

Women Who Help to Draft the Indian Constitution

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Abstract:

The making of the Indian Constitution is often remembered for the leadership of figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Patel. However, the role of women in this nation-building process remains equally significant.

The Indian Constituent Assembly, formed in 1946, was composed of representatives from across the country and was responsible for drafting the Constitution until 1949. Its members were not directly elected by the people; instead, they were chosen indirectly by the provincial assemblies, whose own members had been elected through an indirect process under the Government of India Act of 1935 during the 1937 provincial elections. Although only 15 out of 299 total members were women, they made significant contributions to the framing of the Constitution and strongly championed women's rights. These Fifteen remarkable women came from diverse backgrounds—freedom fighters, social reformers, educationists, writers, and activists who shared a common vision of justice, equality, and dignity.

Keywords: Women, Indian Constitution, Constituent Assembly, Provincial elections, Government of India Act 1935.

INTRODUCTION

The people of India did not directly elect the Constituent Assembly. Instead, its members were chosen indirectly by the provincial assemblies, whose representatives had themselves been elected through an indirect system under the Government of India Act of 1935. The provincial elections of 1937, conducted on a limited franchise, excluded a large number of Indians from voting particularly women and members of lower castes. At the time, women were significantly underrepresented in politics and had limited access to education and employment, contributing to their minimal presence in the Constituent Assembly.

The Constitution of India is one of the longest and most comprehensive in the world. At present, the Constitution contains a preamble, 448 articles in 25 parts, and 12 schedules; at its adoption, it comprised 395 articles in 22 parts and 8 schedules. The Constituent Assembly took nearly three years—2 years, 11 months, and 18 days to complete the historic task of drafting the Constitution. It met in 11 sessions over 165 days, devoting 114 of those days to debating the Draft Constitution.

Under the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, the Assembly consisted of 299 members elected indirectly by the Provincial Legislative Assemblies, including 70 nominees from 29 princely states. Of the 299 members who drafted the Constitution, only 15 were women, less than 5% of the total. In a society that once celebrated matriarchal traditions and worshipped goddesses, the inclusion of only 15 women

reflects the deeply patriarchal nature of the times, despite professed ideals of equality.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To study the formation of Indian Constitution Assembly.
- 2) To study the contribution of women into drafting the Indian Constitution.
- 3) To create awareness about 15 women who was member of Indian Constitution Assembly.

Research Methodology: In order to conduct this research, the information used was primarily based on textual sources, including debate in Constituent assembly, books, essays, and papers published in a variety of national and international journals. Hence, the researcher used secondary data.

15 WOMEN WHO HELP TO DRAFT THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION

1. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949)//Constituency: Bihar

The first woman to preside over the Indian National Congress at its Kanpur session in 1925, widely celebrated as the Nightingale of India, was a distinguished poet, freedom fighter, and political leader. She pursued higher education at King's College, London, and later at Girton College, Cambridge. Throughout the freedom struggle, she was arrested multiple times for her activism. In 1908, at the Indian National Social Conference in Madras, she spoke passionately about improving the conditions of widows. In 1917, she led the All-India Women's Deputation to meet E. S. Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, demanding voting rights for women. That same year, she joined Annie Besant in founding the Women's India Association.

In 1931, she accompanied Mahatma Gandhi to London for the second Round Table Conference. Later, she was appointed to the Constituent Assembly from Bihar, where she served on the ad hoc committee responsible for the design of the national flag, advocated for civil liberties, women's rights, and minorities.

2. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (1889–1964)//Constituency: Central Provinces and Berar

She was a dedicated social worker, an influential politician and Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and when his call for freedom, she abandoned her studies at Oxford and back to India and serve as his secretary. In 1927, she co-founded the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) along with Margaret Cousins, later serving as its Secretary and, in 1933, as its President. From 1934 onward, she lived in Gandhi's ashram. Her participation in the Dandi March in 1930 led to her arrest by British authorities. She further demonstrated her commitment to the Quit India Movement in 1942 by resigning from the British-appointed Education Advisory Board.

