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Participation of women in Peace StruggleAnd Indian Nationalist Movement

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ABSTRACT

The political role of women as a subject for research is of recent origin in India. It is significant that there are so few studies of women's role in the nationalist movement or of the implications- social or political- of their momentous entry into the public sphere. Important works on the national movement mostly fail to examine the significance of women's participation in the struggles. Analysis in this area so far has received insufficient attention in histories of India, when the need to study women's role in history began to be acknowledged world-wide. One searches in vain for an adequate study of women's participation in nationalist historiography. Seeking an explanation for the wide gap between the reality of poor women's lives and official and academic beliefs that women were at the most "supplementary earners" for the family, whose contribution to the family's survival or improvement was "dispensable", the Committee attributed it to the class bias of the intelligentsia, which projected middle class experience as normal for all women. The development of women's studies, however, added other dimensions to this explanation. A more outspoken point of view came from a senior demographer, who in his days as a development administrator had lost a battle to include better economic opportunities for women within the Community Development Programme that 'fuzzy' definitions and silence on the value of women's work was part of a deliberate effort to "keep women subjugated economically, socially and politically .

INTRODUCTION

Interestingly, the propagators of the ideology took little cognizance of not only the reality of roles played by the majority of women, but even the 'voices from within' of women in their own homes whom they were seeking to educate and transform. The CSWI had criticised the educational system for its failure to inculcate the value of equality among the youth, to counter the influence of inherited traditions and socialisation practices. The Committee's report gave substantial evidence of the persistent 'ambivalence' among educationists and policy makers regarding women's expected or desired roles in Soefety. The absence of any serious examination of the political significance of the acceptance of gender equality as a

basic principle of the Indian political system also suggests a critical lacuna in academic assessment. Why has this "radical departure from the inherited social system" been treated so cursorily even dismissively, by scholars? A member of the CSWI has argued that this gap in critical analysis has strengthened a dominant tendency among the intelligentsia to view gender equality as the culmination of the nineteenth century social reform movements, which threw up women's status as a major issue for debate and change.

In our opinion, this perception of a linear connection between the reform movements and gender equality ignores several critical issues and contradictions within the reform movements. It has certainly prevented adequate analysis of the politically critical role of gender equality within Indian nationalism and the political system born out of it. Thirdly it has altogether ignored women's own views, aspirations and needs that provided many additional dimensions to the multiple struggles that contributed to the anti-imperialist movement. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the extension of this mother-worship to the emerging consciousness of the nation visualized as Mother India, enslaved by alien rulers, was an easy transition for many. By the early twentieth century the symbolism of Mother India became acceptable to nationalists of non-Hindu heritage also, possibly because of its popular appeal and potential for revolutionary mobilisation. The nineteenth century reform however, were neither unanimous nor homogeneous in their inspiration and objectives. The common element was their preoccupation with problems that primarily affected women in their own social class and milieu, and made them vulnerable to humiliation. These 'social evils' brought charges of barbarity and uncivilised behaviour from the new rulers, the new teachers and the new dispensers of rewards and recognition. This preoccupation with the West, either to emulate, to assimilate, or to reject, was an inevitable consequence of the circumstances which made the cultural contact possible. Changing socio economic relations, the growth of urban living, new modes of communication and education, as well as the pressure to acknowledge the scientific, technological and political dominance of Europe over the inherited cultural identities unleashed several tendencies that brought about the many contradictions within the reform movements.

1. EVOLUTION OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION AND NATIONALISM

Accepting women's status within the family as an index of their own progress and modernity, the earlier reformers criticised particularly inhuman practices like widow immolation (sati), marriage of child brides to much older men, ban on remarriage of widows, and sought to promote some form of education for women. Orthodox criticism of such moves was countered by statements that such reforms would arrest conversions to Christianity or the drift of oppressed widows to prostitution, and strengthen the stability of the traditional (patriarchal) family. The changes that they sought to promote reflected fairly crudely the social, especially family ideology of the nineteenth century British middle class. They did so without examining its possible long-term impact on the gender role prescriptions-ideal or actual-within the indigenous cultures of the highly diverse Indian society.

