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## Debates in the Madras Legislative Assembly on Voting Rights of Women in 1921

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### Introduction

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was much awakening among women around the world. When one nation after and the other provided voting rights to their women, it became a great inspiration for Indian women, who emerged as an elite group. They started many movements and organizations and held many meetings and conferences. Thus, the campaign for the political rights of women started in 1917, when Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Margaret Cousins at Adyar started the Women's Indian Association in Madras. Soon it emerged as an all-India movement in its every sense <sup>1</sup>

The Women's Indian Association, which identified itself strongly with the cause of women suffrage, began the vigorous campaign as soon as the British government published "The Rules of Elections of Provincial Legislative Council" in 1920.<sup>2</sup> The suffrage campaign was limited in nature and consisted of appeals to legislators to offer resolutions and the lobbying of members of the newly formed legislative councils. The number of women involved varied across the Provinces. The Bombay campaign appeared to be the most vigorous, as nineteen women's associations and over 800 women, including some European women also participated.<sup>3</sup>

In Madras, the Women's Indian Association organized a women's conference at the Senate House of the University of Madras on 28 December 1920. Nearly 500 ladies attended it from various parts of the Presidency. It passed resolutions regarding women's voting right.<sup>4</sup> These resolutions were sent to the newly elected council members to get their support for the enfranchisement of women. A month later, Mrs. Cousins with Dorothy Jinarajadasa had a visit to the council chamber. There they met M. Krishnan Nair, a Malabar lawyer and a member of the new Madras Legislative Council, who had a soft corner for the liberation of women. He promised them to propose their cause in the Legislative Council.<sup>5</sup>

On 27 February 1921, M. Krishnan Nair gave notice of a resolution in favour of removing sex disqualification in voting in the Madras Legislative Council. It was admitted in the Council under the Madras Electoral Rules. As per the regulations of the Madras Legislative Council, any resolution could be discussed only after the expiry of a month since the notice of the resolution was given. Therefore, the financial business, of the council stated that the resolution could be taken either towards the end of March or in early April.<sup>6</sup>

The Women's Indian Association wanted to gather many supporters for this resolution. Therefore, they planned to send a deputation to the Law Member, K. Srinivasa Iyengar. The delegates of the deputation were Sadasiva Iyer, B. Ramachandra Rao, B. Rama Rao, Gurusamy Chetti, Annie Besant, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Mahadeva Sastri, Laxmipathi, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Lakshmana Rao and Lazarus.<sup>7</sup>

When the delegation met the Law Member at his residence on 7 March 1921 K. Srinivasa Iyengar received them very cordially and listened attentively to the memorandum presented to him. By this memorandum they wanted him to help Krishnan Nair to pass the resolution of removal of sex disqualification in elections. They urged him that he could influence the members in the Council to vote for the proposed resolution.<sup>8</sup>

Mr. Iyengar promised his support to the resolution and he thought that there would not be much difficulty in persuading the Council to accept it. The only difficulty would be regarding the voting of "gosha"<sup>9</sup> women. But for the sake of a few women who wished to be "gosha", the majority of women should not be deprived of their rights. No woman would be forced to vote unless she wished to do so. Hearing this obvious reply, the deputation thanked him and withdrew.<sup>10</sup>

Another deputation took place on 17 March 1921 to K. Venkata Reddi. The same ladies formed this deputation with the addition of Mrs. Subbarayan and Zaminadrini of Kumaramanagalam. A memorandum was presented giving the reasons as to why women were asking for the vote.<sup>11</sup> K.V. Reddi received the deputation most courteously but was not in a position to promise his vote for the resolution.

On 1 April 1921, which was a note worthy date in Indian History for the women of India particularly women of Tamil Nadu, the Resolution regarding women's voting right put for discussion in the Madras Legislative Council. On that day the members of the Women's Indian Association and other women who were demanding for women suffrage went to Fort St. George. They were sitting in the lady's gallery, which was at the end of the chamber facing the speaker's seat.

