In the long history of humanity and its development, and also in the cultural context of the affairs of the world, woman has been as important a factor as man has been. That is why the significance and importance of the study of women and their problems never diminish because the greatness or otherwise of a civilisation depends largely on how women are being treated in that civilisation. Succeeding ages also brought some changes in the attitudes of men and women towards each other. This attitudinal change among men towards women opened, as though, the Pandora’s box, because in that event man raked more questions than he could answer satisfactorily. For instance, he put forth his argument that woman was inferior to man physically, psychologically, intellectually and so on. However, the recent research has disproved man’s social, biological and psychological supremacy theories.

Civilization, to a great extent, is the result of a society’s capacity to control some of its strong and selfish impulses embedded in human nature. No class of similar importance and extent, as that of women, was placed in the infancy of the society in a position of such an absolute dependence on man. The very word “woman” (old English wifman), etymologically meaning “wife”, is an example in point. The original word “wifman” (man’s wife) indicates that a woman’s status and power are valued or determined only by considering her marital status or by her relationship with man. In the 14th century, the “f” was dropped to say “wiman” and then the word came to be pronounced as “woman”.

Thus the word “woman” sums up a long history of dependence and subordination of woman to man. This period is supposed to be the “dark age” in the history of emancipation of women.

The first account of the problems of Indian Woman dates back from the 19th Century. These accounts tell of an ancient time when women were held in high esteem, followed by a long period, when their status declined. Then the Europeans came on the scene.
The foreign rulers introduced new ideas about women's roles and capabilities and these ideas were adopted by enlightened Indians. Both the British missionaries and Indian reformers, who welcomed the opportunity to put forth a critique of their own society, hypothesized a "golden age" during the ancient time, followed by centuries of corruption and betrayal of woman which is called the "dark age". Salvation came in the form of European form of governance, technology and a new value system.


Soon after this, a systematic study of women's past began and people came to know that they were witnessing a revolution. Greda Lerner, an American pioneer in the field of Women's history wrote,

"Women have history, women are in history"³

Her words became a manifesto. What emerged then was a new way of thinking about gender. Instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential, historians treated it as construed. This liberating hypothesis stimulated questions about Woman's un-equal position.

In the 19th Century, the important question was not ‘What do women want?’ But ‘How can they be modernised?’ This question was satisfactorily solved not by the Muslim rulers, who came to India prior to the British, but by the timely changes that affected the lives of ordinary people during the British regime. The Muslim rule in India did not intervene in the religious practices of the Indians and they did not bother to improve the status of women in this country.

James Mill, in his History of British India (1826) wrote that the social status of women could be an indicator of the society’s advancement or otherwise. That is why he deplored Manu’s harsh recommendations against women. A consensus seems to be emerging from the colonial historians like Reverend E Storrow, Herbert Hope Risely and others, regarding the position of Indian Women.

“A society which accepts intellectual inanition and moral stagnation as the natural condition of its womankind, cannot hope to develop the high qualities of courage, devotion and self-sacrifice which go into the making of a nation”

THE INDIAN POINT OF VIEW:

Contrary to the theory of these British historians, the Indian social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Sarswati and Pandit Vidyasagar and others advanced the “Golden Age” theory. This view of the Vedic past tells that women, then, were educated, moved about freely, married after the age of maturity and participated in religious and cultural activities along with their men without inhibitions.

In support of their argument, the Indian historians quote examples of the learned women in the Vedic period like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra and others, who were treated on par with men. They were popular not only for their intellectual capabilities but

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for their worldly wisdom too. After sometime, the supervision of the society went into
the hands of the lawgivers like Manu, who were the staunch supporters of the
patriarchal principles. What followed then is too well known to repeat. The Vedic period
is termed as the “Golden Age” by some feminists, because woman had held a
respectable position in the society, followed by the “Dark Age” when all the infirmities
were heaped upon her. When the Western education was made available to her, a
“new woman” appeared on the horizon. Many men and women reformers and
philanthropists worked really hard to realise the dream of the “new woman”.

MALE REFORMERS:

There is a long list of male social reformers across India, who undertook the task of
Women’s emancipation, braving all odds. To name few of them, Mahadev Govind
Ranade, Dhondo Keshav Karve, Jyotiba Fule and from the South, the reformers like
R.Venkataram Naidu, Kandakuri Vireshlingam Pantalu are prominent. The persons like
Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, from Calcutta also did a tremendous job to improve
the lot of the female victims in the society. They had many revolutionary ideas like
encouragement to widow re-marriage, prohibition of child-marriage, strongly protesting
against the “Sati” system, condemning the Devadasi (temple prostitution) system and so
on. Some of the Muslim reformers like Khwaja Altaf Husain, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and
Shaikh Abdullah also did their bit to educate and improve the condition of Muslim
Women. However, the Muslim society was in such a deep quagmire that it had to wait
for more time to see the dawn of liberation of its women folk.

