

Ideology of The Founding Members of The All India Women's Conference

By Amneet Gill

The All India Women's Conference is a women's organization established in the colonial period to discuss the various hindrances that confronted the spread of education among Indian women as literacy levels among them were abysmally low. The organization observed that unless various social impediments like child marriage and purdah were removed, the spread of education among Indian women would be limited. The organization while focussing on education, widened its field of work in order to attain women empowerment and thus benefited the society at large. It was in 1926 that one of its founders, an Irish lady, Margaret E. Cousins, gathered together some of the eminent women of India, to discuss the various problems that confronted Indian women. While tracing the origin of the organization, it becomes necessary to go into the thoughts and ideas of Margaret E. Cousins, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur as they

were the founder members of the organization and also helped in the formulation of its aims and objectives. A brief sketch of their contributions and ideologies is given below.

MARGARET ELIZABETH COUSINS

Margaret E. Cousins, known as the 'mother' of the organization, founded the All India Women's Conference and was its first honorary organizing secretary. Born in 1878 in Ireland of Irish parents she made India her home from 1915. She was an ardent worker of the suffragette movement in England, a gifted painter and a writer. She held a doctorate in music. She worked tirelessly for the upliftment of Indian women who owe a great debt of gratitude to this intrepid pioneer, who was a staunch believer in women's rights.

Paraphrasing Emerson's saying "The world is a symbol, in the whole and in all its parts," Margaret E. Cousins, once famously pronounced

that, “India is a paradox, in the whole and in all its parts.”¹ She thus understood the Indian social reality. She knew that it was almost impossible for people who are nationals of small nations, such as the English to realise the vast extent, the immense population, the variety of ethnological types, the range of climatic conditions, the multitude of different languages and the contradictions of customs which define India. She took a keen interest in the history of the country and observed that India faced many invasions from the 8th century onwards, thus could never attain unity among its people. She felt that five hundred years of Muslim rule gave India a language known as Hindustani which was spoken by three quarters of the population. This unifying language led to national unity. Praising the British rule, Cousins felt that its educational policy, made English the single medium of higher education for a unified India, and sowed the seeds of a single national consciousness.

Cousins rightly identified the emergence of a consciously fostered unity of Indian womanhood beginning from around 1914 when Dr. Annie Besant entered Indian politics and delivered a memorable series of public lectures in Madras entitled “Wake up, India!” which resonated throughout India in a clarion call to people to work out their own salvation by freeing their girls from illiteracy and child marriage, by freeing their outcastes (since re-named Harijans by Gandhiji) from all religious and social degradations, and by freeing the whole nation from foreign domination.² Giving credit to Dr. Annie Besant for spreading the idea of nationalism, Cousins observed that much had been accomplished by her in 1917. The rich seed of the idea of India as one united country had taken deep root. Through Women’s India Association, all types of women who were residents of India were bonded together for mutual service and the good of the country.³

¹ Margaret E. Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, Kitabistan Publications, Allahabad, 1947, p.26

² *Ibid.*, p.29

³ Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement, 1857-1947*, Sterling Publications, New Delhi, p.54

Cousins felt that the enthusiasm that swept over the country for political freedom was from the beginning linked with a realization that it should be freedom for women as well as for men. There had been women members of the Indian National Congress from its inception, but Dr. Annie Besant, with the formation of the Home Rule League, fostered a greater unity of India.

Margaret E. Cousins mixed with the common people, celebrated their festivals and visited their homes. She found such inherent intelligence that it was difficult for her to understand how India had the lowest percentage of literacy in the world. She wanted to work seriously towards removing the various impediments in the field of education in India. The All India Women's Conference owes its origin to the initiative taken by Mrs. Margaret Cousins who as Secretary of the Women's India Association appealed to women in the country to form local committees and hold constituent conferences in each of the provinces and in certain defined

districts for purposes of eliciting views on the problem of women's education.⁴

MUTHULAKSHMI REDDY

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was another prominent woman whose thoughts were vital in rendering substance to the All India Women's Conference and its ethos.

