

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN FREEDOM MOVEMENT OF INDIA

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The low states of women as reflected in social evils like infanticide, Sati pratha, ill treatment to widows, polygamy, child marriage and denied of property right to women attracted attention of nineteenth century reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar, Dwarka Nath Tagore, Keshav Chander Sen, Swami Dayanand, Swami Viveknand and other. Various socio-reform moments including Brahma Samaj, Prathana Samaj, Arya Samaj ,Ramakrishana mission and many others work hard for the amelioration of the position of women. They emphasized the necessity of social reforms, but their work was more or less localized. They were also able to stir-up the intelligentsia. But by and large there message reached the local and provincial levels. And with there disappearance in many cases, the movement either came to standstill or was directed to some other activity.

A remarkable progress made by some women in the short span of time also owes a great deal to this movement for social reform and upliftment of women. They were inspired mainly by the social upliftment of their own fellow sisters, prominent among them were Annie Besant, Sister Nivedita, Sarojini Naidu, Pandita Ramabai, Swaran Kumari Devi, Handa Mehta and kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya etc.

The dawn of nationalist ideas created an awakening among Indian leaders. Efforts were being made for getting political and administrative reforms for the country. Many associations of national as well as local character came into being. British Indian association, Indian association etc. came into existence during the second half of the nineteenth century. Dissatisfaction among people made the establishment of an organization of national character inevitable. As a result of efforts of Indian leader, with the assistance of A.O.Hume, Indian national congress came into being to give representation to all shades of public opinion in the century. From its very inception, women were permitted to take part in the activities of Indian National Congress.

swaran kumari devi and kadambini Ganguli won the honour of being first two women delegates to Indian National Congress in 1890.

The participation of women in the freedom movement forms an important and interesting aspect of the history of the modern India. It is of great significance in the history of India in the sense that this participation brought political independence as well as socio-cultural regeneration for the country as anticipated by Gandhi.

In anti-Bengal partition movement many women participated and a few women like madam cama, sister nivedita and Sarojini naidu attended the sessions of Indian National Congress. Annie Besant entered politics in 1913 and started home rule movement in 1914 and appealed to women to participate in it. Home rule movement under her inspiring leadership spread all over the country. Its importance lies in the fact that it gave the idea of self-government to the people as a goal realizable at no distinct date.

After M.G. Ranade's death the social initiative was taken up by Goal Krishna Gokhale. After the latter's death, the bulk of the congress, which favoured the non-abdication of social responsibility, leaned heavily on Gandhi.

In 1917, Mahatma Gandhi emerged on the Indian scene with his new weapons of non – violence and satyagarha to fight against foreign yoke in the country. He was of the firm opinion that women could be the most successful soldiers in the non- violent fight for satyagarha, which he had already experience during his satyagarha in South Africa. He invited women to come out of their conservative set up and join the freedom struggle. His charismatic personality made deep impact upon women and they come in large number to join his movements.


For instance, in the non-co-operation of 1920-21, for the first time women participated on mass scale as Gandhi himself observed that no other class of people in country shown evidence of as much awakening as women. They participated in it as the first step of their emancipation and social amelioration. They took active part in boycotting the foreign goods and cloth and picketed the liquor shops and worked for the collection of funds. In past, they had never attended national meetings in large numbers but during non-co-operation movement, they went everywhere in thousands. Most prominent among these women were Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi,

Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Sarla Devi Choudhrani, Kamala Nehru, Swarup Rani etc.

Nature of Gandhi's leadership and programmes enabled the tradition bound conservative women to make a break through. The political carrier of majority of women had started with direct or indirect contacts with Gandhi. A close study of Gandhi's influence over women reveals that they were either present at meeting addressed by him or met him personally, communicated with him or read about him. Sarojini Naidu was impressed by Gandhi's simplicity during the very first meeting in London. According to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Gandhi's commitment to the Women's movement attracted the latter; Mirabehn alias Madeline slade was inspired by a book written on Gandhi by Romain Rollan . The women followers of Gandhi belonged to all sections of society ranging from poor illiterate women to rich and educated like Raj Kumari Amrit kaur.

Gandhi interpreted nationalism and independence to women-folk not as a goal in itself but as a goal desirable and specially relevant for protecting their own interests. He visualized the participation of women in politics and spinning khadi as an integral part of their religion and personal salvation. His leadership enabled an increased number of women to participate in the freedom struggle through the membership of Indian National Congress. The Congress had accepted in principle the complete equality of women. Gandhi's pervasive influence with in Congress and outside had assured a total lack of antagonism towards the women folk.