As a result of rigorous persuasion of these and many other social reformers, the ‘New
Woman’ of the nineteenth century, as Geraldine Forebs puts it, appeared on the scene.
Armed with Western education, some of the Indian Women started private schools for
girls and brought pressure on the British Government to start more and more schools
for girls.

The Hindu image of a “perfect wife” was slowly fading and the position of woman was
re-defined. To begin with, there were modifications in the nature of the activities of
Women. Secondly, the area of their activities was also expanded. Women came out of their houses to participate in various other activities. And thirdly, there was a growing approval of the individualism of woman. As a result of this, by the end of the 19th century, there were a number of women, who were educated, mobile, articulate and deeply involved in social work. The "New Woman" was a part of the modernising movement, which sought to achieve greater equality between men and women.

Along with men, as stated earlier, there are some great women also, who are responsible for the emergence of the "New Woman" in India. Saraladevi Chaudhurni (1872-1954), who graduated herself from Bethune College, Calcutta with English Honours in 1890, Rassundari Devi and Haimavati Sen from Bengal and Ramabai Ranade from Maharashtra are the early examples of the awakened Indian women. Gradually their tribe increased and they started demanding more and more educational facilities for girls. The British Government in India was forced to reserve funds for Women's education.

"In 1854, there were approximately 626 girls' schools with a total of 21,755 students"5

By the end of World War I, there were schools for girls in all parts of India. Between 1900 and 1920, the "new women" who were the direct beneficiaries of the social reforms, came forward to open their own schools for their less fortunate sisters.

For the first time, Indian women began to communicate with women outside their homes. Encouraged by their male guardians to move along with the changing times, these educated Indian Women also joined new clubs and associations opened for Women. These organisations became platform for expressing women's opinions on different issues. They also served as training schools for women, who took up leadership roles in politics and social work at a later stage.

One such early association was 'Bharat Mahila Parishad', an auxiliary of the Indian

National Congress. In the inaugural session of the Parishad in 1905, Ramabai Ranade strongly upheld the necessity of education for orphans, widows and so on. "Widows" was the main issue of the speech of Ramabai Ranade. The second speaker was Mrs Abbas Tyabji, who read a paper on Muslim Women’s education. After sometime, these women started their own organisations.

THE FIRST 'WOMEN'S ORGANISATION' FOUNDED BY WOMEN:

Indian women began to define their interests and find solutions to their problems, when they became more and more educated. Many women’s social, cultural and educational institutions sprang up all over India, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, Saraladevi Chaudhurani was critical of women’s meetings held under the aegis of the Indian National Congress. She was skeptical about the intentions of the male members of the Congress towards upliftment of women. Not that they were opposed to women’s development but they were lacking in their political will to do so. Hence, Saraladevi called them,

"Men living in the shadow of Manu"¹

This apprehension of Saraladevi came to be true when the male members of the Indian National Congress, who supported openly the feminist movement, were instrumental in defeating all the bills like Women’s franchise, Divorce act, Inheritance act and so on in the Legislative Council, at a later stage. Therefore, she founded Bharat Stree Mahamandal, exclusively devoted to Women’s cause and not dependent on men’s mercy. This association had branches in the East and North India. Saraladevi was a staunch supporter of female education and widow re-marriage and she strongly opposed the Paradah System and child marriage.

After this trial, three big national women’s organisations came into existence between 1917 and 1927. They were, Women’s India Association (WIA), The National Council for Women (NCWI) and All India Women’s Conference (AIWC).

Margaret Cousin, an Irish theosophist, who came to India to work in the Theosophical Society at Adyar in Tamil Nadu, was the main person to start “Women’s India Association”. Its membership was thrown open for both the Indian and European women. Other important members of this association were Anne Basent, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs Malati Patwardhan, Mrs Dadabhoy, Mrs Ambujammal and others. In 1925, this association launched the “Self Respect” movement to free woman from male dominance and to achieve social justice and equality with men. But at a later stage, the association realized that it was very difficult to fight for women’s rights like right to property, right to divorce, gender discrimination and so on, in the contemporary social set up without active support of men. Though the association was disheartened on this front, it bluntly refused to accept intervention of men. Women also refused to accept the priestly class as a divine representative in the matters of marriage and other cultural activities. They decided to strive hard to be independent in such matters, instead of invoking men’s help or the help of any other extra-terrestrial agencies. Women priests, who are found today in places like Pune in Maharashtra, owe their alliance to this association.

