

Role of Women's Organisations in Women's Education in India, 1917–1947

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Abstract

It is the women's movement, which in itself is a social movement. The objective of the study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the activities of the Women's Organisations as well its educational activities. The idea is to note the educational contribution of the Women's Organisations. The research questions include how far the Indian Women's Organisations empowered women and how did the Indian Women's Organisations support women's education and the methodology is based on historical method which is based on researching documents, contemporary newspapers in the archives, and the libraries. The core findings reveal that women's organisations are no longer elitist. But, initially, they did focus on the upper caste or upper class women. In time, these organisations became non-communal. Over a period of time, these women's organisations became more multi-class. A group of professionals namely, doctors, teachers, academics and social workers actually laid the foundation of the women's education. Even post independence, women's education was about empowering the family not so much about the individual woman. The study captures the period between 1917 to 1947, which was about actually the period, when the Women's Indian Association was set up in 1917. There was also the 1947 period which is associated with the freedom of the nation. This period is a breaking point in History where women witnessed changes in their political rights through the right to vote and also set the ball moving towards the Hindu Code Bill which changed the social and economic rights of women. In the Indian context, women's movement has been classified into three phases. The first phase was related to the movement by social reformers. The second

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phase was carried forward by national leaders, like Gandhi. The third phase was after independence. It highlights that the women movement was not only lead by the nationalist leaders but also by the numerous women leaders like Muthulakshmi Reddi, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, etc. It also explores the legislative steps and efforts for women education in the stipulated period.

INTRODUCTION

Social movements like the women's movement in India were not unheard of. The Women's Movement in India was founded on social reforms of the nineteenth century. Women's issues formed the core of the women's movement in India. Finally, it was only by the twentieth century that social movements became the norm with the organised efforts of organisations like the Women's Indian Association and the All India Women's Conference, with the rise of democracies.

The women's organisations helped in furthering women's education. But, the education of women promoted by these organisations was highly traditional. The women's organisations supported the women's education within the family. The woman was reared in these organisations to be a better wife and a better mother. Moreover, educational reform was closely tied to political, legal and social reform even in the twentieth century. This is because women had to be freed in order to study. They had to be freed from the burden of early marriage, from the fetters of oppressive domestic life, from the evils of *Devadasi* system and immoral traffic of women and children. The women's movement

was organised primarily by the Women's Indian Association and All India Women's Conference. Although its foundations were laid by the social reformers in the nineteenth century, the nineteenth century has been described as the age of women. This is because women were the subject of much debate. Issues like Sati, Child Marriage, etc., were debated on. In fact there were social reformers who worked for the cause of women. One such man was Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833). He laboured to abolish Sati in 1829. He also addressed the question of women's rights and women's education (Jones 2003, p. 31). Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) also struggled to legalise widow remarriage in 1856. In addition, he opened forty schools for girls in villages from 1857 to 1858 (Sarkar 2007, p. 179). Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) established rescue homes for needy women. In her book *Stri Dharma Niti*, she provided guidance for women. She also attacked brahmanical ritualism. Even in her personal life, she married a Sudra, despite being a Brahmin (Kumar 1993, p. 26). M.G. Ranade (1842-1901) was a member of *Prarthana Samaj*. He established a Girls' High School in September

in 1882. In his personal life, he educated his wife, Ramabai Ranade. He furthermore struggled to raise the age of marriage (Chaudhuri 2011, p. 73). Ramabai Ranade (1862–1924) began the Seva Sadan in 1908 in Bombay. It centred on primary education and enabled women to become independent (Srivastava 2000, p. 123). Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890) too educated his own wife. He too set up girls' schools and a school for untouchables. He had compassion on women and the lower castes (Chaudhuri 2011, p. 43). Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910) wrote *Stri Purusha Tulana* in 1882. In this work, she questioned patriarchy and the notion of *pativrata* wherein the husbands were treated like Gods. Further, she observed that women had tolerated the wayward ways of men like alcoholism and adultery. She moreover, critiqued the lack of education among women, their seclusion, *purdah* and enforced widowhood (Shinde 2007, pp. 321–323). Behramji Malabari (1853–1912) was a strong advocate of the age of consent campaign 1890–91. He got support from the British public and media for this (Goodwin 2013, p. 12). Swarnakumari Debi (1856–1932) was the woman behind *Sakhi Samiti* of 1886. It worked specifically, for widows and self-reliance among women. She was also the first woman editor of *Bharati*, the women's journal (NCERT Training Material for Teacher Educators on Gender Equality and Empowerment 2013, p. 5). Rokeya Sakhawat

Hossein (1880–1932) wrote on women's emancipation in *Sultana's Dream*. She critiqued the seclusion of Muslim women and also worked for social reform like vocational training for women.

