



WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION (WIA): THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIAN WOMANHOOD-A HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article mainly focused on the Women's India Association an important organization that was started in South India worked hard for the welfare and empowerment of women. So many women were the members of this organization. They themselves published journals related to women issues like Sati, Widow Remarriage, Child Marriage, Female Infanticide etc. Women in India have always been a matter of concern. Society considers women as second class citizens. Even a few years ago, women could not enjoy equal status and rights as men. At present the status of women is much better than before. The women's movement has helped a lot in this regard. This movement can be divided into the pre-independence and post-independence periods. During 20th century, women are come forward to enhance their position and made several 'women organization' for upliftment of women status as equal to men on social, economical and political phenomenon. In India there are lot of major and minor organizations founded for the development of women such as Women India Association (WIA), All India Women Conference (AIWC), and National Council of Women in India (NCWI), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), and Sri Sarada Ladies Union. Indeed, these women organization retained the women status into better position over the years. Now, the women have placed high place in education, hygiene, and politics caused only the efforts of women organization.



KEYWORDS: Women, Stri Dharma, WIA, Movement, Education, Society.

INTRODUCTION:

To be a patriarchal society, women in India live under men. Women are influenced and managed by men. Although the condition of women has improved in modern India patriarchy has not been eradicated. 19th century social reform movements paved the way for women to voice their opinions and address concerns over the inequality of education between men and women. The early 20th century saw an uprising in women's organisations advocating female representation in political and economic practices¹. All India Women's Conference (AIWC), National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and Women's Indian Association (WIA) were all part of this national movement that saw large scale resistance of Indian women. The establishment of formal women's organizations marked a new stage in the movement's evolution.

Women's Movement in India : the pre-Independence period

Three major women's organizations at the national level emerged during the period (1917-1927). These were Women's Indian Association (WIA), All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and

National Council for women in India (NCWI)². The issues that were most prominent in the campaigns of these organizations were related to marriage, divorce and inheritance and towards expanding educational and economic opportunities to women. Women have been the victims of many socio-economic injustices. In fact, during British rule, a large positive movement for women's liberation was organized. New economic and legal systems were introduced in British India. In this case, the women of this country came in contact with the concept of Western democratic meditation. During British rule, women's equality in education and culture was fairly universally recognized. In this time education spread widely among the women. Girls' education has become as essential as boys. Various religious reform organizations and missionary societies have played a leading role in women's education in British India³.

In British India, a number of women's organizations were formed to protect and expand the interests of women. Such women's organizations have emerged and developed at the regional level as well as at the national level. The objectives of women's organizations are to ensure equality between men and women, to ensure that women enjoy all rights as men, and to provide for the overall advancement of women. Women movements are well organized to the vision of freedom and equality of women. All movements are guided and ideological fighting with the oppression. Movement move on to achieve the goals of education, occupation, and legal rights both family and social life. The character of a social movement as an instrument of social change is quite different from an initiative or emulative process of mobility and change. Many social movements tend to be characterized by collective leadership with a division of labour among different types of elites⁴.

Origin of WIA

During the First World War, the people from the world got awakening and raise the organization for getting their rights in the form of organization. Also the women were started the origination to grasp their power and glory by their own Hands. The Women Indian Association (WIA) is founded in 1917, made tremendous effort for the upgrade the women position in the male-dominated society. The emergence of women India Association has the important organ, named "Stri Dharma", a monthly magazine made tremendous efforts for uplifting the position. This magazine continuously worked for social awakening from 1917 to 1923⁵. Moreover, the members of the association have contributed the service to the society. The prominent leaders are actively participated the political forum and written the numerous articles in the magazine for the women empowerment, namely Annie Besant, Dorthy Jinarajadasa, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi, Margaret Cousins and Muthulakshmi Reddy was the founder-president of WIA and nominated to the Madras Legislative council member in 1926. This organization worked for the women empowerment for more than 21 years. The women Indian Association has did the works like education for the lower classes and castes and outcastes. Also it was focused on Hygiene, prevention of disease, care of children, sanitation, cleanliness, citizenship, the duties of men and women to the community⁶.