“The National Council for Women in India” was the next women’s organisation established in 1925, by some nationalist women like Meharbai Tata, wife of Sir Dorabji Tata, Maniben Kara and others. In the beginning, it worked as a branch of the International Council of Women, with its head quarter at Washington. The other members included the Begum Saheba of Bhopal and the Maharani of Baroda. Due to its exclusivist outlook, this association did not flourish.

The most important of the Women’s Organisations and most truly Indian of the three, was the last to be established. The ‘All India Women’s Conference’, first met in Poona in January 1927. The Ranisaheb of Sangli and Maharani Chimanbai of Baroda were the first among the speakers at the inaugural session. The Ranisaheb of Sangli pleaded that no special or feminist education should be given to Indian women because such an effort, might not only antagonise the male faction of the society, which was not necessary at that point of time, but also create an army of educated women, with specialised training, which might provide employment opportunities for them. She also
stressed the need to provide education to women, which would prepare them to play a complementary role to men. The Maharani of Baroda spoke against Pardah and Child Marriage.

In 1936 conference, the association took an important decision to achieve “Solidarity of Sisters” which means that all the members, beginning from the Maharani to the Harijan women (untouchables), were to be considered equal for all practical purposes. However, some women members did not like this resolution. During 1930s and 1940s, the AIWC faced a series of challenges. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a Gandhian, wanted this organisation to be more politically oriented, but this proposal was voted down.

The AIWC was committed to a comprehensive legal bill on women. This idea was not popular with the Muslim women, because many of them believed that the Islamic laws came down from The Quran and hence they could not be tampered with.

An overall picture, one gets of these institutions, therefore, is

1. They were only the petitioning associations, either to the government or to bigger organisations like the All India National Congress.

2. They were forced to take their complaints against male dominance to men only. In such cases men offered them mere lip service.

3. There did not seem to be a binding force for all these women’s organisations. However, there was a common aim, emancipation of women. Every unit had its own way of achieving it. Unless there was some strong institutional support, like that of the Indian National Congress, very little could be achieved by such associations.

By 1917, there appeared to be a definite change in the concept of all these women’s organisations regarding the status of women in the society. In the beginning, their aim was an overall improvement in the socio-cultural conditions of women like female education, prohibiting child marriage and the like. But after the visit of Edwin Montague, the Secretary of State for India, women turned little more political. They wanted the government to grant them voting power. They said that they should be allowed to contest elections to Provincial Assemblies and Legislative Councils. To that effect,
legislation should be passed to empower women to contest elections and claim equal opportunities with men.

In 1917 itself, the State Secretary Edwin Montague announced that the British government wanted to include more Indians in the process of governing India. To know more about this country, he paid a visit to India during summer, the same year. Most of the women's associations in India sought time to meet him and press for more political powers to Indian women. In fact, they wanted women to have the status of "people". Sarojini Naidu was nominated the sole representative to negotiate with the State Secretary on behalf of all the women's organisations.

Close on the heels of Montague's visit to India in 1917, the thirty-third session of the Indian National Congress was held in Delhi in December 1918. Salaradevi Chaudhurani, the most outspoken President of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, proposed a resolution of Female Franchise. She said that women had as much right to chart their own course of action as men, for, this was the age of human rights, social justice, equality and self-determination. She also came down heavily on the fanciful division of intellect and emotions being the spheres of men and women respectively. This alleged concept denied intellectualism among women and tended to consider them as bundles of emotions. Mrs. Jaiji Jehangir Petit, the Chairperson of Bombay Women's Committee, sent a cable to London saying:

"Women ask no favour but claim right and justice. If the vote is denied, it will mean serious check to women's advancement in India." 6

However, as a final stroke of good luck in favour of Indian womanhood, the Committee gave a combined report that women should be enfranchised to expedite social reforms and also recommended an increase in the ratio of female to male voters from 1:20 to 1:5.

Before Indian Women could react to these recommendations, they had to face the

communal award that confirmed reserved seats in elections for Muslims and depressed classes. Gandhiji opposed this stratification among the Hindus, saying that the untouchables were also a part of the Hindu society. An interesting point to be noted is, some Muslim women like Begum Shah Nawaz also did not like this reservation because it might take the Muslim women away from the mainstream of Indian politics. However, Muslim men were ready to welcome this award, because they thought that it was the right step to protect the political rights of the minorities. Thus, the rift between the Hindus and Muslims began to raise its ugly head, which led to many disasters in future. In this way, at last, Indian women earned their right to vote and contest elections.