She was elected to the Constituent Assembly from the Central Provinces and Berar, where she played a crucial role in ensuring constitutional equality for women—particularly through Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Indian Constitution. She also contributed to the inclusion of the Uniform Civil Code under the Directive Principles of State Policy. As India's first Health Minister, a position she held for ten years, she established the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) and served as its first president.

3. Hansa Jivraj Mehta(1897-1995)//Constituency: Bombay

She was a prominent writer, social reformer, activist, and educator. In 1937, she contested the Bombay Legislative Council elections from the General category and not only won but served on the council until 1949. She became President of the All India Women's Conference in 1946, during which she drafted the

Indian Women's Charter of Rights and Duties, a significant document that demanded gender equality and expanded civil rights for women. As a relentless advocate for women's political and social empowerment, she played an important role in shaping discussions on fundamental rights in the Indian Constitution and was elected to the Constituent Assembly as a member of the Congress from Bombay Constituency. She served on the Advisory Committee, the Sub-Committee on Fundamental Rights, and the Provincial Constitution Committee.

Hansa Mehta strongly supported the idea of a Uniform Civil Code, criticized the practice of purdah as oppressive, and opposed quotas or separate electorates for women, believing firmly in equal citizenship. Notably, she presented the National Flag on behalf of the women of India. Beyond India, she made a lasting global impact at the United Nations: as a member of the UN Human Rights Commission, she was instrumental in changing the phrase "all men are born free and equal" to "all human beings," ensuring universal gender-inclusive language in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

4. Durgabai Deshmukh (1909-1981)//Constituency: Madras

She was a pioneering freedom fighter, lawyer, social reformer, and champion of women's rights who played a crucial role in shaping India's early social welfare landscape. From the young age of twelve, she actively participated in the Indian freedom movement, even quitting school to protest the imposition of English as the medium of instruction during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922). At just fourteen, she volunteered at the Indian National Congress session in Kakinada. She later took part in the Salt Satyagraha from Madras in May 1930 and, during her imprisonment, learned English and completed an M.A. from Andhra University. She also studied law at Madras University and briefly practiced at the bar, gaining recognition for her commitment to justice.

In 1936, she founded the Andhra Mahila Sabha in Madras to help young Telugu girls prepare for matriculation examinations, and she also established and edited the Telugu journal "Andhra Mahila". As a representative from Madras in the Constituent Assembly, she served on the Committee on Rules and Procedure and the Steering Committee, advocating strongly for judicial independence and measures to combat women trafficking. She also argued that Hindustani, rather than highly Sanskritised Hindi, should be adopted as India's national language. She also served on the Planning Commission and was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in recognition of her lifelong dedication to public service and social reform.

5. Begum Aizaz Rasul (1908-1970)//Constituency: United Provinces

She was the only Muslim woman member of the Indian Constituent Assembly and a prominent voice for minority and women's rights during the framing of the Constitution. Born into the princely family of Malerkotla in British Punjab, she entered politics early, often accompanying her father to political meetings and even serving as his secretary for a brief period, an unusual opportunity for women of her time. After the enactment of the Government of India Act of 1935, she and her husband joined the Muslim League, where she quickly emerged as an articulate and respected leader. Following the League's dissolution in India after Partition, she joined the Indian National Congress in 1950. As a member of the Muslim League representing the United Provinces, she was elected to the Constituent Assembly. Although she did not serve on any specific committee, she played an active role in debates concerning the national language, reservations, property rights, and minority protections. She strongly emphasized the need for "just compensation" when property was acquired by the state and firmly

opposed separate electorates for minorities, arguing that such divisions weakened national unity. Beyond constitutional issues, she championed women's equality, speaking against discriminatory personal laws related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. After independence, she continued her political career, becoming the first woman Leader of the Opposition in the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly and later serving on the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Council. Her autobiography, "From Purdah to Parliament", remains an important reflection on the experiences of women in early Indian politics.

6. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900-1990)//Constituency: United Provinces

She was an influential diplomat, politician, freedom fighter, and a pioneering figure in global diplomacy. A distinguished member of the Nehru family, she became the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet position when she served as Minister for Local Self-Government and Public Health in the United Provinces in 1937. Elected to the Constituent Assembly from the United Provinces as a representative of the Indian National Congress, she participated in shaping the political vision of independent India and strongly advocated the emergence of a "new Asia" in the post-Raj world order. Deeply committed to internationalism, she later served as India's ambassador to several key countries including the Soviet Union, the United States, Mexico, and Ireland. In 1953, she achieved global recognition by becoming the first woman president of the United Nations General Assembly, an unprecedented accomplishment that underscored her diplomatic stature. A vocal supporter of human rights, anti-colonial solidarity, and gender equality, she also played a significant role in the Non-Aligned Movement's early diplomatic engagements.

7. Annie Mascarene (1902-1963)//Constituency: Travancore and Cochin Union

She was a pioneering nationalist leader from Kerala and one of the earliest women to play a significant role in the region's struggle for independence. She was born into a Latin Catholic family in Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Princely State Travancore). She became the first woman to join the Travancore State Congress and the first woman to serve on its Working Committee. As one of the foremost leaders of the movement in Travancore, she actively mobilized people against monarchical rule and worked toward the democratic integration of the state with the Indian Union. A committed advocate of women's rights, she campaigned for legal reforms to protect women from exploitation and discrimination. Between 1949 and 1950, she briefly served as the Minister in Charge of Health and Power in the Travancore-Cochin government. Annie Mascarene firmly believed in the right of the people to elect their representatives without interference from any authority, reflecting her deep commitment to democratic governance. After independence, she was elected to the first Lok Sabha in 1952 from Thiruvananthapuram, becoming one of the first women Members of Parliament in independent India. A strong supporter of national unity, she expressed gratitude to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel for integrating India "without bloodshed," recognizing his decisive role in national consolidation. Her legacy remains significant in Kerala's political history as a courageous freedom fighter, social reformer, and trailblazing woman leader.

8. Purnima Banerjee (1911–1951)//Constituency: United Provinces

She was a courageous freedom fighter, political organizer, and women's rights advocate whose contributions left a lasting imprint on India's nationalist movement. Actively involved in both the Individual Satyagraha and the Quit India Movement, she was repeatedly imprisoned for her participation

in civil disobedience campaigns. A committed member of the Congress Socialist Party as well as the Indian National Congress, she worked tirelessly to strengthen grassroots political mobilization. As Secretary of the Allahabad City Congress Committee, she focused particularly on rural engagement, emphasizing the need to involve peasants, agricultural laborers, and marginalized communities in the freedom struggle. Appointed to the Constituent Assembly from the United Provinces, she played a thoughtful role in constitutional debates. She argued that the preventive detention clause in Draft Article 15A (now Article 22) must include strict time limits on detention without trial, and further insisted that families of detained wage-earners be provided maintenance allowances. During discussions on the Preamble, she firmly articulated that Indian sovereignty derives from the people themselves, not from any external authority and she believed that the age limit of Upper House (Rajya Sabha) should be reduced from 35 to 30 years. Beyond her constitutional contributions, Purnima Banerjee was deeply engaged in social reform efforts, advocating for women's education, labor rights, and economic self-reliance. As the younger sister of freedom fighter Aruna Asaf Ali, she was part of a remarkable family tradition of political activism, and her early death in 1951 cut short a life dedicated to democratic ideals and social justice.

9. Renuka Ray (1904–1997)//Constituency: West Bengal

She was a distinguished parliamentarian, social reformer, and one of the leading women voices in the framing of independent India's constitutional and social policy landscape. She played a key role in shaping discussions on fundamental rights in the Indian Constitution, consistently advocating equality, justice, and the removal of gender-based discrimination. In 1934, while serving as Secretary of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), she authored the influential document "Legal Disabilities of Women in India: A Plea for a Commission of Inquiry," which became a foundational text calling for legal reform. Throughout her career, she campaigned actively against women trafficking, worked to improve the living and working conditions of female laborers, and spoke extensively on women's access to property, education, and economic independence. Within the Constituent Assembly, she contributed to debates on women's rights, minority protections, and provisions relating to a bicameral legislature, while strongly supporting the enactment of a Uniform Civil Code to ensure gender-equitable personal laws. In 1949, she represented India at the United Nations General Assembly, where she spoke on issues of social welfare and human rights. After independence, she served in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly and later in the Lok Sabha, and also chaired the Central Social Welfare Board. Renowned for her integrity and reformist zeal, Renuka Ray's work helped shape both India's constitutional vision and the institutional foundations of women's welfare in the decades that followed.

