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Votes, Reserved Seats and Women's Participation

Did women in India win the vote in 1947 without a struggle? What compromises were made to keep women, who were keen on accepting the offer of separate electorates, within the nationalist fold? How did the challenges faced by women in pre-independence struggles resonate in the contemporary demand for women's reservations?

Towards the end of the 19th century, Indian nationalists began raising the demand for greater Indian participation in legislative and other administrative bodies which impinged on every aspect of their lives. Partly in response to these demands, but also in order to expand the circle of collaborators who would ensure the continued stability of British rule in India, some gradual changes were effected in the system of representation to include more and more Indians. But such concessions were also part of a policy of divide and rule, setting one group off against another through systems of electoral 'protection'.

Broadening the Circle of Collaborators

Beginning with the Indian Councils Act of 1892, there was a gradual expansion of the inclusion of Indians in local governance. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 following the Minto–Morley Reforms, the Government of India Act of 1919 following the Montagu–Chelmsford Proposals of 1918 and, finally, the Government of India Act of 1935, under which elections were held in the provinces in 1937, were part of a process of constitutional reform which yielded more political space to sections of Indian society. The struggle for legal remedies to the social problems affecting women that was waged throughout the 19th century was given a new meaning in the 20th century when the

broader struggle for independence got under way. Complex demands for women's right to the vote on the same terms as men began to be made, as women fought for their right to represent themselves. But interesting and important disagreements emerged between women themselves, and between colonial authorities and nationalist leaders.

It is often pointed out that the mobilization of women in the Indian national movement was unique, with important legacies for their continued involvement in public/political life in South Asia today. It is also claimed that Indian women were granted equal rights to suffrage at the moment of independence without any sustained political struggle. Compared with the protracted struggles of women from advanced capitalist countries in securing the vote, and the ferocity of the reactions to their demands, Indian women were certainly guaranteed the rights of adult franchise at the moment of independence. India did remain distinct from a large number of post-colonial countries (such as Egypt and Turkey) where the promise of equal enfranchisement of women and men remained unrealized for a long time after independence.

A return to the demand for equal representation in elected bodies by Indian women is necessary for several reasons. First, it was a movement in which women themselves engaged, and their struggles and arguments, despite advances and retreats of this process, eventually won them the vote. We are also now aware that the question of women's rights is inseparable from the caste and communal matrix of Indian politics, even prior to 1947. The struggle for women's right to vote occurred alongside and against other political struggles.

Attention to these complex histories is therefore crucial, since bitter differences have emerged over the Women's Reservation Bill of 1996, introduced in the parliament as the 81st Constitution Amendment Bill, and its provision of seats for women to legislatures and parliament. The bill lingered long without being passed in both houses, as older objections, biases and contentions about women in politics were rehearsed. Finally, it was passed as the Women's Reservation Act (Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinyam) of 2023 although as a post-dated promise.¹ This is in contrast to the easier passage of the 73rd and 74th amendments, passed in 1993–94, which guaranteed women a place in urban and rural local bodies.

¹ See Rashmi Singh, 'Women's Reservation Act and Its Unsettled Details', *India Forum*, 6 December 2023, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/gender/womens-reservation-act-and-its-unsettled-details> (accessed November 2024).

The 20th-century struggle for women's vote in India was embedded in the broader mobilization of women in the movement for national liberation. Some middle-class woman claimed to be the representatives of all modern Indian womanhood, distinct from their working-class, lower-caste, Westernized and minority counterparts. But as recent feminist scholarship has established, the field of forces had completely changed by the late 1920s. How was the campaign for women's vote and the battle for reserved seats shaped by these transformations?

Lord Cross's Indian Councils Act of 1892 marked one of the first of a series of 'constitutional reforms' which was prompted by, among other things, a desire to dampen enthusiasm for the Congress. Although it did not concede elections as such, it did allow for the consultation of university senates, chambers of commerce and landlord associations in nominating members. The enlarged non-official element of the Imperial Council, 10 out of 16 members, had rather limited powers, being able to raise questions on the budget, for example, without being allowed to pass amendments and vote on it.² This succeeded in keeping more forceful Congress demands at bay, though only for a short while, as was revealed by the explosive responses to the partition of Bengal in 1905.

The Swadeshi upsurge of 1905–08 and growing Congress disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of local board politics, which made nominees no more than 'glorified drain inspectors', produced a fresh set of demands for greater and more tangible representation. The strategy of the Minto–Morley reforms of 1908, which led to the Indian Councils Act of 1909, was primarily to assuage Congress fears by rallying the moderates and, at the same time, to respond with unseemly enthusiasm to the growing disenchantment of Indian Muslims through the device of 'separate electorates', a strategy that was later applied to other groups such as 'untouchables' and women.

The 1909 act was an improvement over the 1892 act, granting actual elections for the first time, as well as conceding greater powers for budget discussion, sponsoring resolutions, and so on. The new Imperial Council was to have 27 elected members, though in a total of 60 the majority were still official members, and the government could veto politically dangerous candidates. There were further provisions, notably the one that permitted 8 of the 27 non-official members to be Muslims and deliberately kept the income qualifications low for them.³

² Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (Macmillan, 1983), p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

A Politics of Respectability

The struggle for independence mustered entire families, including women who otherwise led very traditional and conservative lives. The mobilization was in large part enabled by recasting the role of middle-class women.⁴ The Indian national movement, especially in its Gandhian phase, elaborated a public sphere of female involvement applauded as a 'politics of respectability', which, as Tanika Sarkar has said, was 'a subtle symbiosis between the religious and the political in the nationalist message under [Gandhi's] leadership [which] enabled nationalism to transcend the realm of politics and elevate itself to the religious domain'.⁵