**WOMEN’S DISABILITIES:**

Though women succeeded in getting the franchise, they were excluded again, from the new representation structure with a rider that a woman could contest election provided she herself owned property or married a man of property. Futility of this argument was too obvious because women had no right to property then. Therefore, they could not own property and secondly, all women are not lucky to marry men with property. That was why the women leaders thought that to be denied the same civil rights, which men enjoyed, because of gender differentiation, was patently illegal and immoral. Hence in 1934, the AIWC asked the government to consider the legal disabilities of women. The commission was to study the disabilities of women with regard to inheritance, marriage, guardianship of children and so on. Mrs. Renuka Ray, the Law Secretary of AIWC, strongly pleaded with the government to pass such social and personal laws that would make women independent and fully equipped to participate in politics without inhibitions. The AIWC declared that they were demanding equality to enable women to play their roles in the affairs of the country. Therefore, they said.

“We want no sex war of the Western variety”

Consequently, the Hindu Women’s Right to Property Bill, an amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, a bill allowing Inter-caste Marriages, Hindu Women’s Right to

Divorce Act, Muslim Personal Law Bill and Muslim Women's Right to Divorce Bill were introduced between 1937 and 1938.

All these Bills were defeated one by one because the male members of the Legislative Council did not want any change in the status of Women. The debate, over these Bills, shocked women leaders because they were unaware of such a deep conspiracy of male members. Begum Hamid Ali deplored the utterly unsympathetic attitude of men in the assembly, as

"They were afraid, they might lose half of their land, power and money".  

Thus, a bold attempt to acquire more rights and political power was thwarted by men.

In this way, the period, between the campaign for the 1937 Legislative Council elections and the first general elections in free India, saw women come alive politically. In the early years of the twentieth century, a few women began participating in the political meetings and expressing their views boldly. In 1920s, women joined public demonstrations and brought hundreds of new recruits into the freedom movement. By 1930, they became bolder still and marched, protested, picketed and courted arrest, in accordance with the programme approved by Gandhiji. By the Second World War, the situation had changed dramatically.

WOMEN'S STATUS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA:

The Indian Constitution declared equality a fundamental right. This document also guaranteed equal protection of the Law, equal opportunities in government services and it prohibited discrimination in public places. Many women, who participated in the social reforms activities and political activities in India, were happy with the constitutional provisions for women. Belonging to the upper and middle classes of the society, they were poised to become the beneficiaries of the new opportunities. The government asked prominent Women's Organisations to assist them in conceiving and developing

8. Geraldine Forebs, Women in Modern India. P.70.
five-year plans. Some of these organisations agreed to co-operate with the government on condition that women should be allowed to gain more economic benefits. Most of the Women's Organisations got more financial assistance from the government and strived to build permanent buildings for their offices and permanent staff to be paid through government grants. They opened hostels for working women, schools, dispensaries and so on. However, few other Organisations, who did not go after government grants, blamed the former ones for not preparing women for new responsibilities. Every political party in the country had its Women's wing and they were propagating the political ideology of the party they belonged, rather than to respond positively to women's genuine problems like dowry harassment and cruel treatment given to the working women and so on.

The women members of the Communist Party of India were highly critical of the never fulfilled Constitutional demands of women and the vague promises made by the government in their five year plans. In 1954, Mrs. Vibha Farooqi and her friends in the Communist Party of India founded 'National Federation of Indian Women' (NFIW) to focus attention on the emancipation of backward and working class women. They refused to function as the Charitable Trusts run on government grants.

Despite sporadic criticism, the Indian government's promise to equality was not seriously challenged until 1974. In 1971 itself, the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare appointed a Committee

"To examine the Constitutional, Legal and Administrative provisions that have a bearing on the social status of Women, their education and employment".9

The Committee, which was headed by Doctor Phulrenu Guha, Union Minister for Social Welfare, along with another eminent lady Doctor Vina Muzumdar as Secretary, submitted its report in 1974. The studies "Toward Equality" were the first major effort to understand the extent to which the Constitutional guarantees of equality and social justice had not reached women. The report also charged the government stating that


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the status of women had not improved but had, in fact, declined since Independence. The report actually read as

"The review of the disabilities and constraints on Women, which stem from socio-cultural institutions indicate that the majority of Women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution."  

The declaration that social change and development in India had adversely affected women was really a shocking news for most Indians. For a country like India, whose Prime Minister herself was woman and which regularly sent women abroad as ambassadors, representatives to the United Nations Organisation and delegates to the international conferences, this report was a difficult proposition to digest.