In 1914 Annie Besant entered Indian politics and delivered her famous address 'Wake up India'. In 1917, she was elected the first woman President of the Indian National Congress. In the same year, Annie Besant, with the help of Margaret Cousins, founded the **Women's Indian Association** in Madras which became a model for women's institutions elsewhere in the country. With the turn of the 19th century, women's organizations and women's movements influenced the country. Women entered public life and through their organizations, they made spearheaded attack against the irrational orthodoxy, injustice and discrimination to which women were subjected. It was the first organization to create an overall awakening among women and to train them to shoulder their responsibility in public services and bind them together for mutual service and for the good of the country⁷. It was also concerned with influencing the government policy on women's suffrage and issues related to educational and social reforms. Since its inception the WIA was involved in political matters⁸.

Aims and Objectives of WIA

The WIA was formed with the objects of :

1. To present to women their responsibilities as daughters to India.
2. To secure for every girl and boy the right of education through a scheme of compulsory, primary education including the teaching of religion.
3. To secure the abolition of child marriage and to raise the age of consent for married girls to sixteen.
4. To secure for women the voting right for Municipal and Legislative Councils on the same lines as it is, or may be as granted to men.
5. To secure adequate representation of women on Municipalities, Taluk and Local Boards, Legislative Councils and the Assemblies.
6. To secure for women the right to vote and to be elected for Council of State.
7. To establish equality of rights and opportunities between men and women.
8. To help women to raise that the future of India lies largely in their hands: for as wives and mothers; they have the task of training, guiding and forming the character of the future rulers of India.
9. To bond women into groups for the purpose of self development and education, and for the definite service of others⁹.

Branches of Women's Indian Association (WIA)

In 1917 itself the Women's Indian Association started 33 branches in many towns. In 1922 this association had 43 branches and 2300 members. In 1924 it had 51 branches, 18 centers and a membership of 2700. In the year 1927 the Women's Indian Association (WIA) had 71 branches, 21 centers and 3800 members. From all major cities in India, Women's Indian Association (WIA) was the premier women's association in that time¹⁰. It not only secured franchise for Indian women but also secured for them the right to sit in the council. The political policy of this association was to work for reforms through the legislative councils. The other work of this association was to promote education and religious tolerance¹¹.

Organization and Membership

Constitution was drafted for Women's Indian Association (WIA) and the article- I dealt with the name of the association i.e. "The Women's Indian Association". It started growing and the numbers increased steadily. In 1930 it had 72 branches, 23 centers which had more than 4000 members. Many branches were formed in places where ever it was possible and local secretary was appointed to look after and arrange the work in order to suit the local conditions in order to report to the head quarters¹². Each branch was to chart its own course of work in four main areas like religion, education, politics and philanthropy. The organization defined women as religious "by nature" and encouraged non-sectarian religious activity. But the most important work was education and the branches were encouraged to set up adult classes for literacy, sewing and first aid¹³. The Women's Indian Association (WIA) had been politically active from the beginning when they sent a delegation to meet with secretary of state Montague in 1917 to request the franchise for women. The fourth area of work was philanthropy, it involved feeding the poor, setting up shelters for widows and providing relief for disaster victims. The annual subscription of twelve annas must be paid to the head quarters of the association by its members. After some years of its formation, Women's Indian Association (WIA) added a clause to its constitution which said the political policy of the association was to work for reform through the legislative councils, for voting rights¹⁴.

