

## **Women’s Participation during the Colonial Period in India- a Critique on Women’s Emancipation during the Period.**

Dr (Prof) Anuradha Jaiswal

**ABSTRACT:** *Women as the guardians of the inner or spiritual sphere of the nation were regarded during the period as the embodiments of an essentialized ‘Indianness’. The re-articulation of the Indian woman for the self-definition of the nationalist bourgeoisie provided the context for the modernizing of certain indigenous patriarchal modes of regulating women in orthodox Indian society. It is no wonder therefore that the status of women became the main focus of the reforming agenda of the modernizing Indian intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Thus female infanticide was banned, sati was abolished and widow remarriage was legalised. In all cases reforms were legitimated by referring to the shastras and no women were ever evolved in the reform movements. In the nineteenth century as the women’s question became a part of the discourses of progress and modernity, a movement for female education started. By the turn of the century a number of women in middle class households were educated, either formally or informally. Earlier women’s participation was restricted to agricultural activities. If women’s issues did not figure in the nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century, it was because all other forms of emancipation were being perceived as conditional on national liberation. The period after World War One witnessed the rise of two eminent women in Indian politics, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. But it was only with the advent of Gandhi that we see a major rupture in women’s involvement in the nationalist movement. During the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919 he invited women to participate in the nationalist campaign. However it was during the Civil Disobedience movement that the floodgates for women were really opened. The trend that was set in the 1930s continued into the 1940s as women’s active role in the public space became accepted in society. However, as it seems, the women’s question in colonial India hardly received the priority it deserved. Although some women became conscious and actively participated in the political struggles and also identified themselves in many ways with the emerging nation, feminism had not yet been incorporated into the prevailing ideologies of liberation.*

**KEYWORDS-** *Swadeshi, Nationalism, Emancipation, Feminism, Consciousness, Organisations.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The colonial discourses on India from very early on were gendered as the colonized society was feminized and its “effeminate” character, as opposed to “colonial masculinity”, was held to be a justification for its loss of independence. The degraded condition of Indian women was taken as an indicator of India’s inferior status in the hierarchy of civilisations. It is no wonder that the status of women became the main focus of the reforming agenda of the modernizing Indian intellectuals of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In their response to the damning critique of the West, they imagined a golden past where women were treated with dignity and honour, they urged reforms of those customs, which they considered to be distortions or aberrations. Thus female infanticide was banned, sati was abolished and widow remarriage was legalised. In all cases reforms were legitimated by referring to the shastras and no women were ever evolved in the reform movements.

It is difficult to defend an indigenist argument that the condition of women was better in pre-colonial India.<sup>2</sup> The ancient Hindu lawgiver Manu prescribed a permanent dependent status for women to be protected by their fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of their lives. The Muslim society too put similar restrictions on women. By the nineteenth century, the ideal of purdah had become universalized for both Muslim and Hindu women and for both elites and commoners, although in its practical implications it acted differently for different groups. In the nineteenth century as the women’s question became a part of the discourses of progress and modernity, a movement for female education started as a part of the colonized males search for the “new woman”. The agency for the spread of education lay with three groups of people, as Geraldine Forbes has classified them: “ the British rulers, Indian male reformers and educated Indian women”. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, that these reformist groups began to sponsor schools which reflected a new evaluation of females and the perception of an enlarged female role. Soon after these same reform groups sponsored the earliest formal organization for women, Umesh Chandra Dutt, a member of the Brahma Samaj, founded both a women’s organization and a women’s journal. The organization was to give women a place to meet and discuss their problems, the journal would provide an outlet for their

literary efforts as well as reading material for the growing body of literate females. While the efforts of the Brahmos of Bengal resulted in the earliest organizations for women, similar reform groups organized women's associations in other parts of India.