In order to verify the truth contained in the report "Toward Equility", three more committees were appointed, "The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)", "The Centre for Women’s Development Studies" under Vina Muzumdar and "The Research Centre for Women’s Studies" at SNDT Women’s University, Bombay headed by Doctor Nira Desai. All these committees also revealed the same truth that the overall picture of Indian Women presented in "Toward Equality" was true.

However, there was an amusing deviation in "Femina", a leading women's journal of August 1973. In an article titled "Shakti in Modern India", contributed by a feminist writer Shanta Serbjeet Sing, in an obvious reference to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, wrote,

"... setting into motion the process of liberation of Indian Women. Once out of the home, the Indian Woman has been quick to seize every opportunity to free herself from male domination".

This was nothing but a tactic to please the Centre of power. Through research done by various Commissions and Committees, it was proved, beyond doubt that though the constitution guaranteed equality between men and women, it was not achieved in reality. Under such circumstances, the opinions, like the one expressed by Mrs. Serbjeet Sing, would create more confusion in the minds of people. This article was ridiculed by many.

10. (Ibid) P.359
Geraldine Forebs, in her article “Caged Tiger”, published in WSIQ 1979, described the contemporary women’s movements as the first wave of feminism in India. Various Women’s Organisations in States like Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, projected woman as biologically, psychologically and spiritually a different person. These writers based their argument on the points that in every field, woman played a complementary role to man. Thus, these Organisations made their intent clear that they did not want to antagonise the dominant male faction of the contemporary society. It is good to convince the male faction of the society about the inevitability of equality between man and woman in the present set up. Lest, the real progress of the society would not be achieved, keeping half the population in subjugation.

The role of Journals and Magazines published by various Women’s Organisations to spread their philosophy of equality, social justice and so on, is also an important fact in strengthening the feminist movement in India. Though their readership was limited, the Journals and Magazines served the cause by voicing the local feministic issues. In 1979, a small group of women in Delhi started publishing Manushi. The main aim of this journal was to publish important judgments of various High Courts and the Supreme Court, which protected Women’s rights. The Constitutional amendments and bills brought in the Parliament and in various state Assemblies, were also published. This journal acted as a watch-dog to help the women in distress and offered legal assistance to them.

Another magazine Saheli gave more attention to the issues related to dowry. After reading a dowry murder case, published in Saheli, Mrs. Pramila Dandawate, an M.P. made such a powerful case in the Parliament that she was allowed to introduce a Private Member’s Bill in 1980. Consequently, a joint committee of both the houses of the Parliament was constituted, under the Chairmanship of Krishna Sahu, to study the whole issue and suggest means to prohibit the practice. Finally, after much deliberation, the Dowry Prohibition Bill of 1986 was passed.
The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) also published a quarterly *Roshni* from 1941. It preferred to conduct research on the economic and social backwardness of women in different states and forward the results to the respective state governments for further action. These journals, albeit served limited purpose of the society, also had the capacity of rocking the entire Parliament over some sensitive issues concerning women.

**MUSLIM WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION:**

As Hindu women contributed, according to their capacity, towards emancipation of the Indian women, the Muslim women also did the same for the Indian women in general and the Muslim women in particular. Surprisingly, all these efforts of the Muslim women leaders did not form a part of the history of modern India. That is why deliberate attempts are to be made by the Muslim scholars to highlight the contributions of the Muslim women in this direction.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) began an educational institution for Muslim girls in the district town of Bhagalpur, Bihar. It was closed, after sometime, due to family feud and the Begum moved to Calcutta. There she started another school named Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911. Although it was not the first school started by a Muslim woman for Muslim girls, Begum Rokeya's well planned academics and undaunted devotion to this project earned her the title 'Pioneer' in the field of education for Muslim girls.

Syed Sakhawat Hossain, her husband, was educated in Europe. Therefore, he looked towards his young wife for companionship and encouraged her to read and write in English, as she did in native languages. In the beginning years of her career as a writer, Begum Rokeya published three essays, "Ardhangini" (The Wife), "Griha" (Home), and "Borka" (The Veil). In these essays, the Begum sternly criticised women's asymmetrical development, lack of economic means to sustain themselves and the psychological isolation caused by Borka. The pain and agony experienced by Rokeya Begum is evident in her following words,
"Seclusion", Begum Rokeya wrote, “is not a gaping wound, hurting people. It is rather a silent killer like carbon monoxide gas.”

Pungent satire was another quality of Begum Rokeya's writings. She wrote a short story “Sultan’s Dream” (1905), in which women run home and men idle away indoors. Besides such short stories, the Begum published forty-seven serialised reports documenting the Pardah system.