A founder member and president of the All India Women's Conference in 1930-31, Muthulakshmi Reddy by sheer spirit and effort, recorded firsts in many areas of life; chiefly, she was the first women medical graduate in India (1912). A pioneer legislator, she fought for the abolition of the devadasi system, and for the enactment of the laws for the control of immoral traffic in women and children, for prevention of cruelty to children, for prevention of child marriage and for equal rights to women. She resigned from the Legislative Council in protest against

⁴ Geraldine Forbes, "The Indian Women's Movement: A Struggle for Women's Rights or National Liberation," in Gail Minault edited *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, Chanakya Publications, Delhi, 1981, p.87

Mahatma Gandhi's imprisonment and joined the national movement. Dr Reddy was president of

India Association. She was editor of *Stri Dharma*, the official magazine of the Women's India Association, until 1940.

The problems of defining the relationship between the national and the women's question can be best illustrated through her case. She believed that political activism was "flashy" and when the immediate political goals were achieved, women would still suffer from oppression. Separate women's organizations were necessary, she asserted, because through the women's organizations, women could speak freely, vent their grievances, discuss solutions, and develop powers of expression before they attempted to seek amelioration in the outside world.⁵

In the 1920s, Reddy thought that women should keep away from party politics until their status had improved, though there was a paradox because she approved of the

the All Asian Conference at Lahore in 1932 and president for life of the Women's

nomination of women to decision-making bodies, as according to her, women were concerned with social issues. Reddy initially felt that British help was necessary but she changed her perception of their role in social reform with the British opposition to the extension of franchise to women.

"The British government in my opinion and in the opinion of the majority of our public men and women, has not been helping our moral and social progress and has been adopting a policy of either indifference, neutrality and sometimes direct opposition to all our social reform measures. Hence even we women have come to realize that a foreign government has no sympathy with the legitimate aspirations of the people and can never actively help in mending our defective social system."⁶

In 1928, as vice-president of the WIA, Reddy registered her protest against the all-British composition of the Simon Commission. Subsequently

⁵ Aruna Asaf Ali, "Women's Suffrage In India" in Shyam Kumar Nehru, edited, *Our Cause*, Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1941, p.351

⁶ Muthulakshmi Reddy, 'Purdah', Reddy Papers, file no. 11, NMML

Reddy was nominated to the Hartog Committee, the Auxilliary Education Committee, the Simon Commission, all of which she accepted. Her acceptance was denounced by WIA officers. Reddy, in turn, threatened to resign from the Association. She explained that she was not acting in a self-serving and capricious manner but that she had always taken the stand that the WIA's main concern were social issues and the education of women. She firmly believed that at this stage of their development, women should not assume an anti-governmental attitude; as such an attitude was detrimental to their cause.

Before long, nevertheless, Reddy became disillusioned with government actions. When Sarojini Naidu was arrested in 1930, Reddy said, "We women, however, moderate and law abiding cannot afford to be quiet at this juncture".⁷

Reddy understood that social reform would not be possible without political power, and to gain that she felt that it was necessary to align with the nationalists. Though not in favour

of civil disobedience, she resigned from the Legislative Council in 1930, because Mahatma Gandhi had been arrested. She was fully supportive of "swadeshi", "khaddar", the anti-drink campaign and the anti-untouchability movement. However, she never believed that the Congress was fully committed to women's rights.

She was a pioneering legislator and fought for the abolition of the devdasi system, and for the enactment of the laws for the control of immoral traffic in women and children, for prevention of cruelty to children, for prevention of child marriages and for equal rights for women. She was a founder-member and president of the All India Women's Conference in 1930-31. Her contribution to the cause of women empowerment is immense.

KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAYA

Another dynamic woman who was one of the founders of the All India Women's Organization was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. Born in Mangalore, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was educated in Bedford College and London School

⁷ Muthulakshmi Reddy, *The Path Finder*, Everyman Press, Madras, 1939, p.56

of Economics. Her public life began when she was in her twenties. She was the chief organizer and one of the founders of the All India Women's Conference and became its honorary secretary in 1927 and its president in 1934. She was also the president of the Presidency Youth Conference in 1929. Among the most dynamic women, she took part in the salt satyagraha, was a valiant freedom fighter, commander of the Women's Volunteer Corps and spent five years in jail. But it was to constructive work and not to politics that she dedicated her life. She was a leading spirit behind India's cultural renaissance and worked to revitalize the languishing cottage industries. She also founded the Bhartiya Natya Sangh. Kamaladevi travelled extensively in Asia, Europe, America and Africa and led delegations to several international conferences.

To Kamaladevi and her generation the real political history of India seemed to begin with the Gandhi era. When Mahatma Gandhi entered the political arena, she was still a student in her teens but she was conscious of the great upheavals that were taking place in the country and

abroad. All her life she had been troubled and made unhappy by the special differences and economic inequalities with which she was surrounded. The fact that her own lot was economically and socially an easy one did nothing to lessen her sensitivity towards the less privileged. As her own personal difficulties grew so did her resentment towards inequalities and discrimination which began to affect her own life and strained her social relationships.⁸

In Mahatma Gandhi, she saw a leader who seemed to show the way to a better life for all people. He was essentially a man of action, looking forward rather than backward to a revival of past glories. To the youth of the time he held out the promise of speedy change and quick results. She fell in with Gandhi's appeal for simplicity, austerity and identification with people. She took active part in Mahatma Gandhi's salt satyagraha and endured long route marches, vigorous exercises and standing guard over the camp at night.

⁸ Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement (1857-1947)*, Sterling Publications, Delhi, 1968, p.142

She was also elected secretary of the Indian Social Conference, a social organization involved in reforms. She was unanimously elected as the secretary of the first session of the All India Women's Conference held in 1927.

With typical thoroughness, she immersed herself in her job. She managed the office herself, in fact, she was the office. She took lessons in shorthand and taught herself typing. She did all the work including the mailing of letters at the post office. She said: "I am very glad that I did all that because it made me very self-reliant. When somebody is elected to such an office the first question is how to get a typist, and if the typist is not available the work cannot be done... I got myself a typewriter and I taught myself to type and this typewriter travelled with me wherever I went. Whether it was in a train or a waiting room I could always manage to do my own work, and that has stood me in good stead all my life."⁹

As the secretary of the All India Women's Conference, a great deal of

travelling became necessary to build up district organisations which could give some substance to the state bodies. After a year of studying various aspects of the problem of women's education it seemed to several of the members of the committee that education could not be separated from social rights if women were to be made fully conscious of their rightful place in society.

Kamaladevi remembers that the AIWC elicited tremendous response from women. Kamaladevi remembers that women came to attend its meetings in large numbers and many of them made very effective speeches. For travel to the conference, Kamaladevi was able to persuade the railway authorities to give a concession to the delegates so that a double journey could be made on a single ticket which was good for a whole month. Free from the burden of home and children, the women enjoyed taking long trips on their own, travelling in small groups, combining business with pleasure and visiting different parts of the country. Even today these trips continue and remain a lasting tribute to Kamaladevi's efforts to add a touch of

⁹ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Awakening of Indian Women*, Everyman's Press, Madras, 1939, p.34

enjoyment to what could have become a serious business.¹⁰

Constant contact with women of low income groups made Kamaladevi very aware of the kind of life they led. She saw that they never had food or clothes and that whatever was available to the family was never fully available to them, because the men and children had to be given priority. In prison the realisation came to her with a sense of shock that no matter how bad prison conditions were for many prisoners on this subsistence level, they were a relief from the drudgery and hazards of their usual domestic life.

