

Role of Women in the National Movement

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Abstract

The course of the Indian National Movement is marked by multifaceted and complex stages. The question of social reform remained alive in the nationalist debates in the public sphere from late 19th century till 1947. Women consciousness around social and the national questions grew simultaneously. The demand for legal reforms and inclusion of Indians into the imperial legislative councils constituted the early phases of the Indian National Movement. Both Indian men and women were leading the social reform movements since the 1880s. In various women's autobiographies and writings from all over India, particularly Maharashtra and Bengal, the slogan that 'Personal is Political' was being raised.

Keywords: National Movement, political movement, Gandhi, Hindu and Muslim women

Introduction

The fact of women entering the male dominated arena of social reform was tantamount to making a break with the past. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-94) wrote the novel *Anandamath* (Published in 1882) that portrayed revolutionaries sacrificing their lives for the Motherland. Bankim's emotional hymn, "Bande Mataram" (Hail to the Mother") became famous throughout India. This call to save the Motherland was not a call to women to join the political movement but rather a linking of idealized womanhood with nationalism. In fact, a new journal for women, begun in 1875, stated: "We will not discuss political events and controversies because politics would not be interesting or intelligible to women in this country at present." In 1889, four years after the Indian National Congress was founded ten women's attended its annual meeting. In 1890, Swarana-Kumari Ghosal, a women novelist, and Kadambini Ganguly, the first woman in the British Empire to receive a BA and one of the India's first female medical doctors, attended as delegates. From this time on, women attended every meeting of the INC, sometimes as delegate, but more often as observers. Attending with their fathers and husbands, their contribution was both decorative and symbolic. These educated and politically knowledgeable girls and their mothers informed the world that India was as advanced as any western county in its vision of women's public roles.

In 1905 the British partitioned the province of Bengal. Women joined men protesting this division by boycotting foreign goods and buying only Swadeshi goods that is goods produced in the province of Bengal. Women took a vow to devote themselves to the Motherland and observed it by everyday setting aside a handful of rice for the cause. Nanibala Devi was the leader of the New Jugantar (New Age) Party dedicated to violent defeat of the foreign rulers. She joined the party and acted as their house keeper, occasionally posing as the wife of one of the revolutionaries. In this context, where public and private roles were sharply divided by both ideology and physical arrangements, women's political acts were hidden from the British authorities. Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) returned to India in 1915 as the hero of the South-African

struggle. Soon after his introduction to Bombay society, he met women who belonged to women's social reform organizations. He told his audience India needed women leaders who were "pure, firm and self-controlled" like the ancient heroines: Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi. It was these heroines Gandhi recalled when he told women to wake up and recognize their essential equality with men. Only when they appreciated the strength of their ancestresses, would women comprehend their right to freedom and liberty. With the end of World- War-I and renewed demands for self-rule, the government passed the Rowlatt Acts at the beginning of 1919 prohibiting public protest and suspending civil liberties. This was when Gandhi began to develop a program for women. On April 16, the day marked for a general strike throughout India, he addressed a meeting of "ladies of all classes and communities," and asked them to join the Satyagraha movement to facilitate the total involvement of men.

Shrimati Ambujammal, one of Gandhi's loyal followers from Madras, outlined how Gandhi touched the hearts of both Hindu and Muslim women. First, he explained to women there was a place for them in the movement, then he expressed his faith in their courage. It was possible to help the movement without leaving home or neglecting the family. "Do what you can," Gandhi advised women, convincing them that every act counted. At the sometime, he reassured families their women would not sacrifice family honour or prestige. Sucheta Kripalani created Gandhi for his special attention to male attitudes: "Gandhi's personality was such that it inspired confidence not only in women but in guardians of women, their husbands, fathers and brothers." Since his moral stature was high "when women came out and worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected. The Non-co-operation Movement began with members of the reformed councils withdrawing from these councils. The next step was to boycott the law courts and schools. Congress accepted this program at a special session held on August 20, 1920. It was a victory for Mohandas K. Gandhi and promised a more active role for women than that offered by the Swadeshi vow. At one of the several meetings which Sarojini Naidu addressed, women decided to form their

own political organization. Rashtriya Stree Sangha, an independent women's organisation required its member to join the District Congress Committee. Times were changing. Women from all provinces of British India stepped forward in response to Gandhi's call. In East Godavari District, Madras, a group of women gathered to meet and listen to Gandhi's. Smt. Durvuri Subhamam, a woman attending this assembly, "jumped into the freedom struggle" and at this time and resolved to form a women-only cadre of devasevikas. Women followed Gandhi for different reasons for his fight for justice, admiring him as a father and also because their men fork accepted his leadership.

Gandhi returned to politics in 1928 and launched a Civil Disobedience campaign that brought large numbers of women into public life. Women's participation in the civil disobedience movement of 1930-32 differed qualitatively and quantitatively from the early 1920's and won them a place in history. The women's political organization, the Rashtriya Stree Sangha, had remained under the presidency by Sorojini Naidu. It stated its goals as Swaraj and women's emancipation. By 1930, the leadership and structure of the RSS were sufficiently developed far it to spawn a new, smaller organization, the Desh Sevika Sangha whose members were ready for action. Gandhi began the civil disobedience campaign in March of 1930 with his 240 mile March from Ahmedabad to Dandi to make salt in defiance of the British monopoly. Gandhi was constructing a new ideal for Indian woman that rewrote passivity and self-suffering as strength.

