

3900072097

P7209✓
P 954.035

MOTHER INDIA'S DAUGHTERS

The Significance of the
Women's Movement

REFERENCE
ONLY



LONDON GUILDHALL UNIVERSITY
FAWCETT LIBRARY

“The Women's Movement in India holds the key to progress, and the results it may achieve are incalculably great. It is not too much to say that India cannot reach the position to which it aspires in the world until women play their due part as educated citizens.”—*Report of the Indian Statutory Commission.*

PAMPHLET

LONDON:
WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE
55, GOWER STREET, W.C.1

954.035

954.035
MOT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In the confusion of issues and the obscurity of the problems which confront those who are trying to understand the Indian situation at the present time, there is a development, permeating the country and becoming every day more apparent, the significance of which is at present little realised in Great Britain. The Women's Movement in India is growing with a rapidity and vigour which is probably without parallel in any time or country, and as it is leading the way towards all that is most hopeful for the future, it is essential that British men and women should be prepared to give it their understanding, sympathy and support.

Indian Women and their Influence

It is a mistake to think that Indian women have always been down-trodden and without influence. In the ancient history of India we find many women leaders and heroines, and even since the days of the Mohamedan invasion and the subsequent fashion of secluding not only Moslem but many Hindu women in their homes, their influence over their men folk has been much stronger than in many countries where they have had more freedom.

India Awakening

India is now awakening from her age-long sleep, and in the rapid changes that are taking place, national sentiment is making an appeal to women to serve their country. The response is little short of startling, especially to those who have in the past thought of Indian womanhood only in terms of illiteracy and oppression, and have forgotten her ancient and inherent culture and position.

It is, therefore, intensely significant to see to what ends these women, many of them now entering into public life will use their great influence. Their ideals cannot be better expressed than in the words of one of their leaders, who says: "In this wonderful awakening in India there is the clear demand on the part of the women for freedom and self-development, as well as for service. The women's movement is the expression of the instinctive desire of women to rise to full liberty of soul, to fullest development as human beings. We have to battle against apathy, prejudices, and ignorance, but there is within us now a passion for reform which I like to think has been kindled at an altar where burns the flame of love for God and man. The women of India are no longer willing to submit to standards, whether legal, political or ethical, which have been set for them by the male conscience of the community . . . We will resolutely refuse to accept

any safety in any sphere for one class at the cost of any of our sisters Let us see to it that the ideals of the women's movement find their early and proper fulfilment, so that the children of tomorrow may enter into an inheritance of which they shall be proud—a new India, in which the spirit of mistrust, the desire for class or community domination shall have been driven out by the spirit of reverence and love."

How far, it may be asked, are these lofty ideals being translated into practical politics? Are Indian women really showing themselves capable of leadership, of planning constructive work, of filling positions of responsibility in the community? The answers are not far to seek, but, in giving them, the history of the Indian Women's Movement must be briefly sketched.

Women Pioneers

Before the inauguration of women's organisations, women pioneers had been blazing the trail. Pandita Ramabai, working in Poona first for high caste widows and girls, and then for hundreds of children from famine stricken areas; Ramabai Ranade with her wonderful "Home of Service," where women were trained "to take part intelligently in all domestic, social and national responsibilities; Saroj Nalini Dutt, in Bengal, starting Women's Institutes in the villages; H.H. the Begum of Bhopal, ruling with enlightened statesmanship—these were glowing examples of the capabilities of Indian womanhood.

During the last twenty years Indian women have served as Honorary Magistrates, on District Educational Boards, in the Medical Services, on official Committees and Commissions, as members of Municipal and Legislative bodies, and in other responsible positions.

The Women Organise

Then came the need for the co-ordination of women's efforts.

In 1917 the Women's Indian Association was started in Madras. It has now 72 branches and 4,000 members, with a wonderful programme of social, educational and political (non-party) work, a record already of achievement that would do credit to many older organisations of women in other countries, and with many of its members occupying outstanding positions in public service. It is interesting here to note that, through pressure brought to bear on the Government by this Association, the objections made by the Advisory Committee that it would be premature to extend the franchise to Indian women were overruled, and the Reform Bill of 1919 was so drawn as to secure that if any Provincial Council passed a resolution in favour of removing the sex qualification, this should become operative. Actually within ten years, led first by two Indian States, the Provincial Legislatures had passed all the necessary resolutions. **It is important, however, to add that as the main qualifications**

were based on property they exclude (in the words of the Simon Commission Report) "nearly all women and the general body of the poor," a point to be remembered when we consider the proposals for women's franchise in the new constitution.

The National Council of Women in India was founded in 1925 in order to federate the Provincial Women's Councils and other societies with similar aims for women's advancement and welfare, and to link India with international women's movements. This organisation has six main centres in different provinces, including Burma, each with its own branches and 77 affiliated societies.

