

# Did Women Participate In National Movements?

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## Indian Women In Nationalist Struggle:

India's struggle for independence is of tremendous importance in the history of anti-colonial movements. The most important aspect of this movement for Independence from a historical point of view was that it saw mass participation by Indian women, women who had until then been confined to the domestic sphere. The contribution of women in the Independence Movement was significant. They were involved in diverse nationalist activities, both within and outside the home. Within the home, they spun and wove khadi, held classes to educate other women and contributed significantly to nationalist literature in the form of articles, poems and propaganda material.

Shelter and nursing care were also provided to nationalist leaders who were in hiding from the British authorities. Outside the home, Prabhats were organised in which women from all castes and classes would walk to the local temple singing songs to rouse the nationalist and patriotic feelings of the people. They also held meetings and demonstrations, took part in satyagraha, picketed toddy and foreign-cloth shops, went to prison and also suffered brutalities at the hands of the British police.[1]

## Spiritual Symbolism Of Women:

Amongst Indian reformers, Hindu culture, in contrast, was regarded as superior to Western models. Western ideas consisted of the concepts of liberalism and humanitarianism. These Western values were seen to form a part of the 'material' domain; a domain dominated by Western science, technology and methods of statecraft. Opposed to this domain was the 'spiritual' domain, which was seen as a representative of the 'true identity' of Indian people. The women were supposed to be the guardian of this 'spiritual' domain. However, the 'spiritual' domain had to be made more consistent with the outside world with its new ideas of equality and liberalism, to make it powerful enough to stand against the ideals of the alien rule of the colonisers. Thus, the construct of the 'new woman' was formulated.[2]

## “New Woman”:

Although the concept of 'new woman' was in the picture, it was only meant to familiarise the women with the notions of cleanliness, education etc. it hardly talked about the empowerment of women; of securing them a space to voice their views in the society. But the male psyche at that time was not ready to undermine the importance of the so-called masculine traits as opposed to the feminine traits or to even bring the two at par with each other and hence, prevailed the male dominance. To contain the liberty of the newly liberalised 'new woman', the male nationalist leaders came up with the construct of the 'common woman'. The 'common woman', as opposed to the 'new woman', was coarse, promiscuous and vulgar.

The common women were the Nautch girls, street-vendors, fisherwomen, washerwomen to cite a few.[3] Maybe the male psyche feared the new woman construct that was being adopted by the nationalist leaders. Hence, they were afraid that the new women might override the importance of men owing to their achievements in the society. To keep a section of women lower to the men, the nationalist leaders came up with the notion of 'common women' as opposed to the new women. So that the women would feel embarrassed about their variant called the 'common women' and in turn will always submit themselves to the 'perfectness' of the male.

## Femininity And Masculinity:

Indians were accused of being orthodox by the British. Therefore, they came up with the concept of 'new woman' to express the modernity in the Indian society because women at that time were regarded by the British as the symbols of social change. This process of modernisation of the women was initiated because British had said that the Indians were orthodox and were chained by their superstitions and hence, are unfit to rule owing to their

'barbaric' lifestyle. The British took upon themselves the 'white man's burden', under which they aimed at 'civilising' Indians by ruling them.

Another reason that the British gave to justify their colonial rule on India was that the Indian men were not 'masculine enough' to rule themselves. Hence, to counter this very allegation made by the British, the Indian men did not want the women to be capable enough to secure the freedom of the country without the help of men as that, would be evidence, that shall reiterate what the British said. Indian men did not want a narrative to be woven at the end where the women came to the forefront and secured freedom for the country.

The Indian men such a narrative might become the reason behind Indian men being regarded as the weaker sex in future. Hence, redefining the concept of 'femininity' in a way that it either led to the glorification of masculinity or rendered masculinity as a cause for the glorification of the femininity was a constant process. The Indian Consent Act 1891, a colonial move towards prohibiting consummation of the marriage by Indian men before their wives became twelve years of age, was provided as proof of the 'depraved nature of Indian gender relations'. It was argued by the legislators that consummation before a designated age was a feature associated with 'effeminate' men who lacked the masculine qualities of self-restraint and self-control.[5]

### **Gandhi And Women's Participation In Nationalist Movement:**

The emergence of Gandhi on the political scene in the 1920s as a nationalist leader had a tremendous impact on women. His ideas about women's roles in the nationalist movement were considered revolutionary for that period. Though he believed in gender-specific roles, he was very critical of those roles that cloistered women in ignorance and affected them adversely like purdah, dowry and the devadasi (temple dancers) tradition. He realised the significant role women could play in the nationalist movement through their active participation. Also, he realised how the construct of the 'new woman' had to be modified to bring women out of their homes. He argued that the qualities of self-sacrifice and 'silent suffering' were ingrained in Indian women. Thus, women were ideally suited to participate in his movement; the core concepts of which were- Ahimsa (non-violence in thought, action and deed) and Satyagraha. According to Gandhiji, *"If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women"*. [6]

Gandhiji's take on the practices like purdah etc. was that it led to the ignorance of women and hence, blocked the way towards modernisation, that shall in-turn would have lead to the modernisation of the country. But, Gandhi too could be critiqued on the ideas that he possessed regarding the role of the women in the nationalist struggle. Although he wanted the modernisation of the women, he still wished to confine them to their gender-specific roles in the society. He wanted the women to be modernised (broken free from traditions like purdah etc.) so that they would rear their children, the future citizens of India, in a way that they will reject traditional social beliefs that were regressive and make efforts to steer the country towards development.