B. Siva Rao, a veteran journalist and a pioneer trade unionist, remembered Kamaladevi as taking a keen interest in the problems of the women workers. In Madras they were fighting for the right of women to have maternity leave for a period of three months—six weeks before and six weeks after delivery. The employers were enraged and decided to dismiss all women from service. Kamaladevi and Mrs Cousins took the matter up

with the Women's India Association creating such a strong feeling on the subject that the employers were forced to back down.¹¹

In Madurai, Kamaladevi's speeches fired the women in another way. The big textile mill owners had put up notices that the workers' union must be dissolved. The women workers - 3,000 in number solidly refused and women threatened their husbands that if they yielded to the demand they would have to cook their own food since their wives would not cook it for them. She was the first organiser of trade unions in Mangalore district and launched a number of unions of both men and women, that of transport workers being the largest.

The All India Women's Conference took up the problem of women labour and caused surveys to be made of plantation and mine labour. Kamaladevi undertook the survey in Bengal and Assam. Through these efforts, legislation was introduced providing better working condition, in particular preventing women from working underground. In the 1930's when India began to export cashew

10 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Indian Women's Battle for Freedom, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1983,p.21

11 Evelyn C. Gedge and Mithan Choksi, Women in Modern India, Kitab Mahal, Bombay, 1929,p.23

nuts, great importance came to be attached to the smooth surface of the kernel. To avoid chipping, the workers, all of whom were women, were not permitted to use knives. This meant that only finger nails could be used. Mangalore was a big cashew centre and Kamaladevi organised a strike which was successful and the knife was introduced. Crèches were introduced and distribution of milk for children was started. Social legislation was taken up pertaining to child labour and welfare schemes for children were formulated in which the women took particular interest. The Conference also drew up a charter for the rights of children, the first of its kind in the country under her influence.

Kamaladevi had made Poona her base and began associating with social reformers like Justice Ranade and his wife Ramabai, and organisations like the Seva Sadan, the Servants of India Society etc. Poona was chosen as the venue of the first All India Women's Conference. A novel, yet relevant idea was introduced in 1930 by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, i.e. the need for abolition of kitchen drudgery. She pointed out that the usual charge levelled against modern

woman was that 'either she refuses to cook or is incapable of the art'. With spread of education there had been a widening of interests and activities of women and, in order to keep pace with the changes, kitchen reform should go hand-in-hand with other social reforms to liberate women from the rut, she pointed out. Towards this end, a demonstration of modern labour-saving appliances was arranged by the AIWC.¹²

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya felt that women should be recognized as independent economic entities with the option to work on par with men. She urged that women be given every convenience to enable them to work. These would comprise marriage and maternity benefits, crèches, nursery and kindergarten schools, as well as labour-saving gadgets at affordable prices.¹³

The contribution rendered by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in the All India Women's Conference is immense.

RAJKUMARI AMRIT KAUR

12 Aruna Asaf Ali, *The Resurgence of Indian Women*, Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1991, p.102

¹³ Aparna Basu, *Women's Struggle: History of the AIWC*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p.45

Another prominent women associated with the conference was Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. A princess of the Kapurthala state, educated in England, she was an eminent social worker of Punjab. She joined the All India Women's Conference in 1929 and became its secretary, president and chairperson. She was one of the moving spirits in establishing the All India Women's Education Fund Association and worked for setting up of Lady Irwin College. She campaigned for women's franchise and successfully established direct links with women's organizations abroad. Her distinguished service in the World Health Organization and United Nations associations brought both financial help and medical aid to India. She was India's first health minister.

Amrit Kaur developed concern for her country, its people and the non-violent movement that Mahatma Gandhi launched. Of her first glimpse of Mahatma Gandhi she wrote "There was a quiet strength, an earnestness and a deep humility about him that went straight to my young heart".¹⁴ In the course of time, she devoted herself

to Gandhi's works and took to khadi and spinning. She endeared herself to the people of the villages and lived a simple life and soon became Mahatma Gandhi's trusted English secretary. In 1942, during the Quit India Movement, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was taken into custody by the British rulers but she courageously faced the British onslaughts. She was a diligent political worker but she was most active in social work.

