

WHY DID THE CONSTITUTION-MAKERS TRUST THE INDIAN PEOPLE?

Universal Adult Franchise and the Making of Democratic Citizenship in India

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ABSTRACT

India adopted universal adult franchise despite widespread illiteracy, poverty and limited democratic experience that made the decision appear risky. Yet the Constitution-makers chose to place political power in the hands of ordinary citizens from the very beginning of the Republic. This paper asks why they were willing to do so and what this decision reveals about their idea of democratic citizenship. Through an examination of the Constituent Assembly Debates and relevant scholars, the paper explores the tension between the belief that citizens should first be prepared for democracy and the belief that political participation itself could create democratic citizens. It argues that the framers did not simply assume that Indians were already “ready” for democracy. Instead, they challenged the idea that education, property or social status should determine who was capable of political judgment. The decision to adopt universal adult franchise therefore reflected a deeper commitment to political equality and a willingness to let democracy be shaped through the participation of the people themselves.

KEYWORDS: Universal Adult Franchise, Democratic Citizenship, Constituent Assembly, Political Equality, Indian Democracy, Incremental Enfranchisement.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India was an unlikely candidate for immediate universal adult franchise.

Imagine a country where a large proportion of the population could not read or write, where democratic institutions had limited practical precedent, and where millions had only recently emerged from colonial rule and the upheaval of Partition. Now imagine that this country gives all its adult citizens the right to vote, not gradually, not after an educational qualification, and not after years of political training, but from the very beginning of the Republic.

This was the extraordinary decision taken by the makers of the Indian Constitution.¹ In choosing universal adult franchise, the Constitution-makers could have followed a more gradual path, expanding the franchise in stages as literacy, political experience and social conditions developed. Such an approach could appear safer: if democracy required informed political judgment, perhaps citizens should first be prepared for democratic participation before being entrusted with it.

Yet the Constituent Assembly did not accept this logic. Its members debated whether widespread illiteracy and limited political experience made immediate universal franchise dangerous, but they also confronted a different danger - what would be lost if political equality itself were postponed? The debate was therefore not about whether citizens were sufficiently prepared to vote, but also about whether political equality should depend on such judgements in a newly independent India.

This debate becomes particularly significant when viewed against the alternative of incremental enfranchisement. If voting rights were extended level by level, someone would have to decide which citizens were sufficiently educated, experienced or “ready” to participate. This process could have prolonged the very social and political inequalities that universal franchise sought to overcome.

This paper argues that the Constitution-makers' decision was not simply an act of faith in an already democratic population. It was a decision to make political participation itself a foundation of democratic citizenship. By examining the Constituent Assembly Debates alongside arguments for gradual enfranchisement and the experience of India's first general election, this paper explores why the Assembly chose to trust the Indian people—and why that trust may have been essential to the making of Indian democracy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding the adoption of universal adult franchise in India can be understood through two main questions: Why was the Constituent Assembly willing to extend political participation so widely, and what this decision meant for the development of democratic citizenship. The Constituent Assembly Debates are particularly important because they reveal that universal adult franchise was not accepted without doubts and disagreements.

R. K. Sidhwa, speaking on 17 November 1949, openly acknowledged the risks involved in introducing adult franchise in a country where a large proportion of the population was illiterate. But at the same time, he also argued that democracy without adult franchise would have no meaning.²

¹ Constituent assembly debates, 23 November 1949, speech of Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar

² R.K. Sidhwa, constituent assembly debates, 17 November 1949

Hriday Nath Kunzru raised a different concern on 22 November 1949. He questioned whether this sudden transition from a ‘restricted electorate’ to ‘universal adult franchise’ would give citizens enough time and opportunity to develop democratic habits and political judgment. He favored a more gradual expansion, where political parties and public figures could help educate the electorate first.³

Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar responded to this concern. While he acknowledged the widespread ignorance and illiteracy, he sternly rejected education and property as appropriate qualifications for political participation. Such conditions, he argued, would exclude large sections of ordinary people, including laborers, cultivators and women. More importantly, he argued that democracy itself could contribute to the political development and improvement of ordinary citizens.⁴ So the debates therefore reveal a deeper question: Should citizens become prepared for democracy before receiving political power, or could participation itself help create democratic citizens?