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

The Women's Indian Association was established in Adyar, Madras in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa. The organisation fought for women's right to vote and national freedom in India. The All Indian Women's Conference was set up in Poona, Maharashtra in 1927 by Margaret Cousins. The women's education was a central concern for this organisation. The other reforms initiated by this organisation were the Sarda Act of 1929 and the Hindu Code Bill of 1955. Moreover, the political reforms of the All India Women's Conference involved the right to enfranchise. Politics was viewed as constructive work (Chaudhuri 2011, p. 156).

Issues in Women's Organisation

The Women's Indian Association report of 1917–1967 looked at education being the top concern of women's organisations. The Women's Indian Association was in addition, interested in political reform, child welfare, moral and social hygiene. It worked for the removal of brothels and encouraged prison visits. Child Marriage and the *Devadasi* system were also abolished through the Women's Indian Association. The WIA

also opposed separate electorates and reservation of seats for women from 1932 to 1933 (WIA Report 1917-1967, pp. 1-8). As these organisations considered women as the equal to men. All India Women's Conference on the other hand, was concerned with the aspects like primary education, vocational education, child marriage, age of consent, purdah and position of teachers, etc. Women's literacy was an important concern. There was an attempt to raise the age of consent to 16 years by women such as Hansa Mehta in All India Women's Conference. According to Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray 2003, by 1927, the AIWC was concerned about educational, social and legal reform (Basu and Ray 2003, p. 26). Maitrayee Chaudhuri, 2011, has examined social reform in the context of Women's Indian Association, (WIA) and All India Women's Conference, (AIWC). Both these organisations were concerned about educational, legal and political reform. In addition, the Shah Bano Case is discussed. In 1985, alimony was granted to a Muslim woman, Shah Bano by the Supreme Court, despite being divorced (Chaudhuri 2011, p. 203).

Women's Education: It was the central concern of women's organisations. It therefore becomes crucial to study women's education in the pre Independence period and post Independence era, which is another theme. In the nineteenth century,

traditional roles were assigned to women. According to the Report on the Status of Women on Educational Development, 1974, there were few courses open to women. Concerning literacy, it was found that most women were striving for a living and hence, were uneducated. Education was crucial for personality development and productivity in society according to *The Report on Status of Women (Towards Equality Report 1974, p. 234)*. This involves giving people economic opportunities like employment. This is vital asset in our country because the programme involved feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and offering a shelter to the homeless. In addition, it also allowed girls to live a wholistic life, which involved a life of education. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein 2005, penned the feminist dream in the pre Independence era, in which women were at the helm of affairs. Ladyland was thus free of vices because of the rule of women. There were educational institutions in Ladyland. Women were considered more efficient because they did not waste time. There were girls' schools and separate universities for women in Ladyland. A new order where women were in-charge was the set up in Ladyland (Hossain 2005).

Karuna Chanana, 1994, has studied women's education in terms of the obstacles to it, in pre Independence era. These hurdles were no jobs for women, parental apathy and general prejudice. Apart

from this, according to Margaret Cousins, the purdah in the north and child marriage in the south were other such problems that hindered women's education (Chanana 1994, pp. 43–46). Karuna Chanana, 2002, again analysed the hindrances in women's education. These included lack of schools, absence of legal support, domestic chores, traditional mindsets, lack of financial help, purdah, etc. The sex segregation in schools were also blamed. Women's education was infested with different problems. Moreover, the women's movement was praised for releasing the funds for social, research and action. Policy on education should be founded on social reality according to Karuna Chanana.(Chanana, 2002). Gouri Srivastava, 2000, also points to the hurdles that stood in the way of women's education. These were customs like child marriage, purdah, widowhood. There were also the issues of female infanticide and Sati present in the nineteenth century. It was argued that education would lead to a neglect of household responsibilities. Hence, women were not encouraged to study. Also, the main agencies of women's education were Christian missionaries, men and women and the British government (Srivastava, 2000).

