CHAPTER - II

ANNIE BESANT AND WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION
Annie Besant, the daughter of William Page Wood, was born on 1 October 1847 in London. In 1852, when she was five years old, her father died. And hence the family faced great difficulties. So she had to leave home at the age of 13 in 1861. She came to stay with Maryat in Paris who was stern and religious. Besant, apart from spending time in religious activities, also found pleasure in reading the works of Plato, Dante, and Iliad. This reading, perhaps laid the foundation for her political career. The two main tragedies of her early life were her rejection of Christianity and her marriage. In 1867, she was married to Frank Besant, a Clergyman, but the marriage proved to be a failure and she had to seek a divorce. As a result, she had to come out of the world. This gave her the opportunity to gain experience in several professions, which she had to adopt in order to maintain her livelihood. She worked as a cook, a nurse, and did needlework to support herself.¹

In the year 1874, Besant worked under Charles Bradlaugh who was a National reformer. In 1881, she became his co-editor. Besant made her first speech at the Co-operative Institute, Castle Street at London, wherein she demanded political status for women and equality in all spheres on the ground that if they were inferior, they would not be able to withstand...

open competition. She joined the Theosophical Society and the influence of Madam Blavatsky. In 1892, Madam Blavatsky died and Besant along with W.O. Judge became the joint head of the confidential section of the society.\(^2\)

The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics in the year 1914 galvanized new and increased national consciousness in both men and women. In October 1913, she spoke at a great public meeting in Madras recommending that there should be a standing committee of the House of Commons for Indian affairs, which would go into the question of how India might attain freedom.\(^3\) When she was in England in 1914, she tried to form an Indian party in the parliament but her efforts ended in failure. However, her propaganda in England in favour of granting self government to India prepared the ground towards the formation of "Home Rule League" in London.\(^4\) Annie Besant took up the work in helping the Indian people to get self- knowledge, self-respect and self-government.\(^5\)

On her return to India, in the year 1914, she came through a weekly newspaper named, "Commonweal", which helped her in her political

\(^2\) Ibid., p.113.


work, which mainly focused on the public and their problem.⁶ In 1914, she purchased the "Madras Standard" for her political work and renamed it as "New India". Margaret Cousins was the sub-editor of New India she called this freedom "Home Rule" for India.⁷ Besant was the registered printer and publisher of the daily English "New India" and registered printer of a weekly journal called the "Commonweal".⁸

On 14 July 1914, 1100 copies of New India were printed and the number increased to 5,000 within a month, on 15 August. Besant's "New India" became the most popular paper in Madras having a circulation of 10,500 which was higher than any other paper in Madras.⁹ The Home Rule League consisted of two divisions, one in India and the other in England wherein the function of the former was to educate Indians about the implications of the Home Rule Movement, the latter was to educate the English Public in relation to the political condition of India in the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹⁰

---

⁶ Rajkumar, Annie Besant rise to powering Indian Politics 1914-1947, New Delhi, 1981, p.75.
⁸ Tamil Nadu Archives, History of Freedom Movement Bundle No : 64, Home Rule Movement 1914-1920, (Selected Extracts from the confidential records on the Home Rule Movement of Mrs. Besant in Madras), p.27.
Annie Besant was a member of the Indian National Congress in 1914. Her firm belief was that India should have her freedom but also remain in the British Commonwealth.\textsuperscript{11} To get the support of the Indian National Congress for the proposed Home Rule League, Annie Besant went to Bombay in December 1915 where the Congress was to hold its annual session. While in Bombay, she met the grand old man of India, Dadabai Naoroji, who spoke encouragingly about the proposed Home Rule League. In 1916 the work was intensified and the people eagerly read "\textit{New India}" to know the progress of the movement and read Besant's editorials.\textsuperscript{12}

The term Home Rule was adopted from Ireland. In 1914, the Irish freedom fighter won their struggle for which Irish Home Rule Act received the Royal assent. Annie Besant was attracted by the slogan Home Rule because it was shorter, better suited for popular cry and more explicit since it connoted self-government within the empire. She chose this expression instead of Swaraj or self-government because the English people were more familiar with this term.\textsuperscript{13}

The launching of All India Home Rule League in September 1915 was the most significant phenomenon in her career. The first meeting


\textsuperscript{13} G.Venkatesan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.154.
named Home Rule League of Annie Besant was held at Madras on 3 September 1915. As many as 500 people enrolled as members of the league. The All India Home Rule League initially had an executive council of seven office bearers who were elected for a brief period of three years by the thirty four founding branches; obviously Annie Besant was elected as President and G.S. Arundale as its organizing Secretary. Besides C.P. Ramaswamy Ayer was one of the General Secretaries and B.P. Wadia, the treasurer. The function of the league was conducted by these four officials from its headquarters at Adyar.14

According to the concept of Home Rules, India would be free to determine all domestic issues of its rule; and membership was open to all men and women over 18 years of age, who accepted the objects. School students were not admitted to become a member, but undergraduates were allowed to join. Every member and associate should pay one rupee as admission fee to the league, the amount of annual subscription, if any, being determined by and payable to the branch to which the member or associate belongs to.15 Home Rule League had published a large number of booklets in English, but many were published in the languages of the land like Marathi, Tamil, Gujarathi and Sindhi, the price of which were nominal so as to make

