

## Women's Participation in the Constitution Building process of India

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The Constituent Assembly of India was a sovereign body, which was formed on the recommendations of the Cabinet Mission which visited India in 1946 to draft a Constitution for the country. On the basis of the framework provided by the Cabinet Mission, a Constituent Assembly was constituted on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 1946. The Constitution making body was elected by the Provincial Legislative Assembly constituting of 389 members. All sections of the Indian society got representation in the Constituent Assembly in spite of limited suffrage. The first meeting of the Constituent Assembly took place on December 9, 1946 at New Delhi with Dr Sachidanand being elected as the interim President of the Assembly. However, on December 11, 1946, Dr. Rajendra Prasad was elected as the President and H.C. Mukherjee as the Vice-President of the Constituent Assembly. Among the 389 members of the assembly, only 15 were women. This makes the representation of women less than 4% here. While we all remember Dr. B R Ambedkar as the Father of the Constitution and other pioneering male members who helped draft the Indian Constitution, the contribution of the fifteen female members of the Constituent Assembly is little known. Each one of them broke the glass ceiling way before it even became a 'thing'. From fighting child marriage to working relentlessly to uplift those who were in weaker economic, financial, and social positions—these freedom fighters, lawyers, reformists, and politicians did extraordinary work and as a part of the assembly, helped craft a politically balanced republic. This article provides facts and information on female members of constituent assembly of India, women who helped drafting the constitution.

### 1. Ammu Swaminathan

Ammu Swaminathan was a social worker and freedom fighter and politician. She was born in 1894 in Palakkad district of Kerala. She formed the *Women's India Association* in 1917 in Madras. She became ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi and participated in independence

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movement. She became a part of the *Constituent Assembly* from the Madras Constituency in 1946. In a speech during the discussion on the motion by Dr B R Ambedkar to pass the draft Constitution on November 24, 1949, Ammu said, “*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.*”

## 2. Dakshayani Velayudhan

Dakshayani was born on 4th July 1912 on Bolgatty island of Cochin. She belonged to untouchable dalit and extremely unprivileged class. The Pulaya community to which she belonged didn't have the privilege to wear cloth on upper half of body. The very basic and fundamental facility like schools, libraries, hospitals and other public places were not accessible to this community. She fought for her rights and became the first woman of her community to wear the upper half cloth on her body. She also became the first dalit woman to become science graduate in India. Despite facing innumerable odds, she excelled and completed her graduation in 1935 and was later elected as only dalit woman member of constituent assembly of India in 1946 representing Madras province. After giving her input in constituent assembly and creation of constitution, she also worked as member of provisional parliament from 1946 to 1952. Dakshayani sided with B R Ambedkar on many issues related to the Scheduled Caste community during the Constituent Assembly debates.

## 3. Begum Aizaz Rasul

She was born in year 1908 in Malerkotla, Sangrur district of Punjab State. She belonged to Muslim League. She was member of UP legislative assembly and also served as Deputy President of Council (1937-40). She was one of the 28 members of Muslim League who were members of constituent assembly. In fact Begum Rasul was the only muslim woman to become member of constituent assembly. She joined Congress when Muslim League Indian branch was dissolved in 1950. She was the member of advisory committee on Fundamental rights and

minority subcommittee. She was equivocal with Maulana Azad in condemning the separate electoral reservations based on religion for minorities. In 2000, she was awarded *Padma Bhushan* for her contribution to social work.

#### 4. Durgabai Deshmukh

Durgabai Deshmukh was born on 15 July 1909 in Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh. She was social activist for women's cause, politician and known for her contribution in freedom struggle. She was also member of Planning Commission of India post independence. She also started *Balika Hindi Pathshala* in Rajahmundry to impart hindi education in southern region of India. She was ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi and quite inspired by gandhian philosophy. She participated non-cooperation movement at the age of 12 years. Being a lawyer by profession she contributed in legal aspects of constitution. In 1975, she was awarded the *Padma Vibhushan*.