Secondary scholarship adds another dimension to this debate.

Ornit Shani's *How India Became Democratic* focuses on the practical making of democratic citizenship, particularly through the preparation of India's first electoral roll. She shows that universal franchise was not merely a constitutional principle, but a huge exercise of incorporating ordinary Indians into the political system.⁵ Swati and Ramesh Ramanathan similarly describe India's decision a bold case of “instant universal suffrage,” contrasting it with the gradual expansion of voting rights experienced in many other democracies.⁶

Together, these sources show that universal adult franchise was both a constitutional choice and a conception of citizenship. However, they also leave room to examine more closely what it meant for the framers to grant political authority to people who were not necessarily considered “ready” according to conventional standards of education or experience. This paper builds on these debates to argue that the decision reflected a broader commitment to political equality and to the belief that democratic participation could itself contribute to the making of democratic citizens.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative historical and documentary approach to examine the reasons behind the adoption of universal adult franchise in India. It primarily relies on selected Constituent Assembly Debates from November 1949, focusing on the arguments of R. K. Sidhwa, Hriday Nath Kunzru and Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar. These debates are analyzed comparatively to understand the different views on political education, political judgment and the eligibility of ordinary citizens to participate in democracy.

³ Hriday Nath Kunzru, Constituent assembly debates, 22 November 1949

⁴ Constituent assembly debates, 23 November 1949, speech of Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar

⁵ Ornit Shani, *How India became Democratic: Citizenship and making of Universal Adult Franchise*

⁶ Swati Ramanathan and Ramesh Ramanathan, *India's democracy at 70*

The study also uses secondary scholarship on the making of Indian democracy and democratic citizenship, particularly the works of Ornit Shani and Swati and Ramesh Ramanathan. These sources are used to place the Assembly debates within their wider historical context and to examine the significance of universal adult franchise beyond the immediate constitutional debate. The research therefore combines primary historical evidence with secondary interpretation to examine what the decision to adopt universal adult franchise reveals about the Constitution-makers' understanding of democratic citizenship.

4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT : ROAD TO UNIVERSAL ADULT FRANCHISE

Before independence, political participation in India was limited by colonial electoral laws and was far from universal. The Government of India Act of 1935 expanded the electorate compared with earlier arrangements, but voting still remained subject to qualifications and separate electoral arrangements for different communities. The franchise, therefore, did not rest on the principle that every adult citizen possessed an equal political right.

The demand for a broader democratic system, however, had developed during the nationalist movement. The Indian National Congress had increasingly associated political freedom with the transfer of political power to the people and, by the late 1930s, explicitly supported a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of universal adult suffrage. Thus, the idea of adult franchise did not suddenly appear in 1949; it had already become part of the larger nationalist vision of an independent India.

The decision taken during constitution-making nevertheless represented a major break with the colonial system. Instead of gradually extending an existing restricted electorate, India chose to establish universal adult franchise from the beginning of the Republic. The scale of this decision was enormous. The preparation of the first electoral roll involved enrolling more than 173 million people, around 85 percent of whom had no previous experience of voting for legislative representatives.⁷ The electoral roll was already being prepared before the Constitution came into force, making the creation of voters an important part of the practical construction of Indian democracy.

This historical background is important to the central question of this paper. The Constitution-makers were not simply expanding an existing system of voting; they were deciding whether to grant political equality immediately in a society marked by poverty, illiteracy and deep social divisions. It was against this background that the debates over whether Indians were sufficiently prepared for democracy acquired their significance.