---


the distributions as wide as possible. The Tamil pamphlets carried patriotic songs in Tamil and had a great demand in their time.\textsuperscript{16}

The Home Rule has been established to carry out the following objectives; to secure Home Rule for India by all law-abiding and constitutional activity; to maintain the relationship with Great Britain by becoming a free nation within the British empire, under the imperial crown of his majesty, the emperor George V, and his successors; to support and strengthen the national congress which has been laboured for thirty years to lay the foundations of Indian Self Government and to carry on a continuous educative propaganda on the necessity of Home rule for India. Infact, Home Rule means 'the government of the people and by the people'.\textsuperscript{17}

Home Rule means the right of the people to send their representatives to make laws for them, and to levy taxes on them; subjection to laws not made by the representatives of the people is robbery. Thus England proclaimed, and enforced these principles in her own government, so that no one can deny them. Home Rule in England has carried out these principles. Home Rule in India will also carry them out.

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Annie Besant, \textit{National Home Rule League (why founded and how)}, Madras, 1919, pp.8-9.
\end{enumerate}
Home Rule also means education free of cost and compulsory for every child. The corporation of all to ensure a happy and prosperous life for every citizen of the state; the creation of conditions which would enable every child born into the nation to develop all the faculties, her or she would bring with him or her into the world, so that each might grow to the full stature of the manhood or womanhood of which he or she would capable of. Every grown up person should have a share in choosing the person who should represent him in the village panchayat, the taluk board, the district board, the provincial legislative council and the supreme legislative council. This would not all come at once. Every villager would at first have a vote in a village panchayat; probably there would be a small property or educational qualification for the franchise for the higher boards and council. There would be no advantages or disadvantages attached to caste, creed or colour. The white and coloured people would be equal before the law, Indians would manage their own affairs, but foreign and international affairs, like peace and war, would be managed by a council of the commonwealth to which India would send some of her own men like the other free nations belonging to it. The Criminal Institution Development would no longer be allowed to meddle with political matters nor harass harmless people, or terrorize the law-abiding. It would be confined to its legitimate duty of hunting criminals, not patriots. The police must be the servants of the people, not their masters, would be feared by the bad citizen not by the good, and would have a pay sufficient to live upon without taking from the poor. It means that being free to mange their
own land and also defend and protect their own land for safety. They would not be able to depend upon a foreign army, but must maintain their own citizen, army and must keep order with in the motherland, as well guard her brothers.\textsuperscript{18}

The leagues were designed specifically to spread the idea of Home Rule and to generate a country-wide demand for it, aiming perhaps to agitate on the lines of British radical movements in the 19\textsuperscript{th} Century. Annie Besant through that a network of branches of the league to carry out consistent agitation throughout the country. Therefore, the Home Rule League tried to establish branches in almost all the major towns in India. They initiated an intensive campaign of propaganda through the press, public meetings and lectures, and by distributing handbills and pamphlets.\textsuperscript{19}

Besant stressed always about the need for such a Home Rule League and the tasks ahead of its members. By these mottos the movement worked for its ideals, and representatives who came from different parts of the country conveyed the messages of the people of their regions to the organisers.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} S.R. Bakshi, \textit{op.cit.}, p.16-17.

\textsuperscript{19} Rajan Mohan, \textit{Women in Indian National Congress}, Delhi, 1999, p.63.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{New India}, Madras, dated 04.09.1916.
The manifesto of the Home Rule League was published in "New India" on 25 September and was sent to all Indian Papers.\textsuperscript{21} The manifesto comprised of the growing poverty of the masses, the decay of industries and the increasing burden of debt. Besant’s attacked on the policy of government in regard to the volunteers and the administrative of the Arms Act, and by persistent attempts to play upon racial feelings. They afforded every satisfaction for anticipating that such arguments were supplemented by denunciations of the treatment of Indian soldiers and Indian officers.\textsuperscript{22}

The cry of Home Rule spread to the remotest corners of the land and Home Rule Leagues were established all over the country. In Besant’s reign the press became powerful inspite of repression under the press law. Another factor that contributed largely to the success of the movement was that from its inception it recognized the integrity of language areas and adopted the linguistic principle in determining the provincial delimitations.\textsuperscript{23}

The organization was simple. A few people who were interested to work for Home Rule formed themselves into a group and chose one of the members as their representative who communicated with the secretary of the

\textsuperscript{21} Government of Madras, Fort Nightly Report from 1914-1947, p.11.

\textsuperscript{22} Tamil Nadu Archives, History of Freedom Movement Bundle No : 64, Home Rule Movement 1914-1920, (Selected Extracts from the confidential records on the Home Rule Movement of Mrs. Besant in Madras), p.29.

