UNIT 3  SUFFRAGE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Suffrage, or the right to vote, implies a very important human right especially in the contemporary democratic scenario of the world. Voting is a key political right enjoyed by people in a democracy. In different societies people had to suffer a great deal for the acquisition of this political right, particularly women. In almost every country, women achieved this political right much later than men and that too after prolonged struggle. In India, however, women were granted voting rights along with men under the new constitution upon achieving independence from British colonialism.

In 1906, Finland was the first nation in the world to give all citizens full suffrage, that is, the right to vote and to run for office. New Zealand was the first country in the world to grant all citizens the right to vote in 1893, but women did not get the right to run for the New Zealand legislature until 1919.

In the previous units you have seen how the struggle for the rights of women, both political and social, gave birth to a phenomenon called the women’s movement. Here, you will learn about how suffrage or the political right to vote became an important element of the women’s struggle for equal rights, which intensified into a movement over a period of time.
3.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of the term suffrage;
- Discuss various types and uses of the concept of suffrage;
- Critically analyse the role of suffrage in women’s movements all over the world; and
- State the contribution of suffrage in the context of the Indian women’s movement.

3.3 DEFINING SUFFRAGE

The word suffrage derives from the Latin suffragium, meaning “voting tablet”. In the present context different types of suffrage have been identified, depending on the fundamental principles involved in each, such as, universal manhood suffrage, universal suffrage and women’s suffrage, to name a few. (A Dictionary of World History, 2000)

In its simple form, suffrage implies the right to vote or the civil right to enfranchisement. The term stands for the democratic rights and liberties of people and their legal right to vote in their respective countries. In a broader sense, suffrage also implies the right to get voted. The right to run for office and the right to vote are together known as ‘full suffrage’. However, the legal right to vote need not imply that the practical right to vote is bestowed on each person automatically since having the legal claim to vote doesn’t by itself confer upon a person the opportunity to vote. As you would be aware, many a times, rights are mere paper tigers. eg. women’s right to property, especially in a patriarchy. This was true of the right to vote in early times. In this sense, it implies elections and may also mean the right to participate in a referendum. Thus, suffrage implies not only the legal right to vote but also the opportunity to vote (The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth edition, 2008), since it is evident that the legal right to vote cannot be realized unless there are opportunities to do so.

Types of Suffrage

Several types of suffrage have been identified based on the notional aspects involved in each:

Universal Suffrage

As the term suggests, this implies the unrestricted right to vote. Nevertheless there are restrictions of citizenship, age, criminality and sanity.
**Women's Suffrage**

This expression covers the right of women to vote on the same terms as men. The women who fought for this cause are known as suffragists or suffragettes.

**Equal Suffrage**

This type of suffrage refers to the removal of the special privilege a person holds in terms of the number of votes or she is entitled to, depending upon his/her wealth, social status or income; eg. this was the practice in the medieval ages in England when the nobles and Lords exercised the right to have more votes than people from the lower classes. This need not be confused with universal suffrage.

**Census Suffrage**

Under this category, the number of votes a person can give is determined by that person’s rank in the census. This might impose limitations on suffrage.

**Compulsory Suffrage**

This form of suffrage is enforced by the rule of law and those who are eligible to vote are bound to do so.

There are still various forms of exclusion from suffrage such as religious restrictions, wealth, tax, social class, nationality etc. However, the women’s movement had been able to ensure voting rights for all adult women by mid 20th century. This has been a very major achievement as earlier, women were categorically denied the right to vote the world over.

### 3.4 WORLD HISTORY OF WOMAN’S SUFFRAGE

The suffrage issue was taken up by the women’s movement in the 1870’s in the west, and in the early 20th century in India. The issue of suffrage was a political issue since its very inception. It got intertwined with the various types of views expressed by the different ideological positions that had emerged by then, and which were finding influence within feminist and women’s movements across the globe, viz. radicals, liberals, Marxists, and socialists.