The genius of Gandhian mass politics was that it was able to mobilize large sections of the Indian population, including women, in the national movement while keeping their particular demands safely subordinated to the anti-imperialist cause. Beginning with the Swadeshi movement of 1905–08, which saw the first involvement of women in mass politics, through the years of the Non-cooperation (1921–22), Civil Disobedience (1930–34), and Quit India (1942) movements, larger and larger sections of women were engaged in

⁴ Meredith Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁵ Tanika Sarkar, 'Politics and Women in Bengal: The Conditions and Meaning of Participation', in *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State*, ed. J. Krishnamurty, pp. 231–41 (Oxford University Press, 1989). A small selection of a cornucopia of feminist writings on women in political life is as follows: S. Anandhi, 'The Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement, 1920–1947', *Social Scientist* 19, nos. 5–6 (1990), pp. 24–51; Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women* (Oxford University Press, 2000); Aparna Basu, 'Feminism and Nationalism in India, 1917–1947', *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 95–107; Mrinalini Sinha, 'Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late Colonial India', *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (Points of Departure: India and the South Asian Diaspora) (Autumn 2000), pp. 623–44; Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930–42* (Sage Publications, 2006); Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, 'Writing Stri Dharma: International Feminism, Nationalist Politics, and Women's Press Advocacy in Late Colonial India', *Women's History Review* 12, no. 4 (2003), pp. 623–49, DOI: 10.1080/09612020300200377; Geraldine Forbes, 'The Politics of Respectability: Indian Women and the Indian National Congress', in *The Indian National Congress: Centenary Hindsight*, ed. D. A. Low, pp. 54–97 (Oxford University Press, 1988); Gail Pearson, 'Nationalism, Universalization, and the Extended Female Space', in *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, ed. Gail Minault, pp. 174–91 (Chanakya Publications, 1981); Gail Minault, 'Purdah Politics: The Role of Muslim Women in Indian Nationalism, 1911–1924', in *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault, pp. 245–61 (Chanakya Publications, 1982).

mass public activities such as spinning, picketing of cloth and liquor stores, and courting arrest. Women were also active in the periods of constructive work which were carried on in the 1920s and 1930s. On the basis of proven, and wholehearted, participation in nationalist mass politics, the Indian suffrage movement was able to voice demands for participation in the legislative process.

Women attended annual Congress meetings from as early as 1889, although their presence was formal.⁶ They first participated in the public/political sphere during the Swadeshi movement, when large numbers of Bengali housewives combined political action with popular religious observances.⁷ Annie Besant, Bhikaiji Cama and Sarojini Naidu, especially after the First World War, organized women for political activity. The Women's Indian Association (WIA), with Besant as the president, was dedicated to female franchise and social reforms.⁸ After the war, Gandhi began urging women to take the *swadeshi* vow and to engage in spinning, and many middle-class women eagerly responded, coming out in large numbers during the Non-cooperation movement in 1921–22.

The unique link made between Non-cooperation and Khilafat movements encouraged many Muslim women to participate in the national movement. Such participation did not directly challenge the institution of purdah as 'symbolic shelter' but 'extended it beyond previously acceptable limits'.⁹ Bi Amman, the mother of Khilafat leaders Mohammed and Shaukat Ali, who began publicly addressing audiences after the imprisonment of her sons in 1921, was even able to lift her veil by redefining the audience as 'family'.¹⁰ Muslim women had, from 1914, begun forming associations for female education and were therefore quite prepared to be a part of the newly forged alliance between Hindus and Muslims.

The AIWC met in Pune in 1927 and passed resolutions relating to child marriage, later campaigning for the Sarda Act, also known as the Child Marriage Restraint Act, of 1929.¹¹ Gandhi's call for picketing during the first Civil Disobedience movement of 1930–31, galvanized the network of women's groups which had been carefully forged in the 1920s. Battalions of sari-clad

⁶ Forbes, 'The Politics of Respectability', p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁹ Minault, 'Purdah Politics', p. 246.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹¹ Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference, 1927–1990* (Manohar, 1990), pp. 1, 42.

volunteers picketed cloth and liquor stores, organized *prabhat pheris* (songs sung on morning processions) and, in 1930, even led attacks on salt works, without any loss of respectability. Women all over the country 'simultaneously and unhesitatingly' broke the salt law, gaining national and international attention for their actions.¹² By the time of the far more short-lived and violent Quit India movement, women were equal participants in the emerging political formation, although largely in a separate sphere, to some extent imbued with the ideals of 'sacrifice' and sacred 'duty' and distinguished from male political activity.

By emphasizing the responsibility of women to home and the nation, the national movement made passage from private domestic to public/political sphere easier. The first wave of Indian feminists framed their demands for women's rights in terms of the 'needs' of women as nurturers and educators of future nationalists and of responsible citizens.

Women's Organisations and the Demand for Representation

The first efforts to build all-India women's organizations were made between 1910 and 1920, on the substantial successes of a range of women's organizations which were primarily urban, regional and geared to social work. In some cases, as with the Arya Samaj, the agenda was avowedly sectarian.¹³ In 1917, the WIA was set up in Madras, with the help of an Irish suffragette, Margaret Cousins, and Annie Besant 'on a religious but non-sectarian basis'. It soon had branches in major cities throughout the country and its primary focus was on seeking an enlarged role for women in public life.¹⁴ Indian women had begun using the organs of the nationalist social reform movement, such as the *Indian Social Reformer* and the *Indian Review* to argue their case for greater equality. There were also several journals in regional languages, and those in English such as the *Indian Ladies Magazine*, that had a wider reach. The WIA launched its crusade for women's rights with its own journal, *Stri Dharma*, which was widely circulated. From these and other writings of women themselves, we may further trace the emerging self-perceptions of women as political beings.

The two Councils Acts of 1892 and 1909 made no mention of female franchise, and had no need to, since the combination of property and literacy

¹² See Pearson, 'Nationalism, Universalization and the Extended Female Space', p. 184.

¹³ Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990* (Kali for Women, 1993), p. 54.