5. THE DEBATE: WERE INDIANS “READY” FOR DEMOCRACY?

The adoption of universal adult franchise raised an important question: should people be

⁷ Ornit Shani, *How India became Democratic: Citizenship and making of Universal Adult Franchise*

educated and politically experienced before receiving the right to vote? The Constituent Assembly debates reveal different views on this issue. While some members worried about the risks of enfranchising such a large population at once, others argued that these concerns could not justify restricting political participation.

5.1 R. K. Sidhwa: The Risk of Universal Franchise

Speaking on 17 November 1949, R. K. Sidhwa acknowledged the challenges of introducing adult franchise in a country with widespread illiteracy. He described it as the “greatest risk” taken by the Assembly, but maintained that the decision was right. In his view, democracy without adult franchise would have little meaning.⁸

Sidhwa did not deny the difficulties of this transition. Instead, he questioned whether illiteracy should prevent people from participating in democracy. He also challenged the assumption that educated people necessarily possessed better political judgment, arguing that illiterate people could sometimes display greater originality and reasoning. His position suggests that the risks of universal franchise were preferable to a democracy that excluded large sections of the population.

5.2 H. N. Kunzru: Should Citizens Be Educated First?

Hriday Nath Kunzru, speaking on 22 November 1949, raised concerns about the sudden shift from a restricted electorate to universal adult franchise. His main concern was not simply property ownership, but whether citizens had enough political experience and democratic habits to participate effectively.

Kunzru favoured a gradual expansion of voting rights, believing that it would give political parties and candidates time to educate voters. He also expressed his concerns that an inexperienced electorate could be vulnerable to demagoguery.⁹ His argument highlights a key disagreement: should political education come before participation, or should people receive political rights despite their limited experience?

5.3 Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar: Faith in the Common Man

Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar offered a strong defense of universal adult franchise on 23 November 1949. Although he acknowledged widespread illiteracy, he stated that the Assembly had adopted adult suffrage with “an abundant faith in the common man.”¹⁰

Ayyar rejected educational and property qualifications because they would exclude large sections of society. Like Sidhwa, he questioned whether formal education automatically gave someone better political judgment.⁶

More importantly, Ayyar believed that democratic government could itself bring

⁸ R.K. Sidhwa, constituent assembly debates, 17 November 1949

⁹ Hriday Nath Kunzru, Constituent assembly debates, 22 November 1949

¹⁰ Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar, Constituent assembly debates, 23 November 1949

enlightenment, improve living standards and promote ordinary people's well-being. Political participation was therefore not simply a right for those already considered educated or prepared. It could also contribute to citizens' development.

Together, these arguments reveal the central tension in the debate. While Kunzru emphasized the need to develop democratic habits before expanding the franchise, Sidhwa and Ayyar argued that the difficulties involved in the implementation of Adult Franchise did not justify denying people political participation. This disagreement helps explain why the adoption of universal adult franchise was such a significant choice.

6. UNIVERSAL ADULT FRANCHISE AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The Constituent Assembly debates suggest that the adoption of Universal Adult Franchise was about more than allowing people to vote. It reflected a particular understanding of democratic citizenship, in which political rights were not to depend on a person's education, property or social position. The decision recognized ordinary people as legitimate participants in the political life of the country, even when many lacked formal education or experience with elections.

The contrast between Kunzru and Ayyar helps explain this understanding. Kunzru was concerned that citizens needed time to develop political awareness and democratic habits. Ayyar, however, argued that political participation could itself contribute to people's development. This difference reveals two ways of understanding democracy: one in which citizens must first become prepared to participate, and another in which participation is part of how democratic citizenship develops.

The work of Ornit Shani adds an important dimension to this argument. In *How India Became Democratic*, Shani examines how the preparation of India's first electoral roll helped turn the constitutional promise of universal franchise into a practical reality. Enrolling millions of people, many of whom had little or no previous experience of voting, was not simply an administrative exercise. It was also a process through which ordinary Indians were incorporated into the new democratic system.¹¹

Universal Adult Franchise can therefore be understood as both a constitutional principle and a practical step towards creating democratic citizenship. The framers did not need to believe that every citizen was already politically informed or fully prepared. Instead, their decision indicated that a lack of education or experience was not, by itself, a sufficient reason to deny someone political rights.

