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**WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE ARCHIVE OF THE
ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE**

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Women's Rights and the Archive of the All India Women's Conference

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Abstract – The nineteenth century socio- religious reform movement in India produced long term results in terms of opening up more avenues for greater women role and in shaping the anti-colonial stance of the next century. In the first half of the twentieth century the imperial rule was being challenged and was ultimately thrown out of India. The sparks of protest generated in the beginning of the twentieth century had attained huge proportions in fifty years leading to the smoldering of the Indian national movement against colonial domination. The role of women during these eventful years was not to be belittled although it has not received the importance that is its due. In the male dominated political scenario a few women emerged as shooting stars and made a place for women and their problems in a largely nationalistic scenario. These were the pallbearers of future women's movements, like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Muthulaxmi Reddy, H.A. Tata, Hansa Mehta, Rani Laxmibai Rajwade, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Aruna Asaf Ali, to name a few who became dominant players and this is no mean achievement.

However the prominence of a few well-known figures is a poor index of judgment to show the extent to which even the common women were involved in transcending the barriers to lift the self from the downtrodden state to which posterity had pushed them into. In this context it would be apt to highlight the fact that this was the period when women's organizations came up and gave a collective voice to the womenfolk of India. This paper tries to bring out the role of the All India Women's Conference established in 1927 and registered in 1930, in helping women to raise themselves from a position of neglect and disrepute to which history had relegated them.

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THE ORIGIN

The Indian National Movement saw a steep rise in the incidence of women's participation especially in the early years of the 20th century.[1] This was a period marked by an overall increase in organized efforts, of not only men but also of women of all castes, classes, and spheres, to fight British imperialism. The Women's Question took center stage at this juncture and historians have even pointed to a nationalist resolution of the question, although this is still a point of contention. It was in such a scenario that the women became more organized in India and new women's organizations were shaped. One of the more active of these was the All India Women's Conference (henceforth AIWC) founded in 1927. The AIWC began as an organization for the promotion and welfare of women. Indeed the chief aim of the organization was not political but educational, as is evident from its original title, namely, the 'All India Women's Conference on Educational Reforms'.[2] This paper traces the growth of women's rights in the first half of the 20th century under the aegis of the AIWC which grew by leaps and bounds and soon assumed the leadership of the women's movement which was in its germinal stage.

Here an attempt is made to explore the relationship of nationalism and gender in the backdrop of the contribution of the AIWC. The fact that the constitution of AIWC specified education and social welfare as its chief aims goes a long way to explain its relationship with nationalist forces, a subject which has long been the bone of contention amongst scholars. The roles of Irish women like Margaret Cousins, Annie Besant and Mrs. Jan Huidekoper, amongst others, were important. Working alongside their Indian counterparts, they brought a fresh perspective through their experiences of a different country. Thus in the male dominated political situation marked by the Indian National Movement, a few women emerged as shooting stars and helped make a place for women and their problems.

The AIWC was founded in 1927 with the purpose of working to uplift and improve the condition of women and children and to work for a society based on the principals of justice, personal integrity and equal rights and opportunities for all. In 1930 it was registered under the Societies Registration Act, XXI of 1860[3]. While continuing its original mission the AIWC has diversified into various social and economic activities involving women. Today there are more than 1 lakh members in over 500 branches and

AIWC is recognized worldwide as a premier organization working for women's development and empowerment.

The Constitution of the AIWC, (in Article II on policy) aims and objects states that:

1. "The Conference shall not engage in party politics but unite on such points as affect women and children.
2. The objects of the Conference shall be:
 - (a) To promote in India the education of both sexes at all stages.
 - (b) To deal with all questions affecting the welfare of women and children." [4]

An important element of the AIWC was its Constituent Conferences. It was laid down that, "A Constituent Conference is a public meeting of women in a Constituent Area from which delegates are elected to represent that Area at the All India Women's Conference. Each Constituent Conference has power to frame and amend its own bye-laws in conformity with the Articles and Bye- Laws of the Conference and to regulate among other matters the election of delegates, and of local committees, and the holding of sub- Constituent Conferences. Such bye-laws and regulations shall be subject to the approval of the Standing Committee." [5] The various Constituent Conferences are what are called the branches now.

