Pre-Independent Feminist Movements in India

Why in news?

Pre-independence feminist movements played a crucial role in guaranteeing women's rights in the Constitution.

How the women suffrage movement evolved?

- **Enfranchise women**- In 1917, a group of women activists, led by Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins made the first official call to Edwin Montague and Lord Chelmsford who had been tasked to formulate scheme of self-governance for India.
- **Women's Indian Association**- It was formed in 1917 to address the socio-economic challenges faced by women.

It was the first national body to advocate for female suffrage

- In 1918 the Women's Indian Association and others intensified their advocacy travelling to Britain to garner support for their causes.
- **Role of Sarojini Naidu**- She took the women's right to Indian National Congress moving resolutions for women's enfranchisement at Congress sessions in Bijapur (1918) and Bombay (1919).

Sarojini Naidu is the first Indian woman to preside over the Congress session in 1925 at
Calcutta.

- **Government of India Act 1919-** The first victory came with the enactment of this Act that allowed provincial legislatures to enfranchise women.
- In 1921 Madras become the first province to grant women the right to vote, followed by Bombay and the United Provinces.
- **Bengal Legislative Council-** The enfranchisement bill was defeated in this council, suffragists led by the Bangiya Nari Samaj organised massive awareness campaigns for 4 years, leading to the passage of the Bill in 1925.
- **Conditional suffrage-** The right to vote was conditional upon the ownership of property, income and other statuses while excluded a sizeable number of women.
- **Lack of representation-** The women still did not have the right to sit in legislative bodies. They continued to demand equal civic rights for all citizens, regardless of gender, religion or caste.

- **All India Women's Conference**- AIWC believed that women's emancipation was not possible without reforming the various religious laws (personal codes).
- **Nehru Report**- It is a draft Constitution prepared by an All Parties Conference in 1929, it proposed joint electorates with reservation of seats for minorities, but not for women.
- British government was not keen on expanding the political rights of Indians, especially women.
- **International campaign-** To galvanise international support, a delegation of women leaders, led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a princess and a social activist, and Shareefa Hamid Ali, a lawyer and a feminist, travelled to London, and then Geneva, to petition the League of Nations, the precursor of the United Nations, for women's rights in India.
- They also met with other women's organisations and leaders, such as the International Alliance of Women and the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, to seek their solidarity and assistance.
- **Government of India Act 1935-** It 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.
- **Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties-** It was adopted by All India Women's Conference in 1945-46 which demanded equality in all spheres. It made a case for women's economic empowerment and highlighted the need to formally recognise the value of domestic work.
- **Limited special privileges**- A key issue after independence was reservation of seats on religious grounds due to the experience of partition of India.
- Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Begum Qudsia Aizaz Rasul made appeals in the Constituent Assembly to do away with any special privileges.Therefore reservation was limited to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes
- **Separate electorate-** AIWC has been against separate electorate 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.
- **Constitution of India-** It was envisioned as a living document allowing future governements 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.

Quick facts

Women's India Association
• **Established**- 1917
• **Location**- Adyar, Madras
• Founders- Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and others.
• It is ***India's first organization*** which was working pan India united to serve the issues of women from all caste classes and religions.
• **Stri Dharma-** It is monthly journal which became a safe space for women to inspire other women, it also talked to young minds about the future of India and inspired them to become future rulers.

All India Women's Conference
• **Established-** 1927
• **Focus areas**-Women's education, outlawing child marriage, raising the age of consent, and banning polygamy.
• **Advocacy for women rights**- Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties advocated wholesale reforms to the personal codes, demanding the freedom to divorce, and equal property and inheritance rights.
• **Hindu code bill**- The charter found their way in the bill which gave Hindu women equal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption.

References

1. Indian Express- The women who fought for our rights
2. Indian culture- Women's India Association

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