



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2019; 5(1): 142-145
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 04-11-2018
Accepted: 06-12-2018

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Women's organizations in pre-independence India

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Abstract

Women have been playing different roles in civilization since ancient times and these roles have been changing over the period. Research studies have demonstrated that women have raised their position from low to high and made a place in different sectors. In India women have been suffering from social, political and economic inequalities for a very long time. From the low points in medieval period, women suffered a lot and still struggling for gender equality. However the things started changing with the launching of some social reform movements in the 19th century. The educational experiments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought women out from household chores. Therefore women began to communicate with women outside their families and local communities. As a result of this various women's organizations developed from the 19th century onwards.

Keywords: Women associations, women development, awareness campaign

Introduction

In this paper an attempt has been made to discuss various women's organizations which were emerged in pre-independence India and laid the foundation of the political participation of women.

The roots of the Indian women's participation in politics can be traced back to the 19th century reform movement. As a result some great social reformers came out and got some success in spreading pro women ideas. Women's status became central to all reforms. The reformers took up the issues of polygamy, purdah, widow remarriage and women's education. Many reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyoti Rao Phule fought for the upliftment of women in the early 19th century. Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the first Indian to start campaign against Sati, focused on women's education and abolition of Sati. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's fight for the improvement in the condition of widows that led to the widow remarriage act of 1856. Another reformer Mahadev Govinda Ranade, founded the Widow Remarriage Association and the Deccan Education Society.

Pandita Ramabai a woman reformer also raised the cause of women's upliftment. She started a school for child widows in 1882 in Bombay. She advocated women's education and shed light on the plight of child brides and child widows. She was considered as one of the innovators of the feminist movement, with the formation of Mahila Samaj in 1882, which came to known as the first feminist organization in India. She envisioned creating a support network for newly educated women through weekly lectures and lessons at homes, where women could learn and gain confidence through interaction^[1]. She setup Mukti Mission for young widows and Krupa Sadan and Sharda Sadan in 1889 for destitute women^[2]. The Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and Gujarat did similar work. Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar, Madhav Govind Ranade and R.G. Dhandarker in Pune and Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth and his associates in Ahmedabad started organizations for prohibition of child marriage, widow remarriage and women's education. The male inspired and male-guided organizations for women did valuable work in educating women and giving them their first experience with public work. By the late 19th century several women's organizations started to be formed in several parts of India such as the Banga Mahila Samaj, the Aghore Kamini Nari Samiti in Bengal, the Satara Abolonnati Sabha in Maharashtra, the Mahila Sewa Samaj in Bangalore and the Prayas Mahila Samiti in Allahabad^[3].

The National Social Conference was formed at the third session of Indian National Congress in 1887 to provide a forum for the discussion of social issues.

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The Bharat Mahila Paris had was the women's wing of this and was launched in 1905. It focussed on child marriage, condition of widows, dowry and other "evil" customs. Women in Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and other smaller cities formed associations whose members were drawn from among a small group of urban educated families. These encouraged in bringing women out of their homes, giving them an opportunity to meet other women, motivating them to take an interest in public affairs.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 transformed women's participation in the national movement. After 1910, while organizing and working in local women's associations many of them realized that woman should take the leadership into their own hands, started provincial and national women's associations. Thus between 1910 and 1920 the number of social organizations for women grew rapidly. Organizations like Mahila Samities, Women's Clubs, Ladies Societies emerged in the cities and towns of British India and the native states. Within the Parsee community the major organization for women's social work, the Stri Zarhosti Mandal (Parsi Women's Circle) emerged from plague relief work done by the family of Naoroji Patuck. Deeply touched by the hardships suffered by women, Mr. Patuck set up a work class in his home. By 1903 there were over fifty women enrolled and his family decided to ask other women to join them in forming an organization. The organization expanded its agenda to include medical care, education and successfully sought funding from the wealthy Parsi philanthropist Sir Ratan Tata. Equally important, the organization served as a training ground for women who became active in a wide range of activities and organizations in the 1920s and 1930s [4].

