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## STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN SUFFRAGE IN TAMILNADU

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### ABSTRACT:

India offered valuable contributions for the development of women in various fields. Her pious image and glory have been mutilated by the ignorance of the socio-virtual and economic status of women. The women were subordinated to men and treated as moving shuttles. The holy

scripts call them as Ardhagini (better half of husbands). They were neglected and depressed by the men folk. They faced disabilities such as lack of education lower socio-political and economic status etc. because the women had no major approach in the political activities. Though a half of Indian population who belonged to women society but at the same time, are they having equal powers of men in politics? It is a pathetic question on women and also a shame on Indian society. This paper is discussing the actual problems of women suffrage for casting their votes during the elections in Tamil Nadu.

**KEYWORDS:** women, suffrage, power, politics.

### INTRODUCTION:

The British traders who became the rulers after the battle of Plassey in 1757 did not interfere in the social affairs of Indians for more than half a century. Lord William Bentinck (1828-1835) introduced English Education and in 1829 he passed an enactment against the killing of woman by 'Sati'. He also abolished female infanticide and human sacrifice, which were considered by law as criminal, offences and subject to punishments. Thus he was the

first English Governor-General who took a bold step to interfere in Hindu (Native) social affairs and reduced the miseries and social injustices of Hindu women. Women's Education Sati, female infanticide and human sacrifice were not so familiar with Tamil Nadu. During tenure as the Governor-Generalship of Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856) he introduced 'Thomson's General Education' for the growth of education. Further Dalhousie banned the child marriage, female infanticide and encouraged widow re-marriage. The education of women encouraged them to assert equality with men. Their western education removed the old blind faiths in the name of

religion, Shastras and Sambradhayas. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the percentage of educated women in the Madras Presidency was increased', after the entry of the Christian Missionaries in India the Hindu, Muslim and even Christian women attained their salvation<sup>1</sup>.

### POLITICAL PLUG OF WOMEN

The impact of the English education was the awakening of Indian women. They regained their long lost consciousness and began to compare their own restricted and overburdened life with that of western women who enjoyed freedom. The participation of women in the Nationalist Movement acquired

strength and confidence, which enabled them to organize and fight for their own rights. The Social Reform Movement caused the establishment of the National Social Conference in 1887 which provided opportunities to discuss the various kinds of hurdles and problems of the women folk and pleaded to reform the society. Therefore the public, particularly the social scientists decided that Modern India continued to remain India, certain of her own individuality drawing spiritual inspiration and sustenance from her own past.

The services of Christian Missionaries made the educated Dalit women, feel as human beings. Some of them who were as teachers, nurses and clerks stood on their own legs. The Missionaries started separate schools for girls and opened Teacher Training Schools for women in Tamil Nadu<sup>2</sup>. The women indulged in various kinds of activities ranging from mass scale popular agitations, constructive work among Harijans and Adivasis to formal institutional electoral politics. Between 1910 to 1920 number of social organizations for women increased. In 1917 the women of Madras joined the Women's Indian Association and worked for women's emancipation.

Mrs. Annie Besant joined the Congress in 1914 and increased the national consciousness among the women folk. During wartime (1914 — 1918) the Governor of Madras Lord Pentland roused patriotism in the hearts of women and the women openly took part in public procession. They joined the Home Rule Movement founded by Mrs. Annie Besant, who formed the Women's Indian Association in 1917 and many Indian women joined as the members of the Association. Hence forth the women subsequently participated in political activities and they involved struggle for their socio-political rights<sup>3</sup>.

Women's Struggle for the Right to Vote Mrs. Margret Cousins an Irish woman, a well-trained fighter for the cause of women's franchise was invited by Annie Besant and appointed as sub-editor of the magazine, New India. Cousins also worked as a teacher at Madanapalli in Chittoor District. In 1917, she collected 20 women and organized Women Deputation to meet Montague, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Jinarajadasa, Margaret Cousins, Begum Hazrat Mohani, Herabai Tata, Dr. Joshi and others, were the members of the women's deputation<sup>4</sup>. They demanded for women franchise as in the case of men in the ensuing reforms. This was the first voting meet and was a marked milestone in the history of the emergence of womanhood in India. Sarojini Naidu was nominated as the speaker of the group, which met Montague in Madras City on 18th December 1917<sup>5</sup>.