¹⁴ *Stri Dharma*, March 1928.

qualifications worked effectively to keep most women out of the electoral rolls. The WIA organized the first women's franchise delegation to the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms Committee of 1917. The members agreed on the need for women's political freedom in order that they may carry out social reform. In their memorandum to the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms Committee, the delegation said:

Our interests, as one half of the people, are directly affected by the demand in the united scheme (I.3) that 'The Members of the Council should be elected directly by the people on as broad a franchise as possible' and in the Memorandum (3) that 'the franchise should be broadened and extended directly to the people'. We pray that, when such a franchise is being drawn up, women may be recognised as 'people' and that it may be worded in such terms as will not disqualify our sex but allow our women the same opportunities of representation as our men.¹⁵

The WIA derived great benefit from the political experience of suffragette and theosophist Margaret Cousins. Cousins first approached the Montagu–Chelmsford enquiry committee during consultations on the Government of India Act of 1919, with the demand for free access to education for both boys and girls. The demand for equal opportunities in education linked to women's franchise was articulated only when she was informed that the enquiry was strictly 'political'.¹⁶ A separate delegation in 1917 led by Sarojini Naidu, member of the Congress, made the specific demand of votes for women on the same terms as men (that is, on property and income criteria), but the demand was refused, on the ground that they did not represent the majority of Indian women.¹⁷ Women's right to vote was then made a responsibility of the provincial legislatures and not the central assembly, though there was a continued emphasis on their usefulness to nation-building.¹⁸

¹⁵ Copy of the memorandum presented by the all-Indian women's delegation to Lord Chelmsford (viceroy of India) and E. S. Montagu (secretary of state of India), as printed in *All India Women's Conference Souvenir, 1927–1970* (All India Women's Conference, 1979).

¹⁶ Mary E. John, 'Alternate Modernities? Reservations and Women's Movement in 20th-century India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, nos. 43–44 (21 October–3 November 2000), pp. 3822–29, esp. p. 3825.

¹⁷ Virginie Dutoya, 'A Representative Claim Made in the Name of Women? Quotas and the Political Representation of Women in India and Pakistan (1917–2010)', *Revue française de science politique (English Edition)* 66, no. 1 (2016), pp. 41–62, esp. p. 44.

¹⁸ Geraldine Forbes, 'Votes for Women: The Demand for Women's Franchise in India, 1917–1937', in *Symbols of Power: Studies in the Political Status of Women in India*, ed. Vina Mazumdar, pp. 3–23 (Allied Publishers, 1979), p. 5.

The Montagu–Chelmsford reforms proposed a devolution of power that gave provincial legislatures control of local government, public health and education. Although the committee agreed on the need to expand Indian representation in the councils, no mention was made of women. It was up to the Southborough Franchise Committee to determine the exact nature of the reforms suggested by the Montagu–Chelmsford committee. The Southborough committee was quite reluctant at first to give women the right to vote. Despite a concerted effort by the WIA, the women of the Home Rule League and the Bharat Stree Mandal, the Southborough committee concluded that ‘extension of the vote to women would be premature in a society which continued to enforce purdah and prohibitions against female education’.¹⁹

How then did the campaign for votes for women become a demand for reserved seats for women? Jana Everett identifies broadly two phases in the struggle for the woman's vote: the first from 1917 to 1928, when female enfranchisement and increased eligibility for female representation in legislatures was sought; the second until 1937, when attempts were made to broaden both the terms of enfranchisement and representation in legislative bodies.²⁰ The appeals of all Indian organizations such as the WIA, and later the AIWC (established in 1927) and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI, set up in 1925) and provincial-level organizations such as the Bangiya Nari Samaj of Bengal, were addressed equally to the colonial authorities and male nationalist counterparts.²¹

Since the question of female franchise was considered in provincial legislatures, the suffrage campaign shifted from the all-India level to the provincial level.²² The response of Indian women was restrained, by appealing against the decision through protest meetings and despatching telegrams demanding the vote. They received support from the provincial Congress committees, which passed resolutions in favour of women's suffrage, since the Congress lost no opportunity to embarrass the Government of India and establish its moral authority. Long-held colonial assumptions that the authority of the colonial state alone could improve the status of women suffered a serious setback when the Congress nationalists appeared more

¹⁹ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 54.

²⁰ Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (Heritage Publishers, 1985), p. 101.

²¹ Barbara Southard, ‘Colonial Politics and Women's Rights: Women Suffrage Campaigns in Bengal, British India, in the 1920s’, *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (May 1993), pp. 397–439, esp. p. 403.

²² *Ibid.*

willing than their colonial counterparts to accommodate women's demands. N. M. Dumasia noted with some pride in the legislative council:

It is gratifying to find that in a country where men are accused of treating women as chattels the political progress of women has been even more rapid than in England and free from the war of the sexes and the smashing of heads and windows which preceded the enfranchisement of women in England.²³

In 1919, a special delegation comprising Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Hirabai Tata and Mithan Tata journeyed to London to give evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Government of India Bill.²⁴ Active lobbying by alliances of British and Indian women's groups succeeded in extracting an ambiguous response which suggested that once legislative councils were elected in each province, it was up to the men of these councils to decide whether women should be given the vote.²⁵ The pragmatics of such new arrangements were left to the individual legislative councils, allowing for a great deal of unevenness in implementation. Women were thus faced with the twin responsibilities of lobbying provincial councils while fighting the property qualification, and the first task seemed easier than the second.

Women and Provincial Legislatures

Madras blazed the way by granting women the right to vote in 1920, followed by Bombay in 1921, but it was not until 1929 that other provincial legislatures gave women the vote and allowed them to be elected on the same basis as men.²⁶ The situation in the princely states was often much worse, given the absence of a strong Congress movement, although the paternalist ideology of several princely administrations allowed for the nomination of women to the legislatures of Travancore, Cochin and Mysore, in 1924, 1925 and 1930 respectively. In Mysore, two women were nominated to the representative assembly in 1930, and the number was doubled in 1934, but persistent demands to elect women to the legislative council were not conceded. The committee on constitutional reforms

²³ As cited in Forbes, 'Votes for Women', p. 6.

