

Role of Women Empowerment in Wia (Women's Indian Association)

B. Meharunnisha [1]

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I. WOMEN'S INDIAN ASSOCIATION (WIA)

The year 1917 was significant for many reasons. The important one is the formation of Women's Indian Association (WIA). This association was started at Adayar, Madras on 8 May 1917. The founding members of this organization were Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins⁵ and Dorothy Jinarajadasa.⁶ It was the first organization to create an overall awakening among women and to train them to shoulder their responsibility in public services and bind them together for mutual service and the good of the country. It was also concerned with influencing government policy on women's suffrage and issues related to educational and social reforms. Since its inception the Women's Indian Association was involved in political matters. The presence and leadership of Mrs. Annie Besant provided an impetus to women to think in terms of political freedom. In 1917, Annie Besant stimulated the Home Rule movement in Tamil Nadu. WIA branches proposed that equal treatment and status should be given to Indians. They also supported to compulsory primary education for girls and Hindu women's inheritance laws.

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF WIA

1. To secure for every girl and boy the right of education through schemes of Compulsory primary education including the teaching of religion.
2. To secure the abolition of child marriages and other social evils.
3. To secure for women the vote for municipal and legislative councils on the same term as it was or might to grant to men.
4. To secure adequate representation of women in Municipalities, Talukas, Local Boards, Legislative Councils and Assemblies.
5. To establish equality of rights and opportunities between men and women.
6. To give training, guiding and forming the women to the future rulers of India.
7. To band women into groups for the purpose of self-development and education and for the definite service of others.

8. Conducting workshops and seminars on issues related to women and children.
9. To secure for women the right to vote and to be elected for the council of state.

III. BRANCHES OF WIA

In 1917 itself the Women's Indian Association started 33 branches in many towns. In 1922 this association had 43 branches and 2300 members. In 1924 it had 51 branches, 18 centers and a membership of 2700. In the year 1927 the WIA had 71 branches, 21 centers and 3800 members. From all major cities in India, WIA was the premier women's association in that time. It not only secured franchise for Indian women but also secured for them the right to sit in the council. The political policy of this association was to work for reforms through the legislative councils. The other work of this association was to promote education and religious tolerance.

Stri- Dharma was the official organ of WIA and it was a monthly publication and it became a journal after three and half years. It was published in English but included articles in both Tamil and Hindi. It carried news and events of interest to women, reports from the branches and articles on women's condition. It was "the voice, ear, eye of our members, it will speak what we would say to each other and through the words written on its pages we shall see what sisters would say to us." The association insisted that women should dedicate their responsibilities to India as wives and mothers. It had the tendency to train, guide and form character of the future rulers of India.

IV. ORGANIZATION AND MEMBERSHIP

Constitution was drafted for WIA and the article- I dealt with the name of the association i.e. "The Women's Indian Association". It started growing and the numbers increased steadily. In 1930 it had 72 branches, 23 centers which had more than 4000 members. Many branches were formed in places where ever it was possible and local secretary was appointed to look after and arrange the work in order to suit the local conditions in order to report to the head quarters. Each branch was to chart its own course of work in four main areas like religion, education, politics and philanthropy.

^[1] Assistant professor of History, Thiru. Vi. Ka. Govt Arts College, Tiruvarur. 610 002. Email.id: marzusr11@gmail.com

The organization defined women as religious “by nature” and encouraged non-sectarian religious activity. But the most important work was Education and the branches were encouraged to set up adult classes for literacy, sewing and first aid. The WIA had been politically active from the beginning when they sent a delegation to meet with secretary of state Montague in 1917 to request the franchise for women. The fourth area of work was philanthropy, it involved feeding the poor, setting up shelters for widows and providing relief for disaster victims.

Article- III dealt with the membership of the association. Women who agreed and co-operated with the objects of the association became its members and groups of women who had the same aims were affiliated to WIA. Membership was open both Indian and European Women. The annual subscription of twelve annas must be paid to the head quarters of the association by its members. After some years of its formation, WIA added a clause to its constitution which said the political policy of the association was to work for reform through the legislative councils, for voting rights.

