



DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INDIAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT : A REVIEW

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Abstract: Indian freedom movement not only gave us independence from British rule but it also help Indian women to get rid of traditional boundaries which were obstacles in their progress. This study has been undertaken to find out the various efforts which were taken by the Indian women as well as freedom fighters to help the women to come out from their pathetic condition. This study also shows that Indian women had to struggle hard to achieve liberation from British as well as Indian traditional society.

Key Words

Women, education, freedom struggle, Indian society

INTRODUCTION

One thing that comes to the fore when studying British Indian history is that women were at the center of the reform movements that emerged in the society at that time. The role of men has always been important in the lives of Indian women. As time and circumstances changed, so did the role of Indian men in the lives of Indian women. Men's mentality and their attitude towards women has a big role behind the role that women have got in society, politics, economy and family according to time and circumstances. Indian women's lives really began to change after the wave of enlightenment in the 19th century. The 19th century was a century of intellectual awakening and ideological transformation in Indian history. Influenced by western education and modern life values, the Indian youth began to feel restless due to the political and social condition of India. The Indian youth strongly realized that social backwardness, superstitions, irrational traditions, stereotypes, all-round decadence are the root causes behind the plight of India. It started to search for the defects in the society and the factors leading to degradation for the overall development of the Indian society. Then the attention of educated and enlightened Indians focused on the problems of women. They were keenly aware of the fact that the development of the Indian society is not possible without the progress of the women section of the Indian society. Therefore, men took the initiative in the movement for the upliftment of Indian women.

Condition of women's education in India

Women's education was an important focus of the male-led women's movement. According to Geraldine Forbes, three factors were involved in the work of women's education: English rulers, Indian men and educated Indian women.¹ Although the progress of women's education was slow in the early years, by the turn of the 20th century, many women in middle-class Indian families had become educated. But since the purpose of women's education at that time was not women's liberation, women remained confined to the family roles of proper wife and proper mother. There was a similarity between Muslim women and Hindu women of that time. That is, the purpose of Muslim women's education was also to make them a proper wife, a proper mother and a proper Muslim.²

Indian educated women opposed such stereotypical public roles of women. The work of Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai is particularly noteworthy. But when such women advocated women's freedom, both the conservative and reformist classes condemned such women and considered them dangerous to the society.³ In the early years of the 20th century, due to the mechanization of various professions, women also lost employment opportunities in agriculture and handicrafts. Women were largely employed in textile mills, tea plantations, coal mines, but as their family role and work became more important, their income became supplementary to the family and less important. The then factory owners and plantation owners took advantage of this situation and started paying women less wages than men. This was strongly opposed by women workers; but the situation has not changed much.

Rise of Nationalism and role of women

While the nationalism that emerged in the last years of the 19th century intensified in the early years of the 20th century, the women's question remained within the confines of the family rather than the national level. The Congress did not deal with the women question directly until 1917. But when the Congress gained strength from the extremists in Bengal, the idea of 'motherhood' was adopted as a powerful and honest symbol. Nationalists accepted the nation as the 'motherland'. In 1875, the song 'Vande Mataram' written by Bankimchandra Chatterjee forever imprinted the nation as a mother. After this every nationalist leader from Bipin Chandra Pal to Jawaharlal Nehru used the metaphor of motherhood for the nation. But Jasodhara Bagchi opposed the ideology of motherhood. According to her, due to this ideology of motherhood, women were deprived of the real power to acquire education and profession and the role of women was limited only to procreation.⁴ On the whole, it seems that woman had a secondary position in the society, she was not included in the national stream. Nevertheless, women participated in the 'Swadeshi' movement that arose out of the partition of Bengal. Women took the initiative in boycotting British goods, using 'Swadeshi'. Sarladevi Choudharani of Bengal participated in 'Akhara' movement of Bengali youth. Some women took part in the revolutionary work. But they were in a supporting role. Women were doing the work of sheltering revolutionaries, carrying messages, carrying weapons.⁵

Role of women in Gandhiji's Movements

However, after the advent of Mahatma Gandhi in the national movement, there was a big change in the role of women. Gandhi's conception of the ideal Indian woman focused on the sisterly form of woman rather than the motherly form. It was in the struggle of South Africa that Gandhiji had experienced the power of women and he decided to use this power in India as well. According to Gandhiji, Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi were ideal female characters for Indian women. But he did not accept these mythological female characters as servants of men but as a force capable of making sacrifices for family, state and society. Not only that, they believed that women could serve the nation by spinning yarn, boycotting foreign cloths, picketing in front of liquor shops.⁶ Gandhiji accepted the physical weakness of women; But he glorified women's spiritual strength and transformed their weakness into strength. Gandhiji experienced the political potential of women by first participating in public demonstrations in South Africa in 1913.⁷