Post Independence period witnessed equality in education according to the Report on the Status of Women on Educational Development, 1974. Also, during this period, a common curriculum was suggested

as men and women were considered equals. This was particularly, true of Kerala which had a high literacy rate. By the nineteenth century, the curricula was differentiated because women were considered inferior to men. But, in the post Independence era, there was common curriculum that came up because men and women were considered equals. The report further recommended a common course upto the end of class ten (Towards Equality Report, 1974). However, Karuna Chanana, 2001, has argued that there was inequality in education and outside in it in the post Independence period. School and family bases of socialisation would lead to inequality. This would lead to economic discrimination of women in the workplace. This was also seen in universities and higher education. Men were leading these places because of traditional mindsets, discrimination, cut throat competition and absence of child care facilities. Social context therefore affected academic leadership (Chanana, 2001). According to this view, women are still being discriminated against in Education.

Ideology and Religion: There were other strands in women's movement. Gabriele Dietrich, 2008, observed that religion was not related to women's movement because of the secularisation. According to this view, women were to believe in their own potential not blindly follow after religion since Women's Movement

has an inherent secular nature. She also observed that women were rarely ever theologians (Dietrich 2008, p. 508). Tanika Sarkar 2008, talked about Hindu right in the politics of women's organisations. There was an egalitarian ideology prevalent here based on Brahmanical Patriarchy. Here, women were themselves blamed for rapes because they had moved away from tradition. Also, the media had corrupted the minds (Sarkar 2008, p. 528). Sylvia Vatuk, 2008 has discussed the Islamic Feminism. There were NGO's set up in the 1980's that addressed women's suffering concerning divorce and maintenance (Vatuk 2008, p. 498). Gail Omvedt 2004, put forth that women's liberation movement was having different political interests and groupings. There was no ideological consensus. There was an ongoing debate between Marxism and feminism. The two cannot be separated. For those outside, there was a debate whether women were being oppressed or did they hold a different position. There have been debates on various issues concerning women like dowry deaths, rape, wife battering, fight for equal wages, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism. All leftists and feminists supported the need for women's organisation. There was an on-going debate whether to have toiling or democratic women? (Omvedt 2004, p. 182).

Empowerment: Kamala Bhasin, 2008, has studied the empowerment and education of women also in the

context of India. Empowerment, further has been described as a multi-dimensional process. Education for women's empowerment involved questioning patriarchy. It was linked to a greater level of participation of women. Furthermore, it called for freedom of women. The process was about making women visible, appreciating their abilities, providing the right environment and access to resources, etc. (Bhasin, 2008). Narayan K. Banerjee, 2008, has discussed empowerment of women in the context of the third world countries. Here, the key features were poverty, lack of visibility of women, low literacy rate, strong patriarchal community values, etc. Supriya Kumari and Priyanka Kumari 2013, have explained empowerment as being self-efficient. There was need for empowerment concerning women. As one needed to improve education given to girls, bring about equality in curriculum, and provide a conducive environment for girls and remove stereotyping and exploitation of girls (Kumari and Kumari, 2013).

Although women form half the population, history has for long ignored women. It has kept women invisible from the terrain. It has not taken into account the sacrifices and 'contributions' of women. If at all the women's role was mentioned, it was coloured, full of prejudice. Also, very few women get noticed. There was a need to show that women played an equally important role in History (Krishnaraj, 2005). Hence, the role

of women's movement was crucial in relation to Women's Organisations in this regard.

The main objective of the study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the activities of two women's organisations, Women's Indian Association and All India Women's Conference. We will research how women's organisations contributed to women's education.

The study involved analysing the documents, contemporary news papers, in the archives and the libraries. The study was conducted at the National archives, NMML, CWDS archives and other libraries. The primary sources include the Private Papers of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya and S. Muthulakshmi Reddi and reports of the Women's Indian Association and All India Women's Conference and secondary sources and journals.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS: WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION AND ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

The setting up of the WIA and AIWC are important milestones. The WIA fought for right to vote. AIWC advocated for the Sharda Act 1930 and Hindu code Bill of 1955-56. The founder members of WIA in 1917 in Adyar were Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Annie Besant, and Margaret Cousins (Sharma 1981, p. 107) and Margaret Cousins, founded the AIWC in 1927 in Poona (NCERT Training Material for Teacher Educators on Gender Equality and Empowerment, 2013).