In 1889, four years after the Indian National Congress(INC) was founded, ten women attended its annual meeting.<sup>3</sup> In 1890, Swarnakumari 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 doctors, attended as delegates. From this time on, women attended every meeting of the INC, sometimes as delegates, but more often as observers. In 1905, the British partitioned the province of Bengal. Women joined men in protesting this division by boycotting foreign goods and buying only swadeshi goods that is, goods produced in the province of Bengal. 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. Women hid weapons, sheltered fugitives, and encouraged the men, their domestic roles providing cover for these subversive and revolutionary acts. The activities of these Bengali women sympathetic to the swadeshi movements were quite different from their representative roles in the INC. There the delegates appeared as the equals of men, but their true significance was symbolic. Voices of protest from within the Indian womanhood against such public stereotyping were rare, but not altogether absent. In 1882, Tarabhai Shinde, a Marathi women from Berar, published a book entitled, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*. In this she protested against the fact that in a new colonial society men enjoyed all the rights, opportunities and benefits of change, while women were blamed for all the evils and were still bound by the old structures of pativrata(duty to husband). Yet ultimately Tarabhai was no rebel, what she claimed for Indian women was more respect and dignity in a happy home and the enlightenment that the colonial state had supposedly promised.<sup>4</sup>

So far as women's work was concerned, although they did participate in agricultural activities, from the late nineteenth century more and more socially mobile peasant families began to confine their women to household work. When modern nationalism developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, it addressed the women's question within these restrictive parameters of domesticity. If women issues did not figure in the nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century, it was because all forms of emancipation were being perceived as conditional on national liberation. The Congress until 1917, did not directly address the women's question- just as it did not deal with the untouchability issue- because it was unsure of itself and was oversensitive about the fragility of an incipient nation. The period after World War One witnessed the rise of two eminent women in Indian politics. Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society and Sarojini Naidu, who in 1925 was elected president of the Congress. Despite being inspirational figures, these two leaders could neither evolve an ideology for women's emancipation, nor could carve out for them a niche in nationalist politics.<sup>5</sup>

It was only with the advent of Gandhi that we see a major progress in women's involvement in the nationalist movement. It was first in South Africa in 1913 that Gandhi had for the first time involved women in public demonstrations and realized the huge potential of the Indian woman hood. Back in India, during the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, he again invited women to participate in the nationalist campaign, but it was withdrawn before any significant advancement in this direction could take place. Gandhi evoked India's sacred legends, especially the Ramayana, when he asked Hindu women to join the political movements. Between the suspension of non-cooperation in 1922 and his resumption of a leadership role in 1928, Gandhi devoted himself to reconstruction.<sup>6</sup> During these six years he spoke to women's groups about constructive work, continuously reiterating that Sita was the ideal role model and spinning could solve India's and women's problems. 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 1920s and won them a place in history. Bombay women's picketing and demonstrations from 1930 to 1932 received more press attention than women's activities in any parts of the country. The number of women marching were in the thousands and their pickets were organized and effective. Gandhi was constructing a new ideal for Indian women that rewrote passivity and self suffering as strength. Gujrati women living in Bombay responded to this message by following an organization to plan and direct efforts to close shops selling foreign cloth. The DSS(Desh Sevika Sangh) designed and supervised the campaign.. 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. In 1928, Subhas Bose decided to have uniformed women volunteer's march with men in the procession to inaugurate the annual Congress meetings in Calcutta. By 1934 the civil disobedience movement that began with the salt march was over. The participation of women legitimized the Indian National Congress. Women's activities validated Indian unity and satyagraha.<sup>7</sup>

