Women in the making of Indian Constitution

Why in news?

Among the 299-member Constituent Assembly, there were 15 women who advocated passionately for a kind of India that would bear the imprint of both genders.

Who are the influential women members that shaped Indian Constitution?

Annie Mascarene

- She became the *first woman* to hold a *ministerial and legislative assembly position in Travancore*, she raised concerns about under-representation of women in politics.
- She was the first woman to be part of the Travancore State Congress Working Committee.
- In the Constituent Assembly debates she spoke about the *centralisation of power* for a smooth functioning of a democracy, but she also warned against complete centralisation which would negatively affect the nature of democratic institutions.
- She said that the task of the Assembly was to lay down the rudimentary principles of democracy for generations to come and not just for the near future.

Hansa Jivraj Mehta

- As a member of the Constituent Assembly, she was instrumental in shaping the country's constitution and advocating for gender equality.
- She became the President of All India Women's Conference in 1946 and proposed the Charter of Women's Rights
- Her act of presenting the *first national flag on behalf of the women of India* on August 15, 1947, symbolized the integral role women played in the nation's independence and the new era of democracy.
- She made strong arguments against reservations for women.

> *"What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice and political justice, not reserved seats for quotas and separate electorates," she said.*

- Mehta also served on the board of UNESCO and became the first Vice Chancellor of MS University in Baroda.
- **Gender neutral language**- Her appointment to the UN Human Rights Council was a significant moment in history, as she piloted a change of phrase from "All men are born free and equal" to "All human beings are born free and equal".

Dakshayani Velayutham

- Born into the Pulaya community of Kerala, Dakshayani Velayudhan faced acute discrimination from the upper caste communities in Cochin and Travancore.
- She was the *first and only Dalit woman* to be elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1946.
- Dakshayani's term in the constituent assembly was defined by two objectives, both inspired and molded by her time with Gandhi and Ambedkar.
    - To make the assembly go beyond framing a constitution and to give "people a new framework of life" and
    - To use the opportunity to make untouchability illegal, unlawful and ensure a "moral safeguard that gives real protection to the underdogs" in India.
- **Untouchability**-She was a Gandhian, opposed untouchability and supported Article 17 of the Constitution which abolishes untouchability.
- She held strong to the conviction that only an Independent socialist republic can help uplift the dalits and give them the liberties exercised by every other citizen.

Amrit Kaur

- Amrit Kaur joined Mahatma Gandhi in the *Civil Disobedience movement* in 1930 and was passionate about the political participation of women.
- Kaur advocated for universal adult franchise and *did not believe in reservations* for women.
- **Universal adult franchise**- Kaur did not believe in reservation, she believed that true equality would only be gained when women made it to the legislature through ordinary elections rather than through reservations.
- **Secularism-** She advocated for the Uniform Civil Code along with Hansa Mehta and wanted to replace "free practice of religion" with "freedom of religious worship" in the draft Constitution.
- She was *India's first Health Minister* and the *founder of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS)* who argued for its autonomy.

Ammu Swaminathan

- Fearless and politically charged, Ammu Swaminathan was a social worker, politician and anti-caste activist.
- **Women's India Association, 1917-** She along with Annie Besant co-founded this association to tackle the social and economic issues faced by women workers.
- **Equality**- In the Constituent Assembly, she was a proponent of the *adult franchise* and supported the *removal of untouchability*, reflecting her commitment to social equality.
- When the Constituent Assembly resolution was being discussed, Ammu Swaminathan remarked that,

> *"The people outside have been saying that India did not give equal rights to her women. Now we can say that when the Indian people themselves framed their Constitution they have given rights to women equal with every other citizen of the country."*

- Swaminathan's personal experiences with child marriage fueled her advocacy for the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Age of Consent Act.
- She also supported the Hindu Code Bills, which sought to reform Hindu religious laws and promote gender equality.

Durgabhai Deshmukh- Mother of Social Work

- At 12 years of age, she participated in the ***Non-Co-operation Movement*** and along with Andhra Kesari T. Prakasam, she participated in the *Salt Satyagraha* movement in Madras city in 1930.
- **Andhra Mahila Sabha**- She established the sabha in 1937, which became a beacon for education and social welfare
- In the Constituent Assembly, she weighed in on judicial matters and advocated lowering the age from 35 to 30 to hold a seat in the Council of Ministers.
- After Independence, she also served in the Planning Commission as a leader of social services and became the chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB).

