

POLITICAL ENTRY OF WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

During the Modern period, the national movement gave an opportunity for women to participate in the political activities of the country. 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. The British Government appointed the South Borough Committee to examine the question of franchise. The Reform Act of 1921 extended the franchise only to wives who had property and education. In 1929 women had the right to vote on the basis of wifehood, property and education in 1930, a meeting of representative women's organizations demanded immediate acceptance of adult franchise without sex discrimination.

KEY WORDS

Politics, Empowerment of Women, Constitution, General Election, Voting, 73 and 74 Amendments, 33% reservation.

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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.¹ 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. ² 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. The women in Madras presidency organized the young people which were named the Vaanar Sena.³

Margaret Cousins, an Irish lady took important steps towards the upliftment of women in Madras Presidency.⁴ The Congress supported their demand by passing a resolution at the Calcutta session under the presidentship of Annie Besant. The Muslim League also supported Women's enfranchisement in September 1918. Saraladevi Chaudhurani presented the resolution supporting the vote for women.⁵ 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. The committee came to India in 1918. 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. According to the Government of India Act 1919 the women got voting rights and they had no right to contest in the election.⁶

In 1919 the Simon 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 this own right. The Reform Act of 1921 extended the franchise only to wives who had property and education. ⁷ In 25 December 1927, a resolution was passed at 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.⁸ In 1929 all the provincial legislatures had given the women the right to vote on the same terms as men.⁹

In 1929 the Tamil Nadu women's conference was held at Erode and it was presided over by Sarala Devi, Member of women's Indian Association. The following demands were accepted in the conference. That was as follows:

- a) Fundamental rights of women, such as equal rights of inheritance of father's property, equal rights in husbands property, right upon their body, right upon their children, and right to employment in all departments of public services.
- b) Compulsory education for girls.
- c) Complete adult franchise of women.
- d) Dignity of free labour.¹⁰

In 1929 women had the right to vote on the basis of wifehood, property and education in 1930, a meeting of representative women's organizations demanded immediate acceptance of adult franchise without sex discrimination. On 18 February 1933, a public meeting was held at the servants of India Society, Royapettah, Madras. This meeting was held in order to consider the recommendations of the round table conference with regard to the franchise rights of women. The meeting was presided over by Mrs. Ramaswami Sivan and in her introductory remarks, she said that whatever position women occupied in household affairs, they should have equal opportunities with men in society and politics of the country.¹¹

The Government of India Act of 1935 fixed some qualifications to women's franchise. Women of 21 years of age and over will be eligible to vote as follows,

- a) Those who hold some property and taxation qualifications as men.
- b) Those who are able to read and write in any Indian language or dialect in common use in some part of the country.

- c) Those who are wives and widows of those possessing or who would have possessed the necessary property qualifications.
- d) Those who are wives and widows of those who were in previous financial year assessed for the necessary payment of income tax.
- e) Those who are wives and widows of a retired pensioned or discharged officer, or soldier of his majesty's regular military forces.¹²

In February 1937, the first general election was held. In this election, nine women were elected in Madras Presidency and C. Rukmani became the Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Assembly.¹³ The next election took place in 1946. In this election the total population was 49,342,000 and men and women were 23,082,999 and 24,785,000 respectively. The number of women voter was 1,911,444 and the women actually voted were 393,227, its only 20.57 per cent.

Regular elections began to take place after the constitution came into existence on 26 January 1950. It provided the right to equality, right to vote, and the right to contest in the elections to women. The constitution of India pledges equality of status and opportunity, justice, social, economic, political and dignity of the individual were given equally to men and women.¹⁴ Political equality is granted to women under the Indian constitution and is guaranteed through the instrument of adult franchise and Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex.¹⁵ In the 1957 General Election of Tamil Nadu, total number of electors was 17495831, number of electors who voted was 11130996. The polling percentage was only 46.56%.¹⁶ The next election of Tamil Nadu was held in 1962. In this election, total polling percentage was 70.65% including 74.92% male and 66.45% female voters.¹⁷

The voting pattern of election in Tamil Nadu had been influenced by many factors such as raising the price of goods, corruption, influence of films, excessive political publicity and so on. Loss of faith was a factor that influenced the voting pattern. The percentage of polling was very high in 1967 (76.57%). It includes 73.99% women votes. This year the regional party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam came to power.¹⁸ The percentage of polling in 1971 election was 72.10%. It including 69.66% women votes.¹⁹ In 1977 election, the percentage of polling was

very less (61.58%). It includes 59.08% women votes because the regional party was divided in to two parties, namely Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).²⁰

In 1992, the 73 and 74 Amendments of the Indian Constitution were passed to honour Article 40 of the Directive Principles to establish institutions of self-government for the upliftment of villages. The important change brought about by the 73 and 74 Amendment to the Constitution was Introduction of reservation of one-third of total number of seats and offices for women with provisions for rotation. The year 2001 was observed as the year of women's empowerment in order to create large scale awareness about women's rightful place in mainstream of the nations development. The national policy for the empowerment of women was adopted in 2001. Women are entitled to 33% reservation in the local bodies. In Tamil Nadu 30% jobs are reserved for women. Because of this many of the backward women also participate in politics in Tamil Nadu. If they get more reservation they will be in more numbers in politics.

End Notes:

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- 9) Kamaladevi Chattopadhyayya, *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom*, New Delhi, 1983, p.96.
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- 18) Report of General Elections, Election Commission of India, Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu, 1967.
- 19) Report of General Elections, Election Commission of India, Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu, 1971.
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