



JOURNEY OF INDIAN WOMEN FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC SPACE DURING 1857 TO 1947

Dr. Shyamasree Rajguru Ray.

Assistant Professor Of History.

Guskara Mahavidyalaya

P.O- Gushkara, Dist.- Purba Bardhaman,

Pin – 713128, West Bengal

Abstract : The Nineteenth century Renaissance paved the way for Indian women's entry into public life. The Swadeshi Movement prepared a platform for a larger role. The Non- Cooperation, Civil disobedience and Quit India movement led by Mahatma Gandhi were turning points in the emergence of Indian women from their traditional seclusion.

The modus operandi of the non-Gandhian women was very different from that of Gandhian women. Women in the revolutionary mould did not restrict themselves to the National Movement only, - they associated themselves in expanding primary education, rehabilitation of rape victims, training in arms for self-defence etc. Their determination empowered the whole nation. They often sacrificed their feminist agenda and integrated themselves as equal partner in the nationalist movement.

KEY WORDS – Women, Nationalist movement, Awakening, Status

Introduction

There are varying accounts about the status of women in the early and later Vedic period, most of which indicate a gradual decline in the socio-political and economic status of women. Since the Vedic times, the status of women in India has been intertwined with class and caste hierarchies.

The nineteenth century Renaissance paved the way for Indian women's entry in public life. Women's participation into politics on a large scale is thought to be generated from Gandhiji's call for Swaraj. But the ground was prepared since the second half of nineteenth century. Almost the whole project of nineteenth century social reformation centered round one mainstream development, the improvement of the condition of women. The social evils like polygamy, infanticide, sati, kulinism, child marriage, illiteracy imprisoned the Indian women in a perpetual subjugation. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar emphasized on the female related issues, their education and rights. Sati was abolished in 1829, widow remarriage was permitted in 1856, age of consent was raised to 12 in 1891, female infanticide was prohibited by the Acts of 1795, 1804 and 1870, child marriage was forbidden in 1929.

The 19th century reform movement found a galaxy of social reformers who endeavored to improve the status of women, based on a new value system recognizing women in their own right and as a complete human being. During this period, a movement for female education started as a part of the colonial males' search for new woman.

The agency for the spread of education lay with 3 groups of people as Geraldine Forbes has classified them – 'the British rulers, Indian male reformers, and educated Indian women. The initiative was taken in Calcutta by men like Radhakanta Deb and the School Book Society and later by Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahmo Samaj, in western India by Mahadev Gobinda Ranade and Prarthana Samaj, in northern India by Dayananda Saraswati and his Arya Samaj and in Madras, by Annie Beasant and Theosophical Society. Hence, these developments during late 19th century had already sown the seeds of consciousness among the Indian women.

Awakening and orientation:

The growing awareness among women about their subjugated position in a patriarchal society at different levels motivated them to fight for their rights. By the end of the 19th century, many women, representing the elite classes began to form their own organisations. This marked the emergence of a rudimentary women's movement in India. Women's involvement in the reform movement soon implemented their writing capacity that gradually reflected the urgency for women's education on a larger basic, women's right for equal status with men and the assertion of a claim to enjoy political rights. In the 19th century Bengal, there were few women personalities who authored some historical and social novels. Swarnakumari Devi wrote Deep Nirban(1876), Mibar Raj(1887), Bidroho(1890), Huglyr Imambari(1888), Phuler Mala(1895), Basantakumari Mitra wrote Ranonmadini(1884),Prasonnomoyee Devi wrote Ashoka(1889) etc. Rassundori Devi(born around 1809) who was entirely self-taught, wrote the first autobiography by an Indian women (Amar Jiban-1876). Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the pioneer of women

emancipation and education, wanted equal opportunity for women which alone would pave the way for the progress of so called backward Muslim society. Her vision was for total upliftment of society and thereby the whole nation. Her desire was the emancipation of all women folk, irrespective of race and religion. She authored several books in Bengali- Motichur (Vol I &II-1904 &1922), Padmarag (1924), Aborodhbasini (1931) and a fantasy in English – The Sultana’s Dream (1908) .

Congress and other forums as Public Space:

The birth of Indian National Congress(I.N.C.) rendered a political platform to women. Hume’s warning at the very first session of I.N.C. points to the fact of women’s political participation in this way; political reformers of all shades of opinion should never forget that unless the elevation of female elements of the nation proceeds *Pari Passu* (with equal space) with the work , all their labour for the political enfranchisement will prove vain . Since the formation of Congress, women’s participation became a notable feature in Indian politics. The presence of two eminent personalities , Kadambini Ganguli and Swarnakumari Devi in the annual Congress meeting in Bombay in 1899 initiated a new phenomenon in politics. In 1900 , Swarna Kumari Devi and Jyotirmoyee Gangulee attended the Congress Session held in Calcutta as delegates from Bengal Government. Gangulee was the first women to speak from Congress platform and this was perhaps the beginning of a new era and from then on women took an increasingly active part in the political activities of the country. Annie Besant was the first women to become the President of Congress in 1917, followed by Sarojini Naidu in 1925 and Nellie Sengupta in 1933.

