



WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA AND NATION BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

In the following paper I will explore the idea of the women's empowerment as a part of the issue of nation-building in the light of recent events in the country. I take the take Aug. '47 as the time when India became an independent nation though in so many ways it had always been a nation for centuries earlier. The nationalist movement was not just a platform for struggle for independence but an attempt at nation-building. There was space for anyone who had an agenda for the future. The movement against untouchability, the labours' and the farmers' movement, were all a part of the nationalist movement. Women had kept away from active politics till the early 20th century across the world in general and India in particular. But the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi opened the field for participation by women in the struggle for freedom as actively as the men.

Keywords: *Women's movement, nation building, women's empowerment and men, women's empowerment after independence*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the following paper I will explore the idea of the women's empowerment as a part of the issue of nation-building in the light of recent events in the country. I take the take Aug. '47 as the time when India became an independent nation though in so many ways it had always been a nation for centuries earlier. The nationalist movement was not just a platform for struggle for independence but an attempt at nation-building. There was space for anyone who had an agenda for the future. The movement against untouchability, the labours' and the farmers' movement, were all a part of the nationalist movement. Women had kept away from active politics till the early 20th century across the world in general and India in particular. But the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi opened the field for participation by women in the struggle for freedom as actively as the men. In fact there were occasions in the satyagraha like the post-Dandi March salt making when the police and administration came down heavily on the male leadership and it was the women right up to the smallest towns of the country who came out to make salt in protest and carried the movement forward.

The questions of feminism came to me most forcefully in the course of my study regarding the Partition of India. On the one hand women were taking up the initiative and working in relief camps for the millions of migrant refugees on the other hand, they were the worst victims of the violence that spread in the region. They suddenly became the most vulnerable targets for some of the most hideous kinds of violence. The entire nationalist struggle and the participation of women in it seemed to pale out and disappear in the storm of this violence. In the years immediately after the independence, the fledgling nation started taking up a shape and character. The constitution was framed and it seemed to have a place for every vision. It promised an inclusive system every opinion could be voiced, heard and debated. And then again the empowerment of women was pushed back in the list of matters needing immediate attention. Quite ironically the biggest setback came in the development of the movement for women's empowerment with the inclusion of socialist elements in the agenda for nation-building. By the time the realization came about the battle we were fast losing, a lot of the ground had already been lost, the platforms that could have served to strengthen the movement were taken presence in the forum of various political parties.

Broadly speaking, women's movement has been divided into three phases – the feminine, the feminist and the female. In the first phase, women tried to imitate the strongly male systems with an agenda of raising their issues. In the second phase, they challenge the male superiority and establish a relationship of competition for control of power. In the third phase they establish an identity independent of the male order. This is the phase where the currently society is currently located. The demand is now to be able to live as a woman without any role of goddess or weakling tagged.

Based on the above observations of the developments, I have divided the women's movement into three phases – the pre independence, the years following independence and the post- liberalization. The first phase is from the early days of nationalist movement to the last days of the struggle for independence, the second is the period around the time of independence with its harrowing experience of partition, the third is the decades after independence when the state seriously started getting into the business of national building and discovered that the struggle for independence had not change the life of half the nation. The last phase begins with the last decade of the 20th century when the country decided to shift its vision of the future from a socialist to a more open market driven economy. The women demand recognition of their contribution to the society and a right to operate without fear or inhibitions

In the first phase the cause of women was taken up more or less by influential social reformers in collaboration with the British administration. People like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchand Vidyasagar who brought issues like sati, widow remarriage and women's education into the focus of cultural revival and nation building. The Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj movements are examples of such reform movements. But it was also during this phase that All India Women's Conference was founded in 1904 with branches across many small towns. Pandita Ramabai, Swarna Kumari Devi (Tagore's sister), Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya (Sarojini Naidu's sister-in-law), Madame Bhikaji Cama, Sister Nivedita, and Annie Besant are some women who talked about the need for strengthening the position of women. But by the time we come into the 20th century, the women's cause lost its steam and anti-imperialist struggle took up most of the nation's energy. There were women who were actively involved in the struggle for freedom at various levels. Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Begum Shah Nawaz are some of the long list of leaders associated with the Gandhi-led Nationalist movement. They were a vital part of not only the congress led nationalist movement but also the revolutionary movement of Bhagat Singh and Azad. The name of Durga Bhabhi is well known but there were many others like Bina Das, Matangini Hazra, Shanty Ghosh, Pretilata Waddader, Kalpana Datta. Capt. Laxmi Sehgal was also an officer of the Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian Liberation Army.

The cultural revival led by the movements like Progressive Writers movement (PWA) and Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) also saw active participation of women. They were not only writers and performers, but also reformers working with the weakest and poorest sections of society. Amrita Pritam, Ismat Chughtai, Zohra Sehgal, Durga Khotewere not only a part of the movement but also role models. Dr. Rashid Jahan was a notable figure who was a professional doctor and a activist writer. She had been a contributor to the historic book *Angarey* which actually shaped the direction of the PWA.

The weakest point of the nationalist movement was probably the moment of independence when the country was torn apart and suddenly there was a massive migration accompanied by riots and violence. A smooth transfer of power could have led to a different agenda for development. But partition changed the entire framework within which nation-building was to take place. Security and defence became vital and human resource development was not the focus of attention.

The weak position of women was brought sharply into focus when partition happened. Women were lost and found, abducted and rescued, raped and saved, rejected and accepted, mutilated and killed. She was the *Izzat* which needed to be protected, which could be avenged and which was rejected when spoilt. Partition cruelly brought into focus the position of women in society.