In India's non-cooperation movement, Gandhiji involved women in the campaign of boycott and 'Swadeshi'. In 1921, a thousand women took part in a protest against the arrival of the Prince of Wales in Mumbai. Bengal leader Chittaranjan Das's wife Basanti Devi, his sister Urmila Devi and niece Suniti Devi shocked the entire country by taking part in the demonstration in Calcutta and getting themselves barred.⁸ Subsequently, women did similar work in other parts of the country. Women's participation in the civil disobedience movement further increased. A significant number of women were involved in illegal production of salt, 'dharnas' and demonstrations in front of foreign cloth and liquor shops. The agitation in Bombay was most organized, while in Bengal it was most violent and in Madras it was limited. In northern Indian cities like Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi and Lahore, women from prominent families took part in street demonstrations, shocking conservative men. In Bengal women now dared to fire pistols at magistrates and governors.⁹

In the 1940s, the active role of women in public life began to be recognized. Most of the women who took part in the national movement belonged to respectable families of the Hindu middle class. Some rural as well as Muslim women also participated in the national struggle; but their quantity was less. Congress and its leaders were not very interested in the issue of women. They did not involve women in the decision making process. This is why Sarladevi Chowdharani laments that the Congress 'want to make women only law breakers but not law makers'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, hundreds of women in the family joined street protests, went to jail, endured humiliation and returned to their families untainted. .

Some women gradually expanded the limits of their freedom without appealing to any social hierarchy or customs. For example an old Muslim woman Walida B. Amman took part in the Khilafat Movement and Non-cooperation movement in her old age, after observing the veil throughout her life, and at a meeting in

Punjab, she removed the veil and addressed the audience as her 'sons'. She suggested by her actions that a mother does not need a veil in front of her children. Thus the entire country became part of her extended family.¹¹

Progress of Women between 1940 to 1947

Gradually various local social organizations of women came into existence. Women and girls participated in it. There were some Congress auxiliary women's organizations like Rashtriya Stri Sangh, Desh Sevika Sangh. In the early years of the 20th century, many women's organizations emerged that focused more on women's public, political, and legal rights. Women's Indian Association first came into being in Madras in 1917 at all India level. It was led by Irish feminists Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant. Through this, women's education, rights of working women, opposition to illegal trade of women, voting rights to women etc. were done. Due to the continued persuasion of women, between 1921 and 1930 all provincial governments gave women the right to vote; But along with it the conditions of wealth and educational qualification were added.¹²

Later, in the Quit India Movement of 1942, women became more active than before. Women led after male leaders were barred. Sucheta Kripalani led the non-violent movement while the underground revolutionary work was led by Aruna Asaf Ali. The participation of women also increased in the movement of the communists. Women participated in Tebhaga movement in Bengal, Telangana movement in Hyderabad.

Subhash Chandra Bose included women in military campaigns. In 1928 itself, she formed a 'Stree Swayamsevak Sangh' of the Congress under the leadership of Latika Ghosh. She gave military training to women by forming the Jhansi Rani Regiment exclusively for women in the Azad Hind Sena. The women of this regiment took direct part in the Imphal war campaign of 1945. Although this experiment of including women in war was not very successful, women were given the active and heroic role of the historical Jhansi Rani instead of the passive role model of the mythological Sita.¹³

Along with Hindu women, Muslim women also became active. In 1938, the Muslim League formed a women's sub-committee for them. As the demand for Pakistan grew, more and more women joined the election as candidates, voters and as street demonstrators. In Punjab and North-West Frontier Province, their participation was more.

Conclusion

In short, women became active in social life beyond the family threshold in the 20th century as a result of women's reform movements that started in the 19th century. In the early years, women who tried to defy the constraints of male-dominated culture faced social criticism. Gandhiji involved women in the movement in a big way. Most of the women then belonged to the same family whose men were active in Gandhiji's movement. Then the family roles of women as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters expanded into public life. But not a great change has taken place in the life of Indian women as a whole. Women participated in various agitations, their public activism was also accepted. But at the same time the social, physical and mental distance between men and women was also accepted. Once women become active, they move forward of their own free will. They also violated Gandhiji's orders restricting their activities. Humiliation and violence also came to their share in the freedom struggle. It is true that women's participation increased in the 20th century; but national interest and social interest were given more importance than women's rights. But nevertheless, the Indian freedom struggle gave women their existence and their identity independently and inspired them to use the power in women for national work.

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