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**Women in Nationalist Movement:
An Indian Perspective
Dr. Satarupa Pal**

Assistant Professor in Political Science, Rampurhat College, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Indian women were present in great numbers in Nationalist movements. Though, Indian women were considered inferior status than their male counterparts in socio-political milieu. Indian leaders tried to change India socially, economically and politically once the British were removed from the centre of power. Indian women were viewed as indicator of modernization in the 19th century. At that time women had stereotype image of the Indian women, reflecting their traditional bound, religious and subservient person. Indian reformers believed that women have very monotonous role and limited opportunity of self-expression. Exceptionally, women belonging to Hindu upper class family had provided some opportunity to interact and communicate with other women regarding socio-religious activity, entertainment etc.

Women took part meetings, political debates and discussions and tried to emerge a political woman of the 20th century. Women, who used to push in the house hold chores, were now attempting to adapt and adjust to the larger and more sophisticated world of politics. Since 19th century a few social reformers raised their voice for women's emancipation through education, eradication of evil practices and so on. Later on, women were aware about their rights and dignities irrespective of class, creed etc. They did not follow western models. Basically, women in the West involved in the demand for suffrage benefiting their personal gain which is considered their personal gain. But Indian women took part in nationalist movement from a sense of nationalist pride in Indian society.

At this outset, this paper tries to explore women's role in nationalist movements as well as their continuous contribution in political movements in recent times.

Key Words: Women; Nationalist movements; Political Participation; Patriarchy; Modernization.

Since the 19th Century and early 20th Century important trends in thought, ideology such as westernization, reform, modernization concerned themselves with the women's question of India. Indian woman became a political issue and the focus of debate, controversy among the British scholars, missionaries and Indian social reformers. It is known to all that Indian

women were not unified groups, having different opinions and attitudes ranging from the orthodox and conservative to liberal and progressive.

However, Hindu women were traditional bound, religious and subservient who had limited scope for progress. Since the early 19th century social reformers had provided leadership to the women's movement by firmly acknowledging their degraded position in Hindu society. The evolution of women's role from private life was influenced by westernization directly and indirectly, although women leaders argued that the movement was indigenous growth. It was believed that educated and modern women were the product of westernization. The nature and extent of women's political participation in nationalist politics can be categorized at three levels. First, women as part of general mass of people who joined satyagraha such women were gathered for a particular issue or were caught up in the excitement generated by any one satyagraha. They were not involved with the congress or with any local or provincial organization. A large number of women who participated in the nationalist movement were simply part of the general crowds.. Secondly, a small group of women were committed to one particular aspect associated with the nationalist struggle. This would include women who took part in social reform activity allied with Gandhian politics such as living in ashrams or being involved in a campaign for *khadi* and village industry or with the *Harijans*. Their involvement was limited in terms of issue and its geographical location.

The next category consists of a very small number of women who participated in all aspects elite group of women whose allegiance was not limited to the politics of a particular province but were attracted to the movement in its entirety. Elite women were expected to take part in the political activity of different provinces, were regularly involved, and can be described as politicians.

It is noteworthy that a number of women who were totally committed to nationalist activity were not in equal proportion to their male counterparts or even to the total women population. Women in leadership got special status in the movement. The anti-colonial struggle attracted women from irrespective of caste, class and creed etc. The issues involved in discussion of women's presence and role in politics----- such as the desire counteract criticisms of Hindu social organizations or the question of role definition----- were problems linked to the Hindu traditions and conventions.

The question of Muslim women involvement is also very important. Hindu and Muslim women had shared a common experience of subordination and experience. The Indian National Congress was dominated by Hindu politicians and further Gandhiji's leadership and propaganda had strong religious (Hindu) overtones. Wives of Muslim politicians did participate in limited way in politics. A direct attempt to mobilize Muslims to join public life was made by the Muslim League in the 1940s. Muslim women took essential part for independence of Pakistan.

The nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi not merely a political struggle but a means of regenerating and rejuvenating society. He encouraged women to participate in all

aspects and phases of nationalist activity, particularly in the Constructive programme and the non-violent satyagrahas initiated by him.

Mahatma Gandhi believed that women were suitable for non-violent satyagraha. It required not physical strengths but moral courage and spiritual determination. The three essential qualities required of a satyagraha were a capacity for love, non-violence and self-sacrifice.

Women had participation in satyagraha since its inception in South Africa, Kasturba Gandhi, Kasturba Gandhi and the women Tolstoy and phoenix farms had joined the men in a satyagraha to protest against the Immigration Regulation Bill and the three pound tax (Tendulkar: 132-37).. The presence of women in a satyagraha had mobilized public support, as also the marginal and the apathetic worker to join the satyagrahas in great numbers, not only to assert their equality with their male counterparts or their right to be involved in politics but also to the demand for independence.

