

Of ‘Representative Women’ and ‘Women Representatives’: Debating Women’s Reservations in India’s Last Colonial Constitution, 1930-35

Mrinalini Sisodia Wadhwa CC’24 | Heinrich Global Fellowship | Supervisor: Professor Susan Pedersen

Introduction

From Postwar Upheaval to a New Constitution

Early twentieth-century British India saw a diverse cast of activists lay claim to rights, from nationalists in the Indian National Congress demanding autonomy to minority groups seeking political representation and social reform. These efforts only intensified in response to the British government’s crackdown on Indian political activism in the aftermath of the First World War. In response, Britain convened a series of reform committees and **Roundtable Conferences**, inviting representatives of major Indian political and social groups to set forth their demands. These efforts culminated in the **Government of India Act of 1935**, India’s last colonial constitution, which created assemblies for Indians to participate in shaping domestic policy.

Minority Representation, the ‘Woman Question,’ and Reservations

The creation of assemblies sparked a new controversy: the issue of **reservations**, i.e. reserving a certain percentage of assembly seats for members of underrepresented groups such as religious minorities, low-caste Indians, and women. Reservations split the women’s movement. Proponents argued that they were a tool to advance feminist social reform through political representation; opponents claimed they undermined the larger goal of national unity.

Project Aims

A Plurality of Approaches to ‘Women’s Representation’

This project seeks to trace how Indian women’s organizations engaged in debates over reservations, focusing on the evolving positions of representatives of the three main women’s organizations who were called to testify: the **All-India Women’s Conference (AIWC)**, **National Conference of Women in India (NCWI)**, and **Women’s India Association (WIA)**. I seek to raise the following questions:

Research Questions

1. How did the AIWC, NCWI, and WIA leaders understand **the role of ‘women representatives’** in the assemblies, specifically in relation to their social reform demands surrounding women’s marriage and property rights?
2. What was the tenor of their relationships with each other, and with their external interlocutors—male nationalists in the Congress, British political activists in Parliament and the women’s suffrage movement?
3. How did this shape their position on reservations, and anxieties about **what constituted a ‘representative woman’** who could speak for women in colonial India?



Left to right:

K. Radhabai Subbarayan, née Kudmul (1891-1960), nominated representative of the Indian women’s organizations (alongside Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz) at the 1930 Roundtable Conference and member of the AIWC;

Dr. **S. Muthulakshmi Reddy**, née Ammal (1886-1968), the appointed representative of the WIA at the 1933 hearing of the Joint Committee on Constitutional Reform and deputy president of the Madras Legislative Council until her resignation in 1930;

Rajkumari **Amrit Kaur** (1887-1964), co-founder of the AIWC and appointed representative of the AIWC at the 1933 hearing of the Joint Committee on Constitutional Reform, alongside Reddy and Mrs. Hamid Ali.

Image Sources:

Public domain
British Library

Methods, Archives & Sources

This project draws on these women’s correspondence in three British and Indian archives, alongside official committee records from the British Parliament, and publications by these women, including Muthulakshmi Reddy’s *My Experience as a Legislator* (1930) and Begum Shah Nawaz’s *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography* (1971).

Archival Sources

Crucially, missing from these sources are the private papers of two women who did not fit into post-1947 nationalist historiography: Begum Shah Nawaz (who went to Pakistan in 1947, and whose private papers are now in Lahore) and Subbarayan (who broke with Congress and the AIWC, and whose private papers have not been gathered in one collection, beyond a few letters in the British Library and LSE Women’s Library).

LSE Women’s Library: Papers of Eleanor Rathbone, particularly Rathbone’s correspondence with Reddy (7ELR/1), Subbarayan (7ELR/7), Maya Devi (7ELR/10), Lord Lothian (7ELR/13), Mrs. Hamid Ali (7ELR/18), Begum Shah Nawaz (7ELR/19), and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (7ELR/24).