Gradually women realized the necessity of their own forum and some organizations came in existence including the Bharat Mahila Parishad, Arya Mahila Samaj, Stri Zarthosti Mandal (Parsi Women’s Circle) , Anjuman – e Khawatin-e Islam(Muslim Women Association) and Bharat Stri Mahamondal . Their activities were limited to the social arena .From the first two decades of the 20th century, the articulations of women’s issues was based on liberal principles of equality. In these context, three major women’s organisations- the Women’s Indian Association(WIA), the National Council for Women in India(NCWI) and the All India Women’s Conference(AIWC) particularly AIWC played a major role in articulating women’s issues . Since its inception in 1917 the WIA defined itself as an association of women of all races , cultures and religions . Its primary focus was education and was involved in activities of philanthropy. It also demanded women’s right to vote. The NCWI was established in 1925 as a national branch of the International National Council for women . In its first session in 1927, AIWC declared that women’s education was their foremost agenda. However, within a few years it became an organization which discussed not only vital national political and other issues but even global peace and solidarity across the world. In pre independence days, it was the main vehicle for articulation of women issues and advocated the message of liberal feminism. Thus, now women’s issues did not remain confined within a format of a social reform. Women’s issues now meant equality in society – a broader dimension than that held by the 19 the century reformers. Now, women were ready to fight against the traditional orthodoxy, injustice and discrimination and thus to enter public life with no sex -bias at all.

Women's Suffrage Movement in India:

Women's suffrage movement in India had as early as 1917 (17th December) when Sarojini Naidu along with Margaret Cousins , Annie Besant , Dorothy, Uma Nehru , Ramabai Ranade and Abala Basu , led a deputation to the Montague Chemsford Mission (Secretary of State for India and Viceroy). They demanded women's franchise and more facilities for women's education and health care. The British Government ignored the argument for women's franchise. The Government of India Act, 1919 laid down that the question of franchise could be settled by the province. Bombay and Madras were the first province to grant franchise to women in 1921; United Provinces followed in 1923; Punjab and Bengal in 1926; and Assam, the Central Provinces, Bihar and Orissa in 1930. Yet the numbers of the enfranchised women remained very small. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi became the first women legislator when she was appointed to the Madras Legislative Council in 1927 . The Government of India Act , 1935 extended franchise to six millions women . In the 1937 election, 10 women were elected from general constituencies , 41 from reserved constituencies and 5 were nominated to provincial legislative Council. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit became the minister for local self-Government and Public Health in the United Provinces. Anusuyabai Kale of Central Province became Deputy Speaker; Hans Mehta became Parliamentary Secretary in Bombay. But the mainstream demand of the nationalists for the right of enfranchisement of men and women was not fulfilled till 1947.

Labour Movement – Women as pathfinder

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century , Bengal was the most industrially developed state in India. Many jute Mills , Tea Gardens , Coal Mines , Dock , Engineering Industries developed and the working class emerged as an important factor of the civil society. 10, 000 women labourers were engaged in silk , tobacco and potteries. The wages in all these industries were minimum and most of the women labourers were suffering from incurable diseases and eventually succumbed to untimely death. During the period 1920 -40, few inspired dedicated women leaders devoted their life to organize the workers and to lead the labour movement as an integral part of the Nationalist Movement. The leadership of Santosh Kumari Devi, Dr. Prabhavati Dasgupta, Sakina Begum, Sudha Roy and Maitreyee Basu inspired the workers as pathfinders to transform their life and assert their their rights against the exploitative employers. Some of the were Gandhians and few were Marxist in their approach. But the overwhelming response and support they received, exhibited their zeal and determination to empower the helpless and exploited workers.

Women's participation in the Freedom Movement: A quest for Identity

Women gained confidence and visibility as they participated actively in the struggle for independence. Gandhi turned traditional symbols and ideals into sources of inspiration and energy for women, who came out of their homes to organize meetings and processions, to sell khadi, to spread the message of Swadeshi, to give away their jewellery and to picket near the shops of liquor and foreign cloth. Many women emerged as leaders including Hansa Mehta, Mithuben Petit, Avantikabai Gokhale, Premabai Kantak(from western

region), Swarup Rani Nehru, Parvati Devi, Lado Rani Zutshi (and her three daughters, Monmohini, Shyama and Janaki), Satyabati Devi (from northern India), S. Ambujammal, Rukmani Lakshmi pathy, Durgabai from southern India, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Suniti Devi, Hemoprobha Majumder, Sarala Devi, Jyotirmoyee Ganguly, Ashalata sen, Malati Choudhury (from eastern India).