²⁴ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 55.

²⁵ Gail Pearson, 'Reserved Seats: Women and the Vote in Bombay', in Krishnamurty, ed., *Women in Colonial India*, pp. 199–217, esp. p. 201.

²⁶ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 55.

appointed in 1938, the Srinivasa Iyengar Committee, in which there was just one woman, received a petition from the Mysore State Women's Council demanding at least 15 seats compared with the allotted 11 seats, but this was not granted.²⁷

An indication of entrenched resistance to women's vote was the defeat in 1921 of the first resolution for women's suffrage in Bengal, despite the *Bangiya Nari Samaj's* efforts within and outside the legislative council. Some members framed their opposition to women's vote by claiming it was 'tactically incorrect for women to seek the vote in the undemocratic and unrepresentative provincial councils'.²⁸ Others were more explicit in their reasons for denying suffrage to women, whom they considered inherently incapable of exercising these rights with responsibility. The spectre of respectable women mingling with prostitutes was frequently raised to warn of the dire implications of such a democratic move. Many Muslim members of the legislative council opposed granting votes to women on the grounds that since Muslim women were less educated than Hindu women, few would turn out to vote, and the percentage of Hindus going to the polls would rise disproportionately.²⁹

When the Bengal Legislative Council finally granted the vote to women in 1925, it was due to the new political alignments in Bengal, where the *Swaraj Party* was able to overcome the resistance of socially conservative groups such as the Muslims, local notables and landlords. The official British position in the council, which was overwhelmingly against women's vote in 1921, underwent some changes as well, resulting in the acceptance of the vote for women.³⁰

Since the right to vote was itself linked to the ownership of property from which most Indian women were excluded, it was hardly surprising that no more than 1 per cent of women (compared with an average of 11 per cent of men) were able to vote in any of the legislatures.³¹ Gail Pearson shows that the removal of the sex disqualification was largely symbolic, with only 18.3 per cent of the eligible women in Bombay actually casting their vote in 1923. Also, despite the fact that women could vote, they were still barred

²⁷ Bjorn Hettne, *The Political Economy of Indirect Rule* (Manohar, 1982), p. 111.

²⁸ Southard, 'Colonial Politics and Women's Rights', p. 412.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

³⁰ Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 201.

³¹ The figures were 1 per cent in Madras (men: 11.6), 0.8 per cent in Bombay (men: 13.4), 0.3 per cent in Bengal (men: 9.7), 0.5 per cent in Punjab (men: 11.96). Forbes, 'Votes for Women', p. 7.

from actually sitting in the legislatures. The active lobbying of women before the Reforms Enquiry Committee, also known as the Muddiman Committee, in Simla led the Governor General in Council in 1926 to decide to amend electoral rules and remove the sex disqualification.³² The central assembly only followed the lead of the Bombay Provincial Council in removing the disqualification of women in legislatures.

Even before the next big round of negotiations on constitutional reform began in 1930, small victories were won and women gained important new visibility in the legislatures. Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first female member to be nominated to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. Among the kinds of legislations she initiated were bills to abolish the *devadasi* system and child marriage, make medical examination in all schools and colleges compulsory, reduce educational fees for poor girls, establish a children's hospital and secure grants for women training destitute women.³³ Reddy was clearly living up to the expectations of both the nationalists' and women's groups, remaining within the realm of what may broadly be termed 'social feminism', which argued that issues that concerned the welfare of women and children could be understood and represented by women alone.³⁴

The AIWC, set up in 1927, specifically advanced the cause of women and children (and thereby future generations of nationalists). In its memorandum, the AIWC made a demand for universal adult suffrage, mixed general electorates, and no reservations, co-option or nomination of women.³⁵ But there still remained the obstacle of property qualifications for the vote. The Indian Statutory Commission, also known as the Simon Commission, which submitted its report in 1930, refused to accept the Nehru Report's demand for universal adult franchise, conceding enfranchisement of only 20 per cent of the population though it was willing to ensure as much as 33.5 per cent of the total electorate was female. It went further in recommending a wifehood qualification instead of the property qualification, whereby wives and widows of property holders over the age of 25 could vote.³⁶ It also proposed a literacy qualification in addition to those already in place, allowing men and women over the age of 21 to vote.

³² Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 203.

³³ Forbes, 'Votes for Women', p. 8.

³⁴ Southard, 'Colonial Politics and Women's Rights', p. 412.

³⁵ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 56.

³⁶ Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 204.

Women as 'Abstract Citizens' and the Question of Separate Electorates

The Civil Disobedience movement temporarily cast in shadow the constitutional reforms process. In any case, the Congress in its Gandhian phase paid increasing attention to mass political actions which lay beyond legislative strategies, and its spectacular mobilization of women during Civil Disobedience was a sign of this new emphasis. Meanwhile, support for women's enfranchisement continued, though largely in symbolic ways: the appointment of Sarojini Naidu as the Congress president in 1925 was one such action.³⁷

There were dissenting views on separate electorates right from the start: Muthulakshmi Reddy, a doctor from the underprivileged Devadasi caste, recognized the need for separate electorates for women, while acknowledging the disadvantages faced by lower-caste Hindus.³⁸ Radhabai Subbarayan and Begum Shah Nawaz, elite women representatives at the Round Table conference in 1930, also favoured reservations for women: they insisted that they were obliged to shoulder their political responsibilities with men, but categorically denied that they were feminists.³⁹ Highly educated women such as Cornelia Sorabji, a lawyer, had in a confidential memorandum to the government, even before the 1919 reforms, suggested that the time was not ripe for women—and, in particular, illiterate women—to be given the vote.⁴⁰ Debates in the Bengal legislature showed that Muslim representatives were strongly opposed to the vote for women, although by 1925 their opposition had become less entrenched.

