

STATE OF FEMINISM IN INDIA: A STUDY

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Abstract: Traditionally women in Indian society had four fold status – role sequences. These were her role as a daughter, wife, home maker & mother. In ancient times their status was good in the society but their position deteriorated during the medieval period when child marriage, ban on remarriage & other customs became part of social life in some communities in India, but later the Indian women, started fighting for their rights, they started taking parts in freedom movement & also started talking about their rights women's like Annie Basant & Sarojini Naidu started mobilizing other women towards the political sphere.

This article is an attempt to look, women's position in Indian society from ancient to modern time period. This article describes that, how after ancient time their status decrease in medieval period. This article also deals with women's political participation & their demand for their rights. This article is an attempt to give overview of Indian women & start of feminism in India.

Key Words: Patriarchy Gender inequality Indian feminism, empowerment.

Introduction: Writings on ancient history of India contain many references pointing to the high status given to women in the past. These are, however, based largely on evidence from mythology. The ancient Indian culture, which came to be seen as synonymous with the Hindu culture, presents a number of Goddesses who are revered and worshipped, like Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Parvati is depicted as a powerful and benevolent goddess. In the epic Ramayan, Sita has a goddess-like aura and status, being called a Devi. In Mahabharat, Kunti, the mother of the five Pandava brothers, who seeks to fulfill her every wish, is also referred to as “devi”.

It is a great paradox then that, inspite of the high status ascribed to women in the ancient Indian culture, women's position in India has since long been and continues to be subservient to that of men, as in all other parts of the world. Historically, the downgradation of the position and status the female gender, along with other social divisions, emerged with the transition of societies from the simple to complex structures. The simple societies of the pre-historic India (upto 1000BCE) could not have had gender-based and other divisions and discriminations. The Vedic Period (1000 to 500 BCE) that followed pre-historic period was free from the present day evils of social divisions and discriminations. Women in this period enjoyed rights on par with men. The practice of seclusion of women and Sati had not been inaugurated. The caste system and the division of occupations associated with it had not yet emerged. The Rig Veda (IX, 112) says:

"A bard I am, my father a leech

And my mother is a grinder of corn

Diverse in means, but all wishing wealth

/Equally we strive for cattle."

From this it is evident that members of the same family engaged in different occupations.

The Vedic and Post-Vedic Ancient period: Women in the Vedic period are said to have enjoyed a highly respectable position, both within their homes and outside. In the Rigveda, men and women were likened to a pair of horses yoked to a chariot. Women had opportunities and status equal to men in the field of education. They had freedom to pursue education and attain high status in society. Many women engaged in literary activities. Several of the verses of the vedic Samhitas were believed to have been composed by women. Lopamudra, Visvavara, Sikata Nivavari and Ghosha are famous women literatures of the vedic period. The Vedic literature praises the birth of a scholarly daughter. There were a class of women, called brahmavadinis, who were lifelong students of philosophy and theology. They aimed at attaining excellence in the intellectual sphere. Other women pursued education of their choice till their marriage. Being well-trained and grown up at the time of their marriage, they were free to choose their husbands on their own. Women could participate in all religious rites and ceremonies with her husband. Sankara, the renowned philosopher of Advaita or non-dualism, writes, "who is the seen God? One's mother".

During the vedic period, women were also allowed to remarry. This is evident from the Atharvaveda and Dharmasutras. The women were not confined to homes. They had freedom to move freely without having to cover their faces, and they participated in public and social gatherings (Dr A.S. Altekar, The position of women in Hindu civilization).

This tradition of the vedic period of providing opportunities for intellectual attainment and spiritual development to women can be seen in the post vedic period also. Not only Hinduism, but Buddhism also recognized the broad parity between men and women. In Buddhism, Nirvana was possible for both men and women. In the matters of religion, women

were allowed to become nuns. Among the women disciples of Buddha were Mahaprajapati, Gotami, Kshema, Ambapali, Visakha, and Samavati, who rose to the highest stage in the spiritual sphere during this period.

