and a wider program of female emancipation, set up organizations like the Brahmo Samaj in eastern India, the Prarthana Samaj in western India, the Arya Samaj in northern India and the Theosophical Society in southern India. These organizations drew women into the public spheres of formal education, and eventually into employment, political participation and leadership of campaign. Saraladevi Chaudhurani, perhaps the most remarkable of the “new women”, was both a feminist and a nationalist and an active participant in both the social reform and nationalist movements. She was one of the first women to see the need for an association for women. She argued that women’s issues could not be addressed adequately as an adjunct of the National Social Conference (set up by the INC in 1887) or by men who “advertise themselves as champions of the weaker sex, equal opportunities for women, female education and female emancipation… their pet subjects of oratory at the annual show but who actually lived in the “shade of Manu, unwilling to allow women to have independent action”. Saraladevi’s efforts came on the heels of several women’s groups and associations initiated by men also. The notable among them are:

1. The Madras Native Association was founded in 1852.
2. Bharat Ashram at Bengal was started by Keshab Chandra Sen in 1870.
3. Arya Mahila Samaj at Poona was started by Pandita Ramabai in 1882.
4. Madras Social Reform Association was founded in 1892.
5. The Young Women’s Christian Association of India (YWCA) had become a national one in 1896.

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6. The Women Indian Association was formed by Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins at Madras in 1917.\(^{31}\)

7. The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was formed in 1925 and

8. AIWC in 1927.

These associations, initiated or inspired by men, were critical training grounds for women, allowing them access to education and their first experience with public work. But they also tried to impose traditional gender roles and values. Women’s organizations emerged in the twentieth century. All India Muslim Ladies Conference (AIMLC), the WIA, the NCWI and the AIWC were organizations which demonstrated the close ties between social reform, education for women and nationalist politics. The Tamil Nadu Women’s Conference was organized by S. Meenambal Sivaraj, wife of a High Court Judge N.Sivaraj, T. Neelambigkai Ammaiayar, daughter of the distinguished Tamil scholar, Maraimalai Adigal, Dharmambal and others. After 1910, women, experienced in organizing and working in local women’s associations, were convinced that women should take the leadership into their own hands. They started provincial and national women’s organizations. These associations were inevitably elite, bourgeois and urban, consisting of women from the upper class with the advantage of social status, education and privilege, but redeemed by their desire to serve all women.\(^{32}\) Sarojini Naidu, hailing from a family of scholars, daughter of a great scientist, a brilliant student, educated at Cambridge, a well-known poet, and married an eminent doctor who was outside her caste, became a leader in her own right.\(^{33}\)

**Theosophical Society**

Madame Bhavatsky’s first attempt to form an organization was made in


\(^{32}\) Muniruddin Qureshi, *op.cit.*, pp.36-40.

\(^{33}\) Devaki Jain, (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.22.
Cairo. It did not succeed. Madame Bhavatsky and H.S.Olcott were utterly determined to carry on the movement. They established the Headquarters of the Society in Bombay. In 1898, the Society began to hold its Annual Convention alternately in Adyar in Madras and Benares and also decided to hold periodic world conventions outside India. With Annie Besant a new era began. She gave a great lead by urging members to theosophize on various fields: social, economic and political. Thus she applied Theosophy to practical ends. For this purpose she instituted the Theosophical Order of Service and Sons of India in 1908. They opened a branch at Madras in the name of Theosophical Society. The Headquarters at Adyar was enlarged by the purchase made by Madame Bhavatsky and H.S.Olcott Gardens. The declared objects of this society were to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex or color. Margaret Cousins(1878-1954), an Irish feminist and Theosophist, helped to organize a deputation of Indian women in 1917 to petition for an extension of franchise to Indian women. Based in Madras, this group utilized the network of the Theosophical Society and worked for political ends such as the franchise as well as social reforms.

**All India Women Conference**

The AIWC, one of the oldest voluntary organizations in the country, was founded in 1927 by Margaret Cousins, an Irish Lady, who had made India her home. AIWC’s original concern was women’s education but gradually it took up various social and economic issues concerning women, such as purdah, child marriage, and women’s property rights. The AIWC met in Madras in 1932 in an atmosphere of grave concern and avidly discussed the status of women and formulated its demands-fundamental rights, franchise and representation of women. Gandhi was unwilling to have women in the political and direct action programmes. The women protested eloquently, pointing out that he had left the care of his ashram in his absence, completely in the hands of women.34

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At present, AIWC has over one lakh members in 500 branches all over the country. It is recognized as a premier organization working for women's development and empowerment. The AIWC has a glorious past with eminent members such as Sarojini Naidu, Romeswari Nehru, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Muthulakshmi Reddi, Lakshmi Menon and Masuma Begum having as its presidents. The socio-economic program was started in 1995 with the objective of capacity building for women by giving financial support for their entrepreneurial endeavours and to make them economically independent. The literacy campaign of AIWC was intensified in 1996 by initiating the formal education programs, primarily the education for the school drop out girls and condensed courses in education for adult women by 27 branches of AIWC all over India.