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, critical of the women's meetings held in union with the Indian National Social Conference, called for a permanent association of Indian women. Women answered favorably and Saraladevi started the planning for the first meeting. Saraladevi's organization, the Bharat Stree Mahamandal had its first meeting in Allahabad in 1910. One of the primary goals of the organization was to encourage female education which at that time was not well developed. The Bharat Stree Mahamandal designed to open branches in all parts of India to promote female education. It developed branches in Lahore, Allahabad, Delhi, Karachi, Amritsar, Hyderabad, Kanpur, Bankura, Hazaribagh Midnapore and Kolkata to bring together women all over, regardless of race, creed, and class, on the basis of their general interest in the proper and material growth of the women of India. Saraladevi had written about the importance of women escaping male domination so only women were allowed to join this organization [5].

The three major women's organizations which thus trace their origin to the decade between 1917-1927 were: (1) The Women's Indian Association (WIA), (2) The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and (3) the All India Women's Conference (AIWC). All these organizations were formed by women between 1917 and 1927 after First World War. During this period struggle against colonial rule intensified. Gandhi ji expanded Indian women's public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj. At that time, women showed active participation in the National Movement paving the way for some women's organizations.

Women's Indian Association (WIA)

It is interesting that the WIA was founded by an intrepid

Irish woman, Margaret E. Cousins on 8 May 1917 in Adyar, Madras. The WIA's success can be attributed to its secular agenda for women of all creeds, classes and castes. The women who formed this organization decided to name it the "Women's Indian Association" because membership was open to both Indians and Europeans. Annie Besant became the first President of WIA. The other founder women included S. Ambujammal, Dr. Muthulaksmi Reddi, Mangalammal Sadasivier, Saralabai Naik, Herabai Tata, Dr. Poonen Lukhose, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Begam Hasrat Mohani and Dhanavanti Rama Rao. Describing themselves as the daughters of India, their objectives were to guide the nation; serve the poor, promote women's education and compulsory universal primary education, abolish child marriage, raise the age of sexual consent to sixteen for women, win female suffrage and attain the female right to elected office [6]. Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Malati Patwardhan, Mrs. Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadabhoy and Mrs. Ambujammal acted as honorary secretaries. By the end of the first year there came into existence thirty three branches. Within five years the number rose to forty-three branches, twenty centers and 2300 members [7]. The WIA was a vigorous organization that undertook to widen its scope of activities beyond fund-raising, social service and women's education. It sought to influence government policy on equal rights for women in some areas and was involved with the issues of suffrage, education and social reform.

The WIA took an active part in the political movements of the time. In 1917 for instance, when Besant was arrested and interned, branches of the WIA took active part in obtaining her release. The WIA published a monthly journal named 'Stri Dharma' in English language. WIA was the first women's association in India to present a memorandum to the Round Table Conference on Women's Franchise and her constitutional rights as well as the initiator of the first All Asian Women's Conference [8].

National Council of Women in India (NCWI)

The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was formally formed in 1925, with the efforts of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras's dedicated and influential women who had contributed commendably to the war efforts. It came to be accepted as the national branch of the International Council of Women. The president of the International Council of Women was Marchioness of Aberdeen, from 1922-1936 [9]. It provided an opportunity to voice Indian opinion in International forums. A national branch of the International Council of Women, its most prominent member was Mehribai Tata who aggressively campaigned against inert charity and advised men to support female education and freedom of movement for women. She advised the middle class women to visit slums as alongside inert charity. Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Annie Besant, Mrs. Ambujammal, Mrs. Malati Patwardhan, Kanuben C. Mehta are the important women associated with this organization [10]. The NCWI received active support from both British and Indian women. It was an elitist organization and did not become broad based.