Perhaps the most important and far-reaching of the many activities of which the women's movement is composed to-day is the All-India Women's Conference. The original object of the Conference was to promote the education of women, but in 1929 it was resolved that social reform should also be included in its programme of work. Women of all creeds and classes from far and wide—for this Conference has branches in all the principal towns of British India as well as several important Indian States—attend the annual Sessions.

A Remarkable Conference

The last of these annual conferences held in January of this year demonstrates in a remarkable degree the breadth of outlook and the progressive nature of the reforms for which the women are working. A British woman visitor to the conference wrote at the time: "No one who has sat with such a conference of 250 picked representatives, and heard them carry through with fervour and efficiency the discussions of fundamental importance, can fail to realise that here is a dynamite to blast the rockbound traditions which have held India's women, to remove the shackles from their feet, and to bring them free to the plane of fulfilment in their own national and international life Their attitude and their activity are changing the face of India In this conference Hindus, Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Moslems, Sikhs, Christians, the 'untouchable' and the autocrat, live, sit, eat and work together, and on the basic questions affecting their destiny they speak with one voice. They refuse to be communally divided."

Another British visitor wrote: "Though the Conference was strenuous in the number of its subjects, Committees and Conferences, yet it had its social side. There was a delegates' camp, and there and in the efficient transit service of buses, friendships were formed. Women from far Travancore talked to sisters from Assam, Sindhi girls made common cause with Hyderabadis of Deccan, Bengalees became well known to all through the kind attentions of the 250 members of the Calcutta Reception Committee. Another light of the Conference was the presence for the first time of two Harijan (low-caste) women as delegates. Each was a good speaker in Hindi and they received an ovation each time they spoke. A beautiful

gesture in connection with their visit was that a Brahmin widow of the highest rank had paid all their travelling expenses as her personal donation."

The subjects discussed covered many vital problems, and resolutions of far-reaching importance were passed. They dealt with urgently needed reforms with regard to conditions of labour; they demanded, together with other resolutions on educational reform, that in the new constitution every child should be guaranteed free instruction in reading and writing; they pressed for more rigid control over cinema films, with women on every board of censorship; a majority declared in favour of scientific instruction in birth control "in view of the appalling hygienic and economic conditions of society," and they urged for the compulsory registration of midwives. A group of resolutions related to the immoral traffic in women and children and their rescue. These represent a few of the subjects dealt with.

There was also a resolution in support of a Bill in the Legislative Assembly for the Abolition of Capital Punishment, which appealed strongly to the women and was passed unanimously.

Space only permits the mention of one more resolution of outstanding importance. Its significance at this time is such that we feel compelled to reproduce it in full. It was carried unanimously as follows:—

"Believing that the welfare of nations and classes depends on the building up of a new order:—

- (a) We lend full support to all efforts that are being made and will be made in the future for the surmounting of barriers of race, creed, caste and nationality, and promoting the spirit of international reconciliation and goodwill.
- (b) We desire to express once more our condemnation of war as a crime against humanity and our whole-hearted sympathy with all those men and women who are striving honestly for world disarmament.
- (c) We dedicate ourselves in our homeland to the supreme task of creating around us and in us a spirit of true patriotism and love of humanity, so that, rising above the narrow confines of communities and provinces, we may see fulfilled the vision of a larger India ready to take her rightful place in the world comity of nations."

It would seem that the women of the East in the midst of a fear-stricken world, falsely planning for security once again in terms of force, have a spiritual vision of reconciliation and world co-operation, and may yet prove to be the leaders in a new movement for peace.

Personalities

The question may be asked, who are the personalities among the Indian women leaders to-day? It seems invidious to distinguish among so many, but there is Sarojini Naidu, whose name is a household word in India

not only for her political activities but who is admired for the inspiration of her poetry ; Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Deputy President for three years of the Madras Legislative Council ; Mrs. Brijlal Nehru, a member of the " Age of Consent Committee " and an ardent worker for social reform ; Begum Shah Nawaz, invited by the Government to all three Sessions of the Round Table Conference ; the Rani Rajwade, Organising Secretary of the All-India Women's Conference ; the Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, who with Dr. Reddi and Mrs. Hamid Ali were elected by the women's organisations to give evidence on their behalf before the Joint Parliamentary Committee, and who has been chosen to act as liaison officer between the British and Indian women's organisations, thus being brought closely into touch with us in this country.

These are only a very few of the Indian women who to-day are serving their country in a conspicuous way. It is impossible to mention all who have been returned to Municipal Councils, standing at elections on the same footing as men, those who are responsible for the Women's University at Poona, for the new Lady Irwin College for Women at Delhi, for Girls' Schools and Women's Institutes. Many women are now throwing themselves with the greatest enthusiasm and self-sacrifice into the campaign for the removal of "untouchability," under the guidance and inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi, and many others are working in maternity and child-welfare centres, and fighting the evils of prostitution. We must certainly attribute the successful passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in a large measure to the work of the women's organisations, and they are now making the greatest effort to ensure, not only the enforcement of the Act, but also an amendment so as to make child marriage impossible. Many Indian women have in recent years passed the highest tests in law and medicine, and every year hundreds are obtaining degrees at the universities.