Functions of Women's Indian Association (WIA)

Many of the Indian women already belonged to the Tamil Madhar Sangam (Tamil Ladies' Association) and had joined with British women in forming the National Indian Association to promote female education, particularly English language instruction, and the teaching of crafts¹⁵. As the two groups began to mix more freely, they decided to form Ladies' Recreational Club to sponsor tea parties and games like badminton and tennis. Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa were proposing a new organization that would combine education, crafts and sports. Women's Indian Association (WIA)

dispersed mainly in the political development, social upliftment, educating women, eradicating the grievances of womanhood and struggle for freedom. Like East and West, the service to India and humanity was built with the spirit of internationalism¹⁶. Annie Besant became the first president and continued to be in the post for seventeen long years till her death. Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadhabhoy and Ambujammal served as honorary secretaries. In 1922, the 43 branches of Women's Indian Association (WIA) supported that equal status and treatment should be given to Indians, compulsory primary education to girls and also supported the Hindu women inheritance law. In 1922-1923 the compulsory primary education was provided by all branches. In this period there were a number of appointments in municipal councils and local government to women. Most of the board members belonged to Women's Indian Association (WIA)¹⁷. Margaret Cousins, Secretary of Women's Indian Association (WIA), was the first woman in India to be an honorary magistrate. She also prohibited the labour of women and children in coal mines. In May 1923 Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Patwardhan and Mrs. and Miss Tata attended as delegates to the Congress of International Suffrage Alliance in Rome. This association sent protest to the South African Government against their continued exclusion of women from the rights of citizenship. This association also wrote League of Nations to include women in their committees. It supported Japanese women to attend political meetings and to form political associations. Madras Corporation accepted the compulsory primary education for boys and girls in 1924 and it started in 1925. During this period Women's Indian Association (WIA) started women's home of service for women's development in Mylapore, Madras. The period between 1924-1926 was called the child welfare period. All the branches made interest to increase child welfare work. All the members were involved in guiding girls for protecting the children in a systematic manner¹⁸.

Stri-Dharma

The *Stri-Dharma* was the official organ of WIA and it was a monthly publication and it became a journal after three and half years. It was published in English but included articles in both Tamil and Hindi. It carried news and events of interest to women, reports from the branches and articles on women's condition. It was "the voice, ear, eye of our members, it will speak what we would say to each other and through the words written on its pages we shall see what sisters would say to us". The association insisted that women should dedicate their responsibilities to India as wives and mothers. It had the tendency to train, guide and form the character of the future rulers of India. From its early beginnings, Stri Dharma emerged as a strong voice in the international feminist movement, supporting claims that women shared certain concerns as women that transcended all other differences. The women who started Stri Dharma believed, along with many liberal feminists of the period, that gender solidarity would unify all women, regardless of class, race, or creed. The journal's editors, for example, targeted Hindu and Muslim women from northern and southern India and worked to make the information found in articles available to both literate and non-literate audiences through special programs¹⁹.

Activities & Achievements of WIA

Vigilance and Rescue Works

Brothels existed in Madras city and other parts of the presidency. To end this evil practice, the WIA started Vigilance and Rescue Works. The WIA and the Madras Vigilance Association shared the responsibility of rescuing girls and women from the brothels. On 21st March 1939, a meeting was organized in Y.M.C.A. Hall and it was presided by George Stanley, the Governor of Madras. He appealed to the people to give money for starting rescue homes. He also asked the people to grant liberally to establish Rescue Homes for the unfortunate women. All the leading local papers gave publicity, by writing notes about it in the leading columns²⁰. Copies of the appeals were sent to all District Boards and Municipalities and leading land holders, businessmen, lawyers, Officials, etc. It was decided to run a rescue home committee. It did not reach the level due to the lack of financial aids. The Government of Madras also postponed implementation of this Act due to the lack of rescue homes. The WIA appealed to the people to do all possible help to start rescue homes. Under the control of Muthulakshmi Reddy,

her associates took the initiative to start a separate Rescue Home. Their efforts for establishing a rescue home was successful. In 1935, a separate rescue home was started in Madras²¹.

Vidhya Vivah Sahiya Sabha

The Vidhava Vivah Sahiya Sabha was established in Madras in 1921 to encourage widow remarriages. This association was started by the members of WIA. It was much opposed by orthodoxy especially Brahmins who regarded the remarriage of a widow as the most sinful. Gradually, Hindu women also came forward to receive western education and these educated women became conscious of their inferior positions and began to assert their rights. The WIA and AIWC succeeded in getting various legislations relating to inheritance rights of widows and their remarriage. Moreover, some of the educated and progressive sections of young men came forward to rebel against superstitions and marry widows²².