The crucial question is how and why suffrage became such an important issue in the women’s struggle in the 19th century. The explanation may be found in the fact of subordination of women to men, especially in legal matters and rights. This was nothing typical of one region or country but was a phenomenon across the globe. Women had to face deprivations on all fronts. They were excluded from university education, they could not vote and had limited or no control over the financial resources of the
family. There was stiff resistance to the idea of women’s progress because men feared that the ‘new woman’ would demand equality of opportunity in all fields including education and politics.

**Box 3.1**

The term ‘new woman’ came from the title of a lecture given by the Italian feminist Maria Montessori (1870-1952), a doctor and originator of innovative schools that encouraged creativity in children. When a female Greek scientist gave her first lecture at the University of Athens, male students disrupted her lecture with shouts of ‘back to the kitchen’.

The Polish born French scientist, Marie Curie, who discovered radium and won two Noble Prizes, related the isolation and challenges of her studies in Paris in early 1890s: “It seems that life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that [our goals], at whatever cost, must be obtained” (Cited in Gutek, 2004, p. 5-7).

Even Britain’s Queen Victoria called demands by women for equal rights “on which her poor feeble sex is bent... a mad, wicked folly... forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety” (See www.historyofwomen.org).

The beginnings were difficult for women. Those demanding equal rights faced considerable opposition. The struggle for suffrage marked the beginning of the women’s movement the world over as this became the main plank in the debate over women’s rights. Right-wing political parties opposed women’s suffrage on principle. The moderate among them claimed that women could not understand political issues and left wing socialists in Catholic countries feared that if women had the right to vote they would support religious candidates. However, socialist parties and unions gave their support to women workers fighting for better wages and conditions. In France, a plummeting birth rate gave rise to a different set of concerns regarding women’s social roles. The demand for suffrage was seen as a dangerous ‘liberation’ of women from subordination to their husbands.

The struggle of the suffragettes shaped not only the women’s movement but also the concept of feminism at this time. The feminist movement developed very slowly in Europe and was most active in Britain, where women had gained the right to vote in municipal elections in 1864, and for country and parish councils six years later. In 1889, at the time of the centennial of the French Revolution, the first International Congress on
Women’s Rights and Feminine Institutions took place in Paris. By 1900, more than 850 German associations were working for women’s rights which included improved educational and employment opportunities and equal wages.

By the end of the 19th century, British women’s groups prepared a petition calling for reforms, with more than quarter of a million signatures and presented it to the Parliament. As more occupations such as jobs in department stores and teaching opened up for women, the campaign for women’s suffrage widened. The International Women’s Suffrage Alliance, constituted in Berlin in 1904, set up branches in a number of countries. It’s President, Carrie Chapman Catt, and first Vice-President, Millicent Fawcett, led the moderate wing of the British--American suffrage movement. A more militant group of feminists undertook a campaign of direct action. Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), who had been elected to the school board in Manchester, founded the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1903. Its members campaigned for female suffrage by breaking shop windows, tossing acid on the golf course and bombing the house of Liberal Party leader, David Lloyd George. Other “suffragettes”, as they were called, went on hunger strikes and upon being arrested, they were force fed or else arrested and re-arrested. In 1907, British women gained the right to serve in local government. Three years later, Parliament considered a bill that would grant the vote to single women who owned property, but the Bill was dropped. This created a lot of unrest and dissatisfaction among women and took the movement to the next level.