Besides having the right to participate in the religious rites and ceremonies on par with men, women in ancient India also participated in the affairs of the state. In Kashmir, queen Didda ruled with sovereign power for about 22 years. Accounts of Megasthenes points to women rulers in the Kingdom of the Pandyas in the South.

In the post-vedic Gupta period, the queen Kumaradevi exercised great power in the affairs of the state, along with her husband Chandragupta-I, the founder of the Gupta dynasty. As an indicator of her power and prestige, coins were minted in her name, an honor which was usually accorded exclusively to the ruling kings in those days. In the Gupta period, women were not debarred from exercising their public rights. In the Satvahana empire in the second century BCE, queen Nayanika ruled as a regent to her son. The Vakataka administration in Madhya Pradesh was administered for 10 years by Prabhavati Gupta, after the death of her husband, in the 4th century AD. In the middle of the 7th Century AD, a portion of the Bombay Deccan was ruled by a senior queen, Chandraditya, of the Chalukya dynasty. There are also instances of widowed queens ruling in the history of Rajput kingdoms. In the medieval period, women also took part and even led wars. For example, the widow of Rana Sanga, Karnavati, defended their domain against the attack by Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat. In the Mauryan empire, women spies constituted the force for the personal security and safety of the king.

The Status of Women in the Medieval Period: The status of women in India declined from the post-Vedic period onwards. The freedom and liberty which the women enjoyed in ancient India was lost in the medieval India.

The evidence for the definite downfall of women from a supposed high pedestal in the ancient culture into a position second to men in every aspect of life is clearly available in the Manusmriti, where it is recorded that, "by a young girl, by a young woman or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house." The laws of Manu contain many strictures against women. Women have had to suffer from different types and forms of discriminations and oppression, such as the ancient Hindu practice of Sati, dowry death, child marriage and many more.

However, even in the medieval period, there were a few outstanding women who exercised power and enjoyed high status as administrators like Rudramba, the Kakateya queen; Gulbadan Begum; Jahan Ara;

Ifazia Sultan; Nurjahan; Begum Hazrat Mahal; Chand Bibi; etc. The Maratha royal families, during the 17th and 18th centuries especially, had influential women who exercised considerable power. Tara Bai, the daughter-in-law of Shivaji, and wife of Raja Ram, was a good administrator. She regrouped the Maratha power. Due to her strong opposition, Aurangzeb was not able to establish his rule in the Deccan for seven years after the death of Raja Ram.

Thus, it can be seen that though there are instances in India of women achieving high status and power in the society and polity from very early times, In the modern times, the longest serving Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, was a woman. Four women have become Chief Ministers in India, namely, Kum. Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati and Vasundhara Raje Scindia. and , and women have been successful and prominent at all levels of society women. Freedom fighter such as Sarojini Naidu, were at forefront of the independence struggle against the British (to be shifted to another place).

During the medieval period, Islam spread in India. From the 10th century onwards, impacted by the Muslim conquerors of India, the old culture gave way to new cultures. Notably, the practice of purdah system and seclusion of women began to be introduced during this period. In fact, the social custom of secluding women and segregating of men and women had predated the arrival of Islam. In Islam, men and women stand on an equal footing in their relationship with the Divine. The Quran contains numerous injunctions for bettering the lot of women. There is no ban on widow-remarriage. Divorce is allowed. Islam acknowledges women's right to inheritance. Shares in property is allowed for wife, daughter, mother, sister and grand mother, the general rule being that the female has equal claim to inherit what the corresponding male inherits. One probable reason for strengthening the practice of seclusion of women is that with the incursion into India of conquerors and marauders in the medieval period, women had to be more protected and sheltered. Along with this, women's education and freedom also began to be curtailed. Evils such as child marriage, polygamy, Sati, prevention of widow remarriage considerably lowered the status of women. The fact that girl children were married off at the very young age of nine or ten, ostensibly to protect their chastity and honour, entailed denial of education for them. This, along with the purdah system also meant dependence of women on men for external work.