In India, a few elite women encouraged by the presence of Annie Besant, had attended political meetings since the beginning of the First world war,. The most outstanding of these women were Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and Bi Amma, the mother of Mohammad Ali. The Home Rule League had established had published a women's branch to enable women to meet and discuss political issues without the inhibiting presence of men (Besant 1922: 91-104).

In 1919, women had participated satyagraha in limited numbers. Small and isolated groups of women held political meetings in Bombay to educate women in the nature of satyagraha, and Kasurba Gandhi and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay sold proscribed literature in the streets (Chattopadhyay 1921).

Lack of training and socio-religious conventions of the country led to the limited participation of women in politics. Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive programme held as one of its objectives the training and education of women in the fundamentals of activity and propaganda.

The participation of women in the Constructive programme would enable them to criticize from their family or their community experience gained at a local level would make the women self-confident and generate leadership. A few women were involved in terrorist societies. Members of secret terrorist societies were recruited from sports clubs and gymnasiums associated with the University of Calcutta or through the various study circles within the campus.

The government of India's Sedition Committee Report of 1918 noted that the members of terrorists groups were students predominantly between the age group of 16 to 30 years. Kalpana Dutta had come to Calcutta to join the University and became Chittagong Armoury Raid. She was sentenced to life imprisonment which was later commuted after the intervention of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi (Dutt 1945). Bina Das graduated from Calcutta University in 1932, the same year she attempted to kill Stanford Jackson, the

Governor of Bengal. She was only twenty –one; Kamala Gupta was a graduate student and the warden of girls' hostel in Calcutta. She attempted assassination of Sir Charles Teggart, the police commission of Calcutta and Sir Stanley Jackson.

It is to be said that celebrated writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his novel *Anadamath* emphasized the worship of *kali* and *Shakti* as symbols of mother and the nationalist spirit. The weakness or passivity of women could no longer be used as an exercise to keep; them out of politics.

The politicians of the nationalist movement, motivated by their own selfish aims, assiduously counted women who indicated a desire to be educated, work outside the house or to remarry. This was especially true of the wives, daughters and sisters of politicians and social reformers. They were motivated to participate in political and decision-making roles in public life. They became symbols of emancipated woman and a sense of pride not only to their families but to the country.

Apart from extremist politics in nationalist movement women's leadership also emerged from Congress. At that time congress was not only a party but also a political platform of nationalist movement. Women's leadership was belonged to Congress, had unique advantages of education, wealth, liberal background and support.

It is noteworthy that prominent Congress women like Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Aruna Asaf Ali. Mridula Sarabai and Sucheta Kripalini had all expressed the need to establish a women's department with the congress .It was believed that Congress women formed many groups by which they interacted themselves regarding their mutual inters and disabilities.

At the annual A. I. C. C meetings of the Congress, women were present as members and were appointed delegates. There were no women in Congress working Committee in 1936. 'Women's organizations and the suffrage movement' was an essential part of nationalist movement. With the changing socio-political environment, women raised their voice for their suffrage. Women's organizations played important role in the suffrage movement. The first challenge the women's Indian Association faced in the political sphere was the question of women's right to vote. The demand for franchise was basically conservative. It is known to all that women's political rights as an indicator of just society. Political equality of women counteracts the image of the downtrodden and the oppressive woman, and give them a status equal to that of the western women.

The growing political and social awareness among women is evidently the numbers and popularity of women's organization. Of these the two most important were the National Council of women All India Women's conference. The National Council of women was founded 1925, tried to provide link among various organizations outside the country. The AIWC took over from the women's Indian Association the work of gaining recognition for women's political rights. The Franchise Committee of the Round Table Conference turned India to assess the country's need for new reforms.

It is to be mentioned that a number of women elected to the Constituent Assembly like Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Meheta, Sucheta Kripalini, Poornima Banerjee and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur.

The relatively high proportion of women in politics is influenced by the prolonged anti-colonial struggle in which they participated in large number. Women's participation in freedom movement made them conscious and aware to political issues and helped to prepare themselves political leaders for their country.

To sum up, we can say that in the 19th century reform movement. Social reformers tried to redefine women's role in society. They were converted into 'new woman' who westernized, educated, involved in public life and product of modernization. But this 'new woman' was controlled by new type of patriarchy (Forbes 1999:28). This 'new woman' was the active agent of patriarchy, controlling by hegemonic strategies of subordination under the nationalist leaders. With the call of Mahatma Gandhi, women from different class, class, creeds joined nationalist movement. Soon after the nationalist movement, women's question was rejected from nationalist project. In his first article of Young India, Gandhi opposed the 'votes for women' by stating that existing British government is the greatest of all evils in society. But at that time women's voice suppressed under the nationalist project (Forbes 1999: 142). The All India Women's Conference (1927) bargained with the Congress for benefits for women in the 1930s when questions of development were being discussed. Though the women's movement operated within the moral framework of nationalism, there were tensions between the nationalist agendum set by the male leadership and what women viewed to be their own interests. (Forbes 2005: 11-76).