But Gandhi never talked about the lifting up of women from the traps of social evils or injecting these newly liberated women (new women) into the nationalist movement as prominent actors at par with the male nationalist leaders, who could act significantly towards the nationalist movement. Although Gandhi brought the women out of their homes, he still attributed certain gender-specific roles to them like self-sacrifice and silent suffering, spinning and weaving khadi etc. The women were already performing these tasks within their family spaces under the patriarchal system of the society before being subjected to the notion the 'new woman', the difference was just that this contribution of the women came to be counted as a contribution to the nationalist movement but without bringing any significant change.

Hence, when one follows Gandhian lines of women participation in the nationalist movement, the idea of the 'new woman' comes under question because women's status remained the same. As far as the social setting was concerned the women were, after the introduction of 'new women', being looked at from a different angle by the national leaders like Gandhi but the only role they were expected to play was still attributed as the 'womanly duties'.

### **The Free Radio:**

This image of a woman's role, in the nationalist movements, which got built up during the Indian freedom struggle also gave birth to the image of women as sacrificing figures to bring about the change. and On the other hand, men have always acted violently as change makers of the society. A short story by Salman Rushdie titled- "The

Free Radio”, reflects a true occurrence in Indian history. Set in the era of emergency in 1975, in a village situated on the outskirts of Delhi; where the sterilisation of men is being conducted, and every person who undergoes the process is given a free radio by the government.

The story makes an effort to interchange the gender roles through its protagonist, Ramani, who sacrifices his ‘masculinity’, by undergoing sterilisation. On the other hand, his female counterpart in the story is projected as the dominating figure, which influences the male hero of the story to undergo the process of the sterilisation, which actually is considered a trait of dominance in Indian society for its male members. The author projects his uneasiness with this change in the gender role as far as the national scenario of struggles is concerned through his narrator in the story.

The narrator in the story goes on to question the character of the woman who acquired the male trait of dominance and being influential in the story is actually reiterating the construct of the “common woman”, which was used as a weapon to put a cap on the empowerment of women, a necessary tool to tarnish the image of woman in the society by the male nationalist leaders to avoid the ‘femininity’ from being glorified more than ‘masculinity’. It was done by the male nationalist leaders by categorising a certain section of the women as having a questionable character and not being ‘sophisticated enough’.

The story gives us an insight into the ‘oppressor’s ideology’, whereby the person who belongs to a hegemonic group naturally born to know and rule proclaims the ignorance on those outside this group. As a result, Ramani becomes a man who doesn’t deserve to be taught because he will never learn anything according to the teacher’s view. The story reiterates the idea of the perpetuation of the oppressor’s role as long as the oppressed is not made aware of his condition. By keeping him in dark the teacher can maintain his elite status and continue to manipulate him.

Also, throughout the story, the narrator constantly tries to preserve the dominance/importance of these male traits in the story by time and again chiding Ramani for his decision to undergo sterilisation to get married to the thief’s widow. As this meant that Ramani was the one making sacrifices to fit into a family set up and not his woman counterpart. This is where the Indian society feels being challenged because such a setup poses a threat to the male-oriented and oppressive patriarchal social setup.

But the irony of the story is that the narrator himself goes on to defy his ‘masculinity’, Indian society usually attributes the trait of gossiping to the women and also talks of the women are characterised as born with a gift of gab owing to the very low level of enforcement that their opinions find in the society and to women being placed below men in the social hierarchy. The narrator in the story possesses both of these traits prominently because throughout the story he is in the process of gossiping with the reader about the thief’s widow, and all his talks become a gab in the story when all the lessons that he gave to Ramani turn out to be futile, and he actually went through sterilisation for having a family with the thief’s widow.

So the issues like stereotyping and underestimating women on their role in the nationalist movements in an effort to glorify the contributions made by men, make people fall for the farce that- “Women had hardly any role to play in the national movements.”

[1] Thapar, Suruchi, “Women as Activists; Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement”. *Feminist Review*, No. 44, Nationalisms and National Identities (Summer, 1993), Published by Palgrave Macmillan Journals, pp.81-96

[2] Chatterjee, Partha (1989) ‘The Nationalist resolution of the women’s question’ in SANGHARI and VAID (1989).

[3] Thapar, Suruchi, “Women as Activists; Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement”. *Feminist Review*, No. 44, Nationalisms and National Identities (Summer, 1993), Published by Palgrave Macmillan Journals, pp.81-96.

[4] Mrinalini Sinha, ‘Potent Protests: The Age of Consent Controversy’ in *Colonial Masculinities: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: MUP, 1995), pp. 138-80.

[5] *Young India*, 15.12.21.