However, as Mrinalini Sinha has shown, women emerged 'as a legitimate constituency in their own right', as opposed to standing merely for the collective interests of the community (read: religion), around the passage of the Sarda Act in 1929. This followed the furore over Katherine Mayo's indictment of Indian society and culture in *Mother India*.⁴¹ For the first time, the realm of social reform was knitted to the question of political empowerment.

³⁷ Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, p. 112.

³⁸ M. John, 'Alternate Modernities?' p. 3824.

³⁹ Anupama Roy, "'The Womanly Vote" and Women Citizens: Debates on Women's Franchise in Late Colonial India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 36, no. 3 (2002), pp. 469–93, esp. p. 486.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁴¹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Spectres of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 153, 161.

The massive participation of women in the Civil Disobedience movement had demonstrated beyond all doubt that they deserved franchise on equal terms with men. The inclusion of a clause that ‘the franchise shall be on the basis of universal adult suffrage’ in the Charter of Fundamental Rights adopted at the Karachi Congress session of 1930 was a sign of the Congress’s commitment to such equality.⁴² An abstract notion of citizenship, with women as rights-bearing subjects, emerged as Indian women forged links with Irish and English suffragettes to claim a ‘universal sisterhood’ in a display of women as a nationalist collectivity.⁴³

But that moment of Indian sisterhood soon evaporated when the issue of separate electorates came up, since women were seen vis-à-vis the Muslim minority and the lower castes. The Lothian Committee in 1932 provided for a 2–10 per cent reservation of seats for women in provincial legislatures, and the Communal Award provided for divided electorates, threatening feminist political unity. In the demand for universal suffrage, women rallied behind the nationalist injunction (forcefully argued by Gandhi himself) to stay undivided: ‘fair field and no favours’ meant the right to vote without property and educational qualifications and the removal of sex disqualifications, but without reservations for women. By 1932, all those who had argued for separate electorates for women had to withdraw in favour of a broader ‘unanimity’ with male nationalists. Once more, the political and the social realms were divided. In making the practically impossible choice between the rights of women and the rights of minorities, the adoption of a ‘universality’ in fact cloaked the Hindu and upper-caste nature of this compromise.

This produced new cleavages within the women’s movement. The Congress and its supporters argued for nothing less than political representation based on universal adult franchise, rather than reserved seats. The AIWC focused on a political citizenship that remained blind to social difference.⁴⁴ Others, however, appeared to be willing to accept what was conceded if only in the

⁴² *Indian National Congress, 1930–34* (All India Congress Committee, Allahabad, n.d.).

⁴³ Sinha, *Spectres of Mother India*, pp. 141, 203. On the international fight for suffrage and political rights, see Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–1952* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Sumita Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Ian Christopher Fletcher, Philippa Levine and Laura E. Nym Mayhall (eds.), *Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race* (Routledge, 2001).

⁴⁴ Annie Devenish, *Debating Women’s Citizenship in India, 1930–1960* (Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 74ff.

short run. In 1931, the WIA, which had long associated itself closely with the Congress, considered the two women nominees to the First Round Table Conference, Radhabai Subbarayan and Begum Shah Nawaz, as traitors and displayed little interest in the memorandum that these women presented to the Franchise Sub-committee. In many ways, their memorandum echoed the views of the Simon Commission, with the additional plea that consideration be given to the reservation of seats for women, although not on a communal basis.

Bitter opposition to reservations was voiced by Congress women such as Sarojini Naidu, echoing the broader Congress opposition to the Muslim League's enthusiastic endorsement of separate electorates, reserved seats (especially in the short run) and separate constituencies. The WIA's hostility to the First Round Table Conference was transformed by the flurry of activity that followed Gandhi's volte-face and the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact which called off the Civil Disobedience movement. Eager not to miss any opportunities to press their case at the Second Round Table Conference, the WIA argued for a large female contingent, rather than just two or three women. The memorandum of the WIA 'emphasised the necessity of universal adult franchise and opposed the wifehood qualification' and concluded that the reservation of seats for women might be a 'transitional necessity'.⁴⁵ Yet the WIA was only one of three women's groups going to the conference. The AIWC and the NCWI, its other partners, retracted the statement on the necessity of reservation even in the short run, asserting that nothing less than universal adult franchise should be accepted.⁴⁶ Begum Shah Nawaz and Sarojini Naidu emphatically declared at the conference that 'to seek any form of preferential treatment would be to violate the integrity of the universal decision of Indian women for absolute equality of political status'.⁴⁷

This was clearly a victory for the nationalists led by the Congress on the contentious issue of separate electorates, which had been enthusiastically welcomed by the untouchables while the Congress remained implacably opposed. Thus, Muthulakshmi Reddy, who had earlier admitted that the reservation of seats for women was necessary in the short run,

⁴⁵ Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 206.

⁴⁶ *Stri Dharma*, 1932, pp. 241–42. The paper clearly said that it opposed property qualifications as undemocratic and literary qualifications and reservations of seats or nominations as 'humiliating and pernicious', and also expressed readiness to contest the elections on equal terms.

⁴⁷ Kumar, *The History of Doing*, p. 81.

now demanded 'enfranchising women and the depressed classes on equal terms with others'.⁴⁸

The WIA agenda did not entirely overlap with that of the AIWC, since it opposed the wifehood qualification and insisted only on the literacy qualification even in 1931. But the Lothian Committee, which was appointed in 1931 and began work in 1932, suggested using the criteria of property, education, wifehood and literacy to expand the number of women in the electorate. It suggested that 2–5 per cent of the seats in the provincial councils be reserved for at least 10 years.⁴⁹ In Bombay alone, this would enfranchise 14.3 per cent of the female population. As many as 50,000 women were entitled to vote on the property qualification in Bombay, 163,000 on the literacy qualification and an overwhelming 592,000 on just the wifehood qualification.