Rokeya’s tough posture and frank speaking and writing made her somewhat unpopular with the masses. Accused of being pro-Christians and a Europhile, she attracted hostility from her society. However, her main argument that neglect of female education would ultimately harm Muslim Community and Islamic Culture, struck a responsive chord.

Another Muslim woman, who contributed to the cause of education of Muslim women, was Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz, a prominent member of the “National Women's Organisation”. Her uncle Shah Din conceptualised a school for Muslim girls, on the lines of the school run for Sikh girls in Lahore. About two thousand women of the Sikh community collected money to start a girls' school, which later developed into a big educational and cultural centre for the community.

Initially, Jahan Ara's effort was to educate all the girls of Shah Din's family and then the facility was extended to the neighboring villages. Encouraged by the success, Begum Jahan Ara’s mother, Amir-Un-Nissa, started a cultural organisation, Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Muslim Women’s Organisation) to teach more about the basic principles of Islam. This association grew so high in stature that other bigger organisations like NWIC and others, sought its expertise to spread literacy among the rural Muslim women.

One more woman of consequence was Sharifah Hamid Ali, whose crusade against

child-marriage, especially among Muslims, is praiseworthy. She organised a special campaign to support the “Sarada Act”, introduced by Harivilas Sarada, prohibiting child marriage and fixing the minimum age limit of boy and girl for marriage. Begum Hamid Ali, who herself was not married until she was twenty-five, thought that the minimum age for marriage of a girl should be eighteen.

Another area of operation of Begum Hamid Ali, where she worked tirelessly, was to organise a fight against the so-called women’s disabilities regarding the Franchise, Right of Inheritance and Right to Divorce. Ultimately, as this part of the history of the feminist movement in India is well known, all these bills, which would have changed the life of women in general and of Muslim women in particular, were defeated. Begum Hamid Ali and her friends like Renuka Ray, Muthulaxmi Reddy, N N Sircar and others who worked hard to get the bills passed, were shocked to know the selfish and myopic views of the male Council Members. The Begum was not a sort of woman who would take things lying down. In her hard-hitting speech at the All India Congress Committee session of 1940, she did not spare even the gray heads in the Congress, who she thought conspired against the passage of those Women’s Bills.

MUSLIM WOMAN AND ELECTION POLITICS:

The Government of India Act, 1935 granted the vote to women, above twenty-five years of age, who owned property and had attained a certain level of education. Due to this provision, six million Indian women got the voting power and they would also contest election for general as well as reserved seats.

The Congress was reluctant to support the aspiring women against the “propertied men”. Sumit Sarkar comments,

“The Congress as a ruling party found it almost impossible to go on pleasing Hindus and Muslims, landlords and peasants or businessmen and workers at the same time. A steady shift to the “right” occasionally veiled by “left” rhetoric, characterised the functioning of Congress ministries between 1937-39.”

"Women's Organizations" was another area of politics in which the Congress of the day was not interested. That is why no efforts were made by the Congress to support female candidates in 1937 elections. Even Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, the great supporters of women's political activism, were luke warm in their support to women's involvement in political affairs.

Well in advance to the 1937 Provincial Council elections, the AIWC, in its Vizagpatnam session held on 26 July, 1936 made a strong plea to the Congress to give preference to women, because in certain constituencies, women enjoyed more popularity than male Congress leaders there. However, Gandhiji and Nehru went on shifting blame on each other, for not accommodating more women candidates. In one of his private letters to Jawaharlal Nehru, written on 29th May, 1936,

"You even went so far as to say that you did not believe in the tradition or convention of having a woman and certain number of Mussalmans in the cabinet"

The instance of Radhabai Subbarayan would be enough to show the callous attitude; the Congress bore towards women regarding the election politics. The Chairman of the Madras Provincial Congress Committee offered her Congress support, provided any man would not try to stand for the same seat. Then the Congress deserted her when a male candidate claimed the same seat. Mrs. Subbarayan approached no less an important person than C Rajgopalachariar, for an explanation. To everybody's surprise, the latter told her that the Congress could not relinquish a seat merely because it was a woman candidate.

The same women, who were annoyed with the political parties during the election time, were very happy when the results were announced. The total numbers of seats in all the Provincial Councils were 1500, of which the women candidates won 56 seats. Out of the fifty-six seats won by women, thirty-six went to the Congress, eleven to independents, three belonged to the Muslim League and one was Unionist.

Out of the fifty-six women Provincial Council members, only two were Muslim, Qudsia Aizaz Rasul of the United Provinces, who later on became the Deputy Speaker of the
House and the second victorious Muslim woman was, Begum Shah Nawaz from the Punjab, who later on became the Parliamentary Secretary of the Congress party.