The second group of social reformers, focussing on the same issues but far more outspoken in their rejection of western values, projected their attempts as those of 'revival' of pristine traditions of 'Indian' culture, to rescue women from the cultural degeneration of which they had become victims. Education of

a controlled kind and positions of protected dignity within the family and the community were argued as necessary to enrol women as 'custodians of traditional cultural values', against the onslaught of Westernisation. The role prescriptions for the aryaniahilas (noble or respectable women, or followers of the Arya Samaj, one of the reform movements) strangely enough, reiterated not only the ideals prescribed for high caste Hindu women-thus reasserting the traditional claim of higher caste groups to be leaders of culture within the hierarchical social systems-but also of the 'gentlewoman' of Victorian England. Similar role prescriptions were made for upper class Muslim women. Some strands within the reform movements which rejected caste hierarchy using the slogan of human equality, did not extend the concept to women. Instead. they too followed the 'revivalists' in imposing the traditionally dominant, higher caste model of gender role ideology on women among their following.36 The fact that such an ideology bore little relationship to the actual roles that the women played in their community was ignored deliberately or unconsciously. Barring a few exceptions, the 'modernists' or the 'revivalists' were not really concerned with gender equality, women's own desires or their perspectives on dignity and justice. There were however some outstanding exceptions. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar-neither a product of western education nor inspired by the need to 'whitewash' Indian practices to earn the approval of the rulers-was pushed into his campaigns for widow remarriage, the education of women and against polygamy by his mother's influence. His attitude to women was not instrumental (as with the 'modernists' or the 'revivalists'), but humane. One generation later, Jyotiba Phule, from another corner of the sub-continent and from a very different social background pushed the analysis of the inter-relationship- between women's subordination and the maintenance of the caste hierarchy-far beyond the point that Vidyasagar-a doer rather than a theoretician-had managed to articulate. Phule identified women's subordination as an instrument to perpetuate existing models of hierarchy. Phule's and his wife, Savitri Bai's efforts for women's emancipation acquired a far greater radical stance.

2. Intellectual Upbringing matched that of most Nineteenth Century Reformers,

Pandita Ramabai, whose intellectual upbringing matched that of most nineteenth century reformers, remains distinct "in her status as a solitary woman leader of the women's cause, whose equal in stature is yet to emerge in Maharashtra." A high caste Hindu, steeped in both Sanskrit and Western learning, she challenged patriarchy, both through her personal life and the causes that she adopted for her struggles-self reliance for women, motivating women for self-improvement, and women's participation in public including political life. In all these respects, she was far ahead of the rest of the nineteenth century reformers. Her personal independence, her marriage of her own choice to a man of a different linguistic community and caste, and her religious conversion marked her out as a rebel and a feminist. Her analysis of a clear and close connection between the condition of women and the degradation of the nation reads very much like Mahatma Gandhi's statements made four decades later. She too advocated the critical necessity of educating women, but reconunended the need for women teachers, inspectresses of schools and women doctors as essential to break through the prevailing oppression of 'educated men of this country. These contradictions within the reform movements were reflected, mirror-like, in the reformers' struggles to promote women's education. The new opportunities thrown up by the colonial administrative and legal systems (landed property, education-based jobs and professions-in law,

medicine, clerical work, education, the press, publishing etc.) were utilised in the most part by members of the class to which the reformers belonged i.e. those sections of upper caste, upper class Indians who already possessed the requisite cultural skills and social roles enabling adaptations. The rise of such elites created disparities between men and women of this class, and these, in turn, were sought to be bridged by a specific type of education for women.

