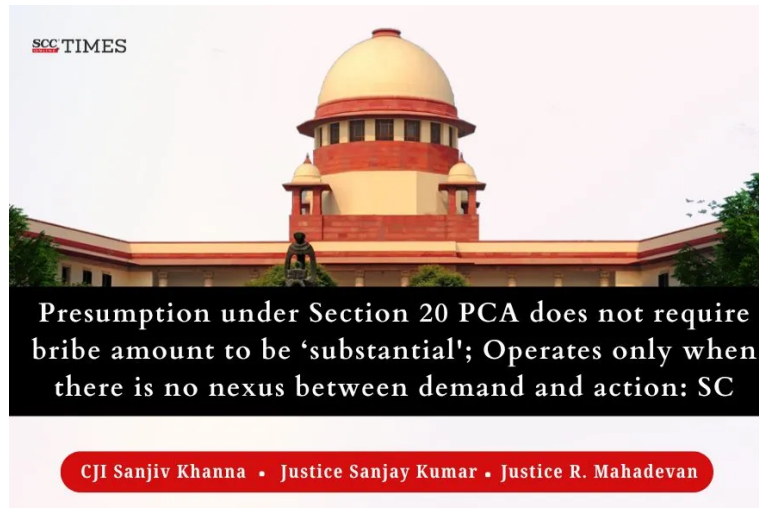


The Founding Mothers of the Indian Constitution: The 15 Women that shaped the Indian Republic

SCC scconline.com/blog/post/2024/11/26/the-founding-mothers-of-the-indian-constitution-the-15-women-that-shaped-the-indian-republic

November 26, 2024



As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Indian Constitution, today, the time is ripe to reflect on the origin, evolution, and the future of our constitutional democracy. In the words of Granville Austin, the Indian Constitution is first and foremost a social document. It embodies the values of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, and secularism. It is one of the most dynamic and evolving Constitutions in the world. The Indian Constitution has managed to keep a culturally diverse and vast country together for 75 years. The world marvels at the durability, flexibility, and effectiveness of the Indian Constitution.

Women members of the Constituent Assembly

On this historic day, we must recall, recognise, and pay tribute to the 299 members, who tirelessly worked for 2 years 11 months and 17 days to draft one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. Popular narratives have made us believe that only men were the architects of the Indian Constitution. We, as a nation, have certainly forgotten about the remarkable contributions made by the 15 exceptional women members of the Constituent Assembly (Assembly). The women belonged to diverse backgrounds and fought many battles to shape the Indian Constitution. However, none of these women were a part of the Drafting Committee of the Assembly.

The women members of the Assembly were Ammu Swaminathan, Dakshayani Velayudhan, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Durgabai Deshmukh, Hansa Jivraj Mehta, Kamla Chaudhry, Leela Roy, Malati Choudhury, Purnima Banerjee, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Renuka Ray, Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kriplani, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Annie Mascarene. They were lawyers, reformists, and freedom fighters and most of them were a part of the feminist movement.

According to an analysis by PRS Legislative Research, most of the women that constituted the Assembly belonged to the upper caste, upper class and were literate. Out of the 15 women, only one was Muslim and another Dalit. The then United Provinces sent four women, the highest number of women to the Constituent Assembly. G Durgabai (Madras), Begum Aizaz Rasul (United Provinces) and Renuka Ray (West Bengal) spoke the most in the Assembly debates. The zeal and contribution of the women members of the Assembly to discussions and debates on issues ranging from reservations to the Uniform Civil Code were unparalleled. Their contributions had a significant impact on several issues, such as gender equality, individual freedoms, decentralisation, and social justice.

Significant contributions of Women Leaders of the Constituent Assembly

Ammu Swaminathan

Ammukutty, as she was fondly called was a courageous social worker and political leader. Through her work, she was fearless in both thought and action, a quality that was evident throughout her lifetime as both a social worker and a politician. She worked towards the establishment of the Women's India Association (WIA). She was a strong advocate of women's rights and called for reform of laws related to succession, inheritance, and marriage. She was elected to the Assembly in 1946 and made contributions to the debates on fundamental rights and directive principles of State policy.

Annie Mascarene

Mascarene represented the Princely State of Travancore and Cochin Union in the Assembly. She was a lawyer and a prominent leader of the movements for independence and the integration of Princely States. She majorly contributed to the debates on federalism.

Dakshayani Velayudhan

Velayudhan was the youngest and the only Dalit woman to be elected to the Assembly. At 34 years of age, she was one of the youngest members of the assembly. In the Assembly, she vehemently opposed untouchability and raised her voice in support of the core principle of decentralisation of power in the governance structure.

