



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU UPTO 1926

KEY WORDS: The South Borough Commission- 1918, The Reform Act of 1921, The Simon Commission- 1927

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the Political empowerment of women in Tamil Nadu upto 1926. Political status of women can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in sharing of power and in the value given by society to the role of women. Women's political background shows that they are far away from the equal status along with men. Equal status is not enjoyed by women and men anywhere in this world and there is difference in the opportunities available for them. In the power hierarchy, women remain at the lowest level and are powerless which is due to their illiteracy, lack of awareness, lack of information and knowledge about markets and skills.

Introduction :

During the early Vedic period, women were educated, civilized, enjoyed equal rights to men and they had high status in the society.¹ Without women's political empowerment and active political participation in decision making processes, women's life-situation cannot be altered². The two major forces which acted as catalyts in the achievements of political equality of women were the national movement and the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi³.

But this high status of women started to deteriorate with the advent of the sutra period (600-300 B.C)⁴. During the Sangam age, the women of Tamil Nadu were treated well and they enjoyed high status in the society. Tolkappiyam clearly tells the status of women during the Sangam period. The status of women under the Pallavas, imperial Cholas and pandyas was high but the education imparted to women was different when it is compared to men.⁵

During the Vijayanagar period, the position of women was good and they occupied an honourable place in the society. Some women under Vijayanagar Empire were highly educated and were good poetes's.⁶ During the Modern period, the national movement gave an opportunity for women to participate in the political activities of the country. During this period both the men and women participated in the national movement and their unity and sacrifice paved way for the success of national movement and success of women in political movement. This laid the foundation for the political awareness among women and this served as a natural cause for women to start women's movement which aimed at equal rights for both men and women. Political participation is closely related to the women's franchise and the right to vote enjoyed by the women helps in determining the degree of women's political participation as well as in decision-making.⁷

In the year 1801 Madras Presidency was formed and the English East India Company started to rule over Tamil Nadu. The rule of East India Company came to end in the year 1858 by the Government of India Act. The various revolutions and wars which took place in the different parts of the world like the French revolution, the Russo-Japanese war, the socialist preaching of the Marxists and its impacts helped the Tamil people to protest against the British domination in Tamil Nadu.⁸ The period from 1857-1947 was called as the era of empowerment of women. During this period many women forgot their homes and worked for national struggle. This experience helped the Tamil women enter in to the political field and gave them more confidence and strength.⁹

Women's political demonstrations in Tamil Nadu were less dramatic than those in either Bombay or Bengal. Women picketed and marched in processions but it was always difficult to mobilize large number of women for action. Support for the swadeshi pledge and for spinning, wearing, and selling khaddar could be mustered, but there were no dramatic demonstrations of the kind found in Calcutta and Bombay. Madras women never joined the revolutionary movement, nor were they subjects of extreme police violence.¹⁰ Participation in the political process provides an opportunity to the women to make the political system to reflect

their aspirations and ambitions and at the same time lends legitimacy to the system which is the hallmark of democracy.¹¹

Before Independence, there were few women rulers, administrators and warriors. Occasionally women were appointed regents when the ruler was a minor. The advent of Gandhi gave a boost to the life of women which was awakened by foreign administration and socio- political situations. He encouraged women to take part in the National, Political and Social movements of the nation. According to him, "freedom struggle was a struggle for the country's freedom as well as the freedom of women" and he worked for both. From the beginning of his political activities, he associated himself with women's cause and sought their help when necessary.¹²

The early twentieth century saw the birth of women's organizations and the beginnings of the demand for political rights. The women's Indian Association was started in Madras in 1917. The main motive of this association was the upliftment of women and the achievement of social equality. Women were glad since the association gave them the opportunity of meeting together in their free afternoon hours for mutual help. In 1917, a deputation of Indian women led by Sarojini Naidu presented to the British Parliament a demand for the enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men.¹³ The women in Madras presidency organized the young people which were named the Vaanar Sena.¹⁴ This organization sowed the seeds of patriotism in the minds of girls and boys.

Margaret Cousins, an Irish lady took important steps towards the upliftment of women in Madras Presidency. She wrote to Prof. D.K. Karve at Poona enquiring about the possibility of a deputation to wait upon the Secretary of State and Viceroy. Accordingly, a deputation under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu met E.S. Montague, the Secretary of State of India and Lord. Chelmsford, the Governor General and Viceroy of India in Madras on 18 December 1917. The main demand was the right of women for vote.¹⁵

The Congress supported their demand by passing a resolution at the Calcutta session under the president ship of Annie Besant. The Bombay special Session of the Congress and the Delhi Session of the National Congress supported the cause. The Muslim League also supported Women's enfranchisement in September 1918. The Thirty-Third Session of the Indian National Congress met in Delhi in December of 1918.¹⁶ Saraladevi Chaudhurani presented the resolution supporting the vote for women. She also told her audience that women had as much right to chart their own destinies as men for this was the age of human rights, justice, freedom and self-determination.¹⁷

The South Borough Commission- 1918

The British Government appointed the South Borough Committee to examine the question of franchise. There was only one Indian in the committee. He was Sir. C. Sankaran Nair. He was a staunch supporter of women's political rights. The committee came to India in 1918. The members of Women's Indian Association, many

eminent women and social workers urged the committee to grant the women the right to Vote. But the committee rejected it. The observation of the committee was as follows: We are satisfied that the social conditions of India make it primitive to extend the franchise to Indian women at this juncture, when so large a portion of male electors require education in the use of a responsible vote. Further, on economic and social basis some consideration had been given which was also beneficial to men. So female suffrage would hardly be a reality.¹⁸ According to the Government of India Act 1919 the women got voting rights and they had no right to contest in the election.¹⁹

The Reform Act of 1921

The Reform Act of 1921 extended the franchise only to wives who had property and education. Gandhiji believed that women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society, and that the recognition of their equality was an essential step to bring about social justice. He had also extended his continued and unqualified support to the enfranchisement of women. This, added to the massive participation by the women in the freedom movement, had a direct impact on the

political and social elite, including women of these classes. As per the Census report, the total population in 1926 was 42,794,155 and men and women population were 21,100,158 and 21,693,997 respectively. In 1926 Election, the total number of voters were 1,377,466, which was only 32 per cent of total population. Out of that, male voters were 1,260,944 (91.54 percent of the total voters) and female voters were 116,522, its only 8.46 per cent of total voters. But only 20,410 women used their franchise. It shows the less education and less awareness of the women voters in the society.²⁰

The Simon Commission- 1927

In the year 1927 Simon Commission was appointed by the British Government in order to report to the government about the working of the reforms of 1919. The commission recommended that the wives of men who possessed the property qualification should be registered as voters. This commission also proposed that women over 21 years of age who had the educational qualification also be enfranchised in their own right.²¹

On 25 December 1927, a resolution was passed as "The Women's Day" Madras. In that, women demanded the provincial governments, municipal councils and local boards to reserve a proportionate number of nominated seats for women the preference of electing their representatives to be nominated by the government, and ask that at least two women should be nominated in each assembly.²² In 1929 all the provincial legislatures had given the women the right to vote on the same terms as men.²³

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