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Voting rights for women in India

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Why is in news? 75th Republic Day of India: The women who fought for our rights

India's journey towards becoming a republic encompasses several movements and stakeholders who struggled for a progressive agenda.

The references to justice, liberty, and equality in the Preamble of the Constitution were a nod of acknowledgement to the aspirations of freedom fighters and social reformers.

The feminist movements in pre-independent India played a crucial role in ensuring women's rights were guaranteed in the Constitution. Sadly, their role in forging the republic remains underappreciated.

The most glaring example is the **case of the right to vote**. It is often claimed that women were "granted" this right at the same time as men. This is misleading and ignores the concerted efforts of women activists.

Evolution of voting rights to women:

One of the **first official calls for enfranchising women was made in 1917** when a delegation of women activists presented a memorandum of demands to Edwin Montagu and Lord Chelmsford, who had been tasked to formulate a scheme of self-governance for India.

The same year, the **Women's Indian Association (WIA)** was formed to address the socio-economic challenges faced by women. It was the first national body to advocate for female suffrage.

In 1918, WIA and others intensified their advocacy, travelling to Britain to garner support for their causes.

Sarojini Naidu took the **women's rights issue to the Congress party**, moving resolutions for women's enfranchisement at Congress sessions in **Bijapur and Bombay**.

The first victory came with the **enactment of the Government of India Act 1919** that allowed provincial legislatures to enfranchise women.

In 1921, **Madras became the first province to grant women the right to vote**, followed by Bombay and the United Provinces.

The **enfranchisement Bill** was defeated in the Bengal Legislative Council. Suffragists led by the Bangiya Nari Samaj organised massive awareness campaigns for four years, leading to the passage of the Bill in 1925. Women leaders did not let up after the initial success.

The right to vote, while monumental, was conditional upon ownership of property, income, and other statuses which excluded a sizeable number of women. Further, women still did not have a right to sit in legislative bodies.

The **Nehru Report**, a draft Constitution, prepared by an **All Parties Conference in 1929** called for equal civic rights for all citizens. Britain was not keen on expanding this right.

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To galvanise international support, a delegation led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Shareefa Hamid Ali travelled to London, and then Geneva to **petition the League of Nations**.

The **Government of India Act 1935** expanded the right to vote and paved the way for women in public offices.

Several **women contested the 1936-37 elections** and joined provincial governments. Women leaders created widespread acceptance for the idea of a universal adult franchise. Their activism extended to social and personal spheres.

In 1927, several women-led organisations joined hands to form the **All India Women's Conference (AIWC)**. Initially, AIWC focussed on **women's education**.

Later, it pushed for outlawing child marriage, raising the age of consent, and banning polygamy.

AIWC believed that women's emancipation was not possible without reforming the various religious laws (personal codes).

In **1945-46**, the AIWC adopted the **Indian Woman's Charter of Rights and Duties**.

The charter demanded equality in all spheres. It specifically made a case for women's economic empowerment and highlighted the need to formally recognise the value of domestic work.

The charter advocated wholesale reforms to the personal codes, demanding the freedom to divorce, and equal property and inheritance rights. Some of these demands found their **way into the Hindu Code Bill** and were enacted a decade later.

In the **aftermath of Partition**, a key issue was the **reservations of seats on religious grounds**.

In the Constituent Assembly, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (a Christian) and Begum Qudsiya Aizaz Rasul (a Muslim) made passionate appeals to do away with any special privileges. Eventually reservation was limited to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

AIWC had been **against separate electorates** and believed that reservation deepened communal divisions — they even argued against women's reservation. These issues caused a rift within the AIWC reflecting the diverse worldviews within the women's movement.

Right to Vote in India:

The right to vote in India is a **fundamental political right** granted to **all eligible Indian citizens** by the Indian Constitution. This right is governed by several articles and laws, including:

Article 326: This article in the Indian Constitution provides for the universal adult suffrage, stating that “the elections to the House of the People and to the Legislative Assembly of every State shall be on the basis of adult suffrage.”

Representation of the People Act, 1950: This Act provides for the preparation and revision of electoral rolls, the conduct of elections, and the determination of the qualifications of voters.

Representation of the People Act, 1951: This Act deals with the conduct of elections, disqualifications for membership of Parliament and State Legislatures, and other related matters.

The right to vote in India is a **fundamental constitutional provision** primarily guaranteed by Article 326 of the Indian Constitution.

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This article enshrines the **principle of universal adult suffrage**, ensuring that every Indian citizen aged 18 or older has the right to participate in elections for the House of the People (Lok Sabha) and Legislative Assemblies of States (Vidhan Sabha).

The voting age was **lowered from 21 to 18** in 1988 through the **61st Amendment Act**, marking a significant democratic reform.

The **Election Commission of India** is responsible for overseeing elections and safeguarding the fair and free exercise of this right, typically conducted through secret ballots.

This right allows citizens to actively engage in the democratic process, selecting their representatives at various levels of government, and is a cornerstone of India's commitment to a representative democracy.

State of Women in Politics and Bureaucracy:

As per data compiled by the **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**, in India, women **make up 14.44% of the 17th Lok Sabha**.

As per the latest **available report of the Election Commission of India (ECI)**, women represent 10.5% of all Members of Parliament as of October 2021.

For all the **state assemblies**, female MLAs' representation stands at an average of 9%.

India's ranking in this regard has fallen over the last few years. It is **currently behind Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal**.

Women's participation is **low enough for several public services jobs** at the Centre and states to facilitate free applications for women candidates.

Despite this, **as per Indian Administrative Services (IAS) data** and the **central government's employment census** of 2011, less than 11% of its total employees were women, which reached 13% in 2020.

Further, only 14% of Secretaries in the IAS were women in 2022.

There are **only three women chief secretaries** across Indian states and union territories.

India has never had a woman cabinet secretary. There have been **no women Secretaries of Home, Finance, Defence and Personnel, either**.

Only 20.37% of **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) owners** are women, 10% of start-ups are founded by females, and 23.3% of women are in the labour force.

Conclusion:

The framers of our Constitution were no strangers to the diversity of thought. The Constitution was envisioned as a living document, allowing future governments to mould the republic as per the contingencies of the time.

In the last 70 years, feminists have strived to advance the rights of women leading to the enactment of various laws, policies, and Constitutional amendments. The groundwork was laid by the women who came much before us.

This 75th Republic Day is an opportune moment for us to honour and acknowledge their contributions.