**Box 3.2**

The decision for the establishment of the International Alliance of Women (a non-governmental, feminist organization) was taken in Washington in 1902 by suffragists frustrated at the reluctance of the International Council of Women to support women’s suffrage. The Alliance was formally constituted in Berlin in 1904 as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Among subsequent congresses were those held in Copenhagen (1906), Amsterdam (1908), London (1909), and Stockholm (June 1911). The IWSA also started its own monthly journal, the Jus Suffragii. The IWSA, influenced by Millicent Fawcett against the militancy of suffragettes in the style of Emily Pankhurst, initially refused membership to the WSPU at their 1906 Copenhagen meeting. In the late 1920s the organization changed its name to the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, and in 1946 this was altered to its current name, International Alliance of Women: Equal Rights - Equal Responsibilities. (www.smith.edu/libraries/lib/ssc)
The leaders of the moderate wings of the British and American Suffrage Movements were President Carrie Chapman Catt and first Vice-President Millicent Fawcett of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance. They are seen here at the 1913 Budapest meeting of the Alliance with other Board members. Fawcett is seated front left, Catt is next to her. Copyright Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (123)

The suffrage movement in America was also growing by leaps and bounds and the giants of the American suffrage movement included names like Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902). They were life-long friends and partners in the suffrage movement. Both devoted their lives to the crusade because they believed that, as Anthony put it: “failure is impossible.” Neither lived to see the Nineteenth Amendment that gave women the vote passed in 1920, but the amendment was known as the ‘Anthony amendment’.
As the women’s suffrage movement developed, cooperation between the American and British women became frequent and fruitful. In a meeting held in honour of Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton in June 1883 at the Prince’s Hall in London, the latter spoke on the social, educational, political and religious position of women in America. The struggle by the British and American women was carried on by the second generation suffragists. Harriot Stanton Blatch (1856-1940), daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sylvia Pankhurst, daughter of Emmeline, (whose mothers had become close friends when Blatch lived in England), worked in close collaboration in support of the cause of suffrage. By the beginning of the First World War, marches and demonstrations were acceptable to most members of the British and American suffrage movements, provided the appropriate permits were obtained.
Fig. 3.3

**Woman Suffrage Parade, Washington, 1913**

To dramatize nationwide demand for a constitutional amendment to enfranchise women, a suffrage army, 8,000 strong, marched in grand procession in the nation’s capital on March 3, 1913, the day before President Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration. Ill-treatment of the suffragists led to a congressional investigation and brought new support for the suffrage cause. Copyright Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (125)

The role of parliamentary bodies had expanded in every Western country during the last decade before the Great War as universal manhood suffrage had come to France, Italy, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and even imperial Germany. Women’s movements became the foremost force for democratization that gained considerably during the war. They had suspended their suffrage campaigns for the duration of the conflict and at the end of the war women’s groups demanded recognition for taking the place of conscripts in factories and fields during the war. After the war, women won the right to vote in Germany, Scandinavia, ultimately in France, where the original women’s suffrage bill had failed in 1922, and other countries in Western Europe—excluding Spain, Austria, Portugal, Switzerland. Women could also vote in the newly created states of Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. The legal position of women was perhaps strongest in Britain where they voted for the first time in the elections in December 1918 and the first woman was elected to the House of Commons soon after. The Sex
Suffrage Act of 1919 opened the way for women to enter professions from which they had previously been excluded. But still, many women returned home to their domestic duties at the end of the war. In most jobs, men returning from the war replaced the women. Nonetheless, a greater variety of jobs became available to women.

**Activity:** Based on the historical overview that you have just read, create a timeline of important dates and events while specifying the country where this event took place. This will help you get a perspective on the significant developments in the struggle for suffrage in the west.

### 3.5 SUFFRAGE AS AN ISSUE OF WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

In the pre-independence era, that is, before 1947, women gradually got the right to vote worldwide. However, Indian women got the right only after Independence with the making of the Constitution of India wherein this discrimination was removed. When the suffrage movement was in full swing in the West, the process of socio-religious reform was taking place in India in which women were the main beneficiaries. As the Indian women slowly gained their self-worth, a women’s movement began to take shape. Between 1917 and 1937, women started demanding the right of political representation for Indian women. The campaign for women’s suffrage took place within the framework of the constitutional reforms of 1919 and 1935. This activity also coincided with the burgeoning national movement in the second decade of the 20th century. Given the colonial context and the very partial enfranchisement of men, the movement for women’s suffrage ran parallel to the struggle for political rights such as in the freedom struggle.

