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## Women Behind The Movement

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### ABSTRACT :

20<sup>th</sup> century was a very fascinating period as well as a phase of significant political excitement in the history of modern India. Reeling under the political and economic burden of British conquest, Indian society changed gradually. During this complicated political turmoil, women played a significant role in nationalist politics. Their contribution in shaping India's nationalist movement is beyond question. Despite facing patriarchal restrictions and social barriers, women actively participated in protests, boycotts, and revolutionary movements, challenging British rule and fighting for Indian independence. In this mentioned context, present paper explores the complex and multifaceted role of women in nationalist politics during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This paper attempts to reframe and acknowledge their crucial role in nation making process.

**KEYWORDS :** Nationalist, femininity, male-dominated, middle-class women.

### INTRODUCTION :

The arrival of the British in India in the mid-eighteenth century marked an entirely new phase in the historical context. The conquest of the colonial powers brought India as a whole under British authority. In 1857, the freedom struggle against the British rule began with the Great Rebellion. The rebellion was the culmination of a centuries-long tradition of fierce popular resistance to colonial rule. Although the rebellion was not successful, it helped awaken the socio-political consciousness of the people of India and realize the need to free themselves from foreign rule. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new political organisations began to emerge in various parts of British India. Inspired by national consciousness, the middle class (educated in western education) strived for political rights. But needless to say, these activities of educated Indians did not escape the attention of the British government. The "Indian National Congress" was established in 1885 by the British ruler to control the thinking of a handful of educated intellectuals. The establishment of the National Congress marked the beginning of a long path for nationalist movements.

### DISCUSSION :

India's nationalist struggle against colonial rule brought about political mobilization of both men and women. Indian society represents the conflicting position of women at the culmination of the concept of patriarchy and matriarchy. In the public sphere, middle-class and elite women were increasingly involved in various activities such as adopting new roles, social reforms, spreading nationalist messages. As a result, the active participation of women in nationalist politics was observed from 1850s onwards. The Congress leadership realized that without the participation of the people, including the common women, the Congress-controlled movement could not be universalized and that it would be impossible to claim representation of a united Indian nation. Even so, the nationalist movement would never have been complete without the support of middle-class women. Symbolic class importance of women in nationalist movements was consistent with nationalist demands.

To arouse the nationalist sentiments of the people and prove the incompetent nature of the British ruler, the nationalist leadership used the concept of 'sacred femininity' which legitimized role of women in the external sphere. Nineteenth century nationalist discourses revolved around the dichotomy of internal and external spheres and the problem of maintaining harmony between the two. Through both these fields, nationalism sought to solve the 'women question' according to its own requirements. Women were the representatives of the inner circle. Historian Dipesh Chakraborty has pointed out that women's society will definitely play an significant role in reconstructing the domestic sphere that supports civil-political life. The nationalist

leadership deliberately linked peasant, labour and women's organizations to demonstrate widespread support for their position. Women's participation in the Indian national movement broadened the base of the women's movement in India. Their role in the freedom struggle not only strengthened the national struggle for independence, but also provided women with an open space to expose the contradictions and constrictions of patriarchal society. The freedom struggle witnessed the participation of women in a passive to active role.

Nineteenth-century liberal reformers or revivalists began to present women as agents of social change. Towards the end of this century, women began to fight for personal reform and political rights. In 1905, the decision of the British ruler to partition Bengal gave birth to a movement across the country. Women also joined men in protesting this division by rejecting foreign products and buying only indigenous things. The activities of Bengali women sympathetic towards the Swadeshi movement were independent of their representative role in the Congress. Women did not act like men in the protest movement against Partition, instead they used their traditional roles to cover a range of political activities.