This environment was particularly challenging for Muslim women. In spite of this, the activists who belonged to the AIWC, lent credence to an ideology that all women were united despite caste, class and religious differences. In such an atmosphere, even the semblance of unity was difficult to maintain.

The AIWC characterised itself as apolitical, even though its leading members belonged to the Congress. This Women’s Organisation passed a resolution to support Gandhiji’s Constructive Programme. When the Muslim members tried to make some changes in the wording and substance of the resolution, they were treated like younger sisters. There were a number of prominent and capable Muslim women, notably Hajra Ahmed, Sharifah Hamid Ali and Kulsum Sayani and others, whose commitment to nationalism and feminism kept Muslim women activists together.

As early as 1934, the Congress, requesting her to contest the Lahore-Amritsar seat, approached Begum Shah Nawaz. She declined to do so. The Muslim leaders in the Punjab were already angry because only few seats were allotted to Muslims and only one was reserved for Muslim women. The leaders of Muslim Community asked Begum Shah Nawaz to organise all Muslim women into a separate Muslim Women’s Organisation, to protest against their marginalisation. But she was not ready. Some of her friends in AIWC like Mrs. Hamid Ali, Mrs. Mukherjee, Rani Rajwade, Mrs. Rustumji and others told Begum Shah Nawaz that such an effort might deepen the rift between the Hindus and Muslims. The Begum was caught in a dilemma because if she did not do so, she would make more enemies in her own community. Between the two, she chose to remain loyal to her own community.

For many years, Begum Shah Nawaz had worked closely with the AIWC, but the communal politics of some women members, forced these Muslim women to stand in rival camps. Commenting on this unfortunate development, Shahida Lateef writes,
"The Indian women's movement lost its momentum and leadership. This affected Muslim women adversely, since the feminist platform had groomed their leadership and provided an ideology, which could unite all women. And worse, the memory of the solidarity forged and nurtured by women's movements was forgotten."  

Begum Shah Nawaz agreed to organise a separate political league for Muslim women and by June, 1936 a meeting of the Punjab Provincial Moslem Women's League was arranged. Later on this organisation was turned into a sub-committee of the All India Muslim League, with Begum Madho Ali as its President and Begum Hafiz-ud-din as Secretary. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, did not like the idea of a separate organisation for Muslim women, but Begum Shah Nawaz prevailed upon him.

Begum Shah Nawaz's activities, moving in the opposite direction, were not liked by the AIWC and their relations got strained. The Begum ignored the sincere advice of her one-time very good friend Begum Hamid Ali. After the partition of our country, she went to Pakistan and became a member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

Qudsia Aizaz Rasul, the daughter of Sir Zulfiqar Ali Khan, the ruler of Malerkotla in the Punjab, was an outspoken opponent of communal politics. In 1929, she married Nawab Syed Aizaz Rasul, a Talukdar of Avadh. Her mother-in-law was a traditional woman but her husband opposed pardah and allowed his wife to move about freely. She fearlessly attacked the anti-Islamic customs and traditions imposed on Muslim women. She decided to contest a general (for Muslims) seat for the United Provinces' Legislative Assembly, instead of contesting a seat reserved for women. The Ulema (religious scholars) issued Fatwa (decree) and warned the electorate against the 'scandalous' lady who abandoned pardah and competed with men. She won the election with an overwhelming majority. In the Council too, she earned more reproaches because she spoke in favour of birth control, separate Women Police to handle women's cases and so on. She was Secretary to the Muslim League, but she decided to stay in India after partition.

Another name that comes to the fore, while studying the Muslim women’s participation in various socio-political movements is, Begum Sharifah Hamid Ali. She was the daughter of Abbas Tyabji, a Bohra Muslim and Ameena, daughter of the famous Congress leader, Badruddin Tyabji. Sharifah came out of pardah even when she was with her parents.

Begum Sharifah lived with her husband, a member of the Indian Civil Service and continued her social work. The Muslim League did not like this bold posture of Begum Sharifah. Shahida Lateef contends that Muslim women’s participation was,

"Always over shadowed by Muslim separatist politics"\(^\text{13}\)

Kulsum Sayani, the daughter of Rajballi Patel, a Khoja Muslim and the first physician to Gandhiji, was brought up in a cosmopolitan atmosphere. On the advice of the Mahatma, she started literacy program among Muslim women. She went from door to door, with a rolling black board under her arm, where poor Muslims lived. No less important persons like Sarojini Naidu, Rameshwari Nehru and others encouraged her. She successfully repulsed the impact of the war cry "Islam is in danger", issued by Jinnah, in her own little way.