\textsuperscript{23} S.R.Bakshi, \textit{op.cit.}, p.19.
Home Rule League and the copies of all the literature were sent to the chosen representative who distributed it to the reading rooms, libraries and local clubs. Annie Besant commenced a whirlwind campaign of active propaganda by personal addresses and through her two papers namely "New India" and "Commonweal". She took advantage of the ready made organization of the Theosophical Society with its branches all over India and even outside, as well as of the personal devotion and admiration felt for her intellect, learning and religious mission by a wide circle of Indians. She setup Home Rule organizations all over the country, made extensive tours, delivering stirring addresses and distributing vast quantities of propagandist literature.²⁴

Home Rule Movement was thoroughly misunderstood by a group of intellectual non-Brahmins. Besant's theosophical basis with its emphasis on the great Brahminical part in India quickly brought her opposition with non-Brahmin leaders T. M. Nair, one of the founding fathers of Justice Party, carried a tirade personally against her. It is believed that the Home Rule Movement hastened the formation of South Indian Liberal Federation at the end of 1916; nevertheless it was one of occasions rather than the cause.²⁵

The Home Rule Movement of Besant was supported by eminent personalities like B.G. Tilak, Dadabhai Naoroji, S. Subramanya Ayyar, B.P. Wadia and Kamath. The press in the Madras Presidency played a vital role in

propagating the ideals of the movement among the masses. The first time the seeds of nationalism in the presidency and were sown for creating political consciousness among the people of India.26

India demanded Home Rule for two reasons. First, freedom was the birth right of every nation, secondly, her most important interests were made subservient to the interests of the British empire without her consent and her resources were not utilized for her greatest needs.27

The Madras Presidency became the centre of Home Rule agitation in India and thrust into the forefront of all Indian politics.28 Home Rule Movement in Madras struggled for its object of Swadeshi, boycott of foreign goods, temperance, national education, labour welfare and Home Rule which were similar in essence to those preached by the Indian National Congress since 1885, Under the inspiring zeal of its leaders like Besant, George Arundale, B.P. Wadia and Subramaniya Iyer. It captured the minds of many intellectuals, both young and old spread its ideals through numerous branches of theosophical societies. Besant herself came to Madurai in 1915 and delivered a number of speeches about Home Rule. Madurai

Theosophical Lodge was one of the first lodges of this state to be converted into a center for Home Rule agitation.\textsuperscript{29}

Student's participation in the Home Rule movement marked a turning point in the History of the national movement in South India. The Home Rule organizers sought the support of the students in order to popularize the movement. Annie Besant felt that by imparting political propaganda in the minds of the students it would help them to inculcate patriotism, more courage and sincerity, which would enable them to serve the country after completing their studies.\textsuperscript{30}

Home Rule classes were organized to inculcate patriotism among the students. In Madras, special Home Rule classes had been arranged twice in a week in the hall of young men's Indian Association. Attacking the backwardness of the England educational system in India, Annie Besant declared that the English government discouraged the higher education.\textsuperscript{31}

On 11 September 1916, when P. Sivaswami Iyer, the Vice Chancellor of Madras University and the supporter of British rule gave a talk

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} B.S. Baliga, \textit{Madras District Gazetteers}, Madurai District, Government of Madras, Madras, 1960, p.73.
\item \textsuperscript{30} NNPR, \textit{New India}, Madras, dated 9.05.1917.
\end{itemize}
at Presidency college, the students interrupted him and abused him. During the meeting at Pachiappa's College, Madras, the students snatched away the cap of the CID sub-Inspector. In St. Joseph College, Trichirapalli and the Government College in Coimbatore, the students pasted wall posters with the phrase "kill the English" and "worship Annie Besant".32

As the Home Rule League movement became very popular and grew in its strength, the government was alarmed. The students were becoming the backbone of the movement in Madras. Naturally, they decided to curb the tendency of the students to identify themselves with political movements and take part in its activities, the government of Madras passed orders to prevent them from entering into politics. The government wanted to bring students in schools and colleges.33

The impact of Home Rule agitation on students in Madras was tremendous. On 24 July 1916, they occupied a compartment reserved for Europeans at the Egmore station. Three days latter anti reservation agitation led to a clash between the students and Europeans at the Fort station, Madras. In many parts of the Madras Presidency the students fearlessly and

33. Government of Madras, G.O.No.559, Home (Education) Department, dated 01.05.1917.
freely disobeyed government orders and restrictions.\textsuperscript{34} So, the English administrations decided to separate the students from the political to separate the students from the political movement. In 1917, an order was passed by the government to restrict the students to participate in the political affairs. The government therefore decided that undergraduate student in any college and no pupil in any school should be permitted to take part in public political discussions, to attend political meetings, to join any political association or to take part in any movement.\textsuperscript{35}

At the time when protesters were kept under detention, agitation in various regions of India was growing in geometrical progression. An order was issued by the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces under Rule 3(a) of the Defence of India Rules, prohibiting the entry of Besant into the Central Provinces. Besant from entering the provinces were freely criticized by Maratha region and the press-comments had been universally hostile. The provincial conference, which met at Amroati passed a resolution protesting against the order. Attending also by B.P. Wadia and N.C. Kelkar, the Editor of Mahralta, the conference was presided over by H.S. Gour, a prominent barrister of Sagar.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} G. Venkatesan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.156.

\textsuperscript{35} Government of Madras, G.O.No.559, Home (Education) Department, dated 01.05.1917.