Prior to the emergence of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in national politics, women's participation in the political sphere was limited. Very few women participated in Swadeshi movement and Home-rule movement in Bengal. Participation of a large number of women in the freedom struggle, despite attending sessions of the Indian National Congress, started with the arrival of Gandhiji. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi migrated to India in 1915 as a hero of the South African struggle. Recalling the ancient heroes, he advised Indian women to wake up. In his view, when women appreciate the strength of their ancestors, they will realize their right to freedom and independence. While in South Africa, Gandhiji realized that the power of self-sacrifice can be used by women in the service of the nation. In 1913, women's participation in public was witnessed for the first time in South Africa under his leadership and he realized the immense political potential of Indian women. With the end of World War I and renewed demands for self-government, the British government passed the Rowlatt Acts in 1919, which banned public protest and suspended civil liberties. During this time Gandhiji took initiative to develop a new program for women. He urged women to join the nationalist campaign during the Rowlatt Satyagraha. Gandhiji withdrew the movement before witnessing significant progress. Although the movement was withdrawn, it became clear that women had joined the anti-British struggle. He requested women to abstain from foreign products, take swadeshi vows and use charka regularly. According to him, one of the causes of India's poverty was the purchase of foreign goods while neglecting indigenous handicrafts.

The 1920s were a turning point in women's participation in the Congress-controlled nationalist movement. The Non-cooperation movement started in 1921 under the leadership of Gandhiji. Government institutions, legislatures, law enforcement agencies began to be boycotted. Nationwide strikes, satyagraha, violations of government-enforced laws were organized. Women's participation in this movement was limited and only women from families whose male members were involved in the struggle were part of the movement. It is clear that the nationalist character of the family was dominant. Initially Gandhiji prescribed a limited role for women, but they demanded a greater active role for themselves. In November 1921, Prince of Wales was greeted by a demonstration of a thousand self-empowered women in Bombay. In Bengal, the incident took a more dramatic form. Chittaranjan Das, the most important Congress leader in eastern India, called on Congress volunteers to sell khadar on the streets of Calcutta against the government's ban on political demonstrations. Congress volunteers including Chittaranjan Das's wife Basanti Devi, sister Urmila Devi, son were arrested. The news of the women's arrest sparked protests. People came together to demand their release. Through this, Gandhi realized the importance of including women in the freedom struggle.

In 'Young India', Gandhiji urged women from other parts of the country to follow the brave actions of the Bengali women. With time women in all provinces of British India responded to Gandhiji's call and marched forward. Similar movements were organized in other parts of the country. Not only women from respectable families took part in this, Gandhian appeals also reached marginalized women (*patita-devdasi*) during this period. Although Gandhiji was not too keen to involve them personally. As a political leader, he believed the power of women. He believed the role of women in social change. Through speeches and rallies across the country, he urged women to join the program of boycotting foreign goods, buying indigenous goods, using the spinning wheel, and publicly disobeying British laws. Between the suspension of the Non-cooperation movement in 1922 and his reappearance in 1928, he engaged in constructive work.

In March 1930, Gandhiji started the Civil disobedience movement by marching from Ahmedabad to Dandi in Gujarat to create salt against the British monopoly. Gandhiji did not want to include women in the Dandi march. But during the march, thousands of women participated in it. Gandhiji pointed out that women's endurance and aversion to violence made them fit for constructive work. The satyagraha movement of the 1930s significantly increased the inclusion of women. Their participation in civil disobedience was quantitatively different from that of the 1920s. Apart from Gandhiji's special appeal to women, women's organizations, women's entry into the Legislative Council, inspired them to join the movement in a larger



context. Against the backdrop of World War II in the 1940s, the colonial government was determined to suppress any mass movement fostered by the Congress. In this situation, women's participation at higher rates, anti-war speeches and secret activities took a terrifying form.