But the AIWC stood firmly against the reservation of seats for women: if compromises had to be made, it was preferable that franchise be restricted in the short run. Such opposition to reservations was clearly ignored in the Ramsay MacDonald Communal Award, which proposed 2.5 per cent of seats in provincial councils be reserved for women, although it distributed women's seats on a communal basis. The award had serious implications not only for women who were segregated from the general electorate, but particularly for Muslim women who were further segregated.⁵⁰ There were sustained protests against the award, but once more there was a lack of unanimity on opposition to the award, especially given the communalized political climate. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur demanded the removal of the wifehood qualification.⁵¹ The award was opposed by Radhabai Subbarayan, but Begum Shah Nawaz urged acceptance of it. However, all women's associations condemned it and were able to forge a united stand by 1933, when Hamid Ali, Muthulakshmi Reddy and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur submitted a joint memorandum before the Joint Select Committee opposing reserved seats and demanding joint elections and the abolition of the Communal Award.⁵² In an interview with the *Bombay Chronicle*, Hamid Ali said, 'We did not want to vote as property or properties of husbands,' and went on to say that if adult franchise for men and women was not immediately possible, the literacy test was all that was required.

⁴⁸ As cited in Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 208.

⁴⁹ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 56.

⁵⁰ Forbes, 'Votes for Women', p. 15.

⁵¹ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 57.

⁵² Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 212.

The report of the Joint Select Committee indicated that it not been influenced by the suggestions of the women's memorandum, since there were only a few marginal changes. In several provinces the wifehood qualification was dropped, and in some provinces the literacy provision was substituted for educational qualifications. With the Congress settling into a period of 'constructive work' after the second wave of the Civil Disobedience movement, there was a fresh round of discussions about the Government of India Bill of 1935, which would provide a new constitutional basis for India. The AIWC tried for one last time to insist on the removal of the wifehood qualification and move against the reservation of seats, threatening non-participation in talks. Yet it also revealed that it was willing to accept whatever concessions were made; the possibility of a truly desegregated electorate therefore once more receded from view.

Predictably, the Government of India Act of 1935 did not accept the principle of universal adult suffrage. The Indian Delimitation Committee, or the Hammond Committee, appointed thereafter showed that women and their demands were being marginalized. The committee toured the country and examined 331 witnesses of which 21 were women. Only one woman was co-opted to the committee, and that too for one day, to decide the issue of reserved seats.⁵³ Women's organizations nevertheless demanded (and got) two (non-Muslim) seats for Bombay, in addition to a Muslim seat, one each in Poona and Ahmedabad, and a rural seat in Ranebinnur.⁵⁴

There was considerable anger at the cavalier manner in which the Hammond Committee had ignored the plan devised by women's groups, which had suggested that women should stand for any constituency for which they were qualified. Should women not be returned at the head of the poll, the one who obtained the highest percentage of votes compared with the numbers of electors on the roll in the constituency should be declared elected until the special number of seats reserved for women had been filled. Colonial authorities were against special constituencies for women, since they were anxious to keep women focused on social reform issues and away from party politics. The Hammond Committee therefore rejected reservation of seats in multi-member constituencies, citing 'the very real difficulties which arise in Indian conditions for the presence of undesirable women at the polls'.

The Hammond Committee in fact reiterated a long-standing fear of nationalist patriarchy: the category of enfranchised women as it now stood

⁵³ Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 214.

⁵⁴ *Indian Social Reformer*, 14 March 1936.

left no room for distinctions which were increasingly being made between 'respectable' and 'disrespectable' women. Gandhi's ideal woman activist was one who renounced worldly pleasures in the cause of the nation; chastity 'in thought, word and deed was an essential pre-requisite for a woman satyagrahi'.⁵⁵ Even as early as 1932, women had reacted angrily to the statement of A. H. Ghaznavi who opposed the Lothian Committee report on the grounds that 'the huge illiterate female population of India is enfranchised at one stroke, and an enormous number of women of ill-fame—their number according to the latest census stands at 30,000 in Calcutta alone—is let loose on the unfortunate candidate'.⁵⁶ The *Indian Social Reformer* retorted that 'the 30,000 women of ill-fame represent at least 60,000 men who have brought on their ill-fame and the prospect of these men getting the vote is not disagreeable to Mr Ghaznavi'. The opposition was, however, not to the morality standard per se, but merely to the fact that it applied only to women. The double standard provoked some women to write in the *Indian Social Reformer*:

A more stupid argument we have seldom come across in a report with pretensions to be[ing] a State document.... The Committee has betrayed complete ignorance of the ramification of women's organisations in India during the last 10 or 12 years.⁵⁷

Government of India Act of 1935

Despite such vociferous criticism, and the demand for more equal treatment and better representation of urban and rural women, nearly all the reserved constituencies for women in 1935 were urban with the exception of Ranebinnur. Women's opinions were not reflected in the Hammond Committee report, which instead went out of its way to protect women candidates, choosing 'small and select' constituencies to prevent the hardships of canvassing.⁵⁸

Under the Government of India Act of 1935, male and female electorates expanded to 43 per cent and 9 per cent respectively, but women passed a resolution of disapproval even after it was passed. In the 1937 elections, the female turnout was quite high, although the AIWC lacked the resources for mass mobilization. A total of 56 women candidates entered legislatures,

⁵⁵ Kumar, *The History of Doing*, p. 85.

⁵⁶ *Stri Dharma*, August 1932, pp. 554–55.

⁵⁷ *Indian Social Reformer*, 14 March 1936.

⁵⁸ As cited in *Indian Social Reformer*, 2 March 1936.