In 1917, Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montague, and the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, toured the country in order to introduce political reforms which are generally known as the ‘Montague-Chelmsford Scheme of Reforms for India’. Among the suggested reforms was one for the larger representation of Indians on the Legislative Councils and the widening of the electorate. However, no mention of women was made and the question of their rights appeared to be totally ignored. Consequently, several women and women’s groups like the Bharat Stri Mandal (normally Stree), the newly formed Women’s India Association, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, (the
latter two having also worked for suffrage in England), took advantage of
the opportunity to create a favourable opinion for women’s suffrage. Sarojini
Naidu led an all-India delegation of women in December 1917 which apprised
the imperial representatives (Montague and Chelmesford) of the awakening
of Indian women (something on the lines of the West) and registered the
demand of women to have the status of “people” (representation in the
legislative councils). The first demand of the delegation was that “when the
terms of the Indian Franchise were drawn up the word ‘people’ should be
understood as including women and that the whole should be ‘worded in
such terms as will not disqualify our sex, but allow our women the same
opportunities of representation as our men’” (Tata, n.d., p.1-2).

This marked the beginning of the Indian women’s struggle to secure political
and civil rights for all women. The Indian women’s suffrage movement had
to face rough weather right from the start as they faced the criticism from
both British officials and nationalists. The former accused them of ignoring
the poor masses of Indian women while the latter did not like their critique
of patriarchy and they were labeled as being disloyal to their culture.

In 1918, egged on by the growing fervor in the country in favour of women’s
suffrage, the Provincial Conferences (legislatures) of erstwhile Bombay and
Madras (now Mumbai and Chennai), passed resolutions to remove sex
disqualification from the then proposed reform bill. They were soon followed
by Andhra Provincial Conference, the Indian Home Rule League, the Bombay
Special National Congress and the Muslim League. In the same year, in the
Bombay Special Session of the Congress, Sarojini Naidu tried to convince
the five-thousand strong audiences about the rationale of extending the
franchise to women by emphasizing that it was scientifically and politically
sound, compatible with tradition and consistent with human rights. Dispelling
the fears of men that this might mean interference by women in their
official, civic and public duties, Naidu stressed that this would rather help
lay the foundation of national character in the hearts of children and would
instill in them ideals of national life. The 33rd Session of the Indian National
Congress was held in Delhi in 1918 and Sarladevi Chaudhurani presented the
resolution supporting the vote for women. Going beyond the assertions of
Sarojini Naidu, she contended that the “sphere of women” included
comradeship with men in all spheres of life including politics (Cited in Basu,
2008, p. 132). The purpose of all the resolutions was that the word
‘people’ or ‘persons’ should be taken to refer to both men and women,
instead of to men alone.
As if the whole scene was ignited - meetings and gatherings followed one after the other all over India. Women's organizations played a very crucial role in expressing support for women's franchise and they were supported by the tireless efforts of prominent women, both British and Indian. Promoting petition politics as the best *modus operandi*, British suffragists like Millicent Fawcett came forward to help the Indian women in their mission.

The year 1918 was indeed a very eventful one for the suffrage movement in India. In order to implement the reform scheme, two committees were appointed by the Government to investigate the suggestions put forward by various sections of people. Of these two, the Southborough Franchise Committee was assigned the task of discovering Indian opinion on the question of Reforms, and of collecting for the British Parliament all available criticism on the Franchise proposals. Seizing these opportunity, Indian women left no stone unturned to bring to the notice of the Committee all possible evidence which showed the need for including women in the new Electorate. The Committee toured India to gather information and in Bombay (Mumbai) a requisition signed by about 800 women was submitted to them asking that women should be included in the Franchise proposals. Several resolutions expressing the strong claim of Indian women for inclusion in the Franchise proposals were presented to the Committee by various women's unions, associations and organizations. But in the report of the Committee in April 1919, the claims of Indian women were totally ignored on the ground that social customs regarding Indian women made the granting of franchise
History of Movements