Just before the introduction of Mont-ford Reforms, Montague visited India to study the political situation personally. The Women's Deputation met him and demanded the right to vote. But when the Mont-Ford Scheme was published in 1918, the franchise right of women was not found in it. It was disqualified on the basis of sex. Therefore, the cry of women ended in wilderness. The women deputation demanded the Committee that the women tax payers must be considered for the right to vote as in the case of men tax payers. They requested that the women graduates must be given for the right to vote. Unfortunately certain women representatives and the Muslim League suddenly turned down and disfavored the women franchisement. Therefore, the Committee felt that the female suffrage would insult the conservative feelings of Hindus and break the harmony of the country. Hence the Committee ignored the question of women's franchise and when the report was published in April 1919, the claims of Indian women to exercise the power to vote were not found<sup>6</sup>.

The written evidence of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. and Miss. Tata of Bombay, and C. Sankaran Nair of Madras and Besant submitted to the Joint Select Committee in London supported the women's franchise in India<sup>7</sup>. They demanded voting right for a million of women who were educated and tax payers. They were voting in the Municipal Councils and that should be taken as a precedent. The electoral rule stated, "Criminals, lunatics and children were not eligible to vote and also the women were not eligible to vote". The Women's Association of Great Britain urged the Joint Committee to extend enfranchisement to women to have a popular Government in India without sex discriminations.

The India Council Act of 1919 accepted franchise for Indian women and placed it in the hands of Provincial Council'. Even before the formation of the first ministry in Madras on 17 January 1921. Mrs. Sadasiva Iyer organized a Women's Conference in Madras on 28th December, 1920 demanded for women's suffrage. On 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1921 Diwan Bahadur M. Krishnan Nayar gave a notice to move his

resolution on women's franchise in the Madras Legislative Council<sup>8</sup>. This was accepted by the Council. But as per Madras electoral rules a resolution could be discussed and passed in the Council only after the expiry of not less than a month since the notice of resolution was given. Therefore the resolution was expected during the Easter holidays.

During this interval, Mrs. Sadasiva Iyer organized a deputation to meet the law member K. Srinivasa Ayyangar. The women's deputation consisted of Mrs. Sadasiva Iyer, Mrs. B. Ramachandra Rao, B. Rama Rao, Mrs. Gurusamy Chetty, Mrs. Annie Besant, Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Mrs. Mahadeva Shastri, Ms. Laxmipathi, Mrs. Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Lakshmana Rao and Mrs. Lazarus.

They met K. Srinivasa Ayyangar, and submitted their memorandum to remove sex disqualification for the franchise in the council of Madras. As per his previous notice dated 27 February 1921 Krishnan Nayar had moved the resolution in the Madras Legislative Council on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1921 for the removal of sex disqualification<sup>9</sup>. Accordingly the resolution moved It emphasized the voting right of women and not the right to contest as candidates to the council.

Then he refuted the report of the Joint Select Committee. He pointed out that all women were not aliens also were not criminals, as criminals were enemies of the society. But the women were the friends of the society and law abiding citizens. He argued that when the men tax payers had the right to vote, why the women tax payers were deprived of that right'.

When Muhammad Usman Sahib raised his doubt about the modesty of women who were reluctant to come out of their houses and to appear in the public and go to the election booths to vote<sup>10</sup>. Nayar had cleared his doubts that women were the fittest persons to maintain the economic matters of the house and there was no necessity to train them to vote. He further said that women were the best advisors to deal with the problems of maternity, child welfare, marriage and divorce and women were not the weaker section'. Their right to vote should not be denied on this basis. For a long time they had been demanding the right to vote and so they | would be keen and earnest in their attempts. The Indian National Congress also continuously was passing resolutions for this purpose. The women were already enjoying their right to vote in local bodies and the Travancore Legislative Council also had granted the power of voting to women. Despite Hindus, even the Muslims also supported the women's franchise. Agahan and Ispahani, championed the right of women to vote. All the witnesses who gave evidence before the Joint | Parliamentary Committee demanded the right to women to vote. In spite of so many violent agitations voting rights of the women in England granted in 1918 was a precedent for the people in Madras to grant the right to vote to women. Madras Presidency took the lead in this matter and was a precedent to other states in India<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, Nayar moved the resolution which was seconded by Raja of Ramnad. But Lionel Davidson, a member of the House was of the opinion that this measure was premature particularly in the case of Gosha women.