That the emphasis was on education and social welfare since its inception is clear from the fact that in the constitution itself there is a mention of these subjects repeatedly and reporting of such matters is stressed more than ones. For instance it is laid down in clause 19 of the Bye- Laws and Regulations of the Conference that immediately after the annual Conference is held "The Local Committee of each Constituent Area shall send as soon as possible a report to the Organizing Secretary, giving an account of the educational and social institutions and the educational and social conditions of the women and girls within its Area, and shall keep this information up to date by further reports from time to time." Clause 20 says that "the Reports thus received by the Organising Secretary shall be kept to form the nucleus of a Reference Library." [6]

Originally, (in the rough draft) the AIWC was conceived of as the 'All India Women's Conference on Educational Reforms'. [7] The first and historic All India Women's Conference on Educational Reform was held at Poona from 5 to 8 January 1927. It brought together women from different parts of India and from all castes and communities. This conference had been the result of work that had been going on for some time and was inspired by a speech of the director of Public Instruction of Bengal; Mr. E.F. Oaten in 1926 in Bethune College, Calcutta where he urged women to

put forward their views and demands regarding the kind of education they wanted. "...We must have the cooperation of women to help us remedy what is wrong in women's education. I would urge that women, who alone can help us adequately, should tell us with one voice what they want and keep on telling us till they get it." [8]

Mrs. Margaret Cousins, secretary of the Women's India Association which was founded to encourage the suffragist movement, formulated a scheme for collecting women from all parts of India as representatives of preliminary local conferences whose objective would be to prepare a memorandum on educational reforms. She felt that the problems related to girl's education were different in different regions and localities and that's why it was necessary to hold women's conferences on educational reforms in each province and district. This would help in the formulation of local solutions and would ultimately lead to a national perspective. Cousins visualized that, "The local conferences should be called and held before the end of October 1926. From each of these conferences, representatives should be elected, who would attend an all India conference which may take place at Poona at the end of December 1926 or in the first week of January 1927. This conference of representatives consisting probably of not more than 40 to 50 women would have the duty of synthesizing from the proceedings of the preliminary constituent conferences, an authoritative and representative memorandum by women on educational reform which would be published widely and sent to all Indian educational authorities." [9]

In one of the preliminary conferences held at the SNDT Women's University in Bombay, Cousins met the delegates who had come from different parts of India and it was decided to hold the all- India conference in Pune since it was a city connected with experiments in women's education. Women's associations from all over India held meetings and sent in their proposals and schemes. Twenty one constituent conferences were held before the main AIWC meeting to be held in 1927. About 7,000 women from all castes and communities attended these constituent conferences to express their views on education and elect delegates to the AIWC meeting.

That Mrs. Jan Huidekoper, an Irish lady, former teacher of Bethuen College and Hon. Secretary of the Indore Women's Educational Association, was instrumental in drafting the clauses and articles of the constitution and also in giving it the final shape is quite clear from the regular correspondence that she had with Kamladevi Devi Chattopadhyaya who became the Honorary Secretary of the first session in 1927-28. [10] Till now all the letter heads mentioned its name as 'All India Women's Conference on Educational Reform'. Initially the organization had to face many teething problems as is shown by the correspondence between Mrs. Huidekoper, who was most active in drafting and advising on various issues, and Kamladevi and there was a regular stream of correspondence between the

two regarding the organizing of the next Conference at Patna. From her letter dated 20 November 1928 one can gather that the Maharani of Gwalior did not accept the offer to hold the Conference at Gwalior. As she advises Kamaladevi she says, "I think in future we shall have to arrange that the President and the locality of the session go together as it were; i.e. if we are asked to Cochin, say, then we get the Consort to preside; the invitation should in some way include the willingness of the chief lady to preside; in British India there may be some choice between the chief Indian lady belonging to the constituency and any English lady of position; that will have to be worked out; but we ought not again to have to go begging for a President." [11] Recounting her experiences of Udaipur visit she went on to narrate how the women of that area had come out of their houses for the first time.