Bengal: Women of Bengal came forward at this time but their demonstrations were smaller and their activities more radical than those of Bombay women. The capital city was also the heart of revolutionary struggle and women's colleges became centers for recruiting new members. In district towns and villages women joined processions, wore Khaddar, and hid fleeing revolutionaries. Bengali nationalism had always valorized violence and this ethos profoundly influenced the participation of Bengali women in the freedom struggle. The Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS), begun in 1928, was the first formal organization to mobilize women for political work. The MRS had goals similar to the RSS in Bombay; they wanted to achieve Swaraj and improve women's status. The first step to Swaraj was the education of women to their double oppression as colonial subjects and inferior sex. Calcutta women formed the Nari Satyagraha Samiti (NSS) in 1929 in response to the congress call for women to be ready to serve the nation. Urmila Devi, one of the first women arrested for political activity was named president; this group had a core of 15-20 women who were willing to picket and risk arrest. They were educated, from professional families, and had all observed some form of Purdah. In October of 1930 the British decided to apply special ordinances allowing them to search and detain individuals without proving reasonable suspicion. Rigorous application of these ordinances made it dangerous to join even peaceful demonstrations. By 1933 most of the women revolutionaries were in prison. There had been between sixty and seventy women who had aided the revolutionary groups, and of those approximately forty were imprisoned. They were patriotic young women and their aim has been to arouse the masses to action. Educated, Knowledgeable about political issues, they also wanted to prove that women could be as brave as men. Saraladevi acknowledged men's role in bringing

women into the freedom movement but she doubted they really cared about improving the lives of women. Women were rewarded with flowery speeches but no appointed to sub-committee and councils summing up women's experiences with politics she said Congress "assigned to women the position of law-breakers only and not law-makers." Women must demand equal treatment and equal status. She spoke to an audience more conservative than herself and in their final session they reiterated the usual demands, rejected resolutions favouring birth control and equal treatment for women, and decided not to form a separate women's Congress.

Madras: Women's political demonstrations in Madras were less dramatic than those in either Bombay or Bengal. Women picketed and marched in processions but it always difficult to mobilize large numbers of women for action. Madras women never joined the revolutionary movement, nor were they subjects of extreme police violence. The explanation for this rests with the nature of politics in Madras as well as the facts of nationalist movement in this province. First, there had been considerable debate within the Madras Congress as to whether or not to accept Gandhi's leadership. There were many leaders who did not support his plan. Second, Congress was seen as a party of Brahmin elite. Third, in other parts of the country women were especially successful in enforcing the boycott of foreign made cloth.

North India: In North-India women from Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi and Lahore joined public demonstrations and shocked a public unused to seeing respectable women in the streets without veils. In these northern cities demonstrations occasionally attracted as many as 1000 women but most of them were much smaller. In Allahabad women from the Nehru family were important leaders. They made public speeches and went door to door urging women to join the movement. Swarup Rani Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru's old and frail mother, emerged from a life-time in the zenana to walk through the streets in Khaddar. In Lahore demonstrations against the Simon Commission were marked by violence. Lado Rani Zutshi, the wife of Motilal Nehru's nephew and three of her daughters, Manmohini, Shyama and Janak led the movement in Lahore. Manmohini became the first woman president of the Lahore student Union and served as a volunteer at the Lahore Congress. In Delhi Satyavati Devi, the granddaughter of Swami Shradhdhanad, became one of the leaders. The Swami, or Munshi Ram as he was known in his earlier years, was deeply influenced by Swami Dayananda, converted to the Arya Samaj, and worked with his brother-in-law Lala Devraj of Jullundar to promote female education. In the north, the political movement engage elite women and women without any education. They belonged to two different worlds but they shared the burden of social norms that inhibited their autonomy. Women leaders wanted to mobilize their less sophisticated sisters for political action and they knew this would be impossible without the permission of husbands and fathers. Therefore, it was expedient to concentrate on nationalist issues and leave feminist issues out of their speeches.

The role of women in the Non-Cooperation movement of the 1920's and the civil disobedience movement of the 1930's called into question Britain's civilizing mission in India. Beginning in the 19th Century (nineteenth century), British

rulers justified their rule by calling attention to the degraded status of India's women. They regarded their efforts to provide education and medical care and pass laws to protect women as proof of their moral purpose. The involvement of women in the nationalist struggle severely challenged the notion that the British were the legitimate rulers of India, and at the same time lent full support to the Congress as the rightful heirs to political power. The participation of women in the freedom movement also shaped the movement for women's rights. Most important, it legitimized their claim to a place in the governance of India. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani posed the question: "How can we attain rights?" and answered: "By the strength of our agitation. We must force menfolk to concede to our demands and at the same time carry on propaganda among our-selves."

So, we can say that in national movement's role of women were important.

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