While the story of partition reveals the vulnerable position of women in society, it has a positive story to tell as well. The families that resettled and even the women who were living in the shelter houses learnt their lesson and ensured that their daughters were educated and able to sustain themselves if need be. There was a sharp rise in the levels of female literacy and in the women who went into higher education in areas where the refugees had settled.

In this first phase of the women's movement, women firmly established the agenda and took charge of the direction of the movements although there was a strong presence of men as guiding figures and supports. The coming of independence also brought the Hindu Code Bill in 1950. It codified among other things the conditions of inheritance and the law regarding marriage. It did strengthen the legal position of women but there have been changes brought in through apex court rulings especially regarding the share of married woman in her family and conditions for divorce.

The constitution guaranteed her equality and freedom. But there was no clear-cut agenda for strengthening the position of women. The policies for encouraging women's education and primary health facilities which could have lead to women's empowerment were not framed. For decades the laws needed to strengthen the position of women in society continued to be in the process of being framed. Even when the laws were framed, they lacked teeth because the agency of the state which was relied upon to bring in change lacked the will to implement the laws. Whether it was the police, the judiciary or even the political leaders, the patriarchal forces operate at every level. The first phase of the feminist movement was a part of the concerted effort to build a nation. And till almost the late sixties, the vision of a equality promised in the constitution was awaited.

By the late sixties it was becoming clear that the political system was not responsive to the commitment made in the constitution. By that time problems like lack of education and socio-legal discrimination was being acutely felt. A few years later the discrimination had taken the form of evils like dowry and dowry deaths and female foeticide and infanticide. This was the time when women's organizations started coming forward to raise voices of protest. An effort was made to begin the process of empowerment. By the seventies, the women had begun to realize that they needed to make their voices heard. The small groups organized at local levels like the mahila seva samiti or the mahilamandals did not shake up the system. The Nav Nirman movement, was deeply influenced by the movement of Jai Prakash Narain. It begun as a protest against inflation and later became a strong opposition of the state's policies. Another remarkable movement was the protest against the local brew first in Maharashtra and later in many states like Andhra Pradesh, Himachal. They traced the problems like debt, wife beating, malnutrition and anti-social activities to be rooted in the alcoholism of the earning male members. None of these movements were highly organized. Some of them were by urban middle class, others by rural women and still others by landless tribals. But they were the first faltering steps towards organizing women for their empowerment. The biggest problem that they had was a lack of national level organization or leadership. They could protest against day to day issues that affected their life like inflation, water electricity, they could also raise fundamental issues displacement, migration, environmental damage as reasons for women becoming weaker but there could not be a concerted effort at rallying for a more sympathetic and responsive system. By Eighties, the Chipko Movement of the women of Gharwal became a classic case of discussion and example. It highlighted the special relationship of the women to their environment while also showing how a united effort can become an effective weapon for protection of rights for women. Similarly the work being done by SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) is at the level of the weakest sections of society. There was a need for activists who were also thinkers and academicians so that laws to empower women get teeth and could be implemented rather than maintain a token presence. Although the advantage of such a

In the last few years the women's empowerment has gained an unprecedented urgency. Laws like the Anti-dowry act, Domestic Violence Act, and now the Women's security Act are steps to sensitize the legal system. But the more important fact to notice is that there is no single platform or organization to take up the issues related to women. The reason for such growing awareness of the need to sensitize the system is then probably the

result of the fact that women have slowly begun to realize the need to stake their claim in the nation-building process. They are affected by the policies of the state and hence the state has to consider the impact the policies will have on the women.

Let me take up an example. In the Nibhaya case, there was no leadership of the entire movement but the government had to respond by bringing in the Women's Security Act – one of the strongest such laws. Another example, albeit a more complicated one is of the people who were displaced in the construction of big dams like Tihri and Narmada. It has implications for the women who are displaced from a familiar social framework and put in an alien surrounding where their traditional support systems are missing. The eco-system that nurtured them is lost and they fight a battle for existence usually as labourers in urban slums. The compensation is given by the government to the men while the women have the responsibility of the children and the family. Thus the voices are now being raised about the entire human displacement for development from the point of view of the women affected and involved. Once again the forum that take up these issues are local and concerned with the socio-geographical environment.

Ernest Renan in his 1882 essay "what is a nation" lists various factors like race, religion, community of interest, geography that make up a nation. But Virginia Woolf standing on the threshold of the 2nd world war questions the very idea of patriotism to a nation. she says "Our country...throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions...therefore if you insist on fighting to protect me, or our country, let be understood soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share...in fact, as a woman my country is the whole world." we look at Renan's definition again then though the rest of the factors could vary, but a shared common vision of the future is indispensable. And there was no effort on the part of the system to work for such an inclusive vision in India. Independence had changed the life of so few. The struggle had just begun for most whether in terms of class or caste or gender. And for women the fight of caste was also a fight of gender because even in the weaker sections she was the weakest.

What needs to be realized perhaps is that only when we will speak up can we make our voices heard. It not a that we are fighting against alien forces. This is a struggle to make our presence accepted in the world where we have always lived and which we cannot escape, to earn real respect where only tokenism and exploitation existed. We need to feel that we contribute to the nation before we can expect the nation to feel we contribute to it.

Feminist theory that evolves then, as seen in works of people like Usha Bande, Malashree Lal, Susie Tharu, Jasbir Jain tries to resolve the issues that are posed before the Indian women. As Malashree Lal puts it, the Indian woman does not want to confront the family centered social setup; she merely wants to make a readjustment so that her position is strengthened. The first wave of reforms and the close interaction with the west did give a sense of empowerment to a certain section of women. But as the works of people like Toru Dutt reveal, there was still a great dilemma even among this class about the difficulty in coming out openly with their views.

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