There were various conferences organised by the AIWC on the matter concerning women's education. These centred around separate schools and separate curriculum for girls. Primary education was made compulsory. Vocational education among girls was encouraged. Girls were motivated to take up teaching. The salaries of women teachers were upgraded. A separate educational fund was set up in 1928. The Lady Irwin College was founded in 1932. The Sarda Bill and Age of Consent Bill for restraining early marriage was taken up. Muslim girls were supported to emerge out of the Purdah. Adult education and birth control awareness were other important concerns. Children's Homes were established. The Madras Children's Act was passed with the help of Muthulakshmi Reddi (AIWC Souvenir, 1927-1970, p. 44). There were several important members of the AIWC like Margaret Cousins and Muthulakshmi Reddi.

Women Members of AIWC

Margaret Cousins was the founder member of WIA and the AIWC. She inspired women and introduced Child Welfare in Madras. A.L. Huidekoper was one of the initial members of AIWC. She wanted lessons on citizenship, aesthetics and domestic science for educating girls. She was committed towards women's education. She set up the Indore Girls' High School (AIWC Souvenir 1927-1970, p. 45). Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) served as the President for

both INC and AIWC. She participated in the political movement and the Women's Movement. She advocated for girls' education. She observed where men were not free, 'women were doubly enslaved' (Education of Women in Modern India 1946, pp. i-ii). Charulata Mukherjee worked for the prevention of immoral traffic of women and children in 1930, particularly in Bengal. She also set up a girl's school. She was the President of the Calcutta unit of AIWC until her death (AIWC Souvenir 1927-1970, p. 57). S. Muthulakshmi Reddi (1886-1968) was the leader and president of WIA and AIWC. She was first lady legislator in 1926. Prior to that in 1912, she became the first woman medical graduate according to the AIWC, Souvenir. She abolished the *Devadasi* system and suppressed the immoral traffic in women and children in 1930. S. Muthulakshmi Reddi addressed the sisters to get rid of lethargy in the interest of the suffering women and children and in the interests of the nation. It was blessed to give than to receive. She advised the educated sisters to look after the needy by using their 'knowledge and wealth.' She further argued that one should just not look after one's interests only but also the interests of others. One should keep the home environment clean and influence the poor to have healthy housing so that diseases like tuberculosis could be kept away. Apart from this, one should strive for better moral hygiene. She furthermore

discussed the importance of reforms and said if we keep quiet about reforms like better sanitation, better health laws, temperance reforms better education, factory legislation and legislation to suppress the immoral traffic in women and children, then how can we protect the women in various professions and bring about equality, for instance' equal wage' (Reddi Private Papers, p. 1129).

S. Muthulakshmi Reddi put forth that the main duty of a woman was service. As a member of the family and society, she had duties. But, most women were satisfied serving the family, few served the society and country. Take the instance of the Indian case. Firstly, a large numbers of widows and secondly, deserted women tried to get admission in women's institutions. One reason to be happy was the Hindu Code Bill which was changed by the legislature of Independent India to provide help to humanity and to free them from societal and legal problems. There was a third category of people, unmarried girls who were deprived of education and the right to marry because their parents could not pay for them. But, there were others who believed that marriage was the sole purpose of a woman's life and therefore, the woman was to get married and stay at home. This kind of advice was apt for those with a joyous home with a caring husband, stable income and wealthy parents. Most widows did not have a home or property, so much so that they were not invited

into homes by close relations. Nor was shelter given to them nor basic amenities. The widows needed to depend on the world outside. Those who were young and educated could be trained in women's institutions as professionals. But, the elderly widows were burdened with children. They had to be employed for menial jobs for a meagre amount. The menial help worked as a cook or family help. It was difficult to employ labour with children. This was where the women's institutions had given them aid. A number of widows worked as cooks or family helps in families. Reddi pointed out that it was the women who could help the needy. Women were considered powerful. They gave life to the child and educated it. They were more responsible for the growth of the child. So, the women must be knowledgeable and enlightened to be a good nurturer. The family too should be responsible for healthy housing, clean water, nutrition and hygiene (Reddi Private Papers, p. 1187). Reddi wanted a few educated women to pioneer the cause of the long-suffering women, Reddi cited from the works of the learned scholars to justify her position. Women were supposed to be problem solvers according to Vivekananda. Gandhi also supported equality of women. Bhartiya went ahead and advocated for the new age under women. It may be argued that Muthulakshmi Reddi felt that women had inherent virtue. Reddi was inspired by Sarojini Naidu. She quoted the work of Naidu to demonstrate that every woman

was the maker of the nation (Reddi Private Papers, p. 1193).