V. FUNCTIONS OF WIA

Many of the Indian women already belonged to the Tamil Madar Sangam (Tamil Ladies' Association) and had joined with British women in forming the National Indian Association to promote female education, particularly English language instruction, and the teaching of crafts. As the two groups began to mix more freely, they decided to form Ladies' Recreational Club to sponsor tea parties and games like badminton and tennis. Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa were proposing a new organization that would combine education, crafts and sports. After the formation of WIA, Dorothy Jinarajadasa was anxious to encourage the formation of branch organizations. She wrote to Theosophical Lodge secretaries throughout Madras Presidency explaining that a local branch of the Women's Indian Association could play a key role in effecting regeneration of India. The response to these letters was so positive Dorothy Jinarajadasa was inspired to write “there is practically no opposition from the Hindu man to anything that women really wish to do.” accepted the compulsory primary education for boys and girls in 1924 and it started in 1925. During this period WIA started women's home of service for women's development in Mylapore, Madras. The period between 1924-1926 was called the child welfare period. All the branches made interest to increase child welfare work.

All the members were involved in guiding girls for protecting the children in a systematic manner. During the year 1926-27 Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was nominated as the vice president of WIA and was nominated to Madras Legislative Council and later the unique honour of being chosen unanimously as Deputy President of Madras Legislative Council fell on her. Due to the protest against imprisonment of Gandhiji, Dr. Mutulakshmi Reddy resigned her Deputy President ship of Madras Legislative Council. The sixth All India Women's Conference was held in Madras in 1931 for which WIA was the reception committee. The main

resolution passed in this meeting was to support to all that was “Swadeshi”. In 1932-1933 the resolution of Temple entry for all was passed. WIA members were spending much from their own pockets for their work. Many social service institutions were established by this association such as Madras Sevasadan, Madras children's aid society, Swadeshi emporium and Montessori schools.

The Women's Indian Association was instrumental in starting the vigilance association at Madras for the betterment of women and children in Madras. The police of Madras with the help of the vigilance association closed one hundred and fifty houses of illfame at Madras in 1934 itself. This association started and WIA dispersed mainly in the political development, social upliftment, educating women, eradicating the grievances of woman hood and struggle for freedom. Like East and West, the service to India and humanity was build with the spirit of internationalism. Annie Besant became the first president and continued to be in the post for seventeen long years till her death. Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Ammu Swaminathan, Mrs. Dadhabhoy and Ambujammal served as honorary secretaries.

In 1922, the 43 branches of WIA supported that equal status and treatment should be given to Indians, compulsory primary education to girls and also supported the Hindu women inheritance law. In 1922-1923 the compulsory primary education was provided by all branches. In this period there were a number of appointments in municipal councils and local government to women. Most of the board members belonged to WIA. Margaret Cousins, Secretary of WIA, was the First woman in India to be an honorary magistrate. She also prohibited the labour of women and children in coal mines.

In May 1923 Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Patwardhan and Mrs. and Miss Tata attended as delegates to the Congress of International Suffrage Alliance in Rome. This association sent protest to the South African Government against their continued exclusion of women from the rights of citizenship. This association also wrote League of Nations to include women in their committees. It supported Japanese women to attend political meetings and to form political associations. Madras Corporation maintained Rescue homes and Orphanages. It was due to the efforts of the association and its members that the Madras Children's Aid Society came into existence and the “Juvenile Court” was established. Mrs. Margret Cousins was appointed as the first honourable magistrate for the Juvenile Court. The Seva Sadan, Avvai Home, the Montessorie School at Patteon Garden and Rescue home were initiated and set on foot by the efforts of Women's Indian Association. WIA offered its valuable suggestion on four important reform bills before the Assembly. They were,

1. Mr. B. Das's Sarada Act amended bill.
2. Dr. Deshmukh's bill to Amend Hindu Law governing Hindu Women's rights to property.
3. Dr. Bhagavan Das bill to validate marriages among caste of Hindus.
4. Rao Bahadur M.C. Raj's bill for removal of caste disabilities.

VI. CONCLUSION

In 1939-1941, free Hindi classes were started. Mrs. Sarojini Varadappan involved herself in teaching Hindi classes. Mrs. Ambujambal, Savitri Rajan and Rahama Unnisa Begum were involved in the compulsory education committee. WIA realized the need in Madras presidency for a separate hospital for patients suffering from cancer around 1934-36. The foundation stone for this cancer institute was laid by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on 10 October 1952. He said, "I am glad that associating myself with this organization which has made a place for itself in India and abroad. Women's Indian Association has distinguished itself in social welfare work and carried on its political activities successfully. It is the largest Women's Association in India having branches from Cape Camorin to Kashmir, has rightly been called as the Mother of Women's Organization in India".

VII. REFERENCE

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