This was a key issue in this period when new demands were being made on women. There was a need to modernise and Westernize women adequately through education to enhance the image of a modern and civilised India. They had to be presentable in colonial society, models of virtue and fit companions to men of the new bourgeoisie who would serve the colonial system. This could be achieved through education which would henceforth be an additional female embellishment. Women would be utilised housewives and useful partners in marriage to suit the needs of a changing society particularly the urban upper class segment. The nurturant and creative aspects of women's nature were consistently stressed, reinforcing the home and family oriented stereotype. The curriculum revalidated the family as the most important social influence. The educational system merely enabled women to undertake a wider range of activities within the traditional framework and ideology, leading to the paradox of a progressive step such as education contributing to the unquestioned acceptance of prescribed values. Thus the promotion of women's education was undertaken not to liberate women's minds or out of esteem for women's rights but to promote the welfare of homes and families and to enhance the prospects ofupwardly mobile men.

Elite and reformist families were responsible for the substantial expansion of women's education. Private institutions for girls and women were established and zenana education encouraged. Proponents of women's education had to adapt to prevailing social norms, patterns of behaviour and attitudes. Indigenous. vernacular centres of learning attracted Muslim youth including girls, in Bengal, United Provinces and Bihar.51 Unexpectedly, on the whole purdah was not as regressive a factor as it might have been in the case of women's education. Despite limitations on girls' access to equal education, access per se was emancipatory in the long run, contributing to the formation of consciousness and its articulation, and had far- reaching implications for women. Education opened up and widened women's intellectual horizons, exposed them to new ideas and other processes of modernisation, altering their view of the world and themselves. While most reformers and British officials propagated a separate type of education for women, the newly-educated women's aspirations were developing on very different lines. Organised representations by women graduates of Calcutta to the Calcutta University Commission emphatically demanded the same curriculum for women as for men-a demand maintained by women's groups through the twentieth century, until its clear acceptance in the national education policy. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) highlighted this continued ambivalence regarding the content of women's education within the educational system through the decades after independence. The mandate that the national education system as a whole had to play "a positive Interventionist role" in changing social (not merely women's) attitudes to one of acceptance of gender equality and 'empowerment' of women entered the Education Policy only on the demands of the women's movements. The social reformers' attempts to alter social values relating to women's status through the education of women succeeded in creating a dominant social ideology of gender roles which bore no relation to the critically important roles that the mass of women played in the family and

the national economy, and ignored many of the effects of subordination that crippled the growth of intellectual and moral freedom and social responsibility of many women in the growing middle class.

3. Women's 'Socialisation for Inequality'

In the long run, the reform movements strengthened women's 'socialisation for inequality' within the middle class as a whole, and fostered the growth of institutions like dowry and the supremacy of the patriarchal family in women's lives. The controls of caste, community and religious norms which already dominated most women's lives, became in fact stronger and more complex with the added dimension of class norms in the case of the educated middle class. Instead of its expected liberating influence, education became a powerful force in strengthening the sanskritisation process, which manifests the integral links and mutually supportive relationship between partiarchy and hierarchy.

Numerous local women's associations, organisations, clubs, societies, samitls and institutions (hostels, rescue homes, shelters, schools) were founded in both British India and the Princely States. Women's uplift, philanthropy, social work among poor and destitute women and social reform were central to their work. These later developed into public activities in support of women's democratic rights and contacts with women's groups and movements outside India. Concern for the economic uplift of women was not absent but was not an over- riding issue. The majority of members of these associations were fromreformist, educated and privileged families.

The earliest organisations in the first half of the nineteenth century faced much social opposition, until the intervention of the 'revivalists' whose attitude had mixed implications for women's participation in activities to 'uplift' women. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the rediscovery of their past led a section of the Hindu elite to seek a religious foundation for reform. While spreading consciousness and pride in indigenous cultural traditions, institutions like the Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, the Prarthana Samaj etc. encouraged social service, educational and reform activities to bring about social change favouring women's uplift. An enlarged definition of religious activities thus permitted the application of religious ideals to social problems. Models of women's social contributions going beyond the family, available within Hindu tradition, were utilised to demonstrate that Hinduism did not degrade women. No attempt was made, however, to tamper with either tradition or the prevailing value system. Women's role was merely sought to be widened in order to serve the community and the family. Thus 'revivalist' ideology provided an alternative rationale for improving women's status. It was also stressed that women's uplift was in the interest of not only women but men.