Sri Sankaracharya, who lived in the same 8th century in which the first Muslim invasion into India took place, strived to regain the supremacy of the Hinduism in the face of expansion of Buddhism. He stressed on giving equal status to women. But this

emphasis remained in the realm of spiritual and religious thought. In the social life, the position of women deteriorated further in the period after the second wave of Muslim invasion of the country in the 11th century during which period there was breakdown of traditional political structure and social institutions along with economic depression. Later the Bhakti movement pioneered by Ramanacharya again sought to change social and religious life of Indian women. The Bhakti saints like Kabir, Tulsiram, Tukaram, Chaitanya and Guru Nanak re-emphasized women's right to worship, which then resulted in some social freedom for women, leading particularly to the abolition of the purdah system. All these, however, did not lead to any substantive change in the social and political power and status of Indian women in general.

The British Period: The remarkable bravery of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi marked a diversion in the character and talent of Indian women in the 19th century (1835-58). She was the great heroine of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and fought the British troops bravely and met a heroic death. Her bravery and administration were even admired by her opponents. It becomes clear that in the hour of need, Indian women of royal families, irrespective of the nature of society, proved themselves competent enough to lead armies, direct governments and rule kingdoms.

The position of common womenfolk in the country was, however, miserable. They were confined to the four walls of their homes, were ignorant and illiterate. With the coming of the British, a new era of social change concerning the position of women in society began. The colonial rulers brought into India an entirely different method of government, along with a different culture and language. The English education and Christianity propagated by Missionaries resulted in a number of movements for social change and religious reform in the 19th century. The gallant band of social reformers led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy created great awakening among women who gradually came forward to claim their legitimate rights. By establishing Brahma Samaj in West Bengal, Raja Ram Mohan Roy propagated the ideal of eradicating the obnoxious Sati system. Later Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, became the pioneer of widow remarriage. In Punjab, Swami Dayanand Saraswati tried to revive the free and equal society of the vedic period by establishing Arya Samaj. In South India, Mrs. Annie Besant pressed the need for a national education for both men and women through her Theosophical society. At the same time, pioneer women social reformers like Pandit Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade, Lady Bose and Bhikaji Cama, dedicated themselves to open opportunities for women.

Rukhmabai had to undergo imprisonment because she would not conform to the law of marital duty, as she was so determined to study to become a doctor and help women, which she eventually did. The work of Ramabai Ranade set a high standard of devoted work for the women of the poor class in Pune. Although she had no formal educational attainments, she built an Institution for the education and training in life-skills of those poor women so that they could earn some money and increase their influence and interest in life. Lady J.C. Bose and Mrs. P.K. Gokhale in Bengal, and Mrs. Parvati Chandersekhar in Mysore State belonged to the same genre of women leaders, who aimed to liberate women. The women ruler of Bhopal, Sultan Jahan Begum Sahiba, is also a name to mention. She instituted all kinds of reforms, wrote books, established hospitals and schools, and was Vice-Chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University. She was a great upholder of the vernacular as the media of instruction and for general public usage. The Maharani of Baroda also played a pioneering role in the women's movement. Her book, 'The Position of Women in Indian Life,' published in 1911 is an early classic on women's issues. All her life she had been a leader of women, advocating new spheres of freedom for them. It was due to her initiative and courage that the All India Women's Conference, at its first session, which had been called to discuss educational reforms, called for a social reform agitation for a law against child marriage.