Education was seen as a major vehicle of reform. January 1927 saw the first All India Conference on educational reform in Poona, bringing together women from different parts of the country. Henceforth this conference was held every year and laid the foundation of the AIWC which grew into an important national women's organization. The model of womanhood that this first women's organisation in India sought to promote is well illustrated in women history. This was the image of feminine caring. This comes through in their goals, objectives, activities and attitudes towards women in need.\(^{35}\)

The AIWC was formed through an amalgamation of various regional women’s groups including the WIA. They were non-political organizations interested in promoting educational opportunities for women and improving their position by social and legal reforms. The nineteenth century reformers had expressed their concern for the low status of women but all their efforts were concentrated on improvement of position of women within the family. Raising the status of women was planned by the reformers by working for their right to

\(^{35}\) Mala Khullar, loc.cit., pp.94-129.
property, remarriage after widowhood, and abolition of child marriage. But AIWC, however, became increasingly involved in the question of women’s right to vote and were largely responsible for organizing the suffrage movement. Consisting of reformist, revivalist and radical streams, the AIWC played a critical role during the freedom struggle and helped women to systematically articulate their political rights in public life.

**Women’s Indian Association**

WIA was founded as the mother of all women’s organizations at national level. The WIA reflected the growing political involvement of women and the work of sympathetic British feminists. The first all-india women’s organization was started by Saraladevi Chaudhurani, the daughter of Swarnakumari Devi. But this did not last and 8 May 1917 saw the birth of WIA at Adyar, due to the efforts of Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Ambujammal. In 1921, the WIA had established 48 branches with a membership of 2700. There were some individuals who worked to generate political consciousness among women as early as the twenties of the twentieth century India. The main object of this Association was to work for the uplift of women and to achieve social equality. The women of India had been touched by the spirit of this new life. The WIA defined itself as including and representing women of all races, cultures and religions.

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Arya Mahila Samaj

In 1882, Pandit Ramabai started the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune. In Bombay, she started a ladies association to provide a common platform to assemble and exchange ideas. Sharada Sadan, a residential school for high caste women, especially for widows, was started by her in Bombay in 1889. Ramabai, wife of Justice Ranade, established the Seva Sadan. The child widow Godubai alias Anandibai was married to D.K. Karve and she founded the Hindu Widows Home (Anath Bailikashram) which extended full support to Pandit Ramabai. There was, however, significant advancement in women’s legal rights and women did obtain the enfranchisement. Further, their demands for a place in the government of newly Independent India were legitimised by their involvement in the nationalist movement. The WIA remained highly limited in class and caste composition and failed to spread outside the Madras Presidency.

This association strongly supported the Home Rule Movement. In 1920s, the AIWC was formed and this became extremely active on the question of women’s suffrage, labour issues, and nationalist work. Political reform, unless accompanied step by step by social reform, is of little real service in a country’s uplift. Thus it was made clear that only a holistic approach can generate dynamism in women’s movement.

Women’s political participation became fragmented as a result of differing ideologies and issue-based protests, with only token number of women participating in “formal” politics. Many women participants were from higher class and caste backgrounds and had been supported by liberal progressive

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41 Ibid., p.37.
43 Samita Sen, loc. cit., p.15.
44 Shantha Mohan, op. cit., p.4.
families.\textsuperscript{45} The women’s movement was organised on diverse issues like dowry, prohibition, violence including rape, equal economic and employment opportunities, ecofeminism and developmental projects.\textsuperscript{46} In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the Hindutva movement has also become a site for women’s right-wing political mobilization, although with dubious potential for the empowerment of women and has become particularly militant around communal issues.\textsuperscript{47}

In modern Tamil Nadu politics, the political parties appropriate women’s issues such as the concerns of anti-liquor movement and appear sympathetic towards women in order to capture votes. As a consequence of this appropriation, women’s movement operates as an offspring of the major political parties.\textsuperscript{48}

**Education of Women**

The earliest educational system known as *Gurukula* system was beneficial mainly to the upper caste Hindus. During the British rule in India, the western education was introduced and it reached all the people. Among the demographic variables, usually investigated in social science research such as age, sex, income, occupation, caste, religion and place of residence, education has been found to have the greatest effect. An educated person is a different type of political actor than the one who has only a little or no formal education. Well educated people are considered to be politically more active, as they have a more critical, calculated, broader and analytical approach towards politics than the less educated. Education helps in making an individual politically conscious, influences his political orientation and shapes his political perceptions.