"Ladies meeting (purdah of course); I believe it is the first ladies meeting ever held there; the men folk there not liking their ladies to go to a meeting even of womenfolk. But we managed and got about fifty ...some 4-5 Parsees, some 3-4 Bengalees all settled there and then the rest Rajputanis. Oh it was a joy to see their bright and happy faces, their eyes like stars as we developed our points; they are so hungry and thirsty for a fuller life and so eager to join in the All India movement." [12]

The AIWC on Educational Reform was held in January 1927 in Pune and chairman of the reception committee, the Rani Saheb of Sangli, pointed at the uniqueness of the occasion hailing it as a sign that women had attained the power of national expression. The first President, Maharani Chimanbai Gaikwad of Baroda, highlighted the fact that it was the first time that an attempt was made by Indian women to formulate their views on their own education.

SOCIAL REFORM

AIWC began as an organization for promoting women's education but within a year of its founding social reforms were included in its agenda underlining the fact that the two go hand in hand. The Pune session revealed several issues concerning women and as a result the scope of the women's conference was widened to include legal and social reform along with educational reform. It played a notable part in initiating and campaigning for the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1927, also known as the Sarda Act and a Uniform Civil Code for the whole country. The AIWC laid emphasis on activities connected with the reform of education and of marriage law; it adopted resolutions demanding compulsory primary education, increased facilities for women in the education system, the abolition of child marriage and the fixing of the legal minimum age of marriage at 14 for females. The organization was composed of women from many strata of society and its office bearers reflected its diversity- the president was the Maharani of Baroda, vice-presidents were the Rani of Sangli, Lady J.C.Bose and Sarojini Naidu, the chairperson was

Margaret Cousins and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was its secretary.

At the 1928 session of the conference in Delhi, Muslim women participated in large numbers and the name was changed to All-India Women's Conference. The Begum of Bhopal, Maimoona Sultana was elected as the President. The 1929 conference was held in Patna and the Rani of Mandi was elected its president. It adopted a resolution that the scope of its activities should be widened to include 'the consideration of all social evils which hinder the progress of education.' [13] Another change was seen at the 1930 conference when Sarojini Naidu was elected president and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya the secretary. During these sessions resolutions were passed on equal inheritance rights for women and the need to enquire into the conditions of life and work of working-class women and children, but no political resolutions were passed. [14]

AIWC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

So far as the question of political participation of women is concerned it is quite obvious that the AIWC was not formed for any political reason whatsoever. It has often been suggested that with the formation of women's organizations like the WIA, the AIWC and the NCWI the political participation of women increased. As the nationalist movement developed in the 1930s, differences of opinion arose within the AIWC concerning its involvement in political issues. Some wished it to remain aloof from politics but women from various streams made efforts to politicize the AIWC. The latter felt that women's emancipation, social or economic could not be achieved without struggling for social justice or without attaining national independence. [15]

STRUGGLE FOR FRANCHISE

It has also been conjectured that under the colonial 'constitutions' provisions were specifically made for women which led to an increase in not only their public appearances but also made them active participants in politics. In 1932, when the question of a new constitution was being debated Indian women produced two memoranda on their stand regarding franchise. They affirmed their belief in equal rights for men and women and refused to ask for privileges for women. They were also opposed to communal division. However, this stand went unheeded and they were given votes on grounds they considered detestable. [16]

CONCLUSION

Along with an increased awareness of their personal rights women also became more alert towards their political rights. This increased consciousness in practically all the spheres has been ascribed to colonialism on the one hand and to nationalism on

the other. With the increasing fervor of the National Movement by the second decade of the 20th century women had also become active not only in nationalist and political bodies but also in organizations whose membership and direction were solely in their hands and AIWC was one of the earliest of such organizations.

The activities of the Women's Conference during the past eight decades have been wide ranging which can be deduced from the wide ranging activities of the Conference and the resolutions passed during at the annual conferences. In 1946, a Charter of Women's Rights and a Memorandum for the central and provincial governments was drawn up and ratified by the AIWC. It sets out the rights and duties of women such as equal rights in civic, personal and property law. The memorandum sets out the views and plans of the conference on the laws and services that should be established in order to improve the living conditions and welfare of women and children. The AIWC not only provided an organized platform to women when it was most required but also helped develop a new awareness amongst them thus giving shape to the women's movement. The base of the organization is ever expanding and the work of the AIWC that is still on, on a national scale, is what gives it a pride of place even after 88 years.

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