Hajra Ahmed, after years of hard work with AIWC, joined the Communist party of India in 1937. Her deep concern with the pathetic conditions of working class Muslim women, made Hajra join the communist party, which floated an impressive agenda for the emancipation of the working class. Secondly, she was disgusted with the behaviour or some of the office bearers of AIWC like Rani Rajwade, who had little sympathy for the working class women. That is why Hajra Ahmed’s change of guard could be justified.

These are the five representatives of the elite Muslim women, who were supported by their liberal fathers and husbands in their pro-women activities. They were happy working with various women’s organisations till 1940, but the issues like separate electorate and the consequence of the communal award, made them to part ways.

\(^{13}\) (Ibid) P.94
Begum Shah Nawaz and Qudsia Rasul maintained their relationship with the Muslim League. Sharifah Hamid Ali and Kulsum Sayani chose the Congress, but not without soul searching in Begum Sharifah’s case and the anguish of public harassment in the case of Kulsum Sayani. Hajra Ahmed had fewer doubts about the suffering class, hence she chose the Communist Party.

These women, except Begum Shah Nawaz, blamed the Muslim League for driving wedge between the Hindu and Muslim women activists. The Congress must also share the blame partially. Rani Rajwade’s ire and un-sympathetic attitude towards the Muslim women is a case in point. Begum Shah Nawaz had worked hard with AIWC. All that she wanted was, her colleagues should understand the Muslim Sharia (religious rules) before they spoke about the Muslim community and Muslim women. On the contrary, the opinions of these Muslim women were ignored and they were ridiculed for holding such views. This aristocratic attitude of some individuals and organisations, created a deep chasm between the two communities.

After independence, the Indian government passed many laws to protect women from violence. Even as the questions of violence against women brought new focus to the women’s movement, the other issues have fragmented the new solidarity. The gravest challenges came from a revitalised and gendered communalism, as illustrated by the Shah Bano case.

In April 1985, the Supreme Court of India granted Shah Bano, a divorcee Muslim woman, the right to maintenance from her former husband. The Muslim community strongly protested against this award, saying that it was a direct intervention in the Muslim Personal Law. Throughout India, the conservative Muslims argued that the decision of the Apex Court was an attack on their identity. On the other hand, the feminists and Hindus, denounced Muslims for their backward laws.

In 1986, the Congress Government at the Centre, introduced Muslim Women’s Bill, (Protection of Rights in Divorce) denying Muslim women redress under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (People talked that introduction of the Bill was to soothe the tempers of the Muslim community, which was angry with the Central Government
over the opening of the doors of Babari Masjid). However, the recent judgment of the Supreme Court and various high courts like Allahabad, Calcutta and so on, granted maintenance to divorced Muslim women. This revived the debate about Judiciary's intervention in the Muslim Personal Law. Whereas the judiciary, in its wisdom, held that a divorced Muslim woman is entitled to maintenance permanently. The Supreme Court took a “generous” view of the clause, “till the time the divorced Mohammedan woman remarries”.

Qazi Muzahidul Islam Qasmi, Chairman, All India Muslim Personal Law Board, in his interview to Mean Time, dated 21st July, 2000 argued,

“We protested against the Supreme Court ruling on the issue of Shah Bano case. The main issue involved in the controversy was, whether the judiciary can interpret the Islamic Laws, The Quran and Sunnah. The 1986 Act clearly suggested that the Muslim Personal Law had its own system and no body was entitled to interpret it without referring to the authentic Jurists of Islamic Law”.

Against this view, the Calcutta High Court in its judgment on 8th June, 2000 ruled that the provision in the Muslim Women’s Divorce Act, 1986 which reads, "All reasonable and fair provisions and maintenance to be made and paid to her"

should not be restricted only to three months of Iddat period. It should be interpreted liberally and maintenance should be granted to the divorced Muslim woman till she remarries.

Now, whether the judiciary in India has over stepped its jurisdiction? “Yes”, say the Ulema because the Muslim marriages and divorces are governed by the Sharia and only the Shariat courts can give judgments in such matters. On the other hand, the non-Muslim intelligentsia says, “No” because, according to their opinion, the Supreme Court has simply interpreted the phrase “all reasonable and fair provisions”, enshrined in the Muslim Women’s Divorce Act, 1986 a bit liberally to the advantage of the affected. Hence, the Apex Court has not interfered with the Sharia Laws. If the Parliament removes the clause from the 1986 Act, the judiciary shall not tamper with the Muslim Personal Law any more.