Consequently, there was less opposition than to earlier reformers' efforts for the same cause and a rudimentary women's movement was under way. By the turn of the century, there was little opposition to local women's associations engaged in self-help activities. In Western India, reformers from the elite of three communities (Parsi, Maharashtrian and Gujarati Brahmins) led the way in the mid-nineteenth century, by establishing girl's schools in the face of stiff opposition. Later, the Prarthana Samaj, founded in the late nineteenth century, organised the Arya Mahila Samaj, Pandita Ramabai set up a series of mahila samajs or women's associations, girls' schools, orphanages, and widows' homes. Ramabai Ranade, (another eminent social worker of the period) did much work for women and the poor and established the Seva Sadan. In Bengal, Swarnakumari Devi's Sakhi Samiti . a women's association, was concerned

with traditional women's handicrafts.

There are several distinct points of view that seek to explain the impact of the growth of nationalism in the later part of the nineteenth century on the situation of women and the debate on women's status. Natarajan, primarily concerned with the fate of 'social reform' as defined by most nineteenth century reformers-argued that reform issues, and particularly the women's issue lost their appeal and favour by being subsumed within nationalism.63 A similar viewpoint is put forward by Ghulam Murshid, who places the debates on the women'i Issue in the early nineteenth century as 'modernising' attempts in response to the 'penetration' of Western liberal ideas. The limited success of these efforts, in his view, declined perceptibly in the later part of the nineteenth century, with the "hardening of popular attitudes" towards them. The new politics of nationalism 'glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional" all attempts at change being viewed as aping Western manners and values. Nationalism in this phase, in his opinion, fostered conservatism in social beliefs and practice.

Sumit Sarkar has argued that the early 'renaissance' reformers were in any case, not full- blooded liberals. Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as caste distinctions, the patriarchal family, the sanctity of ancient scriptures and a preference for symbolic rather than substantial change in social practices were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. On the position of women especially, there was no autonomous struggle by women themselves to change relations within or outside the family. According to Sarkar, these early attempts at reform were not so much the outcome of Western liberal or rationalist values, but more an expression of some 'acute problems of interpersonal adjustments within the family among western educated men.' The "social ostracism and isolation" that they had to face drove them to "a limited and controlled emancipation of wives as a personal necessity for survival in a hostile social world."

Accepting much of Sarkar's critique of the liberal content of the early reformers' ideology, Partha Chatterjee argues that "the relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is not to be explained by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle." In his view, nationalism "resolved the women's question in complete accordance with its preferred goals." What were these 'preferred goals', and how was the 'resolution' achieved? According to Chatterjee, nationalism was not simply a political struggle for power. On the other hand, it related the issue of independence to every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people. Nationalist, in fact, had to decide what to select from the West, and what to avoid or reject - because they were equally sensitive about their own 'self-identity'. This dilemma was finally resolved by accepting a dichotomous framework between the 'material' and the 'spiritual' world, between the 'outer' and 'inner' life. Applied to day-to-day living, this dichotomy separated social space into the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world-and woman is its representations. The material superiority of the West had to be matched by learning modern science and arts - to overthrow colonial role. But "the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence" had to be preserved, protected and strengthened-allowing no

encroachments into this "inner sanctum". Matching this new meaning of the home-world dichotomy with the identification of gender roles, Chatterjee discovers "the ideological framework" within which nationalism resolved the women's question. Education, travel in public conveyances, watching public entertainment programmes, "in time even employment outside the home" could be permitted "But the 'spiritual' signs of her femininity were now clearly marked-in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanour, her religiosity." The new patriarchy of nationalism gave women "a new social responsibility" not to imitate men, but "to maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin group to which men could not now devote much attention."