41 on reserved seats, 10 unreserved and 5 nominated. The majority of these were members of the Congress,⁵⁹ so it was obvious that the real victory in the struggle for women's vote and their presence in the legislatures had been won by the Congress rather than by women per se. The new constitution under which elections were held in 1937 displayed little or no concern for the social or political status of women, reducing them to a mere token presence in the legislatures, equivalent to the presence of nominated women members in a princely state such as Mysore. The Congress won an overwhelming victory in 5 out of 11 provinces and near majority in Bombay, the United Provinces, Bihar, the Central Provinces, Orissa and Madras and, by 1938, was able to establish ministries in the Northwest Frontier Province and Assam as well, the latter through machinations and assembly manoeuvres.⁶⁰ Congresswomen weakly tried to insist before 1937 that enrolment for elections should be done on the basis of literacy qualifications rather than on the basis of wifehood, but by and large there was little enthusiasm for the enrolment campaign.

In any case, the enrolment strategies of the AIWC came to naught: the wifehood qualification was smuggled in, although in an entirely different form. In Bombay, for example, the three Congress nominees were wives of prominent Congressmen: Lilavathi (K. M.) Munshi, Annapurnabai (G. V.) Deshmukh and Hansa (Jivraj) Mehta. In fact, Deshmukh supported a bill to enlarge the wifehood and literacy qualifications.⁶¹ As Gail Pearson has shown, in Bombay the efforts of the AIWC and the WIA were trained on enrolling women as voters, regardless of the basis of that enrolment, and ensuring success for the Congress cause.

Recognizing that the struggle for votes and for entry to provincial legislatures had led to purely symbolic gains, the Standing Committee of the AIWC in 1936 resolved to agitate for franchise and representation of women in local bodies, saying: 'It is very paradoxical that although women have been accorded certain rights of voting and representation in regard to the central and provincial legislatures and municipalities, they were left out of participation in local bodies.'⁶² There were some successes in the municipalities, but the entire struggle for the vote for women in the period between 1917 and 1937 was marked by the efforts of Congress women to represent, or speak for, all of Indian womanhood, which produced its own problems. Would enlarging the

⁵⁹ Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, p. 138.

⁶⁰ S. Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 349–50.

⁶¹ Pearson, 'Reserved Seats', p. 217.

⁶² *Indian Social Reformer*, 15 August 1936.

number of women voters ensure a larger presence of women in legislatures? There was no necessary corollary between the politicization of women and the actual advancement of their cause, since the debate on women's issues remained largely confined to a framework determined by nationalism.

Although the demand of votes for women was made by women, it served colonial authorities to keep up an interest in the increased enfranchisement of women, in continuance of their role as 'protectors', and continued their search for the 'real' or 'women's women', often directly against the expressed wishes of women themselves on the question of reservations for women.⁶³ Virginia Dutoya has argued that the concessions included in the Government of India Act 1935—that enfranchised a greater number of women (to one-fifth of male voters) and even reserved 15 seats in the central legislature and 41 in provincial assemblies—were less of a feminist victory than a continuation of the colonial commitment to the 'protection' of women, as it now intersected with their interest in controlling the politics of representation.⁶⁴ Such an interpretation overlooks and also undermines the specific conjunctures at which a new political collectivity of women was enabled, albeit briefly, and the long and sustained struggles and debates by women themselves.

For instance, in 1946, Hansa Mehta, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and several other AIWC leaders compiled *The Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties* as a prescription for women's citizenship roles. The political was intertwined with social issues facing women, and the document included 'civics, education, experience, work, home-making, and duties to the state, among other topics'. While recommending work outside the home and equal access to education, women were exhorted 'to come forward to work for the national need', raising children, protecting morality and 'striv[ing] to the utmost for world peace'.⁶⁵ Citizenship was thus defined as duty to family, locality, nation and globe, although the link to social work was not lost sight of in the work of women like Kaur.⁶⁶ Her appointment as the health minister in post-independence India was attributed to this valuable experience.

Universal adult suffrage was finally granted by the constitution of independent India. The AIWC thereafter continued to focus its energies on

⁶³ A. Roy, "The Womanly Vote", p. 476.

⁶⁴ Dutoya, 'A Representative Claim Made in the Name of Women?' p. 44.

⁶⁵ Emily Rook-Koepsel, 'Constructing Women's Citizenship: The Local, National, and Global Civics Lessons of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur', *Journal of Women's History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015), pp. 154–75, esp. p. 157.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 158ff.

enrolling women voters. Nationalist women, who had proved their mettle through the anti-imperialist campaigns, were given absolute electoral equality in the new Indian constitution. However, the mere enfranchisement of women in India has translated neither into substantially more women legislators nor into a greater sensitivity about the gendered nature of law making. Even so, in the last Indian election of 2019, there were 78 women in the Lok Sabha (out of 527—that is, 14 per cent) and 24 women in the 224-seat Rajya Sabha (10 per cent).

Towards Reservation of Seats for Women

As we have seen, many anti-feminists attempted to characterize feminist demands as 'unrepresentative'—that is, educated women were incapable of representing the needs and demands of a largely rural, illiterate population. In 1925, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, a leading member of the WIA, had to argue against criticisms from several members of the legislative assembly that the WIA could not represent women: 'We know that the WIA far more represents the opinion of the women of India than does the Legislative Assembly.'⁶⁷ Even so, contemporary chroniclers of the AIWC have found it necessary to emphasize that 'the battle [for women's rights] in India initially was not so much against male domination as against the forces of superstition'.⁶⁸ This caution has in part been prompted by the repeated attempt of contemporary anti-feminism to discredit the demands of Indian feminists by characterizing them as derivative and western, especially when feminists have questioned communal identities which invariably subordinate women's rights.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the principle of universal adult franchise adopted in 1947 gave all adult women the vote on the same terms as men. The Constituent Assembly rejected reservations for women on the grounds that it would violate the principle of equality, with women members arguing that by the incremental process of democracy, women would find their place in representative politics.⁷⁰ The first two decades after Indian independence were a time of hope, with women participating largely in the task of 'nation-building' at a variety of

⁶⁷ *Stri Dharma*, May 1925, p. 39.