Very few women in the 1850s received education. Only a few in a hundred were able to read and write.\textsuperscript{49} The first and foremost factor was the impact of western education under the British rule. Many western educated Indian reformers stressed that western education should be imparted in Indian educational institutions. By learning western education and thoughts, Indian women began to fight for their rights. The second factor was that social reformers, who advocated the western education, opposed old Hindu customs which prevented the Indian women from receiving enlightenment. The social reformers fully opposed the system of sati, the restriction against widow marriage, and advocated education to women. According to scholars like J.N. Farquhar, social changes in India were to a great extent brought about by the Christian Missionaries and the introduction of western system of education.\textsuperscript{50}

The absence of education amongst women was largely responsible for their low status in society. In Madras, the task of educating women was first taken up by the missionaries. The East India Company came forward to impart education to Indians and as per the Charter Act of 1813, a sum of not less than one lakh rupees was allocated to promote Indian education.\textsuperscript{51} In 1821, the first Madras Boarding School was opened at Tirunelveli. In 1840, with the assistance of Rev.Isaac Wilson and his wife, the Scottish Church Society ventured to start six schools for Hindus in Madras with a total of 200 pupils. The first Indian newspaper in Madras, the \textit{Crescent} appeared in 1844.\textsuperscript{52} In 1845, the first girls school was opened under the joint management of Indians and Europeans. Wood’s Dispatch of 1854 gave a solid support to women education. In the year 1866-1867, no government school was established but 75 aided schools were established and

\textsuperscript{49} Altekar, A. S., \textit{op.cit.}, p.67.
enrolled 3109 pupils only. It was in 1868 that the Madras Government recommended to the Government of India, to open Normal Schools, a step necessary for the promotion of female education. Yet the administrators in India did not favour this move. The YWCA was concentrating on improving the status and welfare of women for more than a hundred years since 1875. It was for the first time in 1881 that the missionaries of the Scottish Church started the welfare measures for the education of Hindu women. Schools for Christian converts came into being. *Swadesmitran*, the first Tamil Weekly was issued in 1881. *Penn Mathi Bodini*, a first women's journal was published in November 1891. *Penn Kalvi*, a monthly journal was published first in 1916 and *Pennkal Samathuva Kummi* was published under the name of Chellammal, the wife of Subramaniya Bharathi. As a result of this development, the Hunter Education Commission of 1882 recommended the expansion of girls education and created a few training schools for women teachers. In 1883, Kadambini Basu and Chandramuki Basu in Bengal received B.A. degree from Calcutta University, and they became the first Indian female graduates of the British Empire. In 1890, liberal grants were sanctioned by the British Government to promote women education in India. Women were educated only to enhance their role as wives and mothers. Most of them were unaware that they were the subjects of debate.

In 1892, the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association was founded to fight against the social evils. It promoted women education. Being a child

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54 Giri Raj Shah, *op.cit.*, p.15.
59 Elizabeth Bumiller, *op.cit.*, p.16.
widow, Subbulakshmi Ammal was educated by her father to become the first Brahmin woman graduate in the Madras Presidency. The success of these programmes is reflected in the comparatively rapid growth of female education. In fact, the Indian Universities admitted women even before British Universities did. It was not easy for women and men to overcome the prejudices and conservative reaction in their struggle to gain society’s approval for female education and removal of social injustice.\textsuperscript{62}

Thanks to this progress, in the age group of 6-11 years, 66 per cent of girls attended school while in the 11-14 years of age group, 22 percent of girls attended the school. Female literacy had increased from 0.60 per cent in 1901 to 7.93 percent in 1951.\textsuperscript{63} Yet, after independence, the Indian government is still concerned about women’s education and development.

\textbf{Table - 3.1}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
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Year & Male & Women \\
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1891 & -- & 0.5 \\
1901 & 9.83 & 0.60 \\
1911 & 10.56 & 1.05 \\
1921 & 12.21 & 1.81 \\
1931 & 15.59 & 2.93 \\
1941 & 24.90 & 7.30 \\
1951 & 24.95 & 7.93 \\
1961 & 34.44 & 12.94 \\
1971 & 39.45 & 16.69 \\
1981 & 46.85 & 24.82 \\
1991 & 63.69 & 36.30 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Source: Census of India, 1981 Series I Part II B Primary Census Abstract; Census of India, 1991, Series II, Karnataka Provisional Population Total, p.32

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\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.}, p.1950.
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By the end of the nineteenth century, there were 12 colleges, 467 secondary schools and 5628 primary schools for girls with a total enrolment of 4,44,470 students. The percentage of educated women slowly increased. As per the Table 3.1, the Census Report of 1891 recorded that literate women were only 0.50 per cent but in 1941, it increased to 7.30 per cent.\(^6^4\) The University of Madras conducted convocation in 1925 and issued degrees for 84 women out of a total number of 1744 candidates who took their degrees.\(^6^5\) The women in Tamil Nadu began to learn western system of education. They thought that social evils such as sati, child marriage, widowhood, devadasi system could be eradicated by suitable legislation. The social reformers, feminists, modern political thinkers guided the society in respect of women’s welfare and uplift.\(^6^6\) Education, an aggregative cultural phenomenon, played a significant role in determining the various attributes of socio-economic and political developments of Tamil Nadu.