Resolution connected with the allocation of grants was discussed in the first half and hour of the session and then resolution nineteen was called M.K. Nair rose at the left of the Minister's table and read the Resolution which recommended that government should remove the sex disqualification to the legislative election. He proposed his resolution as follows:

"Sir, the resolution I beg to move is this – 19. This Council recommends to the Government that the sex disqualification prescribed in subclasses (b) of clause (1) in rule 7 of the Madras Electoral Rules for registration of a the electoral roll be removed in respect of women and that the qualification which entitle men to vote, be made applicable to women."<sup>12</sup>

Krishnan Nair referred to many valuable points in his argument with his usual sense of humour and his intelligence. This made the council members and the ministry to have better consideration upon the resolution. In the beginning of his speech, he criticized the powers of the Council and asked the Council to utilize its power to the sectors that deserved. Because the Council did not have the power to permit candidates to contest in the election, he wanted to restrict his motion to enable the women to vote in the election.

Then he referred to the reports of the Joint Select Committee. According to this Committee's report women were included in the list of persons who were denied the right to vote. This list included aliens, lunatics, imbeciles, idiots, children, criminals and women.<sup>13</sup> With this reference he questioned the council members whether women were having any reason to be within this list.<sup>14</sup> He found that there were a large number of women who had adopted the profession of doctors and nurses. He wondered whether there was any

profession at all in which right judgment was necessary as in the medical profession, where the question of life and death often arise. Then, he compared the profession of teaching in which women were largely employed and imparting instruction to young minds, a profession in which judgment of a very high order was an essential criterion. Therefore, he insisted that women should not be deprived of their right to vote.<sup>15</sup>

Then Nair analyzed the character of women in the observance of rules and laws. He contended that women were as law abiding as men. He added that there was a curious anomaly namely that men clerks or men motor drivers who were employed under women had the right of voting but the women themselves under whom they were employed had not power of voting.<sup>16</sup> Nair analyzed other reasons, which deprived the women of their right to vote such as even if the right was given to them, the first one was that their modesty prevented them from coming to the booth. He denied it by saying that if the women were given an opportunity they would prove that this statement would be false. Then for the statement that women do not take interest in public questions he answered that women took more interest than men. He contended that it was not necessary that they should have any political training and to ascertain his statement he compared women's household duties to the public interest. When the prices of provisions rose, naturally their attention was drawn to the economic conditions of their state.<sup>17</sup>

He also referred to certain departments in which the assistance and advice of women would be more valuable than the assistance and advice of men, for instance maternity, the problem of child welfare and the delicate questions of marriage and divorce. In these matters the mandate and opinion of the women electors would certainly be more valuable than the advice of the men electors. Then Nair brought out the ultimate basis of the government decision namely the physical force. Under this, women were considered a weaker sex and therefore, were denied the right to vote should be given to the strongest man, in which case many of the members of the Council would not be there. Therefore, the argument of the weaker sex would not hold good.<sup>18</sup>

Then for the statement that women themselves were not earnest and that they themselves did not make any attempt to get the right he replied by referring to a particular incident

where the deputation of Indian women waited upon when the Secretary of State and Viceroy came to Madras in 1917.<sup>19</sup> With the result, the resolution for the removal of sex disqualification to be passed in every district. The Congress Committee also passed resolutions recommending the removals of sex disqualification in the matter of voting. Even the Muslim League had passed a resolution in 1918 saying that women should be given the power to vote.<sup>20</sup> Several witnesses appeared before the Franchise Committee and stated that the right to vote should be given to women.<sup>21</sup> Then ultimately when the evidence of Lord Southborough was taken before the Joint Select Committee, he said that women themselves in India did not desire to have a franchise. This came as a shock to the women in India.

As soon as they knew it, they raised such an indignant and loud howl of protest as only women could rise. And immediately they set their machinery in motion and meetings were held all over the country. Forty-five meetings of Women's Indian Association were held. Cables were sent to authorities in England and a deputation of men and women waited upon the Secretary of State in England in August 1919.<sup>22</sup> By that time a large conference of ladies was held at Madras and they moved in very strong terms and passed a resolution that the right of voting should be granted to women.<sup>23</sup> Therefore he stressed that the resolution on the removal of sex disqualification of women on franchise should be moved in that Council itself. Further, he added that all the members of the council knew very well about the activities, which women had been putting forward. They had held meetings all over the Presidency and sent deputations.<sup>24</sup> Then he said that women had been trying everything to get their vote. Hence he hoped that the council was generous enough to pass the resolution.