She worked in many fields but it was in the sphere of women empowerment that she launched a systematic campaign, focussing on the various social evils responsible for rendering the position of women weak. The principles and ideas of equality, justice and humanitarianism were deeply rooted in her. She stressed on improving the plight of women within their families and emphasised on their active participation in the larger political, social and economic perspective. Inspiring as her life was, she egged on the urban educated women to give every moment of their spare time to the poor women and bring the message of hope and cheer

14 Amrit Kaur, *Challenges to Women*, New Literature Publishing House, Allahabad, 1946, p.91

that would bring about a positive change in their lives.¹⁵

According to her, the deep poverty of India and deeper ignorance were mainly responsible for the distressful condition of Indian women. She encouraged women to take up social service to help build up a national structure which shall have moral rather than material values as its foundations. She identified three major social impediments of women of her times namely: child marriage, polygamy and purdah.

With regard to child marriage, she found no remedy except education and more education for the people. In the case of polygamy too she felt that not until women themselves realize that polygamy is degrading to their status will they be able to make the man realise that it is wrong. She felt that if women are educated, they will not bow to custom and usage and would be open to social reforms. She desisted women from indulging in acts that detract from the dignity of womanhood and lower their moral stature.

The system of purdah was widely prevalent in the times of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. She could not understand why women would cling to it when it was detrimental to their physical, moral and intellectual wellbeing.¹⁶

Her opinion was that Indian women should frame a new code of laws relating to marriage, inheritance, guardianship, divorce etc. and any women irrespective of her religion should be governed by it. She initiated the debate on universal civil code, before the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was an ardent believer in the equal role of women in public life but rejected the principle of reservation in the case of both minorities and women. In those days of vote seeking and exploitation of social differences, caste, religion and ethnic origin, it is pertinent to recall what Amrit Kaur told the Constituent Assembly's committee on minorities :

“the primary duty of the committee appointed to look into the problems of minorities is to suggest such ways and means as will help to

15 Ibid.,p.67

16 Amrit Kaur, To Women, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1945, p.6

eradicate the evils of separatism, rather than expedients or palliatives which might, in the long run, only contribute to its perpetuation.”¹⁷ Amrit Kaur added:

“Privileges and safeguards really weaken those who demand them. They are a definite bar to unity, without which there can be no peace.”¹⁸

Strongly holding on to her principles, she did not hesitate to criticise Jawahar Lal Nehru over the composition of the working committee of the Indian National Congress as he included a number of socialists but not a single woman member. Amends were soon made. Of the 29 sub committees formed by the National Planning Committee to examine and make recommendations on various economic and social problems, the sub-committee on women’s role in a planned economy was the largest. Amrit Kaur was an articulate and persuasive person, who drew attention to the concern of women empowerment in the field of political participation.

Health and hygiene was the first general issue that Amrit Kaur highlighted in her writings. She examined the plight of the poor women who could not afford the expensive treatments of the hospitals and were themselves ignorant of the elementary rules of hygiene and prevention of diseases. The indigenous midwives were held responsible for the maternal mortality rates. She encouraged women from affluent families to take up the occupations of doctors and nurses and insisted on medical examination of all school going children. She founded an anti-tuberculosis centre as also the centre for child welfare at Jallundhar as early as 1934. She was a member of the Indian Society for the prevention of leprosy and the chairman of the Indian Red Cross Society.

Thus, the All India Women’s Conference was a product of the deliberations among India’s most enlightened women who were great social reformers and were devoted to public life.

17 Amrit Kaur, Selected Speeches and Writings, Archer Publications, New Delhi, 2006,p.95
18 Ibid