In this sense, the Constitution-makers' "trust" in the people did not necessarily mean complete confidence that democracy would face no difficulties. It meant accepting the risks of mass participation rather than making political equality conditional on qualifications that would exclude large sections of society. Universal adult franchise thus established an

¹¹ Ornit Shani, *How India became Democratic: citizenship and making of Universal adult franchise*

important principle of Indian democracy: citizens did not have to prove their worthiness to attain their political rights and recognized themselves as political equals.

7. THE COST OF GRADUALISM: POLITICAL EQUALITY DELAYED

The decision to introduce Universal Adult Franchise from the beginning of the Republic becomes even more significant when considered against the alternative of gradually extending voting rights. Had India granted the right to vote in stages, certain sections of society might have gained political representation much earlier than others, allowing existing social and economic inequalities and hierarchy to influence the distribution of political power. In a society already marked by caste divisions, gender inequality, poverty and unequal access to education, delaying universal suffrage could have risked reinforcing the idea that some groups were more prepared or deserving of political participation than others.

The experiences of other democracies offer useful points of comparison.

In Britain, voting rights were extended through successive reforms rather than granted equally to all adults at once. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 gave voting rights to all men over 21 while this same act enfranchised only the women who were over the age of thirty and met certain qualifications showcasing the gender discrimination in the attainment of the political rights. Equal voting rights for women and men were established finally in 1928.¹²

In the United States, the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited racial discrimination in voting in 1870, yet discriminatory practices continued to prevent many African Americans from exercising their voting rights effectively. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 introduced stronger federal protections against such practices. These examples demonstrate that the formal recognition of political rights and the achievement of equal political participation on ground level are not always the same.¹³

Although these experiences do not prove that gradual suffrage would necessarily have produced the same outcome in India, they raise an important question about the consequences of delaying political equality. If voting rights had initially been restricted to selected social groups, those groups might have gained greater influence over political institutions and the rules.

Extending the franchise to all adult citizens from the outset reduced the possibility of making the right to vote conditional on education, property or social position. It did not eliminate caste, gender or economic discrimination from the society, but it established equal voting rights as a constitutional principle from the beginning. India's decision can therefore be

¹² Great Britain. *Representation of the People Act 1918 and the Equal Franchise Act 1928*.

¹³ United States. *The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) and Voting Rights Act of 1965*.

understood not only as an act of faith in its people, but also as a choice to avoid making political equality a privilege that citizens would have to obtain gradually.

8. CONCLUSION

The adoption of Universal Adult Franchise was a significant decision in the making of Indian democracy. Despite widespread illiteracy, poverty and limited experience with electoral politics, the Constituent Assembly chose not to make political participation conditional on education, property or social status. The debates show that this decision was not made without doubts. While Hriday Nath Kunzru emphasized the need to develop political awareness and democratic habits, R. K. Sidhwa and Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar argued that the challenges of universal franchise could not justify excluding ordinary people from democracy.

This paper has argued that the framers' trust in the Indian people should not be understood as a belief that every citizen was already fully prepared for democratic participation. Rather, it reflected a willingness to recognize people as political equals despite differences in education, wealth and experience. The idea that participation could itself contribute to citizens' political development further strengthened this understanding of democracy.

Universal adult franchise was therefore more than a provision for conducting elections. It represented a commitment to building a democracy in which political rights were not reserved for those considered sufficiently educated or privileged. By extending the right to vote from the beginning, the Constitution-makers placed political equality at the foundation of Indian citizenship. Their decision demonstrated that democracy did not have to wait for citizens to become perfect participants, citizens had to be included in order to shape the democratic future of the country.

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