

WOMEN AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN INDIA: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DIMENSION

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Abstract: Indian society represented a conflicting position of women vacillating between extremes of patriarchy and matriarchy. In this Indian society, the coming of British rule again led to usage of the women question which figured prominently in their colonial discourses. The colonized society was considered to be “effeminate” in character, as opposed to “colonial masculinity” which was held to be a justification for its loss of independence. The journey of confluence and conflict of gender and colonialism in India was multidimensional and multilayered. Indian women congested for their legitimate space in society challenging the overarching patriarchal set up and also participated in the national struggle for independence. Women’s participation in the Indian national movement expended base of women’s movement in India. The freedom struggle saw the participation of women from passive to active to an activist’s role. The involvement of a really large number of women in freedom struggle began

with Gandhi who gave special role to women. The participation of women in public domain started during Non-Cooperation Movement (NCM), 1920 when Gandhi mobilized a large number of women. Though the domestic sphere and its fetter proved detrimental for women to participate in public space but this very segregation helped to organize their activities in the domestic sphere. In the absence of the male who would be jailed for his involvement in nationalist activity, women become the emotional support. The female activism in Quit India movement was visible most significantly. Sucheta Kripalini coordinated the non-violent *Satyagraha* while women also participated in underground revolutionary activities. Aruna Asaf Ali provided leadership for these activities. *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti* or Women Self Defense was formed in 1942 in Bengal by leftist women leaders who mobilized the rural women to fight against colonial policies. Subhash Chandra Bose also added a women’s regiment to his INA(1943) called the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Muslim women leaders like Bi Amman, mother of Shaukat and Muhammad Ali, who participated in Khilafat & Non Cooperation Movement at a meeting in Punjab. In 1938, Muslim league started women Sub-Committee to engage Muslim women.

Keywords: Indian women; Social Movement; Historical & Contemporary dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

Indian society represented a conflicting position of women vacillating between extremes of patriarchy and matriarchy. While Sati-the barbarous practice negated woman life on its own, tying her with the innate presence of her husband even in his life after death. In this patriarchal society, the women's question thus had an overarching presence, but was always answered by other rather than women herself. In this Indian society, the coming of British rule again led to the usage of the women's question which figure prominently in the discourses. While British rule used the analogy of female goddesses to free *Bharatmata* from the colonial rapists. The colonized society was considered to be "effeminate" in character, as opposed to "colonial masculinity", which was held to be a justification for its loss of independence. But women's role vis-a-vis the family was looked through the patriarchal lens. The study of gender and colonialism is thus an interface of two independent fields of studies, which brings to the surface various conflicting questions leading to a confluence of these two parallel streams. However, this journey of confluence and conflict of gender and colonialism in India was multidimensional and multilayered.

Traditional histories of nationalism have largely been written from male perspective. However, mining of new kinds of sources- women's writings, correspondences, biographical literature, interviews as well as the reworking of more stranded historical documents-organizational and private papers, official reports and correspondents widened the ambit and scope of women's history. It reveals a story of movement within a movement. Indian women contested for their legitimate space in society challenging the overarching patriarchal set up and also participated in the National Struggle for Independence. It was a unique balancing act, wherein they had at times to compromise and console itself with the partial fruits of their long and ardors struggle and other times to sacrifice it altogether. The fight from domestic life to political field was and is a long drawn battle for women. Women's participation in the Indian national movement expanded base of women's movement in India. Their participation in freedom struggle strengthened not only the national struggle for freedom; it also provided the forum for women to bring forth the contestation and contractions of the patriarchal society. The freedom struggle saw the participation of women from passive to active to an activist's role.

In the early nineteenth century, the liberal reformers or the revivalists made women as the recipient of social change. Brahma samaj and Prathana Samaj especially did valuable work in educating women and gave them their first experience with public work. Different communities started talking about educating women, nevertheless not as a right holder but as serving the bigger male-dominated community. By the end of the nineteenth century, women started taking upon themselves the role of emancipators and fought for personal reforms and political rights.

WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Indian women's association with the freedom struggle took a new dimension with the growth of popular politics of the Gandhian congress mass movements. The women's participation before Gandhi was in a limited manner for example in Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1905-11) and Home Rule Movement. They also attended sessions of Indian National Congress. But the involvement of really large number of women in freedom struggle began with Gandhi who gave special role to women. The

nationalist expressions of women in the freedom struggle needs to be analyzed from following standpoints:

1. That woman engaged with nationalist politics despite constraints of social practices like the purdah system, backwardness and low level of female literacy.
2. That woman participated in Indian National Movement (INM) through two parallel processes: a) The domestication of the public sphere – women participated in the streets without compromising on their domestic values. b) The politicization of the domestic sphere – women handled situations in their families when nationalism entered households through the activities of their husbands and sons.
3. That woman used the symbolic repertoire of the INM and the political language of Gandhi to facilitate their own participation.

The participation of women in public domain started during Non **Cooperation Movement (NCM)** in 1920, when Gandhi mobilized a large number of women. However, the participation of women was far from active and they could participate only from within domestic sphere. Of course, the degree and intensity of this control or segregation within the domestic sphere varied from household to household, community, class to class and region to region. Though the domestic sphere and its fetter proved detrimental for women to participate in public space but this very segregation helped to organize their activities in the domestic sphere. In the absence of the male who would be jailed for his involvement in nationalist activity, woman became the emotional support. Women organized themselves as both imparters and recipients of national information.