\textsuperscript{36} S.R. Bakshi, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.158-159.
The government of Madras informed the Viceroy on 24 May 1916 about his governments' action against Besant's paper. On 16 May 1916, under Press Act in operation at the point of time a sum of Rs.2,000/- was demanded as security from the New India newspaper of Besant. The security was confiscated on 25 August 1916, and a fresh demand of security under section 3(2) of the Press Act for Rs.5,000/- from Besant, keeper of the Vasantha Press, Adyar, Madras was made.37

On 18 October 1916, the High Court, Madras ordered for the dismissal of Besant's petition under section 17 of the Press Act of in which she sought to set aside the order of the Chief Presidency Magistrate, dated on 22 May, 1916 requiring her to deposit a security of Rs.2000/- in respect to the New India printing works and an order passed by the government of Madras on 25 August 1916 declaring under section 4(1) that the security should be forfeited to the government.38

There was strong protest all over India against the unjust demand of the Madras government. M.M.Malavia, T.B. Sapril, C.Y.Chintamani and M.A.Jinnah were among the personalities who joined this chorus

37. Ibid., p.159.
protest.\textsuperscript{39} Public meeting were held in Madras to protest against the demand of security from "\textit{New India}" and S. Subramanya Iyer presided over it.\textsuperscript{40} Many associations outside the Presidency joined the out cry. "\textit{New India}" defence funds were organized. Besant sought legal remedy in the Madras High Court lost the case. But the publicity that the case received strengthened the Home Rule agitation, not only in Madras, but also in other part of India, particularly in Bombay and Bengal.\textsuperscript{41}

As a result of their Home Rule agitation, Margaret Cousins was inspired to organize a protest meeting in Madanapalle. In 1917 the interest of the women in the movement for Home Rule was deeply stirred and stimulated by the internment of Besant and hence the Women Indian Association branches took active part in obtaining her release. Gandhiji on July 1917 wrote a letter to the Viceroy stating that the internment was a "Big blunder". All India Muslim League passed a resolution protesting against the internment and the action of the Governor Lord Pentland. The matter of internment of Besant was taken to the notice of American President Woodrow Wilson by S. Subramanya Iyar who gave up his knighthood as protest against the arrest of Besant.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{itemize}
\item[40.] Tamil Nadu Archives, \textit{History of Freedom Movement Bundle No. 112, Diary of Important Events 1910-1947}, p.1.
\item[41.] S. Gopalakrishnan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.56.
\end{itemize}
As the Home Rule agitation became vigorous everywhere it made the government to come out with an announcement on 20 August 1918 that the ultimate goal of the British in ruling the country was to a responsible government. This announcement was made by Montague, the secretary of state and was called the August Declaration. He visited Bombay in December 1917 and met the leaders of the Home Rule League Tilak, Annie Besant and Jinnah. Mantague Chelmsford report was published in July 1918, formally announcing responsible movement as the goal for India. This was followed by the release of Besant and other agitators. Annie Besant withdrew her Home Rule movement as she felt that no more propaganda was necessary for the Home Rule because the movement achieved its main objective with Montague declaration.43

Besant joined the congress in 1914 and she brought new ideas, new talents, new resources and altogether a new method of organization thereby a new outlook into the field of congress. The Home Rule League was to be a separate body from the congress, while in no way supplanting it and it had to take up work, which the congress could not do with its annual sessions and the rare meetings of its committees. Annie Besant disassociated herself with all the reforms for which the congress stood, save

on the self-government, and she worked continuously in press and platform for that criteria.  

In 1917, seeing the services and sacrifices of Annie Besant, the congress elected her as the president of the 32nd session of the Indian National Congress at Culcutta. Being the first woman president of the Congress, She enhanced the prestige of Indian womanhood. Her presidential address was widely applauded as the charter of national liberty. But Annie Besent already had contacts with the congress in the year 1914 when she participated in the 29th congress held at Madras during 28 to 30 December. She was the first lady to occupy a post on the platform of India's National Assembly.

As the president of the Indian National Congress, she got an opportunity in planning out a system of national education in India. It was a graded scheme suiting each type of unit to be educated. Regional universities were established with research facilities in the indigenous knowledge of ancient literature, science, art and crafts, village education was to be developed country wide.

Annie Besant was very active in bringing together different political parties and leaders for framing an agreed scheme of Swaraj and creating public opinion end to end through press and platforms. Besant sowed the seeds of self-government in the heart of every Indian. She preached the meanings of Swarajya and self-government in every village and house.49

Besant was a woman of extraordinary learning not only in religion but also in politics. She organized a Home Rule League in every town and village and all patriotic citizens were preached Home Rule and worked for its attainment under the guidance of the British thereby to reach the goal in eight to ten years. The Home Rule Movement helped the attainment of Swaraj.50

In the latter part of the 19th century several women's organizations were started by the European women to fight for native Women's right. The autonomous women organizations such as the Women's India Association and All India Women's conference played an active role from 1917, onwards in taking up several women issues. The main objectives of these organizations were to work for the upliftment of women.51 The Women's Indian Association established in 1917 was one among them to

49. NNPR, Bharathi, Madras, dated 07.07.1916, p.1194.
50. NNPR, Sampad Abhyudaya, dated 01.10.1915.
work for the political rights of women.\textsuperscript{52} The three major women’s organizations, which organized between 1917 and 1927, were (i) Women's Indian Association (ii) The National Council of Women in Indian Association (NCWI), (iii) All India Women's Conference (AIWC).\textsuperscript{53}

The main objective of these organizations was to work for the upliftment of women. At the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century the strength in number began to increase. The Women's Indian Association was one among them to work for the political rights of women.\textsuperscript{54} In 1917, the Women’s India Association was founded by two European women theosophists Margaret cousins and Dorothy Jinaraja Dasa in Madras under the leadership of Annie Besant. Women’s Indian Association was the first women’s Association, which brought all Indian women together for mutual assistance. The branches of the Women’s Indian Association spread from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. By 1923-1924 it had fifty four branches and 2500 Members and by 1926-1927 there were many branches and 4000 members.\textsuperscript{55}

The main aim of the Women’s Indian Association was to get their suffrage in the local administration, Central and State legislatures and

\textsuperscript{52} P.M. Mathew and M.S.Nair, \textit{Organization and Women's Interest}, New Delhi, 1986, p.11.