Reddi said that Sarojini Naidu wanted specialisation in productive work for nation development. Naidu pleaded the producers to take pride in their work and not a false sense of humility. Further, Naidu inspired workers to be bold and united in a spirit of love and service. In conclusion, humanity was symbolised by the Hindu Goddesses in order for women to be strong and virtuous (Reddi Private Papers, p. 1193). Muthulakshmi Reddi, a family woman, social worker and a renowned doctor; greatly inspired Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, who was a freedom fighter and a member of the Indian National Congress. Though Kamaladevi was younger than Reddi, Kamaladevi learnt valuable lessons from Reddi for the women's cause. Reddi became the spokesperson for the country rather than only women. At the second conference, the British agreed for three women representatives. Muthulakshmi Reddi had been chosen along with Begum Hamid Ali and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. These women asked for voting rights. They also supported the idea of joint electorates and did not want any reservation for women. This was supported by the British press. Muthulakshmi Reddi had come to talk of what they wanted, rather than hear from the Committee nor from the British people. Reddi said that women needed equal rights to carry out their normal duties. Reddi had a brief and fruitful time as a legislator. She established

the Children's hospital, supervised medical needs in schools, apart from overseeing the health of women in addition to child welfare units. She also introduced home science courses. Further, abolished the *Devadasi* system and brought about the suppression of traffic in women and children by the act on Brothels. She was also admired for being the 'Deputy Chairman of Legislative Council' cum 'the First legislator'. She created a good impression of Indian women. At the first Conference, she spoke about citizenship. She moreover, educated foreigners about India and removed the misconceptions. She worked on the *Avvai* home, the first Cancer Institute and was a humanist (Chattopadhyaya Private Papers, 1986, p. 4).

Rameshwari Nehru (1886–1966) was the founder and President of the Delhi unit of AIWC in 1926. She worked for removal of child marriage, caste issues and spread of education. She worked for the Swadeshi Movement, Freedom Movement and was jailed in 1942. She got the Padma Bhushan in 1955 for her services (AIWC Souvenir, 1927–1970, p. 53). Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur (1889–1964) argued for primary, universal and free and compulsory education. She also advocated for adult and mass education. She wanted co-education but supported for Domestic Science for girls. She wanted the educated women to help the marginalised women. (Kaur 1946, p. 90). Sushama Sen (1889–?) was engaged in the women's movement in Bihar in 1916. She was a keen writer, connected with

the Lady Irwin College (AIWC Souvenir 1927–1970, p. 62). Hannah Sen (1894–1957) was an active member of AIWC. She set up the Education Fund (AIWC Souvenir, 1927–1970, p. 56). Hansa Mehta (1897–1995), participated in the first AIWC in Poona in 1927. She condemned child marriages for they interfered with education (Ramji 1977, p. 96). Vijay Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990) participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement. She was politically and socially active (AIWC Souvenir 1927–1970, p. 66).

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (1903–1988) was the founder member of AIWC in 1927 and its President in 1934 (AIWC Souvenir, 1927–1970, p. 67). She joined active politics in 1922. She became a part of Congress in 1922. She also contested elections for the 'legislative assembly' in Madras in 1926. She was a part of the Civil Disobedience of 1930. She actively participated in meetings, prepared salt and picketed 'foreign cloth and liquor shops.' She broke the salt law in Bombay. In addition, she was planning to raid the salt fields'. However, she was arrested. During her trial, she asked the magistrate to leave his workplace and participate in the 'satyagraha.' This incident led to her subsequent imprisonment and fine (Kumar 2016, p. 57). She wrote on the Women's Movement in India. She defined it as based on gender with an economic base arranged around society. She commented on the Child Marriage Bill. It proposed to raise the age of marriage for girls to 14 years and for boys 18 years. But, the bill

lacked 'public' and 'state support'. The lower strata of women were victims of prostitution. In Russia, this above evil of prostitution was tackled by successfully employing all workers including potential prostitutes (Chattopadhyaya 1939, p. 2, 5). She was one of the founders of the A.I.W.C. She became its President in 1934. She travelled in India, braving prejudice against women.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya wrote an article on education called 'Education: new patterns and vistas' (Chattopadhyaya, 1978). It said that there was discontentment with education. This encouraged experiments by social thinkers in formal and non-formal education. One such entity was Ivan Illich. He was a crusader against 'committed education.' He positively worked on 'adult non-formal education.' Adult education should be 'analytical and dialectic'. This would ensure freedom. Ivan Illich's 'motto' was non-preaching of 'ideas and ideologies'. Kamaladevi analysed an institute in Mexico in Curnavaca. Here, the study was through arts and crafts and 'fieldtrips.' The emphasis here was on 'mastery' of speaking skills based on 'Spanish experience'. The centre was thus a 'community' of education. It consisted of 'classrooms, library, craft-studios and two gardens.' Reading was less important than 'hearing and speaking'. In addition, students were exposed to a wide variety of experiences. As far as India was concerned, the problem in the