In 1883, an Indian woman became the first graduate from an Indian University, from Bethune College, Calcutta, the first Arts college for women in India Mrs. Rukminiamma of Mysore, Mrs. Sathianadhan of Madras, Miss. Cornetia Sorabji of Bengal, Miss Bose, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi of Madras, all these women upheld the dignity of scholarly womanhood, demonstrated their capacity for nurturing the ever increasing number of women students seeking education, long before they had an idea that women would ever understand or take part in politics or law or respectable public entertaining or the fine arts. All these led to the Indian public opinion swinging around to a changed view of the desirability of giving women the same opening for public service as men in the national life.

Women in Politics: The historical marginalization of women has had its effect in their representation in the political arena. Women's achievements in the national elections since independence have been quite dismal. In the first parliamentary elections held in the post-Independent India in 1952, women represented only about 4.4 percent of the total elected members of the Lok Sabha, the lower House of the Indian Parliament. And from the first to the sixteenth elections, their representation remains very low.

Women's involvement in politics in the modern era started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although British imperialism profoundly influenced the social and political engagement of both the elite & non-elite women during this period, the character and purposes of their engagement were very different. The non-elite women fought against the British colonialists. The elite women were mainly involved in the Indian Renaissance, the social reform movement of the 19th century. The main goals of the latter were to do away with what were to the Indian elite women the most offensive of traditional Indian practices, through the abolition of female infanticide, sati, child marriage and laws prohibiting widows to remarry. The emphasis was not on equality of women with men but, rather, on the separateness and complementarity of the roles of women and men in society. Because the reforms proposed by the elite women's movement did not threaten the traditional family structure and the perception of women's role in society and home, some men supported them. They perceived that this movement will make women better mothers and wives.

The self-conscious movement for Indian political freedom began with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. From the very beginning its membership was open to women on the same terms as to men. When the congress met in Bombay in 1889, ten women attended the meeting. These included Swamakumari Devi, a well-known Bengali writer and editor of *Bharati*; Kadambini Ganguli, Bengal's first women doctor; Pandita Ramabai, a social reformer. Shrimati Saraladevi Choudhrani of the Tagore family, made history in the Congress session held in Calcutta in 1904 when she trained a group to sing 'Bande Matharam', the song which immediately became famous for its power to arouse patriotic emotions and which eventually became India's national song. She opened the Arya Samaj branches for women to contribute to their upliftment.

The entry of Mrs. Annie Besant into Indian politics in 1914 galvanised new and increased national consciousness in both men and women. In 1874 she demanded that women should be represented in the law-making process because they are expected to adhere to law. In 1915, she started her famous Home Rule Movement. In 1917, the Indian National Congress at its annual session held in Calcutta unanimously elected her as its first woman President. With the beginning of the 20th century, a number of organizations exclusively for women appeared among high-caste or elite women. In 1910, Sarladevi Choudhurani, married to an officer of Civil Services, founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal to assert women's independent identity. Beginning in 1913, Saroj Nalini Dutt, the educated daughter of a high

caste Hindu in the Indian Civil Service, founded Mahila Samitis in many towns. She also started women's institutes in Bengal. The Young Women's Christian Association, the Women's Brahmo Samaj and many other large provincial and community groups aroused the women of the educated class to think and act for their own improvement as a dedicated part of their aspiration for national freedom.