⁶⁸ Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Kumar, *The History of Doing*, esp. pp. 177–81.

⁷⁰ Nivedita Menon, 'Elusive Woman: Feminism and the Women's Reservation Bill', *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, nos. 43–44 (21 October–3 November 2000), pp. 3835–39 and 3,841–44, esp. p. 3835. See also Nivedita Menon, 'Reservations for Women: "Am I That Name?"', in *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, pp. 166–203 (Permanent Black, 2004).

levels, ranging from the revival of craft production to labour organization, education, refugee rehabilitation and social service more generally.⁷¹

However, the participation of women in the political process, whether in terms of voting, standing for elections or exerting an influence on the field of politics, has been far less encouraging. The Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1974 reported the low participation rate (and representation) of women in the legislatures and the parliament.⁷² The report recorded the wishes of those who were in favour of reservations for women, if only as a temporary measure, as well as ‘the strong opposition to the suggestion from all political parties and most women legislators’. The report also concluded that ‘we find ourselves unable to recommend a system of reservation to the State Assemblies and Parliament’.⁷³ In listing its reasons for adhering to an open competition between men and women in the political process, the report famously said: ‘Women are not a community, they are a category,’ and therefore there could ‘be no rational basis for reservation for women’.

It, however, recommended reservation for women to all local bodies, which parties and women legislators had also agreed to as a transitional measure.⁷⁴ However, in their ‘note of dissent’, Vina Mazumdar and Lotika Sarkar (members of the committee) reiterated that given the formidable challenges faced by women, and a gravely unequal system that discouraged women’s participation in politics, the reservation of seats for women was not only an imperative but also a democratic and inclusive protection.⁷⁵

Women gained the right to 33 per cent of seats in the urban and rural bodies, when the 73rd and 74th amendments were passed in 1993. This was part of the move to fulfil the constitutional commitment to building up Panchayati Raj institutions and decentralizing governance systems, but the question of caste was made starkly visible, especially as women representatives, some studies showed, were in fact buttressing the position of the upper castes. Also raised at this time was the figure of ‘proxy’ women, who in a system of rotating constituencies, were seen as mere placeholders for the men who were

⁷¹ An excellent exploration of the lost decades is in Anjali Bhardwaj Datta, Uditi Sen and Mytheli Sreenivas, ‘Introduction: A Country of Her Making’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 2, pp. 218–27, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2021.1899170 and, more generally, the individual articles contained in that special issue.

⁷² *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (Government of India, December 1974).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 355–57.

the actual wielders of political power, although studies did show that not all women were proxies nor were all proxies women.⁷⁶

The 81st amendment, or Women's Reservation Bill, first tabled in 1996, proposed 33 per cent reservation for women to legislatures and the parliament. It has been mired in controversy, with many arguments being made which echo the hostility towards women in the political process, despite the fact that there has been a relatively successful run of women in urban and rural local bodies, following the 73rd and 74th amendments.⁷⁷ Among those who blocked the legislation were those who saw the use of women's reservations as a move to checkmate the political rise of the Other Backward Classes. Caste-based opposition to the bill made for several compromises that were suggested, to accommodate caste along the lines of allocations in the local bodies. As Nivedita Menon has pointed out, feminists came to the recognition that "women" do not simply exist as a category that is available for feminist mobilisation' and that often the categories of 'Dalit', 'Muslim' or 'working class' may be recognized more frequently than 'women'.⁷⁸ Caste and its hierarchies also divided women.⁷⁹

Although the Women's Reservation Bill was passed in the Lok Sabha in 2010, it is yet to be passed by the Rajya Sabha. Viewing the success of women's political participation in purely 'quota' terms or in terms of electoral competitions and processes may also be misleading, since India has had a long tradition of female participation in struggles for social justice and change with far-reaching social, economic and political consequences. These struggles, even in the pre-independence period, were not always subsumed under the rubric of nationalist struggles, especially those that involved women peasants, workers and tribals. Women played crucial roles in the Tebhaga movement of 1946 in Bengal, the Telangana movement from 1946 to 1951 and the Warli movement in 1946. Their participation in movements for social

⁷⁶ Archana Ghosh and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, *Democratization in Progress: Women in Local Urban Politics* (Tulika Books, 2006); Mary E. John, 'Women in Power? Gender, Caste and the Politics of Local Urban Governance', *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 39 (29 September–5 October 2007), pp. 3986–93.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Janaki Nair, 'An Important Springboard', *Seminar* 457 (September 1997); M. John, 'Women in Power?'; Janaki Nair, *All in the Family? Gender Caste and Politics in an Indian Metropolis* (Sephis Publications, 2008).

⁷⁸ Menon, 'Elusive Woman?' p. 3839.

⁷⁹ Laura Dudley Jenkins outlines the recognition by women political leaders of these inequalities in 'Competing Inequalities: The Struggle over Reserved Legislative Seats for Women in India', *International Review of Social History* 44, supp. 7 (Complicating Categories: Gender, Class, Race and Ethnicity) (1999), pp. 53–75.

transformation also produced the spaces within which they began to articulate anti-patriarchal demands. Important instances of women's political initiative in the post-independence period, such as the Shahada movement and the Chipko movement of the 1970s and the anti-arack struggles of the 1990s have revealed the roots of this consciousness among women, which is quite distinct from the issues around which elite women were mobilized in the pre-independence period. Subaltern struggles occur alongside, and frequently in opposition to, the realm of parliamentary politics. The latter realm has often remained aloof from the democratic aspirations of the vast masses of peasant, tribal and working-class women. Charting the latter kind of political activism requires an enquiry into the structure and functioning of trade unions, women's mass front organizations, religious sects and *raitha sanghas* (farmers' organizations), which is beyond the scope of this book.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ For a good summary, however, see *National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988–2000*, the report of the core group set up by the Department of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India, 1988; see, especially, Chapter 7. See also Kumar, *A History of Doing*.