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INTRODUCTION :

Various women's organisations actively worked for the political rights of Indian women, symbolised by their right to vote. The demand was made on the notion of social equality and insisted on women's right to participate equally in the process of government.¹ The first concrete step was taken when the Women's Indian Association (WIA) organised the first delegation of Indian women demanding franchise to meet the Montagu-Chelmsford Committee on Constitutional Reforms in 1917. The delegation demanded voting rights for women on the plea that they also held independent opinions about the reforms needed for the progress of India. However, no attention

was paid to them. Women's organisations continued their efforts and presented petitions before the Southborough Franchise Committee to press for their rights. The response was once again negative as the committee, in its report, stated that extension of the vote to women would be premature in a society which continued to enforce purdah and prohibitions against female education. This led to protest meetings in various parts of India.

In 1919 a special delegation comprising Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Hirabai Tata and Mithan Tata (Lam) went to London to give evidence before the joint parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the Government of India Bill. During their extended stay in London, these women, through newspapers and meetings, campaigned for their demand and succeeded in creating a climate of sympathy. Back home,

the WIA in Madras and a few women's organisations in Bombay had been demanding franchise for women.²

The first success came when the JPC recommended the removal of sex qualifications. Madras granted voting rights to women in 1920 followed by Bombay in 1921. However, for women's organisations, this was only the beginning. The next step was to work for representation in the legislative councils. When elections were held in 1926, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Hannen Angelo contested the election for the Council. They were supported by the WIA but they lost. The government decided to nominate S. Muthulakshmi Reddy,³ a decision welcomed by everyone. The demand to extend voting rights to more women entered a new phase during the visit of the Simon Commission in India. The Commission was largely

AIWC AND FRANCHISE

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ABSTRACT:

The All India Women Conference (AIWC) is an important women organisation working at the all India level. Its main aim is to promote the interests of the women. Attainment of the voting right is considered a way to political entry of the women. Hence the women organizations like AIWC began to struggle for the enfranchisement of the women in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century. Madras Province under the Justice Party provided voting right to the women. It was a pioneer state in this regard.

boycotted. Nevertheless, the Dowager Rani of Mandi led a deputation comprising Mrs Ahmen Shah and Mrs Chitamber among others. While pointing out the low number of enfranchised women, the deputation argued against the application of the same criteria for men and women voters. It suggested that voting rights should be given to property owners and literate women and actual participation should be assured through reserved seats.

The participation of women in the civil disobedience movement won them the admiration of the nationalist leadership and the Congress passed the fundamental rights resolution at the Karachi session in 1931. With it, the demand for equal franchise was further strengthened.

The AIWC joined the movement actively in 1931 when a new Constitution for India was being discussed in the British Parliament. It organised a meeting of women representatives at Bombay in conjunction with the National Council of Women in India (NCWI). Under the Chairmanship of Sarojini Naidu, it elected a drafting committee of eight women-Hans a Mehta Taraben Premchand wife of industrialist Maneklal Premchand Mrs Faiz Tyabji, Margaret Cousins, Hilla Fardoonji, Shareefa Hamid Ali, Malini Sukhtankar and Rani Lakshuibai Rajwade -to prepare a memorandum to be submitted to the franchise committee of the second round table conference. There was a demand for universal adult suffrage, mixed general electorates and no reservation, nomination or co-option for women. The draft was circulated to all the constituencies and their approval secured. Thus a united front was presented on matters of vital importance to women. At the same time, a deputation of fifteen AIWC members consisting of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and others met the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, and impressed upon him the need to have adequate representation of women at the Round Table Conference. Thus, Sarojini Naidu was included as an additional delegate to the conference. In 1938, nine members gave evidence before the Indian Franchise Committee presided over by Lord Lothian. The demand for adult franchise was once again put forward. The delegation included Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Rani Lakshuibai Rajwade, Malini Sukhtankar, Lakshmi Menon, C.N. Nallamuthu Ammal, sister Muthulakshmi Reddy and principal of Queen Mary's College Madras, Hilla Fardoonji, Begum Shareefah Hamid Ali and Miss S.I. Vincent. Ruling out the possibility of universal adult franchise, the Lothian Committee proposed reservation of seats and special franchise. The report suggested that two to five percent of the seats in the provincial council be reserved for a period of ten years and that wives of property owners and literate women be enfranchised.