In terms of women's participation, the movement was most organized in Bombay province. From 1930 to 1932 women's picketing and protests in Bombay received more attention than in other parts of the country. Due to the cosmopolitan nature of the city, the presence of Parsis and Christians who supported women's education, self-awareness of women was natural. Independent women's organization '*Rashtriya Stri Sangh*' was established for the purpose of swaraj and liberation of women. In a nationalist appeal, the Sangh appealed to the women's society to help their motherland in its greatest need. As the agitation grew in intensity, the '*Rashtriya Stri Sangh*' formed a small organization under it called the '*Desh Sevika Sangh*'; its members were ready for any kind of action. Women's societies proved their effectiveness in agitational politics during this period. They organized several demonstrations which inspired the women of British India. Patriotic women followed the nationalist spirit everywhere. The more active women who came from a narrower social base were called 'female intellectuals'. Beside salt satyagraha, these women intellectuals organized farmers for forest satyagraha.

In the context of Bengal, the activities of Bengali women were more radical than those of Bombay women. Calcutta was the epicentre of the revolutionary struggle and the women's colleges became centres for recruiting new members. Bengali nationalism always prioritized violence and this policy influenced the participation of Bengali women in the freedom struggle. The '*Mahila Rashtriya Sangh*' founded by Latika Ghosh in 1928 was the first formal organization to organize women in the political arena. Impressed by Latika's role in the successful women's protest against the Simon Commission, Subhash Chandra Bose inspired her to establish the organization. The '*Mahila Rashtriya Sangh*' of Bengal, like the '*Rashtriya Stri Sangh*' of Bombay, worked towards improving the status of women and achieving swaraj. In their opinion, if the life of women is not improved, the nation will not be free. In response to the call of the Congress, the women of Calcutta formed the '*Nari Satyagraha Samiti*' in 1929 AD. Members of the association were Urmila Devi, Jyotirmayi Ganguly, Shanti Das, Bimal Pratiba Devi and others. All belonged to upper caste and elite-educated families. Middle-class women saw little outside their inner circle. Most of the women who joined revolutionary groups during this period were students. After being associated with women's organizations and the Congress, they joined secret organizations. Earlier women supported the revolutionaries secretly by supplying arms, raising funds, but from this time they directly joined the revolutionary activities. In this context Veena Das, Shanti and Suniti (student of Comilla), Pritilata Waddadar should be mentioned.

Women's political protests in Madras were less dramatic than in Bengal and Bombay. Women in Madras did not join the revolutionary movement and were not subjected to extreme violence. A number of arguments are put forward as to why this is so. First, there was a controversy over Gandhiji's leadership in the Madras Congress. Second, the Congress was considered a party of the Brahmin elite. '*Mahila Swadeshi League*' was formed under the supervision of Ambujammal and Krishna Rao. Their activities included joining organizational march, promoting real value of Swadeshi etc. Women's societies in Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi and Lahore joined public protests. Women from noble families shocked conservative society by openly participating in nationalist protests. Women from Nehru family were notable leaders in Allahabad. Through public speeches, they urged women to participate the movement. Protests against the Simon Commission in Lahore were marked by violence. The women's protest in Delhi had an impact on the male-dominated society. Government reports of the time show how women's activities inspired men to join the movement. The women proved their bravery by standing firm in the face of police attacks. In the northern region, the political movement involved both elite educated women and women with no conventional education. Although their worlds were different, they also had to bear the burden of social norms.

The trend established in the 1930s continued till the 1940s. Emphasis on the importance of non-violence and maintaining a respectable image of women satyagrahis did not violate accepted norms of feminine behaviour, thereby awakening women's society to Gandhiji's appeal. Most of the women who participated in the movement belonged to Hindu middle-class aristocratic families. Although rural women participated in some areas, the lower class and marginalized women were not brought into the fold of the movement. The Congress leaders were not interested in women's issues. Since its inception, women's participation in politics has taken place through various forms of women's organizations. Women's organizations appealed to the government rather than mass movements in support of women's rights issues.

Limited social ideologies and dominance of women's organizations were seriously challenged in the 1940s when women began to demand a more active role for themselves in the external sphere. This women's activism was most prominently manifested in the Quit India movement of 1942. Women participated in all three phases of the nationalist movement – (i) Non-Cooperation movement in 1920-21, (ii) Civil Disobedience movement

in 1930-32, (iii) Quit India Movement in 1940-42. Women's participation in the public sphere was limited in the 1920s, but restrictions eased over the next two decades. During this period, they became more politically aware. In addition to increase in the number of women workers in the 1940s compared to 1930s, violent activities by them also increased.