The real significance of Non-Cooperation movement was that the Indian Nationalist movement acquired a real mass base and the women were integrated in the movement. At the end of the movement, the women proved themselves as equal partner of national consciousness.

The civil disobedience movement led by Gandhi was a turning point in the emergence of Indian women from their traditional seclusion. In the past, the role of women was confined only to the elite classes, but now women from all classes and categories came forward in large numbers, sacrificing their personal life and comfort. Thus, Gandhi's Dandi March of 12th March, 1930 opened a new chapter in India's history. Women participated in protest marches, manufactured salt and picketed foreign clothes and liquor shops. Sarojini Naidu played a significant role in this movement. Matangini Hazra popularly known as 'Gandhi Buri' associated since non-cooperation, played active part in breaking Salt Act and in the no-tax campaign went door to door to persuade the villagers not to pay any tax to the Government of any kind.

In a resolution passed by the Indian Congress on 26.01.1931 it was stated 'We pay our homage and deep admiration for the womanhood of India who in the hour of peril for the motherland forsook the shelter of their home and with unflinching courage and endurance stood shoulder to shoulder with their menfolk in the front line of India's national movement to share with them the sacrifice and triumphs of the struggle.'

While the majority of women chose to go with Gandhi's non violent struggle, there were some who joined the band of revolutionaries. Their activities included raids on Government offices, smuggling of weapons, carrying secret messages, sheltering absconding revolutionaries, manufacturing bombs and killing Government officers. Bhikaji Cama who worked with Shyamji Krishnavarma and Savarkar's Avinava Bharat Society, maintained close links with Indian revolutionaries from outside India. Kalpana Dutta, Preetilata Waddedar, Santi Ghosh, Suniti Choudhury, Bina das, Kalyani das, Kamala Dasgupta, Lila Nag, Indusudha Ghosh displayed rare courage in opposing British rule. Their movement was not restricted to national movement only, they associated themselves in expanding primary education, rehabilitation of rape victims, training in arms for self defence and in creation of job opportunities for women. Their determination, sacrifice and dynamism strengthened the feelings of nationalism and empowered the whole nation.

Quit India Movement – Consolidation of Power

Women too played a prominent role in the Quit India Movement in different parts of the country particularly in the absence of male leaders. After the passing of Quit India Resolution in August 1942, a new generation of women – which was ready to undertake dangerous and challenging tasks began to emerge. Now women played a much more aggressive role as compared to the 1930s.

Thus the traditional image of women as weak and helpless creatures underwent a radical transformation . Their levels of confidence increased manifold and they had a new role to play in the National Movement. All this went a long way in transforming the self-perception of women and gave them a new sense of power, a new self-view.

When all the important leaders of this movement were arrested on 9th August, a spirited young woman, - Aruna Asaf Ali , unfurled the flag, and went underground. Usha Mehta with her three colleagues made history by operating the underground radio. In Bengal, the women of Midnapore district had played a prominent role in this movement. The name of Matangini Hajra will be written in golden letters in the history of freedom movement for her bravery and self-sacrifice.

INA and Peasant Movements :

Some brave women joined Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army . A women's regiment named Rani of Jhansi Regiment , was formed under Laxmi Sehgal . Capt. Laxmi , - a legend in her lifetime and her colleagues form a glorious chapter in the history of India's Freedom Struggle.

It is also relevant to mention here that awakening of women was evident in their participation in agrarian movement to challenge the exploitative system. After the end of Second World War , there was a number of educated women who were participating in various peasant movements across the country. The legacy of female nationalists , taking part in the Quit India movement had ignited the flame of protest to reform the unjust society. Tebhaga movement was one such movement erupted in North Bengal . The landless and poor peasant women formed fighting troops called 'Nari Bahini' and lead a front rank role in defending their rights.

Conclusion: In traditional concept, the female principle complements and completes the male and vice versa. Together, they represent the totality. The Nationalist movement once again discovered this eternal truth and positioned the women in their right place. In a way, Indian women feminized nationalism and in turn the nationalist struggle helped them to liberate themselves from some age -old social taboos and traditional norms. The nationalist struggle provided women with an opportunity to enter the public space and bring about changes in their lives. However, Women's issues and movement were submerged in the tidal wave of nationalist struggle. Gandhi's construction of the Indian women , self-effacing but morally strong , was accepted by and large by people, and by most women. Women found it possible to traverse between the private sphere of home and the public sphere of nationalist struggle. In movement after movement, the Indian women increasingly participated , motivated themselves , sacrificed everything and the urgency of nationalist struggle overrode the priorities of feminist agenda and in this transforming exercise , they irrevocably established their right to the citizenship or membership of this great Country, as responsible equal partner of the Nation in the making.

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