premature. Only two gentlemen, Mr. Hogg and Mr. C. Sankaran Nair advocated votes for women. In July 1919, declaring the grounds for refusal as untenable, the women of Bombay held a public meeting to protest against the indignity and to express their deep regret at the recommendation of the Southborough Franchise Committee. Protest meetings were held all over the country by the women’s associations, resolutions were passed and cablegrams were sent to officials in England urging the need for granting right to franchise to women too. The women’s franchise proposal was indeed passing through the rough and tumble of official opinion, on the one hand, which was invariably unfavourable, and the Indian public opinion, on the other, which was in favour of giving votes to the ‘qualified women of India’. This limited demand for right to vote was distorted by Lord Southborough, to argue that Indian women did not themselves desire enfranchisement. However, a meeting was immediately called and a resolution was passed and sent to the Secretary of State in the name of Mrs. Jaiji Jehangir, which not only expressed the pain of Bombay women but claimed suffrage as their right. A similar resolution was sent to the Joint Select Committee by the Sir Narayan Chandravarkar, President, Bombay Presidency Social Reform Association. The General Secretary of the Women’s India Association, Mrs. Dorothy Jinarajdasa, sent the messages from forty five branches to the Joint Committee asking for votes for the women of India. Mrs. Annie Besant and the members of the All-India Home Rule Deputation, as well as the various deputations that went to London in 1919 to give evidence before the Joint Committee, stirred up widespread interest in the views and efforts of the Indian people for reforms. In August 1919, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu handed a paper to the Joint Select Committee in London supporting women’s franchise in India. At about the same time, a committee of twenty prominent ladies from different communities of the Bombay Presidency was formed and in a public meeting it was decided to send their representatives to England to work for women’s franchise. Consequently, Mrs. H.A. Tata and her daughter Miss M.A. Tata went to England as deputies with Sir Sankaran Nair and their statement was taken in writing because of shortage of time. They emphasized the fact that from time immemorial, the Indian woman has been considered the equal of man and her magnificent past inspires her to future progress. They reiterated that the vote improves the status of women and her self-development and in turn affects the growth of the country. Thus, they expressed their hope that the British people would understand the hopes and aspirations of the Indians, which in turn would hasten the realization that in India, as in England, responsible and satisfactory Government can only be achieved when men and women each bear their share in electing their representatives.
In Great Britain, all these delegations and women’s representatives were well received and they were joined by many indigenous women’s organizations which not only showed sympathy but took interest in the cause of women. Resolutions to support the cause of Indian women were passed by the public bodies and were sent to the higher authorities. One of them read:

That the Women’s Association of Great Britain approves the principle of equality in the citizenship of men and women and urges that the proposals in the present Bill for India for the enfranchisement of men should be extended to women possessing the same qualifications so that popular Government in India may start without any sex disability.  
(Cited in Tata, n.d., p. 9)

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms left the question of women’s suffrage to be decided by the provincial legislatures. The Princely state of Travancore-Cochin was the first to give voting rights to women in 1920. However, Madras was the first province to grant votes to women followed by Bombay and, between 1921 and 1930, one by one the provinces extended the franchise to women and allowed them to stand as legislative candidates. But franchise was extremely limited and women could vote only if they had qualifications like wifehood, property and education. Madras was again ahead with 8.46 per cent of total voters which was the largest amongst the states. It was followed by Bengal and UP with 3 per cent women voters and Punjab trailed behind with 2.5 per cent women voters. In another first, Madras was the first one to throw open its doors to women legislators and elections were held in 1926 in which Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay fought for the Madras Legislative Council seat from Mangalore but lost by a small margin. The Madras government then nominated Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, a well-known social worker and doctor, who worked for the cause of women’s rights in the Legislative Council.