The Madras Seva Sadan

The WIA started the Madras Seva Sadan in 1923 at Udayanvanam, Royapettah High Road, Madras. Its main object was promoting adult education among women and making them self-reliant, self-supporting and thus enabling them to earn an honourable living. Muthulakshmi Reddy, one of the founders of the home, took unmitigated interest in the development of this home. The Home gave scholarships to the students. The fund was collected from the public and from the members of WIA. The students were taught lessons in vernacular and English. But the courses were mostly vocational, such as lace work, needle work, embroidery, weaving, cutting, spinning, jigna and rattan work. The Home created an organisation "Baby Welcome" attached to it and gives medical help to babies. Expectant mothers were attended by the nurses of the Home. The Home was managed by the members of the WIA. As the Deputy Speaker of the Madras Council, Muthulakshmi Reddy requested the government to start at least ten homes to meet the demand of women to be saved. In the women's home girls were trained as nurses, vocational teachers and music teachers. Inspired by the activities of Seva Sadan, a similar home was started at Triplicane, Madras by Lady Andal Venkata Subha Rao in 1928²³.

Madras Children Aid Society

The establishment of the Madras Children Aid Society 1924 was an important step taken by the WIA towards Child Welfare in the Madras Presidency. Under the guidance of Annie Besant, Muthulakshmi Reddy did much for the improvement of Juvenile Offenders who were taken to the Madras Children Aid Society by the police. It was a Training School where they were reformed so that they might become useful and good citizens. It was financed by the Government of Madas. Muthulakshmi Reddy was associated for many years with the institution and paid attention to its development. She continuously fought with the government for rescuing children from undesirable surroundings. Also this institution became a model for the whole of India. It concentrated on matters like children's diet, health, and discipline²⁴.

Home for Widows

Sister Subbulakshmi Ammal, herself a child widow, took up the cause of Hindu widows and established a Widow's Home at Madras. This step provoked opposition from the orthodox people. As an Educationist, Sister Subbulakshmi devoted her whole life for the educational attainment of Hindu widows and introduced them to a new life. In the beginning, the orthodox Hindus were reluctant to send their widowed daughters outside their houses because of fear of social criticism. But Sister Subbulakshmi's successful career showed them that a widow's life need not be devoid of fruitful activities. Muthulakshmi Reddy pleaded with the government to build a hostel for widows. She was instrumental in getting scholarship for all students. The Seva Sadan opened a branch at Madras and trained the widows as teachers and midwives. Muthulakshmi Reddy appealed to the government on several occasions for liberal grants to the Home. She not only helped in getting financial assistance but also sent girls to the Widow's Home. These girls came from the Devadasi community. In 1912, the "Sarda Ashram" was started by Sister Subbulakshmi and it provided a Home for 35 Child widows.

Another institution was started by her in 1926, it was called "Sarda Vidyalaya". It was a boarding school for girls. In 1936, the "Sarda Union" and the "Sarda Vidyalaya" merged with the Ramakrishna Mission²⁵.

The Avvai Home

Due to Muthulakshmi Reddy's Devadasi Abolition Bill, they hoped to be freed from the evil custom. They sought asylum and an opportunity for education and moral life. Hence Muthulakshmi Reddy started the Avvai Home in Mylapore in 1930 to help such helpless women. In 1936, Muthulakshmi Reddy leased a piece of land in Adayar Village from the Arunachaleswar Temple, Tiruvannamalai, for a permanent building for the Avvai Home. The Home was the first Non - Christian institution in the Madras Presidency though it was initially intended for the protection of liberated girls of the Devadasi community.