Begum Aizaz Rasul

Begum was the only Muslim woman member of the Assembly. In the year 1937, she won her first election from a non-reserved seat in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council. She firmly stood in opposition to minority reservations. She dedicated her life for the upliftment of the marginalised by becoming their voice.

Durgabai Deshmukh

Deshmukh was a prominent lawyer, freedom fighter, social reformer, and politician, who played a huge role in organising women satyagrahis in the Civil Disobedience Movement. She was imprisoned three times between 1930 and 1933. Throughout her life, she promoted women's rights. She laid emphasis on the need to set up separate family courts in India.

Hansa Jivraj Mehta

Mehta was a social activist and feminist. She was the founder of Desh Sevika Dal. She served on the assembly and was a member of several committees, including the Fundamental Rights Sub-Committee. She was a reformist and a strong advocate of women's rights. She was the President of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) for one year in 1946, where she proposed a Charter for Women's Rights and Duties. On 15-8-1947, a few minutes after midnight, she presented the national flag to the Assembly, which was the first flag to fly over independent India.

Kamla Chaudhry

Kamla Chaudhry was a Hindi story writer. She actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 and was arrested several times. She encouraged the education of girls in villages and backward areas. After the adoption of the Indian Constitution, she served as a member of the Provincial Government of India till 1952.

Leela Roy

Roy was a freedom fighter and a social worker. She was the only elected woman member from Bengal to the Assembly in December 1946. However, she resigned from her post to stage a protest against the partition of India and dedicated herself to the relief and rehabilitation of refugees.

Malati Choudhury

Choudhury was elected to the Constituent Assembly from Orissa. She was the President of the Utkal Pradesh Congress Committee and was instrumental in emphasising the role of education, especially adult education. She played a vital role in India's independence movement and was imprisoned many times.

Purnima Banerjee

Banerjee was a prominent leader in the freedom movement and was a key personality in the individual satyagraha movement. She was the Secretary of the Indian National Congress Committee in Allahabad. She served in the Assembly from 1946 to 1950, representing the United Provinces and was a member of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly in 1946. She actively worked with the farmers and trade unions and rallied them in the freedom struggle. She famously led the chorus for signing "Jana Gana Mana", once it was officially adopted as the National Anthem on 24-1-1950.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

Amrit Kaur was elected to the Assembly from the United Provinces. She made a significant contribution to the Quit India Movement in 1942. She organised several protests and processions against British rule. She was imprisoned for 20 months. Her contribution to the advancement of social and political rights of women are noteworthy. She became the first Health Minister of independent India.

Renuka Ray

Ray was elected to the Assembly from West Bengal. She made several interventions in the assembly including on the rights of minorities, women's rights, and bicameral legislature. She joined the AIWC and campaigned for the advancement of women's rights and inheritance rights for women in parental property.

Sarojini Naidu

Naidu was an Indian independence activist and poetess. Naidu's poetry includes, children's poems, patriotism, romance, and tragedy. In 1925, she became the President of the Indian National Congress and encouraged many women to participate in the freedom struggle. In 1947, she was appointed as the Governor of United Provinces, a post she retained until her death.

Sucheta Kripalani

Kripalani played a prominent role in the Quit India Movement of 1942. She established the women's wing of the Congress party in 1940. In 1946, she was elected to the Assembly from the United Provinces. Kripalani sang Vande Mataram during the independence session of the Assembly. She also rose to become India's first woman Chief Minister.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit

Pandit was a pioneering policymaker, activist, minister, ambassador, and diplomat who revolutionised the role of women in nation building. In 1937, she became the first female Indian Cabinet Minister and was played a key role in India's freedom struggle. She was one of the first leaders to call for an Indian Constituent Assembly to frame a Constitution. In 1953, she became the first woman President of the UN General Assembly.

Tribute to the Women Leaders of the Constituent Assembly

These 15 women leaders of the Constituent Assembly were multi-talented, dynamic, and had an indomitable spirit towards nation building. They fiercely represented the views of different parts of society by actively participating and contributing to the debates in the Assembly. They were courageous enough to overcome regressive social norms and age-old practices of patriarchy and child marriage to become the voice of the marginalised sections of society. It is henceforth, of utmost importance to recognise the diversity of the Assembly by paying tribute to the forgotten women leaders that framed the Indian Constitution and shaped our constitutional democracy. An acknowledgement of their

efforts is most likely to encourage greater participation of women at all echelons of electoral politics, decision-making, policy formulation and governance towards the fulfilment of the constitutional values of justice, liberty and equality for one and all.

Image Source: <https://cmsadmin.amritmahotsav.nic.in/blogdetail.htm?48>

***Associate Professor of Constitutional Law at O.P. Jindal Global University;
Chevening Scholar**