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# A Plea for the Franchise

of

## Indian Women

*submitted to*

The Members of the Joint Parliamentary  
Committee on Indian Reform,

by

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## A Plea for the Franchise of Indian Women.

NOT without a due sense of my great privilege do I venture to lay before this Committee, in briefest outline, some of the reasons on which the women of India base their claim to equal franchise in the scheme of reforms to inaugurate responsible self-government for India.

I may observe that my sole title to be regarded as an All-India representative of my sex on a question of such far-reaching importance lies in the fact that I am intimately aware of every shade of orthodox and progressive opinion alike, throughout the country, and I am closely associated with all the larger public movements of the day, especially in relation to the vital and delicate problem of the Hindu-Muslim unity.

There are two reasons why I desire to dwell for a moment on the ancient and historic Indian tradition of woman's place and purpose in the civic and spiritual life of the nation, and to recall the versatile and illustrious record of her contribution to the national achievement by her wit and wisdom, her valour, devotion and self-sacrifice, as scholar and statesman, soldier, saint; queen of her own social kingdom and compassionate servant of suffering humanity.

Firstly: To refute the reiterated argument of the illiberal or uninstructed opponent of women's suffrage as being too premature, or too novel and radical a departure from accepted custom likely to offend or alarm a sensitive and stationary prejudice.

Secondly: To demonstrate that the Indian woman is essentially conservative in her impulse and inspiration; and so far from demanding an alien standard of emancipation, she desires that her evolution should be no more than an ample and authentic efflorescence of an age-long ideal of dedicated service whose roots are deep hidden in the past.

I do not for one instant deny that the story of her pro-

gressive development has suffered severe interruption and shared in that general decline—I had almost said decadence—that befalls a nation with so continuous a chronicle of subjection to foreign rule; but of recent years the woman of the Indian renaissance, largely owing to the stimulus of invigorating Western ideas and influences has once more vindicated herself as not wholly unworthy of her own high social and spiritual inheritance. And already she is beginning to recover her natural place and establish her prerogatives as an integral part of the national life.

It is indeed a curious and startling irony of fate that the trend of a doubtless conscientious, but over-cautious, official decision is to withhold from her a formal legislative sanction for a privilege which is already hers in spirit and substance, tacitly acknowledged and widely exercised, for the power of the Indian woman is supreme and her influence incalculable in the inner life of her own people. I do not exaggerate when I assert that there is no summit to which she might not aspire or attain in any sphere of our national energy or enterprise unhampered save by the limitations of her own personal ambition and ability.

Wherein has her sex disqualified the Indian woman, or disinherited her, from the rich honours she has earned in equal emulation and comradeship with her brother in every field of intellectual or patriotic endeavour?

In our older universities she has won brilliant distinction in the arts and sciences, medicine, law, and Oriental learning. She holds office in the courts and senates of our younger universities, like the Hindu University of Benares and the Women's University of Poonah and the National University, as also in the Bombay University.

She has evinced her creative talent in literature and music; she has proved her consummate tact and resource in administering vast properties and intricate affairs, and demonstrated beyond all question her marvellous capacity to organise and sustain great educational institutions and large philanthropic missions for social service. She has been pre-eminently associated with the political life of the country, uplifting the voice of her indignation against all measures of unjust and oppressive legislation, like the Partition of Bengal, the Press Act, and the Rowlatt Bill; she has accorded her cordial support to all beneficent social and economic measures, like Gokhale's Bill for free

and compulsory education, the Civil Marriage Bill of Mr. Basu, the Inter-Caste Marriage Bill of Mr. Patel, and the Swadeshi Movement inaugurated by my friend and leader Mahatma Gandhi, and all efforts to ameliorate the condition of the depressed and afflicted members of our Society.

Moreover, not only has she participated in the programmes of our great periodic national assemblies, like the National Congress, the Muslim League, the Social Reform and Social Service Conferences, but has not infrequently been called upon to guide their deliberations, direct their policies, harmonise their differences, and unite their ideals towards a common goal of self-realisation.

Where then lies the logic of their refusal of a franchise to Pandita Ramabai, or Swarna Kuman Ghosal? To Ramabai Ranade, or Kamala Saththianadhan? To Kamini Sen or Shireenbai Cursetji? To Nagutai Joshi or Anasuya Sarabhai? To Abola Bose or Cornelia Serobji? To Indira Devi or Sarala Devi? To Mrs. Chandrasekharire of Mysore, or Mrs. Sadashiviyer of Madras? To Sarla Ray, Jaiji Petit, Uma Nehru and Vidya Ramanbhai?