\textsuperscript{53} Vinitha Kaul, \textit{Women and the Wind Change}, New Delhi, 2000, p.23.


got into it. The other objectives of the Women's Indian Associations were (i) to present to women their responsibility as daughters of India (ii) to help them realize that the future of India lies in their hands since being housewives and mothers they play an important role in the family in training, guiding and forming their child who will rule India in future, (iii) to encourage and arouse women into groups for the purpose of self-development and education and for the definite service of other (iv) to secure for every girl and boy the right of education through schemes of compulsory primary education, including the teaching of religion, (v) to secure the abolition of child marriage and to raise the age of consent for married girls to sixteen, (vi) to secure women the right to vote in municipal and legislative Councils on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men and (vii) to secure for women the right to be elected as members of all municipal and legislative councils.

The Women's Indian Association published its monthly journal in English named 'Stri-Dharma'. Articles in Hindi and Tamil were also included in Stri-Dharma. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy worked as the editor of this journal from 1931 to 1940. It earned the news of events which was of interest to women, reports from various other branches and articles on women's

56. Stri-Dharma, Vol. 16, No. 11, January, Women's Indian Association Madras, 1918, p.11.


The Indian Women’s Movement was the chief force behind the struggle for women franchise. The first camping for women’s franchise was started in the year 1917. Three women without much talent and personality, of which two were foreigners and one was an Indian had a deep impression in their mind to bring forth the Indian women and make them to participate in the freedom struggle. They were Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Sarojini Naidu.

Margaret Cousins, wife of the Irish the sophist and poet, and her husband James H. Cousins came to India with the inspiration of Annie Besant. Cousins took a leading part in the Women’s franchise movement, like Dorothy Jinaraja-dasa, who was then secretary of the Women’s Indian Association. Both these ladies were theosophilist and accompanied Annie Besant from their native country to India. This association by the influence of Annie Besant and her Colleagues spread all over India. Women’s Indian Association trained middle class women in domestic sciences, economics, hygiene, needle work, spinning, tailoring and in hadicrafts. Classes were also conduct to teach about women’s suffrage, their role in the national movement in philanthropic work. The Association was also associated with several

62. NNPR, Swadesamitran, Madras, dated 02.02.1921.
useful activities like educational, social hygiene, child-welfare and politics. Women of all kinds of opinion were allowed to be members of the association and help them according to their own individual capacity and inclination. The active members of the association were prominent citizens and were conducting their own responsibility. Many social service institutions such as the Madras Seva Sadan, the Madras Children's Aid Society, the Avvai Home and Orphanage, the Swadeshi emporium, the Montessori Schools were set by the association.  

It was due to the demand of this association that women were granted the municipal and legislative franchise. It also led to the introduction of primary and compulsory education for girls in the city of Madras. The Women's Indian Association sent it representatives to take part in the Round Table Conference. This association was the first women association in India to present a memorandum to the Round Table Conference on Women's Franchise and her constitutional rights.  

The Bombay and Madras provincial conferences passed resolutions to remove the sex disqualification from the reform bill. The Andhra


Provincial Conference, the Bombay special national congress, the Indian Home Rule League and the Muslim League passed resolution in favour of women's franchise. At the congress special session held in Bombay during 1918, Sarojini Naidu spoke on behalf of women's suffrage. She spoke that extending franchise to women was national, politically should and consistent with human right. Five thousand delegates attended this session and a resolution was passed by a seventy five per cent majority. When child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in the central legislature in 1929, Women's Indian Association has strenuously worked for its enforcement by appointing Sarada Committee, and the Sarada Bill was passed in October 1929. It was finally evolved into the Sarada Act in April 1930.

In Madras Presidency, Muthulakshmi Reddy moved a resolution in Madras Legislative Council for raising the age of consent through a bill, which was unanimously accepted, by the council. The bill recommended to the Government of India that in the opinion of the council legislation raising the marriageable age of boys and girls to atleast twenty one and sixteen years respectively was necessary. This bill was adopted unanimously by the Madras Legislative Council on 31 August 1929.