Avvai Home provided not only asylum but also vocational training. It had a Senior Basic School for Women. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the Director. There was an industrial section run by the Avvai Home, and they gave admission to girls who had passed Third Form. These students were trained as dress makers. In 1945, Mandakini Dattatreya Despande married Dr. Krishnamurti, son of Muthulakshmi Reddy and she took over the administration of the Avvai Home. Her interest in the field of women's education led to the starting of the Avvai Basic School which became a primary school in 1950 with the assistance of the Government of Madras. In 1952, Teacher Training School was established under the aegis of the National Council of Teachers' Education, Research and Training which awarded a Diploma in Teachers Education. The WIA emerged as the most important organization and became a national institution embracing even global problems in its purview. It did extremely useful work, campaigned against early marriage, polygamy, purdah system, dowry system, widow remarriage and the property rights for women. Socially, the WIA did some notable contribution in eradicating certain social evils. The women association rendered its all support through press. It commits to restrict child marriage in the rural and urban areas. To redress the ill fated women i.e. prostitutes, the WIA started Rescue Homes, where rehabilitation works were made. In order to suppress prostitution and brothels, the WIA took efforts to pass the Madras Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in 1930. The volunteers of the WIA also launched for the abolition of the age old system of dedicating minor girls to temples as devadasis. The WIA's Secretary and President Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy took it as a challenge and abolished devadasi system in 1947. For this purpose, different meetings and conferences were organised in different parts of the Madras Presidency and her neighbouring territories. Stri Dharma, the official publication of the WIA, became an important source of publicity to awaken the people from the long slumber of the age old social evils such as polygamy, prostitution, concubine age devadasi system, child marriage, widowhood etc. Politically, the WIA made remarkable achievements. It produced eminent women leaders such as Dr. Muthulakshmi. She became the Deputy President of the Madras Legislature Council which was a pride to the WIA and women folks. She never hesitated to approach any one for good cause. She was a great fighter for the cause of women. Any harm or injustice done to women in any corner of the world, she would at once condemn it strongly. The most important and fundamental work of the WIA was soon to become a powerful organization in the social and educational reform. Its efforts were very important and a definite landmark in the Indian History.

Economically, the WIA demanded complete equality for women. It stood for better conditions of work in different vocations such as nursing and teaching. It pleaded with the government against unhealthy working conditions of women labourers, their low wages and the absence of material and cultural facilities to working class women. It also launched a campaign against illegal traffic of women and children as well as against the immoral practice of devadasis.

The Women's Indian Association was the first women's organization to take up women worker's demands. The demand for maternity leave was first put forward in the 1921 Jamshedpur strike. It also found mention in the charter of All India Trade Union Congress in the year the organization was formed. The Bombay Maternity Benefit Act was passed in 1929 followed by similar legislation in other provinces²⁶. The Women's Indian Association was instrumental in starting the vigilance association at Madras for the betterment of women and children in Madras. The police of

Madras with the help of the vigilance association closed one hundred and fifty houses of ill fame at Madras in 1934 itself. This association started and maintained Rescue homes and Orphanages. It was due to the efforts of the association and its members that the Madras Children's Aid Society came into existence and the "Juvenile Court" was established. Mrs. Margret Cousins was appointed as the first honourable magistrate for the Juvenile Court. The Seva Sadan, Avvai Home, the Montessorie School at Patteon Garden and Rescue home were initiated and set on foot by the efforts of Women's Indian Association. Women's Indian Association (WIA) offered its valuable suggestion on four important reform bills before the Assembly. They were,

- Mr. B. Das's Sarada Act amended bill.
- Dr. Deshmukh's bill to Amend Hindu Law governing Hindu Women's rights to property.
- Dr. Bhagavan Das bill to validate marriages among caste of Hindus.
- Rao Bahadur M.C. Raj's bill for removal of caste disabilities²⁷.

CONCLUSION

Now the dignity of women is much better than before. But, as a percentage, Indian women still lag far behind men in the workplace, education, health and safety. India has enacted many laws and progressive plans to improve the status of women. But there is still no end to violence against women. Therefore, women should continue their women's movement for the development of women. Women's Indian Association is the mother of all other women's organizations in India. The working condition of the women's organizations proves that they are working, earning money and doing some help for the economic development for women. The history of Women's Indian Association shows that hundreds of women received social and political training only through it. 90% of the elite women all over India were trained only by this women organization. These organizations have now restricted their activities only to social welfare of women and children.

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