context of education was 'securing' employment opportunities. What was therefore needed was 'creativity and innovation.' In reality, the true goal of education has to be understood as 'personality development.' The present system of education has been pushing the young in losing interest in one's cultural heritage. We have become modernised at the cost of our cultural heritage (Chattopadhyaya, 1978, p. 1).

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya also wrote on women's status. She argued that there were two factors that stop the progress of women. Psychological factor that created a continual sense of 'subordination.' The other factor was a lack of women's movement. The professional women got divorced from the 'non-professional' housewives. They started pursuing 'sectional interests' and as a result the larger 'humanity' of women got left out. She also recognised that there was a huge rural and urban divide. Moreover, the leadership had failed as the women had 'stagnated and retreated.' She also identified problems of women like problem of wages (Chattopadhyaya Private Papers, 1923-1988, p. 1). Women according to her were becoming less and less important. She compared the present generation of women with the past generation of women and found the present generation of women complacent. These women of the present lacked a spirit of service, despite pursuing professional careers. She appreciated the work of people like Ramabai Ranade of Maharashtra among others (Chattopadhyaya Private

Papers 1923–1988, p. 2). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya also spoke for those who were deprived of fundamental rights (Chattopadhyaya Private Papers 1923–1988, p. 3). Further, she admired the work of Gandhi in helping women in various fields (Chattopadhyaya Private Papers, 1963, p. 53). She also observed that the British period witnessed the low position given to women. But, deliverance came through Gandhi (Chattopadhyaya Private Papers, 1923–1988, p. 2). She also talked about family planning. She believed people should be advised to have small families. In addition, she advocated for contraceptions rather than sterilisations (Chattopadhyaya Private Papers, 1963, p. 3). Renuka Ray (1904–1997) was attached to the Indian Women's Movement and wrote on Hindu Code Bill. The latter brought about gender equality according to her.

REFORM BY WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

***Devadasi* Reform and Ending of the Immoral Traffic in Women and Children**

Muthulakshmi Reddi was closely linked to the abolition of the *Devadasi* System. She was a member of the WIA and AIWC. In 1926–1927, the Hindu Religious Endowment Act was brought about by Reddi. This act wanted to do away with the services. It wished to protect the minor girls of the community. But, the bill was opposed on the grounds that the *Devadasi* system was part of the national culture as discussed by

Satyamurthy. Moreover, it was not equated with prostitution. But, the reformers believed in marriage replacing temple dedication. Varalakshamma considered them an oppressed class in need of favourable jobs.

Let us examine the Debate concerning the *Devadasi* Reform. The Liberal Rationalist discourse saw the *Devadasi* as a blot on the modernising nation. The Abolitionist perspective gave the practice a filthy hue. The Dalit view talked about denial of respectability to labour. The Rural Development discourse highlighted the poverty and abuse related to the practice (Tambe, 2016, p. 169). S. Muthulakshmi Reddi had argued that initially the *Devadasi* system was moral. But, it became corrupt. Hence, she wanted to redeem the lives of these girls from immorality.

She furthermore, compared Sati with the *Devadasi* system and found the *Devadasi* system worse because it inflicted physical and moral torture. Lala Lajpat Rai, Carmichael and Sarojini Naidu critiqued it. In addition, Reddi put forth that the above practice of *Devadasi* system led to venereal diseases. The *Devadasi* System according to Muthulakshmi Reddi was not intentionally immoral. But, she wanted to abolish the system for the sake of social purity, moral hygiene, public health and good virtue. The *Devadasi* Bill was a child saving measure. But, the problems were created by vested interests (Reddi Private Papers, p. 55).

The *Devadasi* was married to the Hindu God in a ceremony. She received an income for her ritual and artistic services. She maintained sexual relations with the elite male patrons.

As the *Devadasi* system became equated with prostitution in the colonial times. It was observed that in India, children fell prey to prostitution compared to the West, where adults took to prostitution. There were rescue homes for the *Devadasis*. But, Davesh Soneji has pointed that the outlawing of the system led to the impoverishment of the *Devadasi* system. Some *Devadasi* even became beggars (Soneji, 2004, p. 43).