The trend that was set in the 1930s continued into the 1940s, as women's active role in the public space became accepted in society. It is not difficult to see why women responded to Gandhi's appeal, which made women's service to nation a part of their religious duty. His insistence on non-violence and emphasis on the

maintenance of respectable image of women satyagrahis did not breach the accepted norms of feminine behavior and as result, men felt confident that their women would be safe in Gandhi's hands. The participation of women in the freedom movement also shaped the movement for women's rights.<sup>8</sup> Most important it legitimized their claim to a place in the government of India. Women won great respect for their political work and social benefits followed. In the years following the civil disobedience movement more and more women entered the professions, and some men learned to work side by side with them as colleagues. At the same time, the participation of women had some clear drawbacks. Those demonstrating claimed to represent all Indian women but the number of groups involved, other than upper and middle class Hindu women, was never large. A few Muslim women were steadfast followers of Gandhi, many more either found it difficult to accept the overtly Hindu ideological basis of his ideas or were neglected by the Congress organizers. There were distinct regional differences in the number of women who joined, in their relationship with Congress leaders, and the extent to which they synthesized women's interests with nationalist issues. Bombay women were the best organized, the most independent, and fielded the largest demonstrations. Most of their leaders also belonged to women's organisations and they articulated a clearly 'feminist nationalism'.<sup>9</sup> In Bengal women attracted a great deal of attention because of their militancy. We have to acknowledge as well that hundreds of women from respectable families marching in files on the streets of India, going to jails, suffering indignity there, and coming back to their families with no stigma attached, signified a remarkable change in Indian social attitudes.

But did this activism and politicization of women promote a feminist consciousness in colonial India, so far as the wider society was concerned, the answer should be clearly no. But for those women who actually participated in the nationalist struggle, and for their more enlightened middle-class women leaders, life could perhaps never be the same again. Among the Muslim women too, there was the rise of a new "feminist" century that contested the traditional boundaries and ideologies of gender relations. But it also refrained from advocating any "dramatic change" and privileged "the image of the Muslim community" over everything else. Such contradictions were more clearly visible in the space created by the growing number of women's organisations of the time. At the All-India level, the first to appear in Madras in 1917 was the Women's Indian Association, started by enlightened European and Indian ladies, the most important of them being Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, and Annie Besant. At the provincial level too, various organisations started functioning around this time for a multitude of women's issues. The Montague and Chelmsford Reform in 1919, left undecided the question of women's franchise, which was to be determined later by the provincial legislatures. As a reward, all the provincial legislatures between 1921 and 1930 granted voting right to women, subject of course to usual property and educational qualifications. The Government of India Act of 1935 increased the ratio of female voters to 1.5 and gave women reserved seats in legislatures. During the early twentieth century- the birth of a new consciousness, new organisations and the politicization of women- did bring in some remarkable changes for some women- the more enlightened, middle class and urban variety, who had effectively claimed for themselves a niche in the public space. The involvement of women in the communist movement was expanded to a new level when the Tebhaga movement began in Bengal in 1946 under communist-led kisan sabhas with the sharecropper's demand for two thirds share of the produce.<sup>10</sup> Outside the country, around the same time, an experiment to involve Indian women in actual military action had been initiated by Subhas Chandra Bose. The Pakistani movement did involve some Muslim women in public action.<sup>11</sup> Thus, increasingly in the 1940's Indian women across class, caste and religious barriers, claimed agency in their participation in the anti-imperialist and democratic movements.

The concept of feminism itself created a lot of confusion, it was either considered as a Western import subversive of the cultural essence of Indian nationhood or as an undesirable digression from the most important cause of the freedom struggle.<sup>12</sup> The women question in colonial India hardly received the priority it deserved.<sup>13</sup> Although some women became conscious and actively participated in the political struggles, and also identified themselves in many ways with the emerging nations, feminism had not been incorporated into the prevailing ideologies of liberation, the honour and interests of the community and nation still prevailed over the rights of women. The tendency to focus on women as a collectivity rather than on specific groups of women is one of the legacies of the independence struggle.<sup>14</sup> Gail Pearson has argued that nationalist leaders consciously manipulated the word 'women' to suggest the "participation of a united social universe". For contemporary historians, this generalized category operates against understanding the relationship of different groups of women with Congress. However the efforts in the direction of their freedom and progress had just begun.<sup>15</sup>

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