In short, the people began to realize the importance of women’s education and a number of schools came up in the country. The girls were not permitted to take any university examination till the early eighties of the nineteenth century. This period also witnessed many social reform movements which helped in the promotion of women’s education. There was considerable debate among the social reformers with different ideological orientations regarding women’s education. Cultural revivalists perceived women as the custodians of tradition and the family. Women’s education was seen essentially as a means of strengthening traditional Indian culture and values to resist westernization. Thus, education for women was promoted to improve their traditional roles within the patriarchal system. The efforts of social reformers along with missionaries paved the way for the development of public female education in the early nineteenth century and provided impetus to the emergence of a group of educated women as social

\(^{64}\) Manmohan Kaur, *op.cit.*, pp.27-28.


workers, teachers, academicians and doctors who later on became the vanguard of the early women’s movement.\textsuperscript{67} Saradha Ladies Union (1932) became a launching pad for several educational institutions to come up.

As part of the development of education system in Madras, there were women magistrates, women municipal officers and women judges and in some parts, women proved themselves as potential public speakers. The women of India began to stir now and their advancement towards progress was significant.\textsuperscript{68} Brahmin lawyers in Madras began introducing their wives and daughters to western ideas. Lady Sankara Nair began the Ladies Club at Egmore in Madras and this gave the ladies in the neighbourhood opportunities to meet and know each other.\textsuperscript{69}

**Women’s Suffrage Movement**

The election process is a fundamental aspect of political life under a democratic system. In a democracy, elections constitute major political activity for the people, perhaps the only one for the illiterates. Election not only provides an opportunity to the people for choosing their representatives, but also provides them scope for participation in the wider political process. Thus in all modern phase of development, the electoral practice has come to be accepted as political participation.\textsuperscript{70}

The women began to get voting rights since the first quarter of the twentieth century in the world arena.\textsuperscript{*} Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ila Patel, \textit{loc.cit.}, pp.155-175.
\item Francis Young Husband, \textit{Political Awakening in India During the British Rule}, Anmal Publication, Delhi, 1986, p.281.
\item Indian Ladies Magazine, Vol.XII, August 1912, pp.100-102.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
leaders of the British women’s suffrage movement emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. The void left by the lack of democratic, participatory, political opportunities for women has often been filled by ‘wife-ism’ or ‘first lady syndrome’, whereby the wives of political leaders become women leaders as a result of their marital status. Several accounts of the women’s movement in India, which accompanied the nationalist movement in the British Rule, note the lack of an emancipatory outcome and the enduring subservient nature of women’s role in society. Women were welcomed to join the resistance to British colonial rule, but their political activity was encouraged only in so far as to support the traditional gender hierarchy within the Indian society. As long as their political declaration of the rights of women prepared by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and several others. The early leaders of the movement in the United States were Susan B.Anthony, Mrs.Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Abby Kelley Foster and others. The National Women Suffrage Association led by Anthony and Stanton was formed in 1869 to agitate for women suffrage. Another organization – American Women Suffrage Association – led by Lucy Stone was organized to work through the state legislatures. The two societies were united in 1890 as the National American Women Suffrage Association. After continuous effort, the Constitution granted nation-wide suffrage to women in 1920.

New Zealand was the first country in the world to grant full suffrage in 1893 and Australia in 1902, Finland in 1906 and Norway in 1930. In America, after a prolonged struggle, the 19th amendment to the constitution was enacted to give the right of vote for women in 1920. Though 20th century has been described as the century of women’s suffrage, the majority of countries have accorded women the right to vote only during the last fifty years. The Inter Parliamentary Union in a study, “Women in Paliaments”, covering the period 1945-1995, described the women’s access to suffrage as a “long obstacle race as yet unfinished”. In South Asia, the fight for women’s suffrage was a long-drawn one. The debate about women’s voting rights go back to the early part of the twentieth century and the course of its articulation acquired a very urban and elitist character in undivided India. In early 1945, only thirty-one countries allowed women to vote. Burma in 1922 was the first Asian country to which women’s suffrage was extended. Today, women have the right to vote in more than 125 nations.


activity supplemented but did not sacrifice their traditional duties as wives, daughters and sisters, their political activism was encouraged. However, several male supporters of reforms on women’s issues supported women’s movement.  