In 1930, Reddi brought about the end of the *Devadasi* System. In 1906–07, the government had tried to end the Immoral traffic of women and children. A bill by 1926 examined the conditions of brothels in Madras city. Reddi too helped in passing the Brothel Act in 1930 that shut brothels, punished the keepers and saved minor girls from prostitution. The bill was passed on 31 January, 1930. But, there was need for rescue workers (Reddi Private Papers, p. 1041).

Women's Education-Reddi admitted that it was backward. She wanted to encourage girl's education through incentives given to women teachers, vocational training, scholarships to women, hostels, etc. But, there was a demand for education for girls. The right type of education would bring about national progress according to her (Reddi 1929, p. 101).

Legal Reform

The women's organisations supported a petition for prevention of child marriage, in the wake of Phulamani's death. An 11 year old who was raped and died during intercourse (1889). It was argued that early marriage led to poor female health, unhealthy children and lack of education. M.G. Ranade pointed out that early marriage degraded the race, led to poverty and early widowhood. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur also stated that no girl should be married before 22 years. A committee was formed which passed the Age of Consent Bill (1891). It forbade cohabitation before 12 years of age for the wife. Next, the Sarda Act 1929 further raised the age of marriage (Kalaivani, 2015, p. 15). The AIWC session in Poona demanded the age of consent to be raised to 16 years (Basu and Ray, 2003 p. 56). Even previously the AIWC worked for the removal of child marriage.

So the age of marriage for girls was 14 years and for boys 18 years. The law fined a sum of Rs.1000 and adults would be jailed if the girl was below 14 years. The rationale was to hinder child widowhood. Sarda Act discouraged child marriages according to S.N. Agarwala (Agarwala, 1957, p. 101).

S.M. Reddi who called the Act a failure as the prosecution could be done after child marriage. Also, Kalaivani has put forth its implementation remained a problem. Moreover, the act was unknown in villages. The Bhala newspaper reported that the government was meddling with the

people's religion (Hatekar, Mathur and Rege, 2007, p. 145). However, the Muslims of India wanted exemption from the act. But, AIWC wanted all the communities to obey the act.

Before the Hindu Code Bill the Hindu widow had no share in the husband's property. Women were reduced to slaves. Also, polygamy caused population explosion. The Hindu Code Bill gave equality to women according to S.M. Reddi. It allowed women to divorce and polygamy was penalised. It gave women the absolute right to inheritance of property. H.N. Sharda argued that until daughters could inherit property Hindus would remain a subject people. Gail Omvedt said that for Ambedkar the bill marked the freedom for women. But for AIWC it meant a political move (Pardeshi 1998, p. 41). Roshni the journal of AIWC called for Hindu Code Bill's equal rights in inheritance and marriage. It was argued by women's organisations that 'gender equality in Hindu law' was crucial to national progress (Chaudhuri 2011, p. 191).

The bill was hotly debated in 1943-44, 1949 and 1951 on grounds of divorce. Nehru supported divorce on the grounds that he did not believe in unhappy marriages. It was the victory of symbol over substance according to Reba Som, as the condition of women remained poor. Renuka Ray argued that the opposers of the Bill were against the Spirit of the Constitution based on Equality. She argued that the Hindu Code Bill was a symbol of progress. Maitrayee Chaudhuri has

called it a step towards secularism and women.

POLITICAL REFORM

In 1917, a deputation was sent to the Viceroy and Secretary of State for voting rights of women. The local branches of WIA organised meetings and sent suggestions to London. But the pleadings fell on deaf ears (Basu and Ray 2003, p. 70). Southborough Franchise Committee 1918-1919, said No to extension to voting rights to women because India was too conservative, seeped with purdah and lack of education. In 1919, the demand was once again made with a delegation of Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant and others. Madras gave voting rights in 1920. Bombay did so in 1921. Meanwhile, the government chose Muthulakshmi Reddi to the legislative council in 1927 in Madras, this was supported by everyone (Basu and Ray 2003, p. 70).

When Simon Commission 1928, came, enfranchisement was granted on the basis of property and literacy. The AIWC in 1931 asked for votes for women. This included universal adult franchise, no reservation etc. Lothian Committee 1932 denied Universal Adult Franchise because of the size of the country, population and illiteracy. In 1932, there was the reservation of seats for the Muslims and Dalits. These women's organisations asked for Universal Adult Franchise, protesting against separate electorates and reservation of seats for women. In 1933, the Joint

Parliamentary Committee ruled out universal adult franchise.