10. Leela Ray (1900–1970)//Constituency: West Bengal

She was a pioneering social reformer, staunch feminist, educationist, and influential political activist who worked closely with Subhas Chandra Bose. A fierce advocate for women's education and empowerment, she founded the Dipali Sangha in 1923, an organization dedicated to women's upliftment. Under its patronage, she established the Dipali School and later helped create twelve free primary schools to expand educational access for girls. In 1928, she went on to found Nari Shiksha Mandir and Shiksha Bhavan institutions that became important centers for women's learning. Demonstrating her commitment to inclusive education, she also established the Qamrunnessa Girls' School in Dhaka for Muslim women, along with several hostels for girls in Calcutta.

Leela Roy believed deeply in women's economic independence and promoted vocational training through the Dipali Exhibitions, which provided women with opportunities to learn skilled trades. Her political involvement was equally significant: she was the only woman elected from British Bengal to the Constituent Assembly on 9 December 1946. However, she resigned a few months later in protest against the partition of India, reflecting her strong nationalist principles. Beyond her role in the Assembly, she contributed to shaping educational reforms, edited several journals including "Jayashree"—which amplified women's voices—and participated actively in the Forward Bloc and the freedom struggle. Her lifelong dedication made her one of the most influential women leaders in Bengal's socio-political history.

11. Dakshayani Velayudhan (1912–1978)//Constituency: Madras

She was born into the Pulaya community, an agrarian Dalit caste, on Bolgatty Island near Cochin. As the only Dalit woman in the Indian Constituent Assembly and its youngest member at just 34, she represented a historic breakthrough in the nation-building process. She was the first Dalit woman in India to earn a college degree, completing her studies in chemistry at Maharaja's College, Cochin, where she was also the only woman studying science. Her early experiences of caste discrimination, and her family's determined resistance to oppressive customs, deeply shaped her political consciousness. She belonged to the first generation of women in Kerala who were permitted to cover their upper body after long struggles against caste-based dress codes.

Nominated to the Constituent Assembly from Madras in 1945, Dakshayani became a firm and reasoned voice on issues such as the abolition of untouchability, forced labour practices, reservations, and the question of separate electorates for Dalit and she opposed because she believed in building an integrated national identity. She argued that eradicating untouchability required sustained state-led education and social reform rather than heavy penal measures alone. Beyond her constitutional role, she was a dedicated social reformer and lifelong advocate for women's education, dignity, and equal rights. After independence, she continued her work through the Kerala Legislative Council and contributed to several initiatives for Dalit upliftment, labour rights, and social justice.

12. Ammu Swaminathan (1894–1978)//Constituency: Madras

She was born into an upper-caste Nair family in Kerala and emerged as a prominent social worker and feminist leader of early 20th-century India. Alongside Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, Susie Sorabji, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Patwardhan, and Ambujammal, she co-founded the Women's India Association (WIA) in Madras in 1917, one of the earliest national women's organizations. The WIA became the first association to formally demand adult franchise for women and the extension of constitutional rights to Indian women. Though she belonged to an upper caste, she strongly opposed discriminatory caste practices and campaigned vigorously for women's equality, social reform, and the eradication of untouchability. She actively supported the Sarda Act (Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1927) and later championed various Hindu Code Bills that sought to modernize Hindu personal laws relating to inheritance, marriage, and property rights.

Elected to the Constituent Assembly in 1946 from the Madras constituency, she contributed significantly to discussions on labour protections, gender equality, and social justice. Known for her sharp wit, she once remarked that the Constitution was unnecessarily long and should ideally be concise enough "to fit into a woman's purse." She emphasized that the Constitution rests on the twin pillars of Fundamental

Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy, which guarantee essential freedoms such as speech, association, and worship while guiding the state toward social and economic welfare.