Women’s Indian Association’s contribution towards the working of the acts for the suppression of immoral traffic in women and children act, and also the disabilities of the Devadasi System in Hindu temples in the Madras presidency gained great appreciation. Women’s Indian Association was strongly in favour of Muthulakshmi resolution and bill to prohibit the continuity of the Devadasi system and to secure economic victims. Devadasi abolition bill received spontaneous support from all sections of the people. It consistently worked for the eradication of untouchability both by the propaganda meeting in the city and by giving grants and scholarships to institutions and individuals for the education of girls belonging to Adi Dravida Community.69

The Women’s Indian Association was the initiator of the first All Asian Women’s Conference. Margaret Cousins visit to the U.S. with her husband, gave her an opportunity to attend the session of Pan Pacific Women’s Conference, which inspired her to plan an All Asian Women’s Conference there by enlarging the scope of her work to the whole of Asia. She raised funds and worked hard to make the Asian conference a success.70


70. Prathima Asthana, op.cit., pp.69-70.
The association maintained its international links with other international women's organization. The Women's International League for peace and freedom had shown special interest in the Indian Women's movement and helped it considerably by its bulletins, which was issued in London. The British Commonwealth League had been in regular correspondence with the Women's Indian Association.\(^{71}\)

All Indian Women's Conference (AIWC) was started by Women's Indian Association in 1927 as a forum to take up the problems of women's education and to recommend policies to the government. Later on, the forum was consolidated as a women’s organization with constitution framed in 1929. Initially it had only eighty branches, twenty four centres and 400 members all over India. The primary objective of All India Women's Conference was to promote education for both sexes at all levels and also to deal with problems related to the welfare of women and children. The Conference as a body consisted of patrons who were generally the ex-presidents of the conference, one president, six Vice-Presidents, one organizing secretary, two sectional secretaries, one treasurer and a chair person of the standing committee. The conference organized an all India annual conference for which delegates came from various constituent conference; the delegates were elected from the public meetings of women in various constituent areas. The All India Women's

\(^{71}\) Report of the Women's Indian Association for the year 1930-1931, Madras, p.11.
Conference, now and then, formed various Sub-committees to prepare memorandum on important issues, to organize meetings and to conduct signature campaigns.\textsuperscript{72} For instance, All India Women’s Conference, organized the famous Sarada Act Sub-Committee to deal with the issue of child marriage. It also formed the Sub-Committee for Vigilance Association to deal with the problem of prostitution Sub-Committees for political matters were also setup in the later years. All India Women’s conference, in its constitution, stated that the organization would not engage itself in the party politics and unite only on issues that affect women and children. However, in 1932, at the Madras session of the conference, All India Women’s Conference, noted that even while its constitution prevented women activists from taking part in party politics, women as citizens should be provided with equal opportunity to take part in national agitations. It also decided that the conference itself must address the question of freedom for India, voting right for women and memberships and representation of women in various decision – making bodies. From then onwards, the nature and ideology of All India Women’s Conference changed drastically. It no longer confined itself only to women’s issues but also addressed various other political matters.\textsuperscript{73}


Muthulakshmi Reddy guided the policies and programmes of All India Women’s Conference. It was a non-party and a non-partisan organization.\(^74\)

The All India Women’s Conference first met in Poona in January from 5 to 8 1927, followed by more than six months of serious work on the part of Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to the Women’s Indian Association. Maharani Chimanbai Saheb Goecwad of Baroda was the first president of the All India Women’s Conference, underlined the need for a special type of education for women, suited with this nature.\(^75\) The second conference of All India Women’s Conference was held at Delhi in 1928 under the presidentship of Begum mother of Bhopal, its proceedings were opened by Lady Irwin. The most notable resolution passed during this conference was related to Harbilas Sarada Bill for the restraint of early marriage.\(^76\) The Third All India Women’s Conference was held at Patna in 1929 with the Dowager Rani of Mandi as president.\(^77\) The Third All India Women’s Conference on Educational Reform met at Patna from 3 to 7 January 1929, amidst a last gathering of men and women including a large number of


\(^{75}\) K.S. Durrany, The Women’s Movement in Religious Communities in India, Delhi, 2002, p.61.

\(^{76}\) Pratima Asthana, op.cit., p.91.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., p.77.
delegates who had come from all parts of India. The Conference urged the government, municipal councils, local bodies, and women’s association to organize classes and centers to educate adult women in domestic science, fine arts, literary industrial and general subjects including girl-guiding.

The 4th All India Women’s Conference was held in Bombay in 1930 and was presided over by Sarojini Naidu. This conference supported the passing of Sarada Act. The 5th conference was held at Lahore in 1931 and was presided over by Muthulakshmi Reddy. This conference considered that the standard of examination should be raised and better provision was to be made for the actual training. The 6th session held at Madras in 1932 was presided over by Sarala Ray. This conference repeated its demands for the extension of compulsory primary education for girls. The All India Women’s Conference, the Women’s Indian Association, and the National Council of Women in India jointly drew up a memorandum to be placed before the franchise Sub-Committee of the Round Table Conference. This step was duly approved by all branches of various women’s organizations. The 7th Conference met at Lucknow in 1933 under the presidency of Lady

79. Ibid., pp. 69 -72.
Vidyagauri Ramanbhay Nilkanth. The 8th Session of All India Women’s Conference was held at Calcutta in 1933 under the leadership of Lady Abdul Quadir. The 9th session of All India Women’s Conference was held at Karachi under the presidency of Rustonji Faridonji. It decided to make efforts to impress upon the British Parliaments that there should neither be communal electorate nor any wifehood qualifications imposed on them. The conference made a successful attempt to create a widespread demand for the appointment of a commission of the legal disabilities of Indian women, which would suggest reforms in the light of modern conditions. The conference also appointed Rajkumari Amrit Kaur as the liaison officer to maintain permanent contact with women’s organizations in England.