It was the granting of the Communal Award in 1932 which made women's organisations like the AIWC reject the demand of reserved seats for women. They had stood for unity of womanhood and the communal award threatened to divide Hindu and Muslim women. The publication of the white paper in 1933 came as a shock as it included reservation of seats, enfranchisement of wives of property owners and literates, a different franchise for the assembly and stringent qualifications for election to the upper chamber. Though disillusioned, the demand for women's rights was once again framed at the joint meeting of the AIWC, WIA and NCWI in the form of a memorandum to be presented before Lord Linlithgow's joint select committee appointed to discuss the white paper. The memorandum contained suggestions for the period of transition and presented demands in a modified way. There was protest against reserved seats for women and indirect representation of women in the federal assembly. The demand was made for the enfranchisement of all 21-year-old men and women in the urban areas.⁴

Women representatives, including Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Muthulakshmi Reddy and Begum Hamid Ali, went to England and gave evidence before the franchise sub-committee and the full joint parliamentary committee. However, Dr Reddy did not appear before the committee as she left for the USA where she was invited to speak on women's problems in India.⁵ The delegation in England repeated its demand for universal adult franchise and got active support from British women. A liaison group of British women's organisations was formed with Grace Lancaster as liaison officer and it worked unceasingly to press the Conference's demands and strove to educate public opinion in England.

During its annual session in 1933, the AIWC demanded the right to franchise and equal status for women in the future constitution of India and endorsed the statements made by their elected representatives in London.⁶ During its next session, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur moved a resolution

expressing her views on the white paper.⁷ While acknowledging the fact that the joint parliamentary committee wanted greater enfranchisement of women and their definite place in the new Constitution, she nevertheless regretted the fact that the white paper ignored many demands put forward by the AIWC and other women organisations. Amrit Kaur demanded the removal of sex disqualification and objected to the method of enfranchisement which still granted voting rights on the basis of wifehood. The demand for universal adult suffrage in urban areas was once again put forward.

The movement thus initiated by various women's organisations for voting rights of women no doubt created sympathy in Britain, but the new Government of India Act of 1935 once again did not accept universal adult franchise. The AIWC at its annual meeting, showed disapproval of the new franchise qualifications and expressed disappointment.⁸ It was, however, unanimously agreed to conduct vigorous propaganda to get women on the electoral rolls on the criterion of literacy. There was great apathy among women regarding education and the AIWC resolved to overcome this.

Universal adult suffrage was granted by the Constitution of independent India. There was still need to ensure the active participation of women. In 1951, with impending elections, an election department was constituted in the AIWC with Tara Sathe in charge. She approached leaders of political parties to include a fair proportion of women as candidates. The AIWC actively worked to spread the message of universal adult suffrage and to provide information on voting procedure. When the elections were over, it was found that many women were left out of the lists. The volunteers of the AIWC made efforts to ensure the enrollment of all women voters. No doubt voting rights for women are guaranteed but even today, the representation of women in the political set-up is minimal. It is necessary for social workers and political activists to unearth the causes and fight for removing them. Without women's political empowerment and active political participation in decision making processes, women's life-situations cannot be altered.

END NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. AIWC Files Nos. 1 and 2.
3. Regarding her impression of Muthulakshmi Reddy, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya wrote 'she struck me essentially as a mother and a housewife, very kind and human .. .' From 'Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Blazing a Trail' in Aparna Basu, (ed.), *The Path Finder*, AIWC Publications, p. 19.
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8. File no. 110, Part I, Bulletin of Indian Women's Movement, February 1936.



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