There were also several other new women's organizations which were all-India in scope. This included the Women's India Association founded in 1917 in Madras by Annie Besant, the Irish theosophist who urged Indian women to join the Home Rule League and the Swadeshi movement. Mrs. Besant was its President, Mrs. Dorothy Jinarajadasa its Honorary Secretary for eight years, an office later held in succession by Mrs Margaret Cousins, Malati Patwardhan, Mrs Ammu Swaminadhan, Mrs. Dadhobhoy, Mrs Ambujammal. After Mrs Besant's death, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi became its President. Indian Women and the issue of Franchise: In 1917 Edwin Montague, Secretary of State for India, visited India to elicit public opinion on the subject of a new Constitution for Home Rule. This opportunity inspired Margaret Cousins to form a women's delegation to speak to Montague. On December 1917, the first Indian Women's deputation to demand women's political rights and their representation in the contemplated reformed political set-up, met Mr. Montague. The deputation was composed of Smt. Sarojini Naidu as the leader, 14 women leaders drawn from all over the country, and Mrs. Margaret Cousins who initiated the move acting as Secretary. The crux of their demand was that when franchise conditions to India were being drawn, women be recognised as people and be given due political right to franchise. The memorandum submitted by the delegation elaborated other vital demands for education, training in skills, local self-government, social welfare etc. The propaganda for women suffrage was carried on chiefly by the Women's India Association which also supported the propaganda of the Home Rule League. The fact that two women, Dr. Annie Besant and Smt. Sarojini Naidu, were presidents of the India National Congress in 1917 and 1927, respectively and that the former was interned in 1916 for upholding free speech and free association in the cause of Indian Home Rule, did much to stimulate women in desiring their own enfranchisement and in the agitation for political freedom.

The Southborough Commission came to deal with the question of franchise in 1919 and again a woman's delegation led by Mrs Annie Besant and with Smt. Sarojini Naidu as another member, appeared before it to further press for Indian Women's franchise. British officials at first dismissed the idea of women's

suffrage as unrealistic under Indian conditions. The demand was not mentioned in the Montague Chelmsford report; it was rejected by the Southbrough Franchise Committee, and the Indian Provincial and Central governments in 1918 and 1919. Smt. Sarojini Naidu offered a resolution of woman's suffrage at the Congress session in December 1917. Members of the women's delegations lobbied for it at the Provincial and National conferences in 1918. Three Provincial conferences, five Provincial Congress Committees, the Home Rule League, the Muslim League, and finally the Congress itself passed resolutions in support of women's suffrage during the year.

Mrs. Annie Besant and Smt. Sarojini Naidu appeared before the Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill 1914 and Mrs. Herabai and Mrs. Mitthiabai Tata, Women's India Association spokespersons, presented a Memorandum, arguing for women's franchise.

The result of all these was the enfranchisement of women by the different Provincial Legislative Councils, starting with the Madras Presidency in 1921, on the same terms as men. This was followed by Bombay Legislative Council in 1921, Rajkot in 1923, Travancore and Cochin in 1924. These allowed women to become members of the Provincial legislatures. Female political representation was considered as a powerful stimulus for women's education and social reform.

The basis of enfranchisement in the 1923 elections under the Montague Chelmsford reforms was a series of complicated property and income qualifications which varied from Province to Province; and within the Provinces, between the urban and rural areas, and among religious groups. As few women had sufficient property in their own names, the potential female electorate was much smaller than the male electorate. The women participated in the general elections of 1926. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya who contested election as an independent candidate of Women's India Association, lost to the Congress candidate. The Women's India Association, organized deputations to government officials to ask that women be nominated to the Legislative Councils. Three women were nominated: D. Muthulakshmi Reddy in Madras, Mrs. Ahmed Shah in the United Provinces and Mrs. A. Kale in the Central Provinces. In 1927, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was unanimously elected by the members of the Madras Legislative Council to be its Deputy Speaker, and this was a world record. She lived up to the expectations of those who argued that women in politics would play a vital role in social reforms. During the first session of the Legislative Council, she contributed to the improvement of the condition of women and children by introducing Bills to abolish the Devadasi system and child marriage,

making medical inspection compulsory in all schools and colleges, reducing secondary education fees for poor girls, establishing a children's hospital and securing grant for institutions training destitute women.

When the Women's India Association compiled a list of women in public life (1927), it included five members of Legislative Councils (all nominated), 32 Municipal Councilors (six elected) and four members of Taluk Boards (all nominated), 32 Honorary Magistrates and Justices of the Peace (all nominated), and 4 members of University Senates (all elected). Women had reason to be proud of their achievements, and there were no complaints because so many women had been nominated. Most of those nominated were prominent members of social organizations and their names had been presented to the respective governments by the organizations themselves.