Indian Councils Act of 1861 was a landmark in the growth and development of legislature in India. The movement for independence also raised the question of women suffrage. With the Indian Councils Act of 1892, there was a gradual increase in the representation of Indians in local governance. Women’s franchise movement in India demanded equal voting rights for women along with men. That was indeed the first attempt made by women for their political rights. In December 1917, Annie Besant and few other women went to meet the Montagu-Chelmsford Committee which was in charge of assessing the state of public opinion about an increased participation of Indians in the government and demanded that women be given the same voting rights as men. Indeed, the first delegation representing women’s organizations argued that women’s participation in political life would surely improve the quality of political life. As voters and as representatives, they said, women could help the progress of social reform, make politics more moral and the world more peaceful. This is the beginning of women suffrage movement in India.

Fourteen women from different provinces joined the deputation and presented a memorandum to South Borough Franchise Committee. Kamalabhai

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74 Carole Spary, ‘Female Political Leadership in India’, BASAS Annual Conference, University of Leeds, 30 March-1 April, 2005.

75 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Review, Legislative Assembly Department, Madras, May 1980, p.2.


Chattopadhyaya, Rukmani Arundale, Muthulakshmi Reddi and Rukmani Lakshmipathi from Madras Province were the prominent participants in the women suffrage movement. South Borough Committee summarily rejected the memorandum. Then, the WIA planned to organize meetings all over India to push the demand for franchise and to send a woman representative to England. When Montagu discussed Indian demands for political representation, women's wings of political parties raised the issue of women's suffrage. The political entry of these women marked the beginning of a new phase in which women started agitations against the British Government. As a result, as per the 1919 Indian Councils Act, the right to vote was granted to women with various restrictions. This Act enfranchised men and women on the basis of age and property. It empowered provincial legislatures to remove the sex barrier at their discretion. Many provinces immediately introduced resolutions to enfranchise women. Madras was the first province to grant at least a limited franchise to women in 1921, followed by Bombay but it was not until 1929 that other provincial legislatures gave women the right to vote and admitted them on the same basis as men. The Madras Legislative Council was set up in 1921 under the Government of India Act, 1919. Justice Party, which formed the Government in Madras, took the credit for being the first state in extending franchise right to women. In 1926, the Government of India gave right to women to stand as candidates for the Provincial Legislature. The same issue was taken by the Madras Legislative Council in July 1926 and a law was passed. Under this Act, two women in the Province contested the election but both were defeated by a margin of 500 votes.

80 FNR from January 1918 to 16 December 1918.
83 Janaki Nair, *op.cit.*, p.132.
85 G.O. No.309, Law(Legislative) Department, Government of Madras, 5 August 1926.
by their male rivals. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya was the first lady to come forward to contest in an election as an independent candidate but she was defeated by a margin of 515 votes by her male rival. Hawan Angelo contested the election in Madras but she was also defeated. This development generated a powerful current of enthusiasm among women. The WIA influenced the Government of Madras to nominate a woman to the Legislative Council and Government was pleased to nominate a lady. Muthulakshmi Reddi from Madras was the first Indian woman legislator to be nominated to the Legislative Council of Madras in 1927 under the British rule. She was also elected unanimously as the Vice-President of this council and in that capacity, she became the first lady to hold such a post not only in India but also in the whole world. Reddi clearly lived upto the expectations of both the nationalists and the women's groups, remaining within the realm of what may broadly be termed “Social Feminism”. This consisted of welfare of women and children and it was argued that such issues could be understood and represented by women alone.86  

As far as India is concerned, Madras was the first state and Bihar was the last to enfranchise women in 1921 and 1929 respectively.87 Indeed the Act enfranchised less than one per cent of the total female population in Madras. The proportion of female electorate to adult female population was less than one per cent. Gandhi said as early as 1929, “Women must have votes and equal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation”.88 At the Karachi Session of the INC (1931), Nehru piloted the “Fundamental Rights Resolution” which accepted the principle of complete equality of men and women in political life.89 INC declared in that session that in Free India, there would be no discrimination

86 Janaki Nair, op.cit., p.134.
88 Usha Narayanan, op.cit.
on the grounds of sex. The spread of women's suffrage over the subsequent four and a half decades was most rapid. This is illustrated in the Table 3.2.