British Library: Radhabai Subbarayan letters (Mss Eur F341-146)

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library: Papers of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, particularly correspondence with M.K. Gandhi, Agatha Harrison, and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence; Papers of Muthulakshmi Reddy, particularly correspondence with Margaret Cousins, M.K. Gandhi, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, and Subbarayan; Papers of Renuka Ray, particularly correspondence with M.K. Gandhi.

Secondary Sources

Key secondary sources for this project include: Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, Chapter 5; Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*; Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*; Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History*; Professor Pedersen’s *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience*, Chapter 13.

Findings & Further Study

This project reveals that national histories—that have treated the Indian women’s movement as a nationalistic monolith, which, “infected early with the spirit of national unity,” never sought reservations on the basis of gender—misrepresent (or ignore altogether) the debates that took place in the 1930s. For the 1935 Act *did* grant women’s reservations, which came out of a fierce debate between pro- and anti-reservations activists, who each formed alliances with British and Indian political leaders to advance their positions. If the organized women’s movement would disown reservations as “divisive” after 1935, it was not without substantial debate and fallout, in which women activists were pressured by nationalists into abandoning their original visions of representation, and those who refused to do so were sidelined as ‘unrepresentative’—generating controversies over women’s reservations that continue in present-day India. This project, ultimately, argues for the need to treat these women as political agents negotiating representation within the power structures of empire, and for recognizing the plurality of visions of representation that emerged—and clashed—during these debates over constitutional reform.

“Women’s women” and Pro-Reservations Alliances

Among the Indian representatives, the most support for reservations came from **Radhabai Subbarayan**, who believed reservations were the only way to ensure that women served in the assemblies and advanced social reform—fearing that otherwise Congress would not put forth female candidates. She found an ally in British parliamentarian and suffragist **Eleanor Rathbone**, whose experiences of the sidelining of female political leaders after women’s suffrage in Britain made her believe reservations were the only practical way to ensure women served in government. **Muthulakshmi Reddy** originally supported this position and corresponded with Rathbone, but changed her view in the early 1930s to align more closely with the nationalists after Britain’s latest crackdown on Congress and M.K. Gandhi.

“[They] do not represent... a large section of British... or... Indian women”: An Anti-Reservations Fallout

In response to this pro-reservations lobbying, leaders of the organized women’s organizations—that had been convinced to drop their demand for reservations by Congress leaders to drop the demand for reservations in 1931—formed alternative partnerships to remove reservations from the new constitution. This included **Rajkumari Amrit Kaur**, who worked with a group of British women’s activists called the **Six-Point Group** to urge for the reversal of reservations in 1933, criticizing the capacity of women like Subbarayan to speak for the ‘women of India’ without a senior role in organizations like the AIWC.

Reviving Reservations

The 1935 act granted reservations to women *within* religious communities rather than women at large—a position most activists saw as divisive. After independence in 1947, AIWC leaders appointed to the Constituent Assembly rejected reservations for women, claiming (misleadingly) they never sought “special privileges.” Yet reservations continue to spark controversy: a landmark **1971** report endorsed reservations to combat women’s serial political underrepresentation, a **1992** constitutional amendment reserved seats for women in *panchayats* (village governments), and a **2023** act has now reserved a third of seats in Parliament for female candidates.

Acknowledgements:

I am very grateful to Professor Pedersen for her mentorship and advice on this project, which has been in the works since I first learnt of Rathbone’s correspondence with Reddy, Subbarayan, and Kaur about reservations in her Fall 2020 Twentieth-Century Britain lecture; Dean Ariella Lang and Dr. Ashley Niall in the Undergraduate Research and Fellowships Office for their guidance on securing summer funding; the Heinrich family and selection committee for generously supporting this research; and the archivists in London and New Delhi for opening up these collections during my time there.

More information:

Available via email at mw2706@columbia.edu or at college.columbia.edu/news/spotlight-discovery