Before the second stage of the demand for voting right for women began with the appointment of the Simon Commission in 1927, two additional women's organizations were formed at the national level. The National Council of Women in India was begun in 1925 by Lady Dorab Tata, a long-standing member of the Women India Association. Primarily a coordinating organization, this National Council sought to mobilize women to improve their legal, economic and social status. This organization was non-political, but joined the effort to secure the voting right for women. The voting right for women was considered important to ensure that their voice on laws which would influence them and their lives would be heard. Simultaneously, in 1926, the All-India Women's Conference united and awakened women in all parts of India and at its first session in January 1927 in Poona, under the presidency of H.H. the Maharani of Baroda, a new drive began for improved education, especially of girls and, along with it, organised attack on child-marriage and its attendant evil of child-widowhood. Much of its success and growth in popularity was contributed to by the organizing ability and self-sacrificing hard work put into it by Smt. Kamaladevi, who was its Organizing Secretary during its second, third and fourth years.

Women and the Right to Vote: In struggling for the nation's freedom, women achieved their own freedom to a considerable extent. In this great struggle, women of all castes and communities, and belonging to all economic classes, shared the burdens, the pain, the sacrifices, and the joys that an individual gained through the new freedom by acting in response to the need of the moment without reference to old precedents and customs.

When the Round Table Conference was announced in November 1929, the Women's India Association

demanding that women be included in the Indian delegation and submitted the names of three women: Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Reddy and Mrs. Brijlal Nehru. But when Congress decided to boycott it, the Women's India Association also withdrew. With Annie Besant as President, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Muthu Lakshmi Reddy as Vice Presidents, and Margaret Cousins and Ammu Swaminadhan in the Executive Committee, there was little debate as to the stand that the Women's India Association should take. The government nominated Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs. Subbarayan as delegates to this Conference. Both asked for adult franchise, but they weakened their demand in the eyes of Women's India Association, by adding that if this was not possible, there should be a special franchise for women as a temporary measure. This was opposed by Women's India Association, who joined the National Council of Women in India and the All India Women's Conference in formulating a joint memorandum voicing women's demand that there should be joint electorate, not communal electorate, no reserved or nominated seats for women and that mere wifehood of a male voter should not be a qualification.

In the meanwhile in 1931, at the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress, Nehru piloted the 'Fundamental Rights Resolution' which accepted the principle of complete equality of men and women in political life.

In the Second Round Table Conference in 1930, Gandhi went as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress. Sarojini Naidu attended as a representative of women and Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs. Subbarayan attended as nominated members. Begum Shah Nawaz had by this time been convinced by the arguments of the Women's India Association that special concessions and reserved seats were not the answer. But Mrs. Subbarayan stood firm on her belief that without reservation of seats, Indian women would find it difficult to contest for seats.

The Lothian Committee, appointed at the conclusion of the Second Round Table Conference accepted the premise that more women needed to be enfranchised to compel candidates to consider women's interests and opinions and to awaken women politically. Ruling out the possibility of adult franchise they proposed reservation of 2-5% seats in the Provincial Legislative Councils for a period of ten years and that wives of property owners and women literate be enfranchised.

The Communal Award of August 1932 introduced separate electorates – a move that would affect women, because Muslim women would then be seen as a separate group. Also, three percent of the seats were to be reserved for women, to be determined on a communal basis. Gandhi's fast of 1932 touched women. They condemned the Communal Award and

dissociated themselves from this proposal. When various groups were demanding special concessions, women could either ask for the extension of these concessions to them, and side with the forces which seemingly weakened the nationalist movement or repudiate those forces and support Gandhi. They chose the latter course. In demanding adult franchise and opposing special concessions, the women's organizations insisted that they were speaking for all the Indian women. When the White Paper, including the conclusions of the Third Round Table Conference, was published in March 1933, it was found to be less favourable to the women's demand for franchise than the Lothian Committee's views. It included reservation, enfranchisement of wives of property owners and women who passed matriculation, indirect representation of women in the Houses of Provincial Legislative Councils, and stringent qualifications for elections to the upper chamber.