And what of that group of women in the seclusion of the Purdah, whose culture and accomplishment rival the golden age of the Saracens Sultan Jehan of Bhopal and Nazli Raffia of Janjira, Abru Begum, Tyaba Begum, Khujista Sultana Begum; Abadi Banu, the lion-hearted mother of the Ali brothers; the courageous young wife of the poet Hasrat Mohani, the late Suharwardya Begum who from her sequestered corner, set papers in Oriental Classics for the Calcutta University, and Amina Hydari, who won the Kaiser-i-Hind decoration for her selfless services in a time of tragic distress in the Hyderabad State.

\* \* \* \* \*

But it is the Purdah which constitutes the chief weapon in the armoury of opposition against franchise for Indian women. I readily concede that it might in its initial stages seriously inconvenience and complicate the electoral system, and perhaps even be attended with temporary danger of fraudulent votes.

Although it is no part of either my mandate or my mission to ask for any concession or preferential treat-

ment for women, I am still constrained to say that I fail to understand, when the interests of small political minorities of men are safeguarded with a scrupulous care, why it might not be possible in course of time to extend a similar chivalrous consideration to the Purdahnashin in those local and limited areas where this custom is rigidly enforced, for I am sure that her vote would usually be exercised with intelligence and discretion and prove a valuable acquisition to the country.

Without discussing the merits or demerits of this old social custom, I am convinced that, like all time-honoured but already obsolete social observances and usages, the Purdah system can no longer remain immutable, but must readjust itself to the needs and demands of a widespread national re-awakening. And after all, the terrors of the polling booth would scarcely daunt the Purdahnashin who in the course of her religious pilgrimages habitually encounters immense multitudes and becomes no more than a casual unit of a heterogeneous pilgrim democracy.

What, however, of the unsequestered women of Malabar and Madras, the Maharashtra and Gujrat; of the enlightened women of the Sikh, Parsi and Christian Communities, of the Arya Samaj of Punjab, and the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal? Whether the franchise be one of literacy or of property, their inclusion would in no wise disturb or deflect the normal electoral arrangements.

In the name of the women of India, I make my appeal to the statesmen of a glorious country whose cherished freedom is broad-based upon a people's will. There is not one citadel of Hindu civilisation, or one centre of Islamic culture where I have not scattered broadcast my message of India's duty and destiny among the free nations of the world. I have spoken to the youths in their academies, to the women in their walled gardens, to the merchants in the market place, to the peasants in the shade of their fig and banyan trees, but how shall my prophecy be realised and how shall my country take her pre-destined place worthily in the noble world-federation of liberated peoples until the women of India are themselves free and enfranchised, and stand as the guardians of her national honour and the symbols of her national righteousness?

## APPENDIX I.

## WOMEN'S LITERACY IN BRITISH INDIA.

(Statistical Abstract, 1915-1916.)

COMMUNITY.	VERNACULAR PROFICIENCY.	ENGLISH PROFICIENCY.
Hindus ... ..	814,810	23,596
Muslims ... ..	135,867	3,940
Parsees ... ..	31,218	8,347
Christians ... ..	252,295	112,643
Jains ... ..	24,120	209
Sikhs ... ..	17,280	238
Aggregate Literacy ... ..	1,600,763	152,026

  

STANDARD OF EDUCATION.	PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS.	PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS.
Arts Colleges ... ..	469	1,873
Professional Colleges ... ..	131	—
Secondary Schools ... ..	93,997	—
Primary Schools ... ..	993,459	73,400
Special School Instruction ... ..	2,405	—

## APPENDIX II.

## WOMEN'S OCCUPATION IN BRITISH INDIA.

(Census Report 1911.)

Women living on their own Income	...	...	62,614
Department of Medicine	...	...	11,298
Department of Instruction	...	...	25,745
Letters, Arts and Sciences	...	...	88,471
Aggregate of Women following Professions and Liberal Arts	...	...	402,586

## APPENDIX III.

## SOME LEADING NATIONAL MOVEMENTS IN WHICH INDIAN WOMEN HAVE TAKEN A PROMINENT PART.

*All-India Movements.*

Indian National Congress.  
 Social Conference.  
 Social Service League Conference.  
 Medical Conference.  
 Music Conference.  
 Industrial Conference.  
 Muslim League.  
 Home Rule League.  
 Mohomedan Educational Conference.  
 One-Language Conference.  
 Temperance Conference.  
 Humanitarian Conference.  
 Arya Samaj Conference.  
 Sikh Conference.  
 Ladies' Conference.  
 Muslim Ladies' Conference.  
 Hindu Sabha Conference.  
 Theistic Conference.

*Provincial Movements.*

Bombay  
 Madras  
 Sind  
 United Provinces  
 Panjab  
 Bombay Educational Conference.  
 Madras Students' Convention.  
 Behar Students' Conference.  
 Bombay Students' Federation.  
 Depressed Classes Mission.  
 Andhra Library Movement.  
 Satyagraha Movement.  
 Swadeshi Movement.  
 Seva Sadan.  
 Bharat Strée Maha Mandal of Bengal, Malabar United Provinces and Panjab Women's Indian Association.