All India Women's Conference (AIWC)

The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) first met in Poona in January 1927, followed by more than six months of serious work on the part of Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to the WIA. It was an organization

dedicated to the upliftment and betterment of women and children. The first President of the AIWC, the Maharani Chimanbai Gaekwad of Baroda, underlined the need of a special type of education for women, compatible with their nature. Margaret Cousins was the Secretary.¹¹ Renowned women like Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay, Renuka Roy, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Rameshwari Nehru, Begum Hamid Ali, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy etc. were in the leadership of this organization. The first conference of the AIWC passed resolutions on education, ranging from matters concerning primary schools to those relating to college and adult education. It appears that AIWC has done a lot for the upliftment of women. It initiated, supported and fought for the approval of some of the most important laws such as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929.

AIWC's main aim at the time of its inception was to safeguard and protect the interests of Indian women. The first ever witness of such consciousness is a memorandum in which Indian women demanded the right to vote, which shows that they were politically conscious. The AIWC from the beginning, proclaimed that its aims and objectives were mainly concerned with social work related to the upliftment and welfare of women and children and that the organization had not been formed with any political purpose. It concerted on issues such as its campaigns against early marriage, polygamy, purdah, dowry, widow remarriage and property rights for women etc., and prepared the ground for suitable legislations^[12]. In 1917 women started agitating for the franchise under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu. Indian women not only demanded the right to vote by extending the franchise to them but also demanded expansion in the education of girls and drafted a plan for its dissemination.

The result of this was that the Montague-Chelmsford Reform Act of 1919 gave women the right to vote in elections to all state legislatures but not to the Council of State for Governor-General. In 1921, Madras Province granted Right to vote to wealthy and educated women, under the same terms as men. In Punjab the Sikhs granted women equal voting rights in 1925 irrespective of their educational qualifications or being wealthy or poor. This happened when the Gurdwara Act of 1925 was approved^[13]. With the demand of women, in 1926 women were given the right to membership of provincial legislatures. This was of course to be achieved only through government nomination. By 1932, however, the AIWC had become involved with women's political rights and all questions which affected women and children as well as with social problems such as untouchability^[14]. In the Government of India Act 1935 the British Raj set up a system of separate electorates and separate seats for women. Most women's leaders opposed it and demanded adult franchise^[15].

By 1940s, the AIWC was the foremost representative organization of women in India. In 1941, they started publishing its quarterly Journal 'Roshni' and with a central office established in 1946 they shifted their activities to research and propaganda on women's issue. AIWC continued working for women's development and their empowerment. However, with the passage of time the two main organizations in the women's movement, the WIA and the AIWC, were swept away by a variety of influences. The women's question had gradually evolved from the perspective of upliftment within the traditional framework to that of women's equality.

In that period women felt the need to stand on their own feet by becoming more and more economically independent by seeking employment in areas earlier restricted to them. Their struggle for politico-economic freedom was not an immediate off-shoot of the national movement, but many organizations working since the opening of the present century had a striven wholeheartedly and exclusively to create a favorable atmosphere for Indian women. In the early 21st century, the AIWC was engaged in a range of activities and projects aimed at improving educational opportunities and increasing economic opportunities as well. The group used a range of strategies, including public awareness campaigns, protest meetings, leadership training and legislative advocacy. Members worked on a wide variety of issues from health and family welfare, women's labor, and trafficking of women and children to disaster relief and the development of rural energy. The AIWC also initiated several projects aimed at training and employing women in a broad range of fields, including computing and textile weaving^[16].

The women's movement in pre-independent India has been called as the first wave of feminism. In this phase, women blamed tradition and social structure for their suffering and sought redress through education and legal change^[17]. They argued that women could bring household and family matters to decision making forums where public policy was formulated.

The study shows that women organizations have brought women issues to the forefront. These organizations helped women to come out from domestic boundaries, assemble and fought for their cause. This prepared the base of women's active participation in the struggle for freedom under the able guidance of Mahatma Gandhi.

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