**Activity:** As a follow-up to the timeline you created at the end of Section 3.4, do the same here to represent important dates and events in the first phase of the Indian women’s struggle for suffrage. Try to draw comparisons between the two timelines you have created.
3.6 THE SECOND PHASE OF SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN INDIA (1927-1937)

In the years 1928-1937, there were debates on the terms under which women’s franchise should be expanded. The British Government supported reservation of seats for women, separate electorates and less stringent franchise qualifications. But most of the leaders of the women’s movement opposed separate electorates and reservation of seats for women and demanded adult franchise.

The second phase in the battle for female franchise started ten years after the Montague Chelmsford Reforms when the Simon Commission was appointed in 1927 as the first step in the making of a new India Act. The Commission was boycotted by many organizations including the Indian National Congress and the WIA (Women’s Indian Association) on the ground that there were no Indians in the team. However, members of the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC), a newly founded organization, were divided and some of them led by the Rani of Mandi, met the Commission and presented their demands of votes to literate women and reserving seats for women. Another sop was announced by the Viceroy in 1929 in the form of a Round Table Conference (RTC) to be held in London to discuss the next step towards Dominion Status. Again, this was boycotted by the INC and the WIA. However, the Conference was attended by Begum Shahnawaz Khan and Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan in their individual capacity and they did not represent any women’s organization. They proposed adult franchise as the ideal and special reservation for women as an interim measure. Another important step was the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931, whereby the Congress agreed to attend the Second Round Table Conference. The AIWC, under the chairmanship of Sarojini Naidu, took up the task of preparing a memorandum to be submitted to the Franchise Committee of the Second RTC. A Drafting committee was formed consisting of eight women: Hansa Mehta, Taraben Premchand, Margaret Cousins, Faiz Tyabji, Hilla Fardoonji, Shareefa Hamid Ali, Malini Sukhtankar and Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade. The memorandum demanded universal adult franchise, mixed general electorates and no reservation, nomination or cooption for women. Various women’s organizations were also involved and their approval was taken for the proposal. A fifteen member deputation of AIWC members led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur met the Viceroy to appeal for adequate women’s representation at the RTC. As a result a few more delegates were added like Sarojini Naidu and two government nominees, namely Begum Shahnawaz Khan and Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan. The demand of the women’s movement for equal political
rights and women’s active participation in the freedom struggle led the Indian National Congress at its Karachi session in 1931 to pledge gender equality before the law and universal adult franchise. This pledge was honoured in the Constitution of free India.

With the recommendation of the RTC for increased franchise for women and the subsequent approval of the British Parliament, a Franchise Committee was formed with Lord Lothian as the Chairman. The AIWC geared up with a rather impressive delegation which included Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade, Malini Sukhtankar, Lakshmi Menon, C.N. Nallamutha Ammal, Hilla Fardoonji, Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali and Miss S.I. Vincent. The Lothian Committee, which came to India in 1932 and met the delegation, rejected universal adult franchise but recommended that two to five per cent of seats in the provinces be reserved for women and that wives of property owners and literate women be enfranchised. Their recommendations were published as a White Paper in 1933. Meanwhile, in the same year, the Communal Award reserved seats for Muslims and Scheduled Castes. The AIWC rejected the idea of reserved seats for women as they felt that the unity of Indian womanhood would be threatened by the Communal Award which would divide women. The women’s organizations once again took up cudgels to reframe their demand for political rights. In a joint meeting of the AIWC, WIA and NCWI a memorandum was prepared to be presented to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, who appointed a Joint Select Committee to discuss the White Paper. The memorandum consisted of suggestions, demands and protests- suggestions were for the transition period and protests were against reservation of seats and indirect representation of women in the Federal Assembly. The demand consisted of enfranchisement of all men and women above 21 years of age belonging to the urban areas. A delegation of women led by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy and Begum Hamid Ali was deputed to represent the case of women before the Committees and they reiterated their demand for universal adult franchise. In this they got the full support of British women’s organizations which strove to educate public opinion in England.