The women gave full support to the civil disobedience movement in 1930s. During the Salt Satyagrahas, their protest throughout the land, ever the most illiterate women took part in it. In the view of Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, congress would have lost support without a concerted attempt to keep women involved and interested in the movement..Gandhi started his historic Dandi March from Sabarmati on March 12,1930. At first, Gandhi had decided to exclude women from participating in the Satyagraha . Marget Cousine , Kamladevi Chattopadhyay , Durgabai Deshmukh and many other women expressed their resentment over Gandhi's decision and appealed to him to include them .Gandhi, however , still stuck to his earlier stand and maintained that women were more suited to picketing and boycott of liquor and foreign cloth shops. He broke salt law on April 6, 1930.Sarojini Naidu and Mithubehn Patite were the only women who accompanied him in the March.

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Women congress leaders like Kamladevi Chattopadhyay ,Hansa Mehta, Lilavati Munshi led the movement in Bombay. In Madras Rukumani Lakshmi pati ,Durgabai Deshmukh,Muhu lakshmi Reddi and in Gujrat Khurshedbehn Naoroji,Kasturba Gandhi, Mridula Saladevi Sarabhai and Mithubehn Patite were the leaders of the movement.

The women who had never been out of Purdah faced the bare faced ness and walked unveiled in public procession and all that was in store for them in prison life. Sathyagraha.was led mainly by the women of Nehru family, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, Kamla Nehru, Krishna hater singh and Swaroop Rani Nehru etc. In Delhi credit of leading the movement goes to Satyavati. In Punjab, it was led by Lado Rani zutshi, Manmohini sehgal, Raj kumari Amrit Kaur and Paravati Devi. Women of Bengal did not lag behind. Conferences and meetings become almost a routine work. In comilla conference presided over by Urmila Devi, various resolutions were passed for the formulation of women's organizations, boycott of foreign goods, Hindu-Muslim unity and assisting Gandhi in his constructive programme. A few women of Bengal participated in the revolutionary activities also.

Thus, women from various provinces participated in the Satyagraha of 1930 by non- violent as well as violent means by this movement, Gandhi brought about a revolution, in the status of women of India and particularly of the woman belonging to Indian National Congress. Many age-old taboos and customs were swept away in the current of the freedom movement. Women from all cities and communities, poor and rich shared the burden and the sacrifices associated with the freedom movement. Purdah no longer remained the hall-mark of status and respectability. Women also tasted the new freedom of action in response to the needs of household. So, they awake from their slumber, recognized their strength and felt a kind of new consciousness and thus participated in the movement on mass scale. Over 2000 women courted imprisonment and served sentences ranging from six weeks to two years with a cheerfulness and fortitude which was amazing and many other who did not go to jail, played brave part in those difficult days. During the period when this movement was at its height and men were being arrested in ever increasing number, women not only carried on their work with remarkable endurance but showed surprising powers of organizing ability and initiative.

Women in the congress fought for their own rights alongwith the freedom of the country. Women's suffrage movement in India which had its inception in 1917 became stronger with the

passage of time. The period founded in 1917. The NCWI (National Council of Women of India) and AIWC (All India Women,s Conference) came into existence in 1925 and 1926 respectively. These organizations came to be managed by women themselves and the prominent women leaders of these organizations were from congress leadership only. These women through their organization raised voice against various disabilities from which they had been suffering.

Women's franchise propaganda was carried on chiefly by the WIA(Women's Indian Association). The result was enfranchisement of women on the same terms as men by each provincial legislative council commencing with the madras presidency in 1921. By the end of the decade (1921-30) the process of granting vote to women was almost complete in all the provinces. The constitution of India guarantees adult suffrage to all without any discrimination of sex. In the beginning of 1927, Dr. (Mrs.) S. Muthu Lakshmi Reddi was nominated to madras Legislative Council. She was the first Indian women to fit in the Indian Legislative. This was an event of great significance and rich promises for the future. She was also the first women to become the Deputy President of the council.

AIWC pleaded for joint electorates and opposed communal electorates, reservation or nomination for women and wifehood qualification. It stood for free and fair field for all. It also demanded an increased percentage of votes for women in the new bill that was then (1933-34) being drafted for removal of sex disabilities in holding offices. Some prominent congress women were able to win the desired political status for women of country e.g. Annie Besant, M.E cousins, Sarojini Naidu, S.Muthulakshmi Reddi, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur etc. are worth mentioning here. The women also got representation at the Round-Table conference at home and abroad Sarojini Naidu attended second Round -Table conference alongwith Mahatma Gandhi on behalf of the congress.