Begum Aizaz Rasul

- She was the *only Muslim woman member of the Constituent Assembly* and was a notable figure in India's constitutional history.
- She firmly opposed reservations and separate electorates based on religion, arguing that such measures would perpetually divide minorities from the majority.
- **Reserved seats**-She was instrumental in creating *consensus amongst the Muslims leadership* to voluntarily give up the demand for reserved seats for religious minorities.
- Her efforts in promoting women's hockey in India were recognized by naming Indian Women's Hockey Cup after her.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit

- She was the first leaders to call for an Indian constituent assembly to frame a Constitution.
- She was the ***first women to hold a cabinet minister position*** during British era and was a vocal proponent for the establishment of an Indian Constituent Assembly.
- In the Assembly she underscored the importance of India's duties towards its citizens and the international community.
- Notably, she was the *only woman delegate* at the United Nations Organisation Conference and made history by becoming the *first woman and first Asian President* of the UN General Assembly in 1953.

Kamala Chaudhri

- She was closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi and took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930.
- Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent call for freedom movement, she formed Charkha Committees to unite women.
- Kamla Chaudhry, who was one of the 15 women selected from across the country in

the Constituent Assembly for drafting the Constitution, remained active for the upliftment of women through literature and politics throughout her life.

Her famous works were Unmaad (Passion), Picni, Yatra (Journey)and Bel Patra (Leaf Letter) along with from many short stories.

Leela Roy

- She inspired women to join politics, she was a brave soldier of Indian freedom struggle and was a close associate of Subhash Chandra Bose.
- **Dipali Sangha**- In 1923, with her friends, she founded it to establish schools which became centres of political discussion in which noted leaders participated.
- **Chhatri Sangha**- In 1926, an association of women students in Dacca and Kolkata, was founded.
- She was instrumental in forming the *Dacca Mahila Satyagraha Sangha*, which played an active role in the anti-salt tax movement. S
- She started publishing a magazine called ***"Jayashree"*** in 1931 which was edited and managed by women only.
- She quit the Constituent Assembly in protest against the partition of India.

Sucheta Kriplani

- She is credited with having established the women's wing of the Congress party in 1940.
- She is said to have led the Constituent Assembly in singing Vande Mataram, Saare Jahan Se Achcha and the national anthem.
- She was *India's first women Chief Minister*, she made history by assuming the office as the head of Uttar Pradesh government in 1963.

Malati Choudhury

- Nicknamed ***"toofani"*** by Mahatma Gandhi for her dazzling energy and belief in the fight for freedom, Malati Choudhary not only played a significant role in the Civil Disobedience Movement, but also as a powerful voice of dissent against tyranny and inequality.
- Rabindranath Tagore affectionately called her ***Meenu***.
- **Bajiraut Chhatravas**- She found the organisation to fight for the upliftment of vulnerable communities in Odisha.
- She was brought in as an important member of the Constituent Assembly in 1948.

Purnima Banerjee

- She played an important role in the drafting of the Constitution by staying loyal to her socialist ideology.
- Her belief that education was ***"right of livelihood and right of earning an honourable bread"*** should be a part of the fundamental rights of the constitution accounted for many of her early speeches in the assembly.

- She debated that it was the government's responsibility to ensure that through an approved syllabus, proper appreciation of all religions is inculcated into students for the sake of unity of the country.

Renuka Roy

- In 1934, she put forth the famous document: "Legal Disabilities of Women in India; A Plea for a Commission of Enquiry", where she argued for a uniform personal law code, in terms of the situation of women in the eyes of the law in India.
- She was appointed as the President of All India's Women's Conference and made efforts to advocate women rights and inheritance rights in the parental property.
- She was also credited with establishing the All Bengal Women's Union and the Women's Coordinating Council.

Sarojini Naidu

- She is known as the Nightingale of India, the first Indian woman to become the president of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to be appointed as an Indian state governor.
- Fondly called ***Bulbul*** by Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu was one of the women who were in the forefront during the freedom struggle.
- As a member of the ***'Ad-hoc Committee on National Flag'***, she spoke at length in the Constituent Assembly about the importance and meaning of the national flag for India.
- Bappaditya Bandopadhyay quoted "Sarojini Naidu inspired the Indian renaissance movement and had a mission to improve the life of Indian woman."

References

1. Indian Express- The women who wrote the Constitution of India
2. PIB- Women in making of Indian Constitution

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