To quote the first writer, who was present at the Calcutta Conference, again : " An outstanding impression left by the Conference is of the strength, independence, foresight and efficiency of the senior leaders And there is boundless hope in the large numbers of fervent, zealous, sincere, efficient and emancipated younger women from all parts of the country from whose ranks will come the future leaders of one of the most remarkable movements of modern times."

The Women's Demands for Franchise

With this record behind them, and with their intimate knowledge of the needs of their country and the measures that will be most suitable to its conditions, is it any wonder that the women of India, through their organisations, have felt that they were entitled to frame a policy which they could recommend with confidence for Women's Franchise in the new constitution? Furthermore, are they not right in asking that women in Great Britain

should help them by supporting these recommendations with all the influence that they can command? The women's own proposals for franchise are not enough known in this country. First and foremost they stand for communal unity. In their Memorandum presented to the Joint Parliamentary Committee they stated : " We are of opinion that a system of Franchise and Representation based upon Communal electorates and interests, as proposed in the White Paper, will be highly detrimental to the progress of the Indian people as a whole and to that of the women in particular. We stand united in our demand for a system of joint electorates and in our protest against the communal award, as it will introduce the poison of communalism into the now united ranks of the women of India." They therefore refuse to accept the proposal of reserved seats in the legislatures on a communal basis. We hear much of religious dissensions and communal riots and quarrels in our newspapers, but has any serious notice been taken of this magnificent lead given by the women to break down the barriers between classes and communities and to work for national unity? It is surely time that we supported them instead of merely giving them our criticism for attempting the seemingly impossible !

It is well known that proposals for the enfranchisement of women in the proportion of 1 woman to 2 men, made by the Simon Commission, were reduced by the Lothian Committee to 1 woman to $4\frac{1}{2}$ men, and these in turn were whittled down in the Government White Paper to 1 woman to 20 men for the Federal Assembly and (nominally) 1 to 7 for Provincial Legislatures ! The women's organisations are naturally indignant, and feel that these proportions are totally inadequate to enable them to take their full share in the government of their country. While they are determined to press for the Franchise being granted from the first on the right basis, yet they made their own proposals which would give them enough voting strength to pull their weight in the new constitution. Standing as they do for the rights of equal citizenship, they are against the proposals that wives and widows should be given votes on the grounds of their husbands' property. They propose that both men and women passing a literacy test (ability to read and write in any language) should be enfranchised and also that there should be adult suffrage in urban areas, the chief reason for this being that such a franchise would ensure a more intelligent and at the same time a more independent and well organised vote—important factors until the principal of adult franchise, which is their goal, can be accepted for the whole of India. They further demand a definite recognition on a statutory basis of the removal of all sex disabilities, a place for women in the Upper House of the Federal Assembly, and the proposed high property qualifications for this chamber being substituted by educational ones.

The organised women have once more endorsed these proposals at the last All-India Women's Conference, and a special session of the

Conference is to be called after the publication of the report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee "to determine what the attitude of the representative womanhood of India should be in case their demands are ignored."

Do They Carry Weight ?

The comment will probably be made here that the organised women in India represent comparatively very few of the millions who are inarticulate, and that therefore too much weight must not be given to their pronouncements. But is it not true that in any forward movement there must always be a vanguard who lead the way? We may question whether Women's Franchise would have come as soon in England if it had not been for the comparatively small number of women who gave themselves up to working for it ahead of the large body of public opinion. Also those who only knew India in the past perhaps hardly realise how much the National movement has brought women to the fore, so that now thousands are ready to do something for their country if the way of constructive citizenship can be shown them at this time.

Can We Help ?

The final decisions for the new constitution for India now rest with the British Parliament and with us as electors. Is it too much to ask that British women should do all in their power to support and make known the attitude of those women of India who are working for all that stands for progress in their country, and see to it that their demands are satisfied, and that the six million women they want enfranchised may be placed on the electoral roll in the new constitution?

We hear much of the illiteracy of India's women, of the horrors of child marriage and child widowhood, and "Purdah," and because we have not dwelt on these evils in this pamphlet it does not mean that we ignore them. Much has been written on this aspect elsewhere, and we feel that the time has now come when the emphasis needs to be laid on the capability of the Indian women themselves to deal with the causes and consequences of these bad customs, if they were given the power. Five years ago the Simon Commission considered "that the beginning of a movement among Indian women . . . to deal with problems which specially affect home and health and children is one of the most encouraging signs of India's progress, and we believe that the movement would be strengthened by increasing the influence of women at elections." The women's movement has grown a hundredfold since then, and it is more than ever important that we should see that it is strengthened in the way suggested, if we truly care for the welfare of India's millions.

Price 1½d. each, 1/2 a dozen, and 8/9 per 100, post free.

Printed by Hazell, Watson & Viney, Ltd., 52, Long Acre, London, W.C.—6419-34

PAMPHLET