Srinivasa Ayyangar supported the Bill and said that as the right of the mother, sister and daughter in the house would never be refused, so also the right of women introducing to vote should not be refused. When Indians were demanding for universal suffrage why they deny a section of Indians (women) to have the same right<sup>12</sup>. So, Somasundara Pillai said that when men were worshipping water as Gangadevi, earth as Bhumadevi, sky as Akasavani etc., why women were denied the right to vote to them.

At the end of the long discussion the Bill was passed with the majority of 47 votes 13 against and 10 remained neutral and so the motion was declared passed and carried. On 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1921 the Madras Government was pleased to make the following regulations on the "Madras Electoral Sex Disqualification Removal Regulation" (1921)<sup>13</sup>.

1. This resolution may be called the "Madras Electoral Sex Disqualification Removal Regulation" and 2. No women shall be qualified by reason only of her sex of registration on the electoral role of any Constituency of the Legislative Council of Madras. Thus the Madras Presidency led all the other Provinces by giving franchise to the women. The press and the public appreciated the efforts taken by the Government for passing this resolution. The newspaper, Desabhaktan expressed that the privilege entrusted to women would hasten the day for the emancipation of Bharatamata<sup>14</sup>.

Thus in the whole of British India, Madras was the first province that granted women franchise. Emulated by this, other provinces granted women franchise by 1926. The services of Mr. and Mrs. T. Sadasiva Iyer were to be recalled. Lady Sadasiva Iyer as the Vice-President of Women's Indian Association headed the Deputation of women which met Lord Willington who recommended in favour of their cause to the Secretary of State for India\*. She was for the election of Kamala Devi Chattopadaya and Mrs. Hanan Angelo to the Legislative Council. The Women's Indian Association requested the Madras Government to nominate Dr. S. Muthulakshimi Reddy to the Council<sup>15</sup>.

In 1926 Dr. S. Muthulakshimi Reddy was the first Indian woman to sit in the Indian Legislative Council and also the first lady to be elected as its Vice-President among the democratic countries of the world.

The educational qualifications were the same for men and women over 21 years. The Committee stated that the seclusion and illiteracy of Indian women was not a bar for their franchisement. The beginning of a movement among certain Indian women however comparatively few in number they yet be, to grapple with the problems which specially affected his health and children is one of the most encouraging signs of Indian progress and it was believed that the movements would be strengthened by increasing the influences of women in election.

In 1932 the women's representatives appeared before the Lothian Committee and opposed Communal electorates and demanded equality between men and women to be included in the new Constitution.

The women were given the right to vote on the basis of special qualification and so, under the new Constitution of 1935 the men and women voters' ratio was increased from 1: 20 to 1: 7<sup>16</sup>. The special qualifications were (1) literacy i.e., able to write in any language had become entitled to vote, and (ii) the property qualification to vote. This was called wifehood qualification. Thus, the women's franchise was given over to four million women voters.

The struggle for enfranchisement of women was supported by the Indian National Congress and other voluntary bodies and the women's associations at large. At first, in the Presidency the deadlock was based on customs, tradition and religion. The Muhammadans opposed women's franchise. The Justice Party it made sincere attempts, but granting the women franchise or universal suffrage was not within its power. So, the question became an all India problem during the transition period of constitutional reforms. However, the Justice Party Government granted the women right to vote in the Council. Hence, the controversy was, completely absent in its proceedings. There was no pressure group against this reform. Therefore, J.F. Irschick says. "This measure illustrates the broad vision liberal spirit of the Justice Party's stands as a supreme piece of legislation with a vowed social reform bias.

The Indian Women's Franchise Movement had struggled for women franchise and got it. They joined in the National Movement and displayed their capability in the struggle and achieved freedom and equal status with men. They stood for social legislation, which resulted in the political awareness among women. The awakened women folk began their continuous struggle and equality of sex was recognized by the Indian Constitution, which guaranteed their voting rights and right to stand and contest the elections<sup>17</sup>.

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