Maharani Sethu Parvathi Bai of Trivancore presided over the 10th session of the conference held in December 1935, which was attended by several distinguished women from U.S.A, China, Japan and England. Notable Feature of this session was the work done by the Sub-Committee on the Child Marriage Restraint Act. The 11th session was held at Ahmedabad in 1936 under the chairmanship of Margaret Cousins. It enlisted Public

Support for C.D. Deshmuks, Bill to amend Hindu law governing Hindu women’s right to property.\textsuperscript{86}

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur presided over the 12\textsuperscript{th} session held at Nagpur in December 1936. The 13\textsuperscript{th} session of the conference was held at Delhi in 1938 under the presidency of Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade. For the first time it was decided to publish an All Indian Women’s Conference journal. Fourteen session was held at Allahabad in 1939 under the presidency of Begum Hamid Ali. The 15\textsuperscript{th} Session was held at Bangalore in 1940 under the presidency of Rameswari Nehru, which was attended by delegates from Ceylon. The intensive propaganda of the conference force the government to appoint a committee to examine the injustice done to women under the Hindu law, but the conference strongly protested against the limitations imposed on the committee’s terms of reference. The 16\textsuperscript{th} conference of All India Women’s Conference held at Coconada in 1941 was presided over by Vijayalakshmi Pandit. The 17\textsuperscript{th} conference held at Bombay in April 1944 was presided over by Kamaladevi Chattopdhya and was attended by 205 delegates. The 18\textsuperscript{th} session held at Hyderabad in December 1945, was presided over by Hansa Metha and attended by 177 delegates.\textsuperscript{87} The 19\textsuperscript{th} session was held at Akola in 1946 under the presidency of Lady Rama Bai. It drafted a charter on

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{86} Pratima Asthana, \textit{op.cit.}, p.95.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Ibid., pp.96-97.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Women’s rights and duties, and prepared a memorandum on planning for national welfare. The 20th session of the conference was held at Madras in 1947 under the chairmanship of Anasuyabai Kale. The conference sent twelve members to attend the Asian relation conference. It also made a stupendous progress in various fields after India attained independence in 1947. The central office of the conference was shifted to New Delhi and the building was designed to serve as a memorial to two of the pioneers namely, Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins.88

The All India Women’s Conference emerged as the most important organization and became a national institution embracing even global the problems in its purview. It carried out useful in the field of education especially its emphasis was on making women fit to play that role in the family as well as in society. Its campaign against early marriage, polygamy, purdah, dowry, widow-remarriage and the property right for women prepared the ground for the enactment of suitable legislations. It demanded franchise for all women, married or unmarried, and asserted that departments like health, education and labour should be invariably given to women legislators.89 The problem of franchise for women was the first issue addressed by the Women’s Indians Associations. Political equality was

88. Ibid., pp.98-100.
89. Ibid., pp.103-104.
guaranteed to women under the Indian Constitution guaranteed through the instrument of adult franchise and Article 15, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex.  

The struggle for the vote for women was broadly classified into two phases; the first from 1917 to 1928, when female enfranchisement and eligibility for female representation in legislatures was sought, the second until 1937, when attempts were made to broaden both terms of enfranchisement and representation in legislative bodies. 

In 1917, the All India Women’s deputation of 14 women leaders drew from all over the country, who were members of the Women’s India Association waited upon Montague who was then the secretary of state for India and who visited India. A women’s deputation demanded women’s political rights and their role in the coming constitution of India and presented a memorandum to E.S. Montague in Madras. Sarojini Naidu was the leader and Margaret Cousins was the Secretary of this deputation. Other women leaders like Annie Besant, Malathi Patwardhan, Rani Lakshmibai Rajwadence, Naguthai Moropant Joshi were also included in this deputation. The memorandum also demanded also the enfranchisement of

90. Women in Tamil Nadu, A Profile, The Tamil Nadu Corporation for development of women ltd, Madras, 1986, p.89.


Indian women. In 1919, the South Borough Franchise Committee visited India for further study about franchise. A women’s deputation led by Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu voiced the Committee for women’s suffrage on equal terms with men. The committee accepted the petitions and interviewed a few provinces. After making a thorough study, the committee reported that women should be totally excluded from the franchisee. The committee suggested that the social customs in India were not conductive for granting franchise to women and as such suffrage would be premature. It overlooked the fact that women were already serving in municipal councils and other local bodies. But the committee appreciated those who supported the demand and so recommended that this matter should be reconsidered in the next revision. The members of the Women's Indian Associations and Women's delegation who had worked vigorously for female franchise were very disappointed with the Committee. When the Joint Select Committee met in England, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu appeared for it. Sankaran Nair, the only Indian Member of the Southborough Committee asked the Bombay Committee to send a delegate along with Annie Besant and


Sarojini Naidu. The Bombay Committee elected Herabai Tata as a delegate and she with her daughter Mithan Tata went to England.96

When the joint select committee was in discussion Annie Besant warned the Committee for ignoring the women’s demand. She also insisted that if the British continued to do so, Indian women would join in the political protest against them. In her speech Sarojini Naidu represented all Indian women and said that enfranchised women would make a powerful force for progress. Then she pointed out that when the word franchise was heard the idea came to certain women of the women’s university start with, and Annie Besant must say in this they were greatly helped by a European women who had great knowledge of the suffrage movement here, and we applied to bring a deputation to secretary of state and to Lord Chelmseferd.97