4. The Interpretation by some Western Feminist scholars of Indian women'

We turn now to the interpretation by some Western feminist scholars of Indian women's public activities during this period. Gail Minault suggests that the concept of the extended family in Indian culture which could expand virtually indefinitely, was used to justify women's concerns beyond the kin group. The metaphor of the extended family certainly assisted middle class women's performance of some public roles through their associations.69 Gail Minault and Geraldine Forbes argue that women adapted the institution of purdah or seclusion a custom which defined the separate worlds of men and women to form their own associations. The need to be effective required the avoidance of confrontation by not appearing to be a threat to the established order. By projecting the idea that women's needs and nature were special or different,

women were able to mobilise themselves in a public sphere of their own, not open to men. Thus purdah otherwise a hindrance to women's mobility, was utilised for women's advancement through women's forums in which women could voice their concerns. Despite the restrictions of purdah and without challenging patriarchal structures, it was possible for this rudimentary women's movement to acquire a unique strength.

Mediating structures between the separate female world and the world of public affairs extended the female space. From women's uplift to national uplift, from women's emancipation to national regeneration was an inevitable step, as social reform and the growth of nationalist consciousness became increasingly close in a complex-sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory relationship. The politicisation of women in the newly extended female space was facilitated by the mediating role played by members of the female intelligentsia who had more time to absorb nationalist literature as most of them were not involved in working for a living. Many became leaders in both the women's and the national movements. Pandita Ramabai was a delegate to the Indian National Congress in 1889 along with nine other eminent women. Sarojini Naidu believed that the fate of women was linked with the fate of the nation. She wielded tremendous influence on contemporary women and saw no conflict between tradition and women's participation in public affairs, in the world outside the home, as the world was an extension of the home. She appealed to women not to ignore their larger responsibility. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani became an accepted mobillser of youth in the nationalist cause, and was noted by official intelligence reports as 'far more dangerous' to the Raj than her husband, a well- knownrevolutionary.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 galvanised and transformed women's participation in the national

movement. The mobilisation of women was attempted through the publication of pamphlets, public meetings held exclusively for women and new nationalist associations (in contrast to the elite associations) which emerged during the swedeshi period. Mass struggles militancy, armed struggle and political agitations mark this period. Women of different classes were involved in growing numbers in such activities in different parts of India, in both rural and urban areas. The Chief Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam reported confidentially to the Governor General and the Secretary of State, that the youth of East Bengal absorbed hatred of the alien rulers who had "drained Golden Bengal of her wealth. virtually with their mother's milk". Some British women who made Indian nationalism their own cause, played important roles as 'helpers' as well as 'catalysts'. Among them were Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, both Theosophists, Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, and Sister Nivedita, the disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

In 1901 Sarala Devi Chaudhurani formed the Bharat Stri Mahamandal after serious differences with the male leadership of the National Social Conference. After 1910, women experienced in organising and working in local women's associations, and convinced that women should take the leadership into their own hands, started provincial and national women's associations. This was possible through effective intra-elite, intra-regional networks and able organisms cadres. These associations, despite efforts to be national in orientation and representative of as many groups as possible, failed to be actually national in scope, lacking all- India structures, among other shortcomings. But their history is more or less identical with the history of the Indian women's movement. The associations were inevitably elite, bourgeois and urban, consisting of women from the upper crust, women with the advantages of social status, education and privilege but redeemed by their desire to serve all women. Obviously the women's movement in this phase neither represented the masses nor counted among its members lower caste, illiterate, rural, peasant and poor working women.