13. Kamla Chaudhary (1908–1970)//Constituency: United Provinces

She was a noted feminist, acclaimed Hindi fiction writer, and committed political activist. Her political journey began in 1930 when she joined the Indian National Congress and took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement, for which she was imprisoned. She later rose to prominence within the organization and served as the vice president at the 54th session of the All India Congress Committee. Elected to the Constituent Assembly, she contributed to discussions on women's rights, social welfare, and the need for expanding educational opportunities for women across India.

As a literary figure, she authored several influential collections of short stories, including *Unmaad* (1934), *Picnic* (1936), *Yatra* (1947) and *Bel Patra*. Her writings often explored themes such as gender inequality, the hardships faced by widows, the exploitation of peasants, and the emotional struggles of women navigating social constraints. Kamla Chaudhry's dual legacy as both a creator of bold, empathetic literature and a public leader committed to social reform continues to be recognized as an important contribution to modern Indian political and literary history.

14. Malati Choudhury (1904–1998)//Constituency: Odisha

Malati Choudhury (26 July 1904 – 15 March 1998) was a dedicated politician, social reformer, and one of Odisha's most influential women freedom fighters. She played an important role in shaping early social welfare policies and consistently championed women's rights and the upliftment of marginalized communities. Along with her husband, she supported the Indian National Congress during the Dandi March Satyagraha and became deeply involved in the national movement. In 1933, she founded the Utkal Congress Samajvadi Karmi Sangh, which later evolved into the Odisha Provincial branch of the All India Congress Socialist Party.

In 1934, she joined Mahatma Gandhi during his historic padayatra through Odisha, strengthening her commitment to grassroots activism. Over the years, she was arrested and imprisoned multiple times—during 1921, 1936, and the Quit India Movement in 1942 often alongside fellow women activists such as Ramadevi Choudhury and Sarala Devi. Beyond the independence struggle, she devoted herself to social reconstruction in Odisha. She established several institutions to support vulnerable and tribal communities, the most notable being Bajiraut Chhatravas, a hostel aimed at providing education and shelter to children from marginalized backgrounds. Known affectionately as “Maati Dei” in Odisha, Malati Choudhury's lifelong service left a lasting impact on the region's social and political landscape.

15. Sucheta Kripalani (25 June 1908 – 1 December 1974)//Constituency: United Provinces

She was a prominent freedom fighter, parliamentarian, and one of India's most respected women political leaders. Deeply involved in the struggle for independence, she worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi, especially during the Quit India Movement, where she was known for her courage and organizational strength. Elected to the Constituent Assembly from the United Provinces in 1946, she served on the Flag Presentation Committee, which ceremonially presented the first Indian national flag to the Assembly. As Secretary of the Congress Party's Relief and Rehabilitation Committee, she played a vital role in supporting and rehabilitating displaced Bengali refugees during the traumatic period of

Partition.

Sucheta Kripalani also holds a special place in history for her contribution during the midnight session on 14–15 August 1947, when she sang the first verse of “Vande Mataram”, followed by the opening lines of “Sare Jahan Se Achha” and the first verse of “Jana Gana Mana” in the Constituent Assembly. After independence, she continued her political career with distinction, eventually becoming the first woman Chief Minister of an Indian state when she assumed office in Uttar Pradesh from 1963 to 1967. A strong advocate for women’s rights, social welfare, and administrative reform, she remained dedicated to building an inclusive and democratic India throughout her public life.

CONCLUSION

Women played a meaningful and influential part in the making of the Indian Constitution. Despite being few in number, they made strong interventions in the Constituent Assembly and worked to ensure that principles of gender equality and women’s rights found a place in the final document. The Assembly itself—formed in 1946 and composed of representatives from across the country—had only 15 women among its 299 members. Yet these 15 women left a lasting impact through their speeches, proposals, and unwavering commitment to justice. They did not see themselves as speaking only for their own interests; they carried the voices and aspirations of women across India. It is equally important to reflect on the rich debates that shaped the Constitution, as they remind us of the values that were fiercely defended. Understanding and safeguarding these constitutional ideals is vital, especially today, when they may feel increasingly vulnerable.

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