By the mid-1930s, as the pace of the nationalist movement picked up, the AIWC in its 1933 annual session demanded the right to franchise and equal status for women in the future constitution of India. In the 1934 session, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, in a resolution, acknowledged the fact that the Joint Select Committee had granted greater franchise to women and a definite place for them in the new constitution but also regretted the fact that it ignored many of their demands. Their dissatisfaction grew further when the
Government of India Act of 1935 was announced, which again rejected the proposal for universal adult franchise. It did, however, increase the number of enfranchised Indians and the proportional suffrage rights of women since until now, only some women had the right to vote. Their numbers increased slightly as their qualifications, age etc were slightly lowered and some of the previous qualifications were also relaxed. Now, all women over 21 years could vote if they fulfilled the qualifications of property and education; but the women’s organizations were disappointed with this and expressed their disapproval of the provisions of the Act. However, they realized the need to educate the women as a majority was not even literate and this was a major hurdle in the way of achieving voting rights. Women soon made efforts to overcome the problem of education and also gave their wholehearted support to the national movement.

The new constitution framed in 1950 ultimately fulfilled their dreams of universal adult franchise and Indian women finally got what they had been asking for since 1917. The democratic constitution of India gives equitable political participation to all citizens irrespective of caste, class, color, race, gender or religious preferences. After independence, the Gram Panchayat Act was passed which resulted in the setting up of gram panchayats at the village level on a mandatory basis. In an effort to further extend the political rights of women, the Indian Parliament passed the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the constitution in April and June 1992 making Panchayats and Municipalities ‘institutions of self government’. The most important feature of the Act is the reservation of at least 1/3rd of the total seats for women both at the membership level and at the level of functionaries. The question often arises as to why there is ongoing resistance and opposition to giving women a similar reservation in the State Legislatures and the Parliament, despite the fact that men politicians agreed to give 1/3rd reservation to women in Panchayats. As you can see, the struggle for equal rights for women still continues.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit focused on discussing the inherent meaning of the term suffrage in its historical context and its uses in the democratization of individual right to vote and liberty. It is implied in the definition itself. It further analysed the contribution of women’s movement in granting/legalizing the right to vote for adult women in the mid-20th century. In India, the claim for women’s suffrage was a struggle of the women’s movement which started prior to independence. The campaign for women’s legal right to
Suffrage was undertaken within the framework of socio-religious and political reforms of the world and India respectively. Of course, their fight for it forms a separate chapter of History as the right to vote did not come easily to women. Women’s active participation in the freedom movement laid the foundation for their claim to equal voting rights at the constitutional level. The unit concludes by explaining the emergence and implementation of the term ‘suffrage’ in India’s political terrain.

3.8 GLOSSARY

AIWC : All India Women’s Conference
Enfranchisement : Give a person the right to vote.
Franchise : The right to vote at state especially parliamentary elections.

Suffragette/ Suffragist : There is a difference between the terms “suffragist” and “suffragette”. In the United States, supporters of woman suffrage preferred and used the term suffragist. In Britain, militant supporters of woman suffrage called themselves suffragettes. When the American press, or those who opposed woman suffrage, called an American woman a suffragette, it was intended to be derogatory.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Define and explain the term suffrage by drawing suitable examples.
2) Discuss various types of suffrage and explain the term suffrage in Indian context.
3) What is the role of suffrage in determining the nature of women’s movement the world over? Explain.
4) How far was the Indian women’s movement shaped by the struggle for right to vote? What other factors influenced the demand for suffrage by the Indian women?
3.10 REFERENCES

All India Women’s Conference Files, Govt. of India Public Home Department Files at the National Archives of India.


Curie: www.vigyanprasar.gov.in (See also Madame Curie (1983), A Biography by Eve Curie, Heinemann).


3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