#### 5. Hansa Jivraj Mehta

Hansa Jivraj Mehta was social reformist, activist, freedom fighter and great writer. She also worked as president of All India Women's conference in year 1946 before getting nominated to constituent assembly. She was also the member of Fundamental Rights subcommittee. She represented Bombay state in constituent assembly. She was known for her campaign to change the UN human rights universal declaration from "all men are born free and equal" to "all human beings are born free and equal".

#### 6. Kamla Chaudhary

She was born in an affluent family of Lucknow. She joined the nationalists and was an active participant in the *Civil Disobedience Movement* launched by Gandhiji in 1930. She was vice-president of the *All India Congress Committee* in its fifty-fourth session and was elected as a

member of the Lok Sabha in the late seventies. She was also a celebrated fiction writer and her stories usually dealt with women's inner worlds or the emergence of India as a modern nation.

## 7. Leela Roy

Leela Roy was born in Goalpara, Assam in October 1900. She graduated from *Bethune College* in 1921 and became assistant secretary to the *All Bengal Women's Suffrage Committee* and arranged meetings to demand women's rights. In 1923, with her friends, she founded the *Dipali Sangha* and established schools which became centres of political discussion in which noted leaders participated. Later, in 1926, the *Chhatri Sangha*, 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. She became the editor of a journal, *Jayashree*, which had the blessing of Rabindranath Tagore. In 1937, she joined the *Congress* and in the next year, founded the *Bengal Provincial Congress Women's Organisation*. She became a member of the women's subcommittee formed by Subash Chandra Bose and when Bose went to jail in 1940, she was nominated the editor of the *Forward Bloc Weekly*. Before leaving India, Netaji gave complete charge of party activities to Leela Roy and her husband. In 1947, she founded the *Jatiya Mahila Sanghati*, a women's organisation in West Bengal. In 1960, she became the chairwoman of the new party formed with the merger of the *Forward Bloc (Subhasist)* and the *Praja Socialist Party*.

## 8. Malati Choudhury

Malati Choudhury was born in 1904 to a distinguished family in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). In the year 1921, at the age of 16, Malati Choudhury was sent to *Santiniketan* where she got admitted to *Viswa-Bharati*. During the *Salt Satyagraha*, Malati Choudhury, joined the *Indian National Congress* and participated in the movement. She educated and communicated with the people to create a favourable environment for *Satyagraha*.

In 1933, she formed *Utkal Congress Samajvadi Karmi Sangh* which later came to be known as the Orissa Provincial Branch of the *All India Congress Socialist Party*. In 1934, she joined

Gandhiji in his famous “padayatra” in Orissa. She set up several organisations such as the *Bajiraut Chhatravas* for the upliftment of vulnerable communities in Odisha. She protested against the proclamation of Emergency by Indira Gandhi and was eventually imprisoned.

### 9. Purnima Banerjee

Purnima Banerjee was the secretary of the *Indian National Congress* committee in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. She was one among a radical network of women from Uttar Pradesh who stood at the forefront of the freedom movement in late 1930’s and 40’s. She was arrested for her participation in the *Satyagraha* and *Quit India Movement*. One of the more striking aspects of Purnima Banerjee’s speeches in the *Constituent Assembly* was her steadfast commitment to a socialist ideology. As secretary for the city committee, she was responsible for engaging and organizing trade unions, *kisan* meetings and work towards greater rural engagement.

### 10. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

Amrit Kaur was born on 2nd Feb 1889 in Lucknow, United Provinces (present Uttar Pradesh) State. She was a freedom fighter and imminent gandhian. She was the first woman minister with cabinet rank post independence. She worked as Health Minister in first Nehru cabinet. She was one of the most prominent members of constituent assembly that shaped the Indian constitution. Amrit Kaur represented Central Provinces & Berar state in constituent assembly. She was the member of Advisory committee and Fundamental Rights subcommittee. She was firm believer of women’s education, their participation in sports and their healthcare. When she died in 1964, *The New York Times* called her “*a princess in her nation’s service*”.

