



Women in Indian national movement private values and public lives

Meenakshi Mawi

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, SPM College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

Men and women are like two wheels of a carriage. The life of one without the other is incomplete. Neither men nor women can be true to what they are if either of them leads an isolated life. Man and women both contribute to the development of each other's personality. Our ancient scriptures assigned women a place higher than man. It was believed that while man represented the destructive aspects of nature, women represented the constructive one and that blessed in the home, when women are given due respects when, someone begins to write about women and nationalism in India, a few names of elite women are drawn or written. This is not surprising because these women were engaged with some formal political organization i.g. Indian National Congress. But can activism be defined as being political only when it engages with formal politics? Were not the activities of ordinary middle-class women who did not engage with any form of political machinery as important. The findings of the study revealed that through two interrelated processes, the domestication of the public sphere and the politicization of the domestic sphere the article looks at ways in which confining social practices of "Pardah" and norms of segregation and respectability were turned around and at times reinvented to become enabling ones. Their political consciousness was a product of their environment and this article relies on women's understanding, perceptions and experiences of their contributions through their own discourses.

Keywords: Indian national movement private, public lives

Introduction

In 1889, Bombay session of Indian National Congress, ten women participated. Gandhiji gave women the clarion call to join the freedom movement. He believed in equality between men and women. He stressed "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights". Nevertheless, the national movement gave women a platform to step out of the threshold of the homes. Besides, Satyagraha movement was something. Which according to Gandhiji was very becoming a woman's nature. So, she can carry it out very efficiently and effectively. Even Pandit Nehru was very much impressed by the Western philosophy of liberal democracy and was a strong advocate of women's suffrage system. He believed that mere education can never vault up the status of women. They need economic. Political, as well as social independence. Equality between men and women was accepted as an objective of the Indian National Congress in the year 1931. Several women's organization emerged in the first half of the 20th century. The Women's India Association (WIA) was formed by an Irish lady, Margaret Cousins, along with an Indian nationalist in 1917, The National Council of Indian

Women (NCIW) was formed in 1926, and the All India Women's Conference in (AIWC) 1927. In 1917, a demand for women's right to vote was put forward to the Viceroy. The deputation included women figures like Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins. Even the INC extended its full support. And women were given the right to vote. Madras province set the landmark for allowing women to vote. Again in 1927, Muthulakshmi Reddy got elected to the legislative council of Madras. The Indian

National Congress and the women's group worked in close association with each other. The freedom, struggle and women's movement was said to be symbiotic to each other.

Many believed that the women's movement could attain its goal once the freedom struggle gets its destination. It was not that women were only alligned with the Congress and took by moderate and constitutional means to fight for freedom. They had joined hands with the extremists. They gave umbrage to the political activists, exchanged messages between political prisoners and other activists. They were active in the Swadeshi Movement and picketed shops and put foreign products to the bon-fire. They participated in the Salt March against the British Government. Thousands of women were arrested and put behind the bars. Many foreign women were affiliated to Indian revolutionaries working abroad. Women joined the Indian National Army formed by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, which had a Rani Jhansi Women's Regiment. Lakshmi Sehgal was in charge of it. No doubt, the Freedom Movement gave a scope for women to break lose of the traditional barriers and prove their equality with men. One can see that the women's movement, which was contemporaneous with the freedom struggle, was eclipsed by the latter. It could not emerge as a full-fledged movement with a mass appeal. It remained confined to the upper middle class urban women. And it must be pointed out that Gandhiji was a pioneer of women's rights, who presented the images of Sita and Danyanti as role models who were epitome of women's repression and suffering. It has been pointed out that the national movement was "male dictated" and "male manipulated". Women were used and not much was offered to them. According to Maria Mies, "The fact that women themselves accepted their limited tactical function within the independence movement made them excellent instruments in the struggle. But they did not work out a strategy for their own liberation struggle for their own interests. By subordinating these goals to the national cause they

conformed to the traditional Pativrata or Sat/-ideal of the self-sacrificing woman Hordes of women pouring out of their homes. Women of all classes and castes, high and low, gave their support to the national movement. The processions taken out by women, their untiring picketing of cloth and liquor shops, their persuasive appeals for swadeshi are even today marveled at. There are limited statistics on the numbers of women who participated. These were primarily ordinary middle-class women, women students, teachers and ordinary house-wives who were not necessarily educated. Ordinary middle-class women entered the public sphere without disassociating themselves from domestic ideology. Gandhi's non-violent programme facilitated the process of carrying over of domestic values into their new public roles. The domestication of the public sphere made it safe indeed desirable, for women to participate and come out of their homes. Though it was difficult for women to adjust to political changes in the public sphere, it was less difficult for those born or married into politically active households. If Gandhi emphasized the moral and traditional cruelties of women, Nehru emphasized the economic content of women's right and obligations.

Gandhi believed that resistance in Satyagraha could only be offered through self-suffering, for which women were particularly suited. Gandhi, while emphasising women's important role in the domestic domain, also argued that 'woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities'. Mahadevi Verma, a staunch supporter of Gandhi wrote:

"In the struggle for freedom we gave up our lives, embraced death and in the end, in the 20th century we received Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi gave us a new weapon. The edge and sharpness of that weapon never dulls, that weapon never rusts; no one can break that weapon. That weapon is forged by the heart of man, by the mind of man, by the soul of man. That is the weapon of truth, of Ahimsa, of non-acceptance. In fact it is such a weapon that no one can defeat the person who uses it."

While the methodology is one of meticulous historical construction, the paper has contemporary resonance. It is a documentation of the history of women's struggle in freedom movement. Also the paper looks at how domestically was not only important for the nationalist agenda but also for women themselves. How women made sense of this symbolism in their personal lives both within the domestic and public sphere.

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