Women of India from 1917 to 1937 passed from apathetic indifference to eager activity and an acute awareness of their responsibility as citizens. The emergence of Indian womanhood into the sphere of legislative activities not only brought honour to the women folk but was also indicative of their capacity for shouldering political responsibilities.

Feminist movement and women's movement are terms which are frequently used interchangeably although they represent different characteristics of the women's struggle. Feminism and nationalism went hand in hand. Women were eager not only to secure their


rights but they had also become conscious of their duties. In other words, it can be said that there was no power in the world that could set any limitation to women's achievements.

AICC(All India Congress Committee) meeting at Bombay ratified the Quit India resolution on August 8,1942 and famous August movement was launched people from all over the country participated in the movement with excitement and rays of hope to see the dawn of Independence. After the adoption of the resolution almost all the prominent leaders of Indian National Congress including Mahatma Gandhi were arrested and this gap was filled by women congress leaders who led their follow sisters in various provinces. Mass participation of women in the movement was largest, all the movement launched yet for the movement and it became the vanguard of fight for freedom. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mirabehn led other women of the province, held meetings, exhorted people to come forward and join the movement and also courted arrests Usha Mehta started a secret Radio named as 'Voice of India'. It gave the news of Chittagong Bomb Raid, Jamshedpur strike and atrocities of British Govt. upon Indians. It made attempts to justify the Congress decisions and Quit India resolution Hansa Mehta, Lilavati Munshi, Avantikabai Gokhale and Monibehn Patel also offered leadership to the masses.

Some women of Punjab also worked secretly with the underground organizations to evade police arrests. Laxmi Arya was one of them who carried the message of Congress from door to door in order to keep the movement alive outside jail among the masses. Women of Bengal remained as ever, in the forefront. They led processions to occupy Thanas and faced Lathi-charges. They raised an army of volunteer against the Japanese invasion.

Aruna Asaf Ali went underground and edited a monthly journal of the Indian National Congress, Eastern zone named Inquilab. Kamaladas Gupta, Pudmaja Naidu, Renuka Ray, Bina Das, Lila Roy, Shanti Ghose, Jyotimayee Gangopadhyaya etc. also participated in movement.

Vijaylakshmi Pandit from Uttar Pradesh led the movement. She is known as a woman with many "firsts" who hold many respectable offices at home and abroad and brought glory to her sex. Sucheta Kriplani's active participation in freedom struggle started with this movement only. She went underground during the movement instead of offering herself to police and worked in co-operation with this Ram Manohar Lohia, Jai Prakash Narayan and Aruna Asaf Ali, Purnima Banerjee and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan also participated in movement.

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Many of the congress women who became politically active were the wives and daughters of prominent congressmen. Manibehn Patel, daughter of Vallabhai Patel, sushila Nayyar, the sister of Pyarelal Nayyar (Gandhi's secretary), Lilavati Munshi, the wife of K.M. Munshi, Basanti Devi and Urmila Devi wife and sister of C.R. Dass were closely related to male congress leaders. A small number of women leaders. Comprised those who had sometimes faced some personal crisis as young adults. Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya and Lilavati Munshi were married and widowed as young girls.

The political aspirations of several women, who were active during the freedom struggle have been lost in the post independent thirst for power and rapidly declining moral standards of politicians. Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, who had shown his utter helplessness in 1937 in getting women elected or nominated even in the congress working committee, failed again to come to their rescue. He got busy with his vision of building modern India. On their part, women also failed to challenge the male domination of the political life in the country. Most of them simply gave up their efforts after independence. Even before independence, after their participation in the 1942 Quit India Movement, they seemed to have been sidelined, as political leaders remained preoccupied with the nitty-gritty's of the last phase of the fight for independence which required lesser mass support and greater diplomatic efforts at negotiating table.

Ansuyabehn Sarabhai was forced into an unwanted marriage as a young girl. As a result, these women decided To devote their lives to the cause of nation and participated in all the movements started by Gandhi and the congress. Successful carriers of the many congress women reveal that the source of the power was not the support they had gained in the congress or with the politically conscious public but the patronage of Mahatma Gandhi. The wives and daughters of the well-known politicians had an added advantage an easy access to the leadership of Gandhi. Women politicians, who worked independent of Gandhi an guidance has comparatively little success if measured by the importance of public office.

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