They read the newspaper and also literature such as the works of Premchand (1880-1936). Some women, especially those of north India learned greatly from the work of Mahadevi Verma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. They also listened to the conversations of their men folk within the household. Occasionally, the women would hold meeting in each other's homes. The women of a *mohalla* would invite other women to their homes to discuss political events and to sing patriotic songs like the following:

“*Mard bano*
Mard bano
Sab Hindustani mard bano
Avtaar Mahatma Gandhi huye
Azad Hindustan Karane ko”

Thus, Gandhi evoked the idea of collective sisterhood. Concepts like “sisters of mercy” and “mothers of entire humanity” epitomized the women's role. “There were five ways in which women participated passively in nationalist activities:

1. Constructive programmes like spinning *khadi*.
2. Familiar sacrifice.
3. Being supportive wives and mothers to activists.
4. Being pillars of support and strength.
5. Conducting secret activities.

In the **Non Cooperation Movement**, Gandhi consciously involved women in the attempts to link their struggle with the struggle for national independence. But the programmes for women were devised in a way that they could remain domestic and still contribute. He gave women a sense of mission within their domestic field. Thus, women keeping their traditional role became the base of the freedom movement.

However, with the progress of the freedom struggle even the women's question and consciousness was caught in the swirling vortex of political emotions but it still remained within the contestation and subordination of patriarchal structures. Through the two inter related processes, the domestic of the public space and the politicization of the domestic sphere, often the confining social practices of *pardah* and the norms of segregation and respectability, were turned around and at times reinvented to become enabling one. If women could not confront or change their circumstances through normal channels, they contested those limiting spaces by doing what they wanted to do. By aligning those contestations for the benefit of the nationalist movement, they developed political awareness of their own abilities as mothers, sisters and daughters but within the disabling structure of patriarchy.

Women's public activities were more pronounced during **Civil Disobedience Movement**. Though Gandhi visualized a supportive role for women, but they started getting impatient and demanded more active role. Gandhi appreciated the impatience as "healthy sign" but refused to increase their greater role for he believed that women can play higher role in picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops. He chose women for these tasks because of their "inherent" capacity for non violence. He maintained that the agitation of picketing was to be "...initiated and controlled exclusively by women. They may take and should get as much assistance as they need from men, but the men should be in strict subordination to them." (Young India, 1920: 20). Kasturba Gandhi initiated women's participation in the *Salt Satyagrah* by leading 37 women volunteers from Sabarmati Ashram. Sarojini Naidu and Manilal Gandhi led the raid on Dharsana Salt Works. Kamala Devi led procession of 15,000 to raid the Wadala Salt Works. Women thus participated actively in processions, picketing of foreign shops and liquor shops. Women were organized in Bombay, most militant in Bengal and were limited in Madras. In Bengal, some women also participated in violent revolutionary movement and unlike *Swadeshi Movement* where they played a domestic supportive role, now they stood shoulder to shoulder with men with guns and shooting pistols at magistrate and governors.

The female activism in Quit India Movement was visible most significantly. The important leaders of congress being behind bars, made it contingent for the women leaders to take upon themselves the responsibility of directing and taking forward the national movement. Sucheta Kripalini coordinated the non-violent Satyagraha while women also participated in underground revolutionary activities. Aruna Asaf Ali provided leadership for these activities. The movement also witnessed large participation of rural women and also women who had joined the communist movement. Mahila atmaraksha Samiti or women's self defense was formed in 1942 in Bengal by leftist women lads, who mobilized the rural women.

For example, the Tebhaga Movement 1946 saw the formation of women Brigade as *Nari Bahini* to fight against colonial policies. Subash Chandra Bose also added a women's regiment to his INA (1943) called the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. He believed in the power of mothers and sisters thus assigning a new role to passive roles of the mythic *Sita* to a heroic, valorous role of the *Rani of Jhansi*.

As regards of the Muslim women, history does record the defiant efforts of Muslim leaders like Bi Amman, mother of Shaukat and Muhammad Ali, who participated in Khilafat Non Cooperation Movement at a meeting in Punjab. At a meeting in Punjab she lifted her veil saying that one does not

need a veil in front of her children, thus giving shape and idea of *quam*. In the case of Muslims, the personal laws too, were less problematic than Hindu social reforms. They did not demand widow immolation and contained no strictures against widow remarriage. Similarly, with the growth of education, Muslim women were instigated to eradicate female rites and customs that Muslims shared with Hindus. However, soon enough Muslim women activists outran the original intention and they started criticizing absolute female seclusion. By 1930, they also started demanding inheritance rights and by 1939, Muslim women got the right to initiate divorce. Growth of communalism often worked in favour of women creating a competitive mobilization whereby women emerged as a significant constituency. In 1938 Muslim league started a women's sub-committee to engage Muslim women. With the emergence of "Pakistan Movement" more and more Muslim women got sucked into the political movement. Their participation in this public spaces itself was moment of emancipation and liberation for them.

CONCLUSION

The colonial historiography indicates that in India the modern notions of gender rights in the public domain were premised on the public private split whereby private disempowerment and the subordination of Indian women were masked and reinforced by the bestowal of public rights. Colonial reforms were modern but at the same time the underlying throes of patriarchy were not questioned. It was merely the recasting of male domination. Even after Independence, the reality is quite harsh. Despite citizenship rights being guaranteed by the Indian constitution egalitarian society is yet a myth for majority of women. Legislations have not been able to change societal attitudes and perceptions about women. Thus a fight for new values, new perceptions and a new egalitarian based society- the women's movement – continues. Till the paradox exists the movement will and should continue.

The land that provides grain and clothes is referred to as "motherland and the cow that gives milk, ghee and other dairy products is called mother-cow (gaumata). In the west, the country is referred to as father-land but in India it is referred to as "motherland".

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