Table - 3.2

Number of countries where Men and Women got voting rights in National Elections on Equal Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As per the Government of India Act 1935, elections were held in the provinces in 1937. It was part of a process of constitutional reform which yielded more and more political space to the major sections of Indian society of which women formed an important part. Kumudini Basu, a Bengali suffragist who was then a councilor in the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, addressed a letter to the Lothian Committee in October, 1935, thus: "Women suffrage was sought, fought for and obtained all over the world for a distinct purpose and principle. It was found after long experience that many vital questions of social, domestic and
public welfare affecting the home and women’s sphere of activities were entirely neglected and often opposed by male legislators. It was this neglect that provoked women to fight and earn the franchise. It is also pointed out that Indian women were granted equal rights to suffrage without any sustained political struggle. However, the Government of India Act of 1935 declared that women over 21 years of age could vote, provided they were literate and owners of property or wives or widows of men of property. Thus, it appeared that this act enfranchised six million women, one woman to every five men. It is quite evident from the qualification stipulated that this Act also did not enfranchise all the adult women. These rights were not donated to women by male leaders, but were earned by women themselves through struggle.

Jana Everett identifies broadly two phases in the struggle for suffrage for women. The first phase from 1917 to 1928, covers the struggle for female enfranchisement and eligibility for female representation in legislatures. The second phase until 1937, covers attempts to broaden both the terms of enfranchisement and representation in legislative bodies. Eventually equal voting rights for women with those of men were realised only in Independent India. The Constitution of India, particularly its Preamble, established liberal democratic philosophy. It ensures to all its citizens equality, liberty and fraternity. When the Constituent Assembly was set up in October 1946, a number of women like Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray and Hansa Mehta were elected to the Draft Committee to frame the Constitution for Free India.

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Organisational Work

By mid-1935, WIA and AIWC claimed membership of over 10,000 women. NCWI developed eight provincial councils by 1934 and had 180 affiliated societies with a membership of over 8000. WIA did not limit itself to fund raising, social service and women’s education, but also sought to influence government policy on equal rights for women in some areas and was involved with the issue of suffrage, education, political awareness and struggles against male-determined values. The founders of WIA included women like Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant, who were not only suffragists, but also political radicals and critics of imperialism in their own terms.\(^96\)

In 1932, AIWC took up the issue of political rights of women. From the beginning, WIA showed an interest in home rule and women’s suffrage, which was clearly patriotic. Muthulakshmi Reddi, a founder member of WIA and later as Vice-President, signed a protest in 1928 against the all British composition of the Simon Commission. The choice was between aligning with the national movement or adopting an independent political stance. Situations caused leaders of these organizations to redefine their aims, amend laws, argue with each other, and finally end up with organizations which were somewhere between autonomous women’s associations and women’s auxiliary of the INC.\(^97\) During the late 1930s, many of the AIWC office bearers became absorbed in the struggle for independence. Consequently organizational activity dwindled significantly when, by the early 1940s, its officer bearers like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (1889-1964) and Vijayalakshmi Pandit (1900-1990), the sister of Jawarhalal Nehru, were jailed for political activity. World War II further disturbed its organizational work.\(^98\)

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\(^96\) Muniruddin Qureshi, *op.cit.*, pp.36-40.

\(^97\) *Ibid.*

For two decades, women organisations had spoken for all women, placing their demands within the framework of social feminism, which constructed women as socially and psychologically different from men. Yet their ideology was too Hindu, too middle-class, and too urban to appeal to or adequately represent all women. The 1940s was a tumultuous decade for Tamil Nadu as well as at all India level. Growing communalism led to partition which led to the largest known population displacement in human history. There was war and famine. Even the Quit India Movement had to compete with more radical movements for socio-economic justice.

Women’s political demonstrations in Madras were more subdued than in Bengal or Bombay. Though women picketed and marched in processions, it was always difficult to mobilize large number of women for action. In Madras, C.Rajagopalachari, a leading member of the INC, was more concerned with prohibition than with foreign cloth. Rajagopalachari was secretary of the prohibition league of India and member-in-charge of the anti-drink campaign of the INC.99

However, picketing of liquor shops was seen as an inappropriate step for women. Women’s Swadeshi League, under the aegis of Ambujammal and Krishna Rao, organized the Desh Sevika Sangh (women serving the country). Their activities included selling khaddar, joining prabhat pheris and preaching the true value of swadeshi. Women were involved in picketing cloth shops and selling khaddar on the streets in defiance of the government ban on political activities and political demonstrations.

Movement of Women’s Rights in Madras

“To awaken the people it is the woman who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves”, said Jawaharlal Nehru. Even though women are given a place of importance and

respect in India, their real condition is indeed pathetic. The women of Tamil Nadu face problems like sati, dowry, male domination, and harassment also. Movement of Women’s Rights (Pennurimai Iyakkam) was started in Madras and branches were opened at Thanjavur and Madurai. Members went in groups to various villages and towns and interviewed and discussed the status of women. This movement aimed at a change in the present status of women. The evils of society must be highlighted.\textsuperscript{100} The enormous burden of housework is a major hurdle in women’s involvement in political office.