While considering the women's right of voting, which was granted under District Municipalities Act and women were given the power of even standing as candidates for election to the Local Board Act. Nair demanded the Council whether it was going to withhold that right from them. As a matter of fact, for municipalities and local boards, the qualification for voting was much lower than the qualification for voting for the Legislative Council. Seeing that they possessed the right to vote for those bodies Nair doubted that council should be justified after having granted them or refused it.<sup>25</sup>

On ground of comparison of the legislative councils, he pointed out that the Legislative Council in Travancore, an Indian State had granted the power of voting to women even in 1870. He added that certainly there was nothing incongruous and nothing unreasonable if the Council following all these precedents and grants the right of voting of women.<sup>26</sup> Then Krishnan Nair also referred to the opinions expressed by India's best minds on this question.<sup>27</sup>

Further, as a reply to the statement that if the right was granted to gosha women they would not avail it, he suggested that for the convenience of the gosha women, the Government of Madras might appoint women officers to go to the gosha ladies and take their vote. Nair also indicated in Nagapattinam and Nagur, which had a large number of gosha women, women were appointed to record the votes of gosha ladies for the election of the Local Boards and Municipalities. On the same line, Nair asked the Council to extend the arrangements to all elections.<sup>28</sup> He also expressed to the Council that grant of the right of voting to women would be very great impetus to the spread of female education which the council members had so much at their heart.<sup>29</sup> In addition to that Nair explained the incident, which occurred in England. That was in 1884, when Gladstone, the then Prime Minister of England gave the right to vote to the agricultural labourers in England, they were the people of ignorance. The result was that education among the agricultural laboureres developed very considerably.<sup>30</sup> Like that he added the right to vote would enhance the self-respect of women. Naturally he felt that women's condition would be improved, when their self-respect was enhanced.

At the end of his speech, Nair indirectly threatened the council members by referring the suffragette movement of England of 1832. After a vigorous struggle, the British Parliament granted them the right to vote in 1918.<sup>31</sup> Nair requested the Council not to repeat the mistake in Madras Legislative Council and to avoid the occurrences, which took place in England.<sup>32</sup> He was very sure that the Indian women would not do so. On fact there were many English women behind them. Therefore, he indirectly emphasized that those English women might guide the Indian women to take violent approaches for their demand.

Then Nair submitted that if the women were not given the voting right that day, they would surely get it the other day. Why that Council should not grant it and earn their undying gratitude – he asked. Madras had always been noted for its practical common sense and business capacity. The Council had great men from the Madras Presidency, who represented all those good qualities. Why should they not give a lead to other Presidencies and set an example by granting the right to women? With that question he concluded his speech and left the resolution to the Council.<sup>33</sup>

The Raja of Ramnad with humour and wit seconded this resolution. He stated that he was from a family where a strict gosha system prevailed. He opined that gosha system was not a matter, which prevented the giving of franchise to women. He pointed out that under the General Clauses Act and under the Evidence Act man included woman too. Then he referred about the Uttaramerur inscription, which gives a clear picture of the election and working of the local bodies of Chola period. During that time, several committees such as Garden Committee, Tank Committee etc, had women members. If that was so, why they should not be given even voting right, during the twentieth century which had advanced education and liberal views.<sup>34</sup>

But Lionel Davidson, member of the Madras Legislative Council conveyed his opinion that this measure was premature particularly so in the case of gosha women. After that many members expressed their opinions in the council upto 2.00 p.m. During the discussion A. P. Patro wished to postpone the granting of vote for women for about ten years. Because by that time, he expected that the bad Indian social customs would be reformed out of existence and women would then be fit for vote. One of the Ministers, Muhammad Usman Sahib suggested that the age limit should be thirty years and the Muhammadan women should be excluded from voting. Another member, Abbas Ali Khan said that whatever might be said about women he called a spade a spade and he believed women were unfit to vote.<sup>35</sup> These alone constituted the opposition.

