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Political Governance in India

Topic- Women's Movement in India

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Women's Movement in India

The women's movement has a long history in India. Much longer than the current 'second wave' movement, or even the 'first wave' of earlier this century. The Shakti cults go back centuries, and the concept of Shakti – the female power principle – was recognised thousands of years ago. In this form the women's movement represents, not merely an oppositional force fuelled by anger, a rather negative reaction to oppression, but the development of a distinctive female culture, a positive creative force inspiring men and women alike. The changes or rather the transitions that have taken place within the women's movement in India have not followed a chronological or linear pattern, but have at all stages involved a collage of influences, local, national and international.

The women's movements provided a platform for women to come together to raise their voices as one big force to reckon with. These united protests created a strong bond among women, a sisterhood that formed a strong front against the evils that they were fighting against. It showed that women were no less when it came to fighting to get their rights, and in many movements, they showed that they can fare better than their male counterparts, giving confidence to young women and girls that with the right leadership and guidance, they can also make staggering changes for the betterment of the lives of the oppressed. The patriarchal society had made women fight hard for some of their basic rights.

Social Reform Movement and Pre Independent India: Women – Passive Recipients of Emancipation?

Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin (1998) have discussed the deliberate absence of a record of women's voice and contribution to political situations in pre-independent India and of the patriarchal nature of our documented history. Given the fact that in our history there is sufficient evidence that women were excluded from the formal education system, it is not surprising that their voices have not been reflected in the written texts that stand as testimonies of our history. We do not argue, therefore, about the general gender-biased nature of our history, but take that as a given. There are records, however, of cases of 'exceptional' women, women who challenged the norm of that time such as Rassundari Devi, a housewife in Bengal, when she wrote her autobiography in Bengali in 1876 called *Amar Jibon (My Life)* (Tharu and Niranjana 1994). Having never attended formal school, Rassundari was self-taught. Her book is a passionate description of the deplorable condition of women at the time as well as a secret plea to women to stand up from their seat of subservience to be critical of their own lives including the prevalent social customs and practices.

Swarnakumari Devi, less heard of than her brother Rabindranath Tagore, started the Ladies Theosophical Society (a multi-religion association of women) way back in 1882 and later became a member of the Indian National Congress. The Theosophical Society was later associated more with Annie Besant, a British woman supporter of the Indian nationalist movement. Swarnakumari's daughter Sarala Devi started training women in the use of the sword and lathi in 1903, as she was actively involved in nationalism of a militant kind (Kumar 1993). Then there was the case of Pandita Ramabai, whose father was an unconventional social reformer who began with social transformation in his own home by educating his wife Lakshmbai even at the cost of being exiled by his own community for this. Lakshmbai subsequently taught her daughter Sanskrit in the forests as is recorded in Pandita's book (1886) *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. The book is a critique of women's oppression, religion and colonialism (Ramabai 1887). Pandita Ramabai was one of the 10 women delegates to the Indian National Congress in 1889 and she was instrumental in the setting up of several women's organisations, schools for girls, and homes for widows, apart from a host of her other contributions to society.

In 1916, the Begum of Bhopal founded the All India Muslim Women's Conference with education of women as a prime agenda, apart from provisions of other remedial services for women and changing oppressive practices such as polygamy (Liddle and Joshi 1986). We can cite many such instances or special cases where individual women have been leaders in a struggle for women's rights, but whose voices have been accounted for in the patriarchal recording of history. Women's leadership in the nationalist phase however, emerged from a small section of the urban, middle-class, who had their education in English and invariably was in some way linked to movements or organisations in the west. The Women's Indian Association, which had links with the British women's movement for suffrage, was started in 1917 by Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarjadasa and Annie Besant. The National Council of Women, a branch of the International Council of Women, was founded by Lady Tata and Lady Aberdeen in 1925. In 1927, the All India Women's Conference was set up by Margaret Cousins which later merged with the Women's Indian Association in the 1930s. According to Geraldine Forbes (1982: 525), the 'first wave' of feminism in India was the period between the years 1880–1940. At this time several organisations formed women's wings which not only took up the cause of women but gave women space and opportunity to secure the desired changes. In 1904, a women's wing was started in the National Social Conference, which was later called the Indian Women's Conference. The All India Women's Conference started branches in several smaller states in India.

At this time, the issues concerning women's social emancipation that were prime on the agenda of social reformers were issues such as sati, the plight of widows, polygamy, child marriage and women's education. These were some of the causes taken up leaders such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, M.G. Ranade and others. In 1887, M.G. Ranade established the National Social Conference, which did have women's emancipation on its agenda, as he worked for the introduction of widow remarriage, for the abolishment of child marriage and other issues like education for girls. While the National Social Conference focussed on social issues, the Indian National Congress was concerned with the political administration. Between 1772 and 1947, the British introduced several laws which aimed to liberate women in India. Some of the laws prohibited practices such as female infanticide, sati and child marriage. 1891 saw the institution of the Age of Consent Act which raised the legal age at marriage from 10 years to 12 years for girls. Other laws gave women rights such as widow remarriage. Although records of the independent initiative of Indian women during this phase are sketchy, as already discussed earlier, we know that they did participate in the Swadeshi