The number of women directly involved in revolutionary movements in the erstwhile Madras Presidency at the turn of the twentieth century was small, but the inspirational support base of the revolutionaries included more women whose names were not included in the directory of freedom fighters. The women who provided shelter and food, carried messages or arms, or instilled a passion to ‘serve their country’ among their children, telling them about the ‘heroes’ and ‘martyrs’ who sacrificed their lives for the country’s freedom, did not belong merely to the elite class. Many were uneducated and poor. They played such roles without waiting for any social reward. They provided a communication channel for the message of nationalism when nationalist literature was under severe control. The stories continued to spread and the songs and poems were eagerly observed by young people, often from women in their homes. Women’s invisible role, which provided greater force, had received little formal acknowledgement.\textsuperscript{101}

Similarly, women’s active and even militant roles as participants and leaders in national peasants’ and workers’ struggles remained strongly invisible till recently. Recent attempts to reconstruct life stories of women activists and to obtain oral history from surviving women freedom fighters provide little substance to the theory of male direction, guidance or manipulation.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} Murdock George Peter, \textit{Social Structure}, Macmillan, New York, 1949, p.45.
\textsuperscript{101} Muniruddin Qureshi, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.36-40.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}
The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the peak of the so-called first feminist movement. This was the period when women began to organize and mobilize on issues of social reform and civil and political rights. It was a phase of remarkable unity, albeit one achieved at the cost of major social and ideological exclusions. The focus of the movement dissipated in the 1940s. The urgency of the nationalist struggle overrode the priorities of the feminist agenda, and the variety and range of activities in which women began to participate shattered unity. The second feminist movement inherited many of the legacies of these developments from 1940s. Political and social disenfranchisement powered the rise of the second feminist movement.

**Contemporary Period**

The feminist movement in the contemporary period is characterized by its sensible approach. In this movement almost all political parties, except those who have leanings towards fundamentalism and orthodoxy in their outlook, lend their support. By and large it is non-commercial and non-sectarian. But this movement has failed to break away from the traditional stereotype of motherhood, housewife and kitchen queen. The movement has not yet reached a large section of rural and deep slum area. It wants to secure independence of women from male domination but is not willing to think in terms of a life pattern in which the male does not figure as a key person in the role of a father, brother or husband or in any other form. Women failed to get attention of the society due to overwhelming dominance of male in all sectors of social structures of society immediately after independence.¹⁰³

Gail Omvedt calls them pre-movements as far as women are concerned. They reveal the power of women as a force in society, they allow women

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opportunity to bring forward their own needs, and they are often part of a process leading to the development of women’s movements as such.\textsuperscript{104}

The contemporary women’s movement has contributed to bringing gender issues to the forefront of development, planning and pressing the state to enforce progressive legislation and devise gender-sensitive development policies and programmes. At another level, the agitational politics of the women’s movement has redefined women’s participation in larger social and political movements and women’s struggles for women’s rights and issues dealing with the private sphere.\textsuperscript{105} While a liberal discourse of equality was ensured after Independence in 1947, the CSWI produced its report entitled \textit{Towards Equality} which evaluated and acknowledged the enduring plight of Indian women.

In the post-independent India, a series of laws have been passed for the advancement of women. The legislations have been brought out in order to give equal rights and privileges with men, eliminate discriminations against women, abolish inequality between sexes and remove external barriers coming in the way of their self realization and development. Among the many achievements of the movement, the most significant are the constitutional guarantees of equal rights for women and universal adult suffrage in independent India. Several Commissions had been set up by the Government of India to look into the status of women in Indian society. In 1974, the Indian Government published a report, \textit{Towards Equality} that put status of women forcefully on the national agenda by arguing that the position of Indian women had declined, not improved, since 1911.\textsuperscript{106} Today the women’s movement in India is deeply cleaved. There is, nevertheless, a vigorous search for a viable feminist politics. To succeed, feminists must come out from politics, class, caste and community differences.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{104} Gail Omvedt, \textit{loc.cit.}, p.373.
\textsuperscript{105} Ila Patel, \textit{loc.cit.}, pp.155-175.
\textsuperscript{107} Samitha Sen, \textit{op.cit.}, p.2.
Today, women’s movement projects the two most divisive issues before it: Uniform Civil Code and the move to reserve one-third of seats for women in legislative bodies. But it also marks the promise of a transformative feminist politics. There is not one women’s movement in India, an overarching collective in which gender politics is articulated. Yet the multiplicity of sites, disciplines and discourses takes the movement towards vibrant gender politics.