At last, the motion was moved by V. Rama Rao. Resolution No. 19 was then put to vote and declared carried. Forty-seven voted for it and thirteen voted against the motion while ten were neutral.<sup>36</sup> Hence the resolution which recommended the Government to remove the



sex disqualification was passed on 1 April 1921 with a two third majority in the Madras Legislative Council.<sup>37</sup>

On 10 May 1921, the Madras Government was pleased to make the following regulations:

- This Resolution may be called the Madras electoral sex disqualification removal regulation.
- No woman shall be disqualified by reason only of her sex for registration on the electoral roll of any constituency of the Legislative Council of Madras.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the Madras Presidency had given a fine lead to all the other provinces of British India by giving franchise to the women of Madras Province.<sup>39</sup> Bombay Presidency also extended the franchise to women in the same year i.e. 1921.<sup>40</sup> The United Provinces followed it in 1923 Punjab, Assam and Bengal in 1926 and finally the Central Province and Bihar and Orissa in 1930.<sup>41</sup>

This was appreciated by most of the sections of the people. The daily newspapers, which were the voice of the people, appreciated that move. Referring with appreciation, to the resolution passed in the Madras Legislative Council, granting franchise to women, the “Desabhaktan” (Devotee of the Nation) expressed the hope that the privilege thus conferred on women would hasten the day for the emancipation of Mother Bharatha.

## Conclusion

Thus, the first step taken by the Women’s Indian Association towards the attainment of women’s political empowerment was achieved in the Madras Presidency in the year 1921. Because of the earnest activities of the members of the Women’s Indian Association, M. Krishnan Nair, a member of the Madras Legislative Council proposed the resolution on the removal of sexual disqualification in voting. It was passed in the Council with one-third majority on 1 April 1921.

## End Notes

1. Devaki Jain, (ed.), *Indian Woman*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1975, p.24
2. Margaret E. Cousins, “The Reform Act and the Future of Women” in *Stri-Dharma*, Vol.1, No.10, April, 1920, p.139.

3. Editorial (Tl. Column) *Stri-Dharma*, Vol.5, No.1, September, 1921, p.15.
4. *Stri-Dharma*, Vol.4, No.1, April, 1921, p.14.
5. James Cousins and Margaret Cousins, *We Two Together*, Ganesh & Co., Madras, 1950, p.405.
6. G.O. No. 139, dated 4.7.1921, Law (Legislative) Department.
7. *Op. cit.*, (F.N.No.4).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Gosha is a Hindi word means concealed. Gosha women means women who are not coming out of their home and concealing herself from the sight of other men except their husband, father and brothers (Subodh Kapoor (ed.), *The Indian Encyclopedia*, Vol.9, New Delhi, 2002).
10. *Op. cit.*, (F.N.No.4).
11. Extracts from the Report on English and Vernacular Newspapers for the year 1921-April-June. ("Franchise of Women" in *Swadesamitran*, 19 March, 1921, Madras).
12. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I-B, Madras, 1921, p.1515.
13. Report from the Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill, Vol.I, The Report, Government of India, Delhi, 1919, p.133.
14. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I-B, Madras, 1921, pp.1515-1516.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. G.O. No. 139, dated 4.7.1921, Law (Legislative) Department.
18. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I-B, Madras, 1921, pp. 1515-1520.
19. "Women Deputation in India", 19 December, 1917, p.3.
20. Muthulakshmi Reddi, My Experience as a Legislator, Current Thought Press, Madras, 1930, p.221.
21. Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill, Vol. III, Ministers of Evidence, House of Commons, London, 1919, p.137.
22. *Ibid.* Vol. II & Vol. III.
23. *Op. cit.*, (F.N.No.4).
24. *Ibid.*
25. G.O. No. 139, dated 4.7.1921, Law (Legislative) Department, Ordinary Series, pp. 1-3.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I-B, Madras, 1921, p.1518.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. G.O. No. 139, dated 4.7.1921, Law (Legislative) Department Ordinary Series, pp.1-5.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I-B, Madras, 1921, p.1520.
34. *Ibid.*
35. G.O. No. 139, dated 4.7.1921, Law (Legislative) Department.
36. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. I-B, Madras, 1921, pp. 1539-1540.
37. G.O. No. 139, dated 4.7.1921, Law (Legislative) Department, p.17.
38. G.O. No. 108, dated 10.5.1921, Law (Legislative), Department.
39. "Madras Leads the Way" in *New India*, 1 April 1921, p.6.
40. Kunniammal, N, "Women and Municipality" (Tl.), *Stri-Dharma*, Vol.5, No.1, September, 1921, p.15.
41. Dame Millicent Fawcett, The Woman's Question in India, *Stri-Dharma*, Vol.9, No. 6, April 1926, p.82.