Due to the lack of time Herabai Tata was asked to submit a statement. All the three argued that recent social and educated developments had restored Indian women to this former power and influence. Most of the British believed that Majority of Indian Women were uneducated and living in seclusion. Leaders like Tilak, V.J. Patel, U.P. Madhava Rao,


Junniah, Yakub Hassan all supported the demand of the women while giving evidence before the Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill in 1919. But, the Government of India Bill, 1919 was passed without mentioning the women's franchise, one of its provisions allowed the provincial legislation councils to settle the votes for women. A group of Indian population including women was enfranchised by the Reforms Act of 1921. This right to vote stated that women could vote only if they possessed qualifications of wifehood, property and education. One after another the provincial legislatures enfranchised the women of their provinces.

In Madras the Justice Party won the election during the 1920's. As soon as it had formed the Government, the Women's India Association asked the Government to pass a resolution regarding the vote for women. So Diwan Bahadur M. Krishnan Nayar passed a resolution in the Madras Legislative council to remove the sex disqualification of women. The resolution was passed on 1 April 1921. In response to this resolution the Government of Madras was pleased to make the regulation called the Madras Electoral Sex Disqualification Removal Regulation. It stated that no woman


should be disqualified by reason only of her sex for registration on the electoral role of any constituency of the legislative council of Madras.¹⁰⁰

Madras was the first province, which granted the voting right to women in 1921. The Legislative Council of United Provinces granted vote to women in 1923, Cochin and Travancore in 1923, Bengal in 1925, Central province in 1927, finally Bihar and Orissa in 1929 and completed the enfranchisement of the women of British India.¹⁰¹

Despite Women’s Indian Association full involvement in the elections of 1926 and its vigorous campaigns for the women candidates, none of its candidates won. In the face of this defeat, a deputation of Indian Women met the Governor of Madras on 25 November 1926 and urged him to take measures to nominate few women representatives to the council. They argued that women representatives in the council were an urgent need to examine various social legislation that were meant for women and children. They requested for at least four seats in the council for women.¹⁰² The Madras Legislative Council finally nominated Muthulakshmi Reddy as the Deputy President by the council Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first Indian women to sit in the Legislative Council. It was during this period, many women were


nominated and elected as magistrates and as representatives in local bodies.\textsuperscript{103}

In 1931, the British Government appointed a Franchise Committee under Lothian. In 1932, the Lothian Franchise Committee visited India to collect opinions. While giving evidence to the Franchise Committee a Muslim member of this committee named Mohammud Yakub affirmed that women’s seats should be reserved on a communal basis. The committee met a small percentage of Indian women and accepted the joint memorandum, which was given by the All India Women’s Organizations. This committee also rejected adult franchise.\textsuperscript{104} In August 1932, the Communal award was announced. The seats were reserved for women in the provincial legislatures were only 2.5 percent. In September 1932, the Poona Pact was issued which granted reserved seats to the depressed classes within the Hindu constituency. The Women’s Organization opposed communal electorates and they thought that the only way to solve all these problems was adult suffrage.\textsuperscript{105}

The Women’s Indian Association strongly opposed the proposals for the formation of separate or communal electorates for either

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{103} S. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, \textit{My Experience as a Legislator}, Madras, 1930, p.4.
\bibitem{105} Margaret E. Cousins, \textit{Indian Womanhood Today}, Allahabad, 1941, p.40.
\end{thebibliography}
men or women and the reservation of seats for communities and interests in the provincial councils and Assemblies as these policies would neither promote unity among the several communities, caste, creeds and races in India nor tend to the spontaneous growth of rationalism among the masses.¹⁰⁶

All India Women Conferences, Women’s Indian Association and the National Council of Women in India prepared a memorandum after a long discussion. It demanded adult suffrage and objected the separate electorates and reservation of seats. The British women like Eleanor Ruthbone advised the Indian women to take back the demand for universal Franchise and to accept reserved seats.

When the Government of India Act of 1935 was in its last stage of preparation the Linlithgow committee asked witnesses from Indian Women’s Organizations. Muthulakshmi Reddy of Women’s Indian Association, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur of All India Women Conference and Begum Hamid Ali of National Council of Women in India were nominated as the spokeswomen before the committee. Many Memorandums were presented, and all insisted the importance in increasing the number of women voters to about five million.¹⁰⁷


¹⁰⁷. Margaret E.Cousins, *op.cit.*, p.76.
In 1935, Act provided the reservation of forty one seats for women in provincial legislatures. It gave the right to vote for women with property and educational qualifications, and wives of men of military service. In 1937 election, eight women were elected from several constitutions. In the Madras Provincial Assembly eight seats were received for women.108

The number of women voters, women’s representatives in assembles and parliament had increased after independence. Indian women got franchise very earlier when compared to certain countries of the world. The constituent Assembly set up in the year 1946, October, and a body elected by the existing legislatures, had among its members Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Renuka Roy and Hansa Metha, among others to frame the constitution of independent India. Thus the seed sown by Annie Besant during the first quarter of the 20th century in the sphere of awakening of women through her Home Rule Movement and franchise movement paved the way for the entry and involvement of women in large scale in the arena of national movement. Since the women began to fight for their political rights and identify and socio-economic matters.