With different political forces in the national movement going their own ways, the women’s movement also underwent split. Many women leaders became involved in government initiatives and other institutional activities for women’s welfare. In 1954, Communist women left the AIWC to form the National Federation of Indian Women, which became a party forum and not a broad united platform for women. In the late sixties and early seventies, there was a new political ferment in the country, which gave rise to a host of new political trends and movements.

There is a general belief that between the Indian Constitution and the Hindu Code Bill, the entire problem of Indian women has been settled once and for all. This seeming emancipation is misleading because gains in public life enjoyed by Indian women were fought for and won by women themselves. The women’s movement, which gathered strength from the 1920s, culminated in the legislation of 1956. Unfortunately in more recent decades, Indian women have too readily surrendered their responsibility for preserving and enlarging their rights to institutions of State and Society. The effect of this is seen in the overall decline in their participation in public life. It is very clear that there is a need to revive the women’s movement if women are to achieve genuine equality as citizens and are not to become one of the several casualties in the developmental process.\(^\text{108}\)

The report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, known as *Towards Equality*, laments that instead of changing social values and attitudes regarding women’s roles, the educational system has contributed to strengthening

and perpetuating traditional ideas of women's subordination through the 'curricula, the classification of subjects on the basis of sex and the unwritten code of conduct enforced on their pupil's.

**Resurgence of Women's Movement**

One of the biggest challenges women have had to face in recent years is the growing influence of the religious fundamentalism in Tamil Nadu. Right-wing groups built much of their support on the involvement of women such as offering to help them with domestic problems, enabling them to enter the public space in a limited way, and all the while ensuring that the overall ideology within which they operate remains firmly patriarchal. For activists too, this has posed major problems. It has forced them to confront the fact that they cannot assume solidarity as women that cuts across class, religion, caste and ethnic differences.

The resurgence of the women's movement in the 1970s in the context of the upsurge in social movements against growing inequality marked a significant paradigm shift in the analysis and understanding of women's issues and in redefining feminist politics. The proliferation of women's action groups and grassroots organizations since the 1970s reflect the diversity and complexity of the women's movement. Even the main organizations of the women's movement were institutionalized through government funding, and could not maintain their former independent and critical appraisal of Government policies with regard to women. Most women's organizations are now devoting their energies to social welfare work.

Women's organizations in the past two decades or more have scored significant gains in the struggle for gender equality. Through consciousness-

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raising, organizing, mobilizing, networking and lobbying, they have raised gender to the level of public discourse, pioneered creative programs and institutions, and pushed the limits of advocacy and reform. All this they have done with the intention of sitting in the decision-making table. But women’s movement has failed to translate their gains into political power and they have made those gains vulnerable to legislative whims and fancies, fiscal cutbacks, and economic meltdown.

Women’s political participation was socially legitimized through the women’s movement. The participation of women in various activities like singing, writing, and going to jail strengthened the women involvement in public life. They also took part in the peaceful movements like satyagraha, non-cooperation and Quit India Movement. Some women even took up training in using guns. As women started realizing the importance of their rights and capacity to contribute to the uplift of the society, the scene started fast changing. Women movements also endeavored to alter the gender equations in the society. Women’s entry into national politics through non-violent methods under Gandhi’s leadership brought spectacular results. Thousands of Indian women comprising of urban and rural, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, young and old, learnt the meaning of liberation of the nation and contributed to the struggle for independence with all their energy.

Women asserted their political rights, as voters and representatives. The women participation in public life considerably helped them to be aware of their status in the society.\(^{112}\) In 1921, the 36th annual session of the INC was held at Ahmedabad in which 131 women acted as volunteers, 14 women were members of the committees and 144 attended the session as delegates.\(^{113}\) A meeting of the Tamil Nadu INC Working Committee was held at Madurai on 2 July 1930, in which Pechimuthu Ammal, Haji Moulana Jahib, Krishna Swami and Pattabi

\(^{112}\) CWMG, Vol.LXXXVI, pp.304-305; Harijan, 26 January 1947.

\(^{113}\) Report of the 36th Indian National Congress, 1921, Appendices III and V, p.4.
Rama Iyer participated and passed a proposal for picketing in Madurai. They helped Gandhi in the implementation of his constructive work. Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Sunity Devi were the first women to offer civil resistance to the government. They begged the public to buy and use home-made cloth and observed hartal on the day of the visit of the Prince of Wales to Calcutta. The Government arrested them. Gandhi was very much inspired and said, "The women of India should have much share in winning Swaraj as Men". Gandhi appreciated the value of women’s support and continuously sought to draw more women into political activities. The initiatives, courage and leadership women displayed in the political movement towards national independence or liberation from colonial rule assured them a ready and abiding place in India’s new resurgent life. Today practically all doors are open to them, and women are seen filling a variety of posts and positions, including the army.