The women's organizations suddenly found themselves in a difficult position, as they were faced with increased criticism from within their ranks. Rani Rajwade, Chairwoman of All India Women Conference's Standing Committee and Muthulakshmi Reddy, the Chairwoman of the All India Women's Conference and Honorary General Secretary of the Women's India Association, were deeply committed to the principle of adult franchise and they were by now disillusioned about the intentions of the British authorities. The Government of India Act, of 1935, once again did not accept universal adult franchise and provided for reservation of 41 seats for women in the provincial legislatures. Under this Act, the right to vote was extended to more women. Earlier the proportion was one woman to twenty men and after the Act of 1935, the proportion was one woman to every five men voters in an electorate of 35 million voters.

The demands for women's rights were once again framed at the joint meeting of women's organizations in the form of a Memorandum to be presented before Lord Lingithgow's Joint Select Committee in 1933. The Memorandum contained suggestions for the period of transition and protested against reserved seats for women and indirect representation of women in the lower Houses of provincial legislatures. It is noteworthy that women's movement not merely derived its strength from the anti-imperialist struggle, but it also influenced the latter to support the women's demand for equal citizenship and participation.

In the general elections held in February 1937, approximately 43 percent of the adult males and 9 percent of the adult female were enfranchised. The enfranchised women voters were very enthusiastic in electioneering and casting their vote for the

Congress. The women workers in the villages and towns were awake to their responsibilities and their powers as enfranchised citizens using the vote as direct means of securing self-government. In these elections, 56 women entered the legislatures. There were 41 seats reserved for women in the Provincial Legislative Assemblies, ten women won unreserved seats and five were nominated to Provincial Legislative Councils. The party affiliations of those who won the elections were as follows: 36 Congress candidates, 11 independent, 3 Muslim League and 1 Unionist. Two women who had represented the women's uplift perspective were nominated to legislative bodies: Radabhai Subbaroyan to the Central Assembly and Mona Hensman to the Madras Legislative Council. Begum Shah Nawaz was elected to the Punjab Assembly as a Unionist. Several women active in the All India Women's Conference as well as the Congress won seats, these included Hansa Mehta, Lakshmi Ammal and Durgabai. General seats (non-reserved) for the Lower House were contested and won by seven women in the United Provinces and one in Madras Presidency. In areas where women contested seats with men, the Congress women candidates were extraordinarily successful. One woman elementary teacher defeated the Vice-Chancellor of the University of her Province. Amongst the eighty odd legislators, four were parliamentary secretaries and several women were Whips of their parties. The women thus elected as legislatures rendered valuable services to the nation, especially in areas in which women were particularly concerned with. For example, as a Minister of local Self-Government in the United Provinces Assembly, Smt. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit took special interest in safeguarding public health and sanitation and maternity and child welfare. It was under her guidance that anti-malaria scheme was prepared and implemented in the United Provinces. She also made special efforts to convert night schools into real adult literacy centres. She strove to model evening institutions on Russian principles of education. She adopted them to suit Indian conditions.

Women and legislation: Each religious community in India is governed by separate laws, known as 'personal laws', in the areas such as marriage, inheritance and related subjects. The Hindu Personal Law relies upon the Dharma and the Smritis. In the Smritis, early marriage was prescribed, marriage was indissoluble, prohibiting divorce and widow remarriage, women had limited property rights and polygamy was allowed. British officials and Hindu reformers urged some modifications in the Hindu Personal Law through Regulations and Acts to benefit women, prohibition of infanticide in 1795, abolition of Sati in 1829, legalization of widow remarriage in 1856 and the 1891 age of consent act, and child marriage

restraint act (Sarda Act) of 1929. The specific subjects in the 8-fold programme of legislation drafted by the All India Women's Conference to which the women legislators subscribed, were a high single standard of morality for men and women alike equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex, an adequate all India maternity service, the abolition of child marriage, increase in education of girls so that present disparity by which six times as many boys as girls were educated should be removed etc.

