

The Women's Question: Participation in the Indian National Movement and its impact

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I. 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, female goddesses in different forms like Sita-Parvati-Durga or Lakshmi dominated the core of Hinduism and Hinduized way of life, as the ultimate source of strength, wealth and wisdom. However the goddesses themselves and their stories of immense power always had an overarching presence of elements like respect for husband, sacrifice and one's duty towards the larger society. In this patriarchal society the women's question thus had an overarching presence, but was always answered by others rather than woman herself.

In this Indian society the coming of British rule again led to usage of the 'women's question' which figured prominently in their colonial discourses. While British rule used the barbaric and pitiable position of women in India to their role of Civilizing Mission, the Indian reformers 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 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. (Davis, Neera Yuval.1997). However mining of new kinds of sources – women's writings, correspondences, biographical literature, interviews as well as the reworking of more stranded historical document: organizational and private papers, official reports and correspondent widened the ambit and scope of women's history. (Jafri,2012:280). 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, where in they had at times to compromise and console itself with the partial fruits of their long and arduous struggle and other times to sacrifice it altogether. The fight from domestic life to political field was and is along 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 activists role.

The basic form of women's movement was triggered by nineteenth century male reformers. Colonial social reform of the nineteenth century tried to abolish abuses of social life and tried to usher in more progressive gender relations. "A new colonial education purveyed through the state, and Christian Missionaries, altered and modernized traditional social perceptions; a new religious movement revived and consolidated older humanitarian impulses and a sudden rise of a pool of human greatness eager to save the weak and helpless" led to enactment of social legislation by the government. (Sarkar.2007:2-5) For example: Abolition of Sati (1829), Widow Remarriage Act. (1856) Child Marriage Act. (1872) Banning of Devdasi (1925). Despite these positive progressive legislations the women's question was far from being answered by the women themselves. One also needs to remember that women's question and the concern for domesticity was very much a part of the civilizational critique of India.

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 cudgels for personal reforms and political rights.

II. Women in the National Movement

Indian women 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 women engaged with Nationalist politics despite constraints of social practices like the purdah system, backwardness and low level of female literacy.
2. That women participated in 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 women used the symbolic repertoire of the INM and the political language of Gandhi to facilitate their own participation." (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006:171)

The participation of women in public domain started during **Non Cooperation Movement (NCM)** in 1920, when Gandhi mobilized large number of women. However the participation of women far from active and they could participate only from within the domestic sphere. However the degree and intensity of this control or segregation within the domestic sphere varied from household to household, community to 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 like 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 menfolk within the household. Occasionally the women would hold meetings 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.

"Mard bano ,mard bano

sab Hindustani mard bano

Avtaar Mahatma Gandhi huye

Azaad Hindustan Karane Ko"-

Transcript of poem sung by Kala Tripathi,,(H isar,Haryana,1930s) woman who stayed within domestic sphere.(Thapar-Bjorkert,2006:180)

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 programmers like spinning khadi.
2. Familial sacrifice
3. Being supportive wives and mothers to activists
4. Being pillars of support and strength.
5. Conducting secret activities." (Thapar-Bjorkert,2006:181)

In the NCM 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 away 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 domestication of the public space and the politicization of the domestic sphere, often the confining social practices of purdah and the norms of segregation and respectability, were turned around and at times re invented to become enabling one. If women could not confront or change their circumstances through formal 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 stricture 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. Kamla 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 magistrates and governors. (Bandhopadhyay, 2013:241)

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 Kriplani: 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 defence, was in 1942 in Bengal by leftist women lads, who mobilized the rural women.

For example, the Tebhaga Movement 1946, saw the formation of women and Brigade as Nari Bahinis 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 a passive roles of the mythic Sita to a heroic valorous role of the Rani of Jhansi.

Among Muslims - Women had more intense, fight in the domestic sphere 'Purdah' was epitome of their culture and any contradiction to it was considered to be blasphemy. However the history does record the defiant efforts of Muslim women leaders like Bi Amman, mother of Shaukat and Muhammed 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 to idea of quaaam. 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. The Farajji reformers of the mid-nineteenth century attributed the prevalence of such norms in Muslim to Hindus and thus encouraged Muslim to popularize 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 the 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 liberating for them.

III. Women's Organizations

In the early, twentieth century many women's organization came into picture who were active in the public arena and also focused on women's political and legal rights.

-Rashtriya Stree Sangha or Das Devika Sangha was started as auxiliary body of Congress.

-1910 Sarala Devi Chaudhurani 'Bharat stree Mahanandala' tried to spread education

-In 1917, in Madras women's Indian Association was started by enlightened European and Indian ladies – Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant.

-1925, the National Council of Women in India was formed as a branch of the International council of Women Lady Mehribai Tata was an actives of this society.

-1927, All India, Women Conference came into existence which championed for all sorts of women rights, from franchise to marriage reform and the rights of women laborers..

- In 1920 in Bengal, Bangiya Nari Samaj campaigned for women's voting rights.

- All Bengal Women's union campaigned for legislation against trafficking of women.

Women's organization appealed to both government and nationality for support. However government support was often a compromise. The nationalists on the other hand were more sympathetic for the women's question,

since 1920, because they needed their participation in the nation-building project. Women too privileged these “pieces of universalisation” by placing nationalism before women’s issues. The women’s fight for suffrage was granted in Government of India Act 1935 where the ratio of female voters was raised 1:5 and women also got reserved seats in legislative. Similarly, various social legislations and acts tried to improve gender parity. For example : The Sarda Act. Of 1929 – which fixed the minimum age of marriage for females at 14 and male at eighteen, laws defining women’s right to property, inheritance, divorce, to restrain dowry and control position. (Bandhopadhyay,2006:394)

IV. Women and Partition

Thus by the pinnacle of INM Indian women across class, caste and religions barriers started participating in the anti imperialistic and democratic process. Irrespective of the fact whether it was Hindu or Muslim women, the issue of women’s emancipation was always treated as subordinate to that of national liberation, community honour or class struggle. According to Sumit Sarkar it was women and peasants who represented the ultimate site of purity unspoiled by the modern world and western education. This form of purity, chastity of the female body has been linked to the nation state. It’s for reasons like this that women have been seen as the symbol and repositories of group or communal national identity. The link between honour of community leads to two forms of control over women’s labour, their fertility, their sexuality and their mobility. The first is internal form of control by their own community itself since the loss of control over their own women is seen as threat to their masculinity, their family and their community. Secondly women find themselves more vulnerable of violence by other community. Since they are seen as repositories of their community honour and their rape, control and other forms of violence against them is seen as a more effective manner of humiliating and subjugating that community .Women thus become more vulnerable to violence in communal riots. The partition of India in 1947 revealed a similar story when women from both sides became victims of sexual aggression and control in order to avenge the hurt and injury on the community in question. Thus communal violence has seen the participation of women thereby proving that women are not necessarily a collective but are well entrenched in their own caste and community identities. (Bandhopadhyay ,2006:398)

It was even more evident in the partition. As pointed out by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, they were caught in ‘continuum of violence’ where they had the choice either to be raped, mutilated and humiliated by the men of the other community or to commit suicide instigated by their own family members and kinsmen to prevent the honour of their community from being violated by the enemy. Empirical data supports this fact when in a span of few months seventy five to one hundred thousand women were abducted or raped. (Butulia,2001:208)

V. 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 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 as “motherland” (Thapar-bjorkert,2006:236)

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