However, women's question in nationalist movement had two fold aspects –women's suffrage on the one hand and the reform of Hindu personal law on the other.

In this regard, Liddle and Joshi opined that Government of India Act 1919 excluded women from casting their vote, but allowed the Provincial Assemblies to drop the exclusion clause if they no denied (Liddle & Joshi 1986:35)

The reform of personal law was opposed by the contradictory stand of nationalist leaders. The Hindu Code Bill referred on marriage, divorce, inheritance etc which went against patriarchy and the interests of nationalist leaders (Liddle & Joshi 1986:36-37). Apart from that, elite women were popularized as women leaders while ordinary women's contributions were undervalued by the Indian nationalism. In this regard, Unsung and unknown story of Raj Kumari Gupta from Kanpur, Tara Rani Srivastava from Patna, Ganga Devi, Abadi Bano Begum is still relevant for women's nationalist movement (Devi 2012: 4).

After the independence, Indian government guaranteed various provisions for women's safety and security in socio-political milieu. Despite of that they continue to be faced discriminations in their life. 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992) , rural women got elected and right to take part in the decision-making bodies while urbanized and

educated women ushered in a new kind of leadership at regional and national level politics. But they are still guided by their male family members and party colleagues. Recently 50 percent women's reservation of gram panchayat elections could not reflect a different picture for women's participation. Women from political families got privileged in politics which is dubbed as 'biwi (wife) beti (daughter), brigade' which focused women's entry into formal political institutions in India (Hasan 2011: 405).

Above all, since the nationalist movement women's questions continue to be suppressed under patriarchal socio-political systems. Civil society, NGOs and holistic approaches may eradicate exclusionary systems in the near future.

Conclusion: To conclude we can say that women are granted various affirmative actions under the Indian Constitution. Despite of that women continue to be faced various types of discrimination in their life. But since pre-independence women were represented themselves in international forums. It is to be mentioned that Lakshmi Menon was elected to the UN Commission on Human Rights and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was appointed Ambassador to Russia and then to the United States. Apart from that the first General election in 1952 presented that women contested for seats in Parliament of India. Women are also appointed as Cabinet Ministers and participated as candidates from national and state level parties. Since 2009, women's participation are increasing in Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies.

However, the participation of women in the nationalist movement created a tradition of female involvement in politics. During the period, nationalist leaders set a dream of a modern and progressive nation for Independent India. Women were aware to adopt and experiment with new roles to take part in nationalist movement. With the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi Indian women gathered in the Satyagraha movement. Women politicians also took part in meetings and debates and discussions to confirm their ambition as a politician.

Women's movements have different aspects of women's struggle which are not similar for different women's groups in India. What is common to them is the demand for equal rights and opportunities with men. In India, the social reform movement of the 19th Century, women's participation in nationalist politics restored their just and honourable position in Indian society.

However, the involvement of women in nationalist politics has not significantly changed the image of the ideal Hindu woman. Role of women has remained same in traditional structure of Indian society. The ideal woman is a good wife, mother and the embodiment of all virtues. Women could participate in politics if they managed their household responsibilities towards their family. It is true that women were not being asked to choose between their duties at home and politics. Nationalist movement has given them opportunity to participate in politics and availed to enjoy prestige and power outside the home. It has introduced them to public domain which is said to be male domain in the past.

Elite women who joined the nationalist movement were not mobilized on the basis of personal gain or equal footing of political power structure with their male counterparts. They were committed to traditional roles but their involvement was necessitated by the peculiar political situation of the country.

Various types of oppressions associated with the stereotype image of Indian women were effectively counteracted by the nationalist movement. The dramatic emergence of women during anti-colonial struggle indicated that they had crossed all the limitations placed on their role in the political life of the country. In the 19th century social reformers reinterpreted the women's role in the family and community had been extended by nationalist leadership to include politics. But women's participation was guided by their male family members. It is to be noted that women's participation in nationalist politics was limited to elite families in society.

However, participation in politics remained unchanged the ideals of Hindu womanhood as well as Indian womanhood. The role of wife and mother continued to be revered in Indian society. In the era of 21st century, women's participation in politics is still continuing with the spirit of liberalism and egalitarianism which was evident during the nationalist struggle.

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