### 11. Renuka Ray

Renuka Ray in 1934 as legal secretary of the AIWC, submitted a document titled ‘*Legal Disabilities of Women in India; A Plea for a Commission of Enquiry*’. This articulated the AIWC’s disappointment with the treatment of the *Sharda Bill* and their commitment to the legal review of the situation of women before the law in India. Renuka argued for a uniform personal

law code, saying that the position of Indian women was one of the most iniquitous in the world. From 1943 to 1946 she was a member of the *Central Legislative Assembly*, then of the *Constituent Assembly* and the *Provisional Parliament*. In 1952–57, she served on the *West Bengal Legislative Assembly* as Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation. In 1957 and again in 1962, she was the member for Malda of the Lok Sabha.

She was also President of the AIWC in 1952, served on the *Planning Commission* and on the governing body of *Visva Bharati University* in Shanti Niketan. She served as a Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation. She established the *All Bengal Women's Union* and the *Women's Coordinating Council*

## 12. Sarojini Naidu

Sarojini Naidu was born on Feb 13, 1879, in Hyderabad, India. She was the first Indian woman to be president of the *Indian National Congress* and to be appointed as an Indian state governor. She is popularly called as "*the Nightingale of India*". She studied at *King's College*, London, and later at *Girton College*, Cambridge. After some experience in the suffragist campaign in England, she was drawn to India's Congress movement and to Mahatma Gandhi's *Non-cooperation Movement*. In 1924 she travelled to Africa in the interest of Indians there and toured North America, lecturing on the Congress movement, in 1928–29. Back in India, her anti-British activity brought her a number of prison sentences (1930, 1932 and 1942–43). She accompanied Gandhi to London for the inconclusive second session of the *Round Table Conference* in 1931. Sarojini Naidu was also known for her literary prowess and in 1914 she was elected a fellow of the *Royal Society of Literature*.

## 13. Sucheta Kriplani

Sucheta Kriplani was born in 1908 in present-day Haryana's Ambala town. She is especially remembered for her role in the *Quit India Movement* of 1942. Kripalani also established the women's wing of the Congress party in 1940. Post-independence, Kripalani's political stint included serving as an MP from New Delhi and then also as the Minister of Labour, Community

Development and Industry in Uttar Pradesh's state government. She took over as the chief minister of UP from Chandra Bhanu Gupta and occupied the top post till 1967. She was India's first woman Chief Minister.

#### 14. Vijalakshami Pandit

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was born in Allahabad on August 18, 1900, and she was the sister of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Pandit's long career in politics officially began with her election to the *Allahabad Municipal Board*. In 1936, she was elected to the *Assembly of the United Provinces*, and in 1937 became minister of local self-government and public health—the first Indian woman ever to become a cabinet minister. In September 1953, she was appointed as the first woman and the first Asian to be elected president of the *U.N. General Assembly*.

#### 15. Annie Mascarene

Annie Mascarene was born on 6th June 1902 at Trivandrum. She was a member of the Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly between 1948 and 1952 where she served briefly as a Minister in charge of Health and Power. Mascarene represented the Princely State of Travancore and Cochin Union in the Constituent Assembly. In the Assembly she spoke on the issue of federalism. On 18th November 1949, a few days before the adoption of the Constitution, Mascarene supported the federal framework of the Constitution with a strong centre. Mascarene was elected to the first Lok Sabha as an independent candidate. She was the first woman from Kerala to have been elected to the Lok Sabha where she raised concerns about under representation of women in politics.

To conclude, we can say that women have been conquering every possible hurdle with grace for several decades now and these fifteen women are very good role models for women of today. While we celebrate and applaud women who break the glass ceiling today, we must also look back at history and learn about how the women then started it all. They have left an undeniable and immortal impact on the country and the world with their hard work and sacrifice, and this should never go unnoticed!