It needs to be noted that Mrs. Subhadra Kumari Chowhan (member of Jubhupore assembly) was the only woman member of the reception committee at the Indian National Congress' 52nd session in 1939. In 1940, out of 13 members Sarojini Naidu was the only women Congress Working Committee. In 1946, the Congress Working Committee had Mridula Sarabai, Sarojini Naidu and Aruna Asaf Ali as members. Mention must also be made of Sucheta Kriplani who became the secretary of the women's section of Indian National Congress and its foreign department in 1936.

In 1942, during the Quit India Movement, when all the top leaders were arrested and the movement became practically leaderless, women joined hands with others and carried it on by taking out processions, holding meetings, demonstrations and organising strikes. Aruna Asaf Ali, Kalpana Joshi, Preeti Waddadkar, Durga Bai and Usha Mehta were the famous figures of the 1942 movement. In July, 1943, in response to the clarion call of Subhash Chandra Bose, a women's regiment named 'The Rani of Jhansi Regiment' was formed in Singapore with Lakshmi Sehgal as its captain.

It was decided to hold meetings of this body in mohallas (colonies) so that the uneducated women were kept informed regarding war and the congress activities. Another work undertaken by this department was to organise volunteers corps and train in the art of self-protection in an emergency. In addition to this work, the women's department was to undertake many other activities like studying the difficulties of women and their causes and cures, co-ordinating the activities of women Congress workers, and increasing the membership of women in various congress activities.

The long drawn battle for India's Independence finally ended with the Lord Mountbatten Plan on 15th August 1947 and Independent India emerged to fulfill the dreams of lakhs of Indian people who had fought for the freedom. Women's role in the demise of the Raj and in the establishment of the new India was important in a number of ways. The participation of large number of women swelled the ranks of the Swaraj campaign and helped it turn into a mass movement.

Women did not lag behind even in the making of the Constitution of free India. The Constituent Assembly which was set up in October, 1946, a body elected by the existing legislatures, had among its members Sarojini Naidu Durgabai Deshmukh, Renuka Ray and Hansa Mehta, among others to frame the constitution of free India. Besides, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur as a member of the Constituent Assembly's sub-committee on fundamental rights participated actively in the drafting of the clauses guarantee gender equality in the Indian society by prohibition discriminations in any basis.

By the time of independence the elite women's movement had won the battle of franchise, the partnership of a few women's organizations and the Congress movement had been established and women from all sectors of society had participated politics, Direct political participation promoted women's confidence and self-reliance and broke the barriers of the public private dichotomies in their lives. Yet on the issue of women's roles in society, an ideological conflict continued between those who looked to an men had separate but complementary

roles and those who saw the reality of women's multi dimensional roles. In sum five factors shaped the similarities and differences in the organizational and political form and I substance of women's political engagement prior to 1947. Colonial exploitation and the early mass protest movements; the primarily elite origins of the leading participants in the women's movement and male leadership of the early social reform movement; the non violent national mass movement under Gandhi, the marginalized militant movement and the absence, of a radical onslaught on the patriarchal basis of Indian Culture and Society.

While the women were assertive and determined in their struggle, they were never physically aggressive or violent. What this meant in terms of rewards for women's right can be answered by looking at the constitution and its promise of equality. But what women's involvement did not accomplish was either a strong women's department within the congress or a separate women's political organization which could make all these constitutional promises real in their day to day life.

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41. Besides, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur as a member of the Constituent Assembly's sub-committee on fundamental rights participated actively in the drafting of the clauses guarantee gender equality in the Indian Constitution, which seeks to establish a just and egalitarian society by prohibiting discriminations in any basis.

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