But, the JPC increased the right to vote among women. This privilege was available to wives, literate women and wives of initiatory officers. In 1947 Universal Adult Franchise was given. The AIWC tried to enrol all women voters. But their political participation had been a concern (Basu and Ray, 2003, p. 73).

But, women were part of social welfare and revolutionary politics. They endured police repression, imprisonment and capital punishment. Furthermore they argued that women shifted from supportive role to direct confrontational role. These women were from urban educated families (Thanikodi and Sugirtha, 2007, p. 600).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Findings and Summary

The women's movement in India can be categorised into four phases. Phase one was pioneered by social reformers. Phase two was led by the national leaders of India, namely Gandhi. Phase three was spearheaded after independence. This phase witnessed the 'politicisation' of the women's movement because women got the right to vote. Phase four started in mid-1970 (Saxena, 1994, p.395). Our study focusses on the period from 1917 to 1947, which roughly, covers the first two phases and touches upon phase three of the women's movement in India. During the early phase of the movement,

the Indian social reformers improved the condition of women and helped in educational reform. During this phase Sati was abolished in 1829, and widow remarriage was legalised in 1856, which encouraged education of women. The main reformers were Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Pandita Ramabai among others. The next important development was the setting up of women's organisations namely, the Women's Indian Association in Madras in 1917 and the All India Women's Conference in Pune in 1927. These organisations worked for ending the *Devadasi* vice and immoral traffic of women and children. One woman who worked in this direction was Muthulakshmi Reddi. She was part of WIA and AIWC. Politically, there were also demands made by these organisations, which culminated into the Universal Adult Franchise. Legally too, the demands were for the Hindu Code Bill, 1955–56 and Sarda Act, 1929 which tried to improve the lot of women. The Hindu Code Bill which was initiated in the 1940s, granted women the right to divorce and the right to inheritance of property, apart from abolishing polygamy. The Sarda Act 1929 discouraged child marriage. Therefore, the Indian women's movement was successful to the extent it questioned inequalities of caste, class and gender. It was non-communal. But definitely, had an upper class or caste bias and was urbanised. It has often been accused

of being un-Indian and westernised. As far as education in the nineteenth century is concerned, it aimed at making better wives and mothers. Even in the post Independence period, education was directed towards enhancing the status of the woman within the family (Tapan, 2000, p. 125).

The Indian Women's Movement had two main strategies, first conscious raising and second engaging with law. The first strategy involved 'a group of women for women, by women and of women.' The second strategy held the state responsible for the Indian Women's Movement. For instance, the state legislation on Sati (Chari 2009, p. 56). It has also been observed that the nineteenth century dealt with the question of women. Education at this time lacked a gendered perspective. Education for the woman was about being a better wife and a mother (Chari, 2009, p. 50).

Vina Mazumdar has commented on pre Independence research being full of women's problems. This was apparently done to justify social reform and to create a sense of pride in one's culture. So, sadly much of the research was centred around upper class women (Mazumdar, 1994, p. 42). Although, today the women's movement is 'no longer from the top percolating downward' (Mazumdar, 1994, p. 53). The women's organisations called for free, universal and compulsory education from the start (Kaur, 1946, p. 62).

RELEVANCE OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS TODAY

With the work of the social reformers, the notion of the new woman emerged. This was echoed in the formation of women's organisations in India. In the pre Independence period, these organisations gave a voice to women by bringing the Sarada Act in the late 1920's that raised the marriageable age of women. Finally, these organisations also ended the *Devadasi* System and ushered in the Brothel Act in the 1930s. These organisations helped not only in the pre Independence period, but also in the post Independence period. In the post Independence period, these women's organisations enabled women to get voting rights for themselves, by 1947. The Hindu Code Bill of the 1950s was also supported by these organisations for allowing women to divorce, questioning polygamy in society and by permitting inheritance of property for women. These organisations continue to exist for the welfare of women. These organisations help women's education, apart from rescuing women from violence and deplorable conditions like rapes and dowries. They provide relief to women through vocational work and hostels and short stay facilities. They bring about a change in the country by empowering women. As when a woman is well-educated the entire family is in progress, this affects the fortunes of the nations as well. So, education remains the primary work of these organisations.

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