Movement in the early 1900s and continued to play a crucial role in the struggle for independence from British colonial power. During the years of Mahatma Gandhi's leadership in particular, women's participation in the political struggle was encouraged. According to Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) and Vina Mazumdar (1976), the class-caste bias of the early women's movement impacted the kind of issues taken up for 'change'. The issues of concern were those that largely impacted the higher castes and middle classes such as widow remarriage, dowry, polygamy and property rights. Besides, the larger question was always the 'national' during this phase and if the women's question got addressed it might have been because it was seen to enhance the larger cause. For example, women's suffrage meant an increase in 'Indian' representation which no doubt would be in the longer run unfavourable to the British. It must be noted that while issues that meant a change in the public life were accepted, the very notion of equal citizens in both caste and sex terms was not. Particularly, equality in the private sphere was not accepted. Any change that would threaten the Indian male privilege or position in the private sphere was left unchanged such as, for example, inheritance rights, issues relating to domestic violence, etc. Jana Matson Everett discusses how issues which critiqued the domestic or private lives such as marriage and inheritance faced much resistance while issues concerning political or economic life such as suffrage and employment were received with less resistance from the male population in pre-Independent India. The sections of the Hindu Code Bill which talked of equal property rights to wives, daughters and widows, the sections that banned polygamy, legalised inter-caste marriages and made divorce possible on certain grounds were not accepted. Even the following statement that existed in the draft 'the State shall endeavour to secure that marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and shall be maintained through mutual cooperation, with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis' never saw its place in the Constitution. The Hindu Code Bill represented a challenge to male domination, not to British colonialism; therefore, it was not received well.

Women's Participation in the Struggle for Independence

The following quote from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* best illustrates the role of women in the struggle for Independence: Most of us menfolk were in prison. And then a remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British government but their own menfolk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working class women, rich women, poor women, pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. The liberal ideas of the individual right to freedom and equality were particularly championed by Mahatma Gandhi and that laid the foundations of what later developed within the women's movement as autonomous women's organisations fostering similar aims of self-determination and independence. It was during this period that we have clear records of women's participation in struggle, although the enemy at that time was colonialism and not patriarchy. In the early years, however, Gandhi's definition of women's nature and role in the freedom struggle was deep rooted in Hindu patriarchy. By the 1920s, however, he began acknowledging the important role women could play in the struggle for freedom, and called women to participate in the civil disobedience movement.

Women's participation was not without restrictions, as politics dealt with the public life making it 'unsuitable' for women. Women criticized their exclusion in the salt satyagraha led by Gandhi which subsequently led to Gandhi's reconsideration of his view against women's participation in 1930. About the civil disobedience movement Gandhi wrote 'the women in India tore down the purdah

and came forward to work for the nation. They saw that the country demanded something more than their looking after their homes ...' (Gandhi 1954: 18).

Some of the names of women who were involved in satyagrahas against colonial rule subsequently were Sarojini Naidu, Lado Rani Zutshi, Rani Gudiallo, Kamala Nehru, Hansa Mehta, Anantikabai Gokhale, Satyavati, Parvathibai, Rukmini Lakshmipaty, Lilavati Munshi, Durgabai Deshmukh and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya - to name just a few as thousands of women joined in the manufacturing and selling of salt all over the country. This is remembered as the turning point for women's participation in struggle.

Talking of the incident (of April 6, 1930), Radha Kumar says 'On that memorable day thousands of women strode down to the sea like proud warriors. But instead of weapons, they bore pitchers of clay, brass and copper; and, instead of uniforms, the simple cotton saris of village India'. The reform and nationalist movements in India saw the growth of liberalism and in many ways marked the beginning of ideas of individual freedom and equality. Of all the leaders and reformers, Gandhi was most forceful in his conviction that women should and have the right to individuality and the freedom from violation of their personal dignity. Women's organisations such as Desh Sevika Sangh, Nari Satyagraha Samiti, Mahila Rashtriya Sangh, Ladies Picketing Board, Stri Swarajya Sangh and Swayam Sevika Sangh began mushrooming at this time to organise the mass boycott of foreign cloth and liquor. The strategy of non-violence at this time became the standard protest tactic as the government continued with lathi charges and mass arrests. When women were jailed, feelings of solidarity developed between women satyagrahis of different classes, linguistic and caste backgrounds. In 1954, Gandhi wrote about women's participation in satyagraha thus: 'It is given her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. She can become the leader in satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. But the protest that women participated in was not always non-violent. It must be mentioned here that, although the ideas of individual freedom propagated by the reform and nationalist movements was accepted by women in their personal and organisational lives, they did meet with resistance from society and even their own families.

The women's movement in India goes back to more than a hundred years but its composition, its agenda, its form and style, its outreach, its inclusiveness have been changing over the years. The social reform movement before independence first addressed the woman's condition within Hindu society but this was restricted to the women in the upper castes and exposed illiberal traditions such as that of treatment of widows and child marriage and was largely sponsored by men who saw threats to Hindu society by colonial powers' criticisms and hence wished to safeguard their cultural edifices by reforming what they thought were mere aberrations but left the patriarchal social structure untouched. Subsequent events were induction of women in the nationalist movement, the Constitution's promise of gender equality; 1974's Towards Equality Report prepared by the Committee on the Status of Women; international women's movements and The Convention on the Abolition of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).