The British government applied a policy of repression and arrested all the frontline leaders of the movement. All nationalist movements tend to be organized secretly. In such a dire situation, some prominent women leader took responsibility for the movement. Aruna Asaf Ali and Sucheta Kripalani's work is commendable during this period. Sucheta Kripalani was associated with non-violent resistance while Aruna Asaf Ali led the secret revolutionary movement and rejected Gandhiji's advice to surrender. The revolutionary movement was ideologically opposed to Gandhian ideals of non-violence. The most important part of this movement was the participation of a large number of rural women who took their own initiative to liberate the country. Around the same time, Subhash Chandra Bose formed an overseas army in Southeast Asia known as the 'Indian National Army' to include Indian women in actual military action outside the country. A women's wing named 'Jhansi Regiment' was formed after Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi. This army was a symbol of female valour. He believed in strong women's association. Manavati Arya, Lakshmi Swaminathan Sehgal, Keshar Kaur and others were active members of the Jhansirani division. Ideologically, women's spontaneous participation in the armed struggle attests to the increasing importance of women in nationalist politics.

The rise of the 'Pakistan Movement' in the 1940s paved the way for Muslim women in the subcontinent to join political activities. Greater political hierarchies, or male-centric politics, influenced the women's movement. The Muslim League tried to make its politics universal and formed women's sub-committees to involve women. As the Pakistan movement gained momentum, participation of common women in politics increased gradually. The inclusion of Muslim women in the external sphere was equivalent to emancipation for them.

In the 1940s, Indian women participated in the anti-imperialist democratic movement across the narrow lines of caste, religion and caste. The role of women in the Non-cooperation, civil disobedience and the Quit India movement called into question the civilizing aims of the British government in India. At the beginning of the 19th century, the British rulers justified their rule by drawing attention to the deteriorating condition of women in India. But the involvement of women in the nationalist struggle attacked that justification and at the same time gave full support to the Congress as the rightful inheritor of political power. Violent attacks on protesters questioned the British as moral rulers.

Women's entry into male-dominated spaces has dispelled stereotypes of Indian women as subordinate, weak, modest etc. A significant aspect of women's contribution to nationalist politics was the imprisonment of women satyagrahis. By entering the prison, women proved their courage, determination and commitment to end the British rule. Most debates and analysis of women's participation in movements have focused on externalities. But not all women had access to the outdoors. Yet they indirectly supported the movement. It is inappropriate to cite any one factor as the reason for the widespread participation of middle-class women in nationalist politics. It was a complex formation of political expectations. Conservative norms affected both elite and ordinary middle-class women. Although the support of male family members made public access easier for elite women than for ordinary middle-class women. The political knowledge of leaders like Gandhiji and Nehru facilitated this process.

## CONCLUSION :

Women's participation legitimized the Indian National Congress. Their activities justified Indian unity and satyagraha. Women's participation in the freedom movement gave rise to the women's rights movement. At the same time there were some obvious drawbacks to women's participation. The protestors claimed to represent all Indian women but the number of women belonging to classes other than upper-middle class Hindu women was never large. Although a number of Muslim women were staunch followers of Gandhiji, most women found it difficult to accept the overtly Hindu ideological underpinnings of his ideas. In some cases they were ignored by the Congress organizers. As can be inferred from the statement of historical facts, women were drawn into the anti-imperialist democratic movement as a strategic necessity. In particular, Gandhiji's role in women's involvement is analysed as a planned phenomenon that was able to serve the political objectives of the nationalist movement. In colonial India, the question of women's rights did not receive the priority it deserved. A significant section of the women's society became aware and joined the struggle. They followed different motivations for participation. Despite various limitations, women's participation in nationalist politics has set an example of women's important role in nation building.

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