5. All India Women's Conference

The All India Women's conference, originally convened only to discuss women's education, became a permanent body which succeeded in developing branches all over India. It called itself an apolitical body; its constitution included a clause that declared that it would not engage in party politics. Its emphasis was on unity and women's uplift through education, and social and legal reform. It also emphasised women's contribution to national development. However, the AIWC had become involved with women's political rights and all question which affected women and children as well as with social problems such as untouchability. Although its major focus and priority remained the women's question and the elimination of women's backwardness, and stress was laid on the well-being of women and the family the future of India gradually became an important concern. Many members of the WIA were also members of the AIWC and many such members were members of the Indian National Congress, and leaders in the national movement as well. This factor led to close relations between the women's and the national movements. Consequently, the two main actors in the women's movement, the WIA and the AIWC, were swept by a variety of influences. The women's question had gradually evolved from the perspective of uplift within the traditional framework to that of women's equality. But involvement in the struggle for freedom led the women's movement into dilemmas and contradictions, it was caught between the middle

class character of its membership and the increasing radicalism within the national movement with its transformation into a mass movement .

Similarly, women's active, even militant roles, as participants and leaders in quasitionalist peasant and workers' struggles remained strangely invisible till farly recently. Recent attempts to reconstruct life stories of women activists and to obtain oral history from the few surviving women freedom fighters provide little substance to the theory of male direction, guidelines or manipulation. The women continue to say that they felt "compelled to join the struggle". And repeatedly they acknowledge the support received-overt or covert-from other women in the family, the kin group, friends and neighbourts. Developments since independence have demonstrated time and again that women react to national crises more spontaneously than to routine politics, the present opposition from the women's movement to the communalisation of political life was anticipated. Prannoy Roy's pre-election study had sought answers. In order of priority, to a question on which were the most burning issues facing the nation. The respondents were given a choice-inflation, public corruption, or problems of national integration. Roy's own expectation was that the majority of women would identify inflation as the first problem. He was taken aback when 68 per cent of the women respondents, as compared to only 13 per cent of the men, placed national integration at the top of their priorities. We find it difficult to believe that the leaders of the national movement were not aware of the growing base of women's support and feelings for the national cause, and were 'surprised' at the intensity and degree of their response to the Civil Disobedience movements. What is more understandable is the initial expectation, even desire among many of the leaders, that women will remain content with supportive, constructive roles, but not seek involvement in direct action. In fact, women defied even Gandhi in confronting the forces of repression. The majority of the women who participated actively in different corners of the country did not seek anyone's permission to do so.

In an earlier book he examines the evolution of nationalist consciousness through three thinkers: Bankim Chattopadhyay-representing the "moment of departure" from the apron- strings of colonial ideas, Gandhi-representing the "moment of manoeuvre", combining a "war of movement" with a "war of position", and Nehru-representing the "moment of arrival", engaging in a 'discourse of order' or 'rational Organisation of power'. Since he does not mention women in his discourse on any of the three thinkers, we are safe in presuming that he does not see the women's question as having any political significance-in the vision of the nation nurtured by any of these thinkers. Nor does he appear to attach any political significance to the incorporation of gender equality in the Fundamental Rights Resolution, or the shifts in Gandhi'sstatements about women .

6. Contribution of Social Reformer Gandhi

Unlike the social reformers, Gandhi had realised some of the negative consequences of colonial rule on women's economic status. This realisation strengthened his decision to launch the khadi movement which would offer to the masses of women an immediate, open channel for their participation in the national struggle. Even more, Gandhi used women's role in the khadi movement to convince men that women's participation as equals was essential if the Sivadeshi or boycott movement was to succeed, an argument that he extended later to the winning of full freedom for India, and nation-building (women)

are starving not because there is no food in their village but because they have got no work for which they could get money and for such money they could get food. These poor sisters of yours and mine are without work for nearly six months in a year because of your sins and my sins... these millions of sisters of ours at one time spun yarn... and it was woven into cloth that we used to wear. 200 years ago, the women of India spun not merely for home demands but also for foreign lands. They spun not merely coarse counts but the finest that the world has ever spun. No machine has yet reached the fineness of the yarn spun by our ancestors. I do not know how much men in India will have to pay for keeping you, the women of India, in darkness about so many things of the highest importance in life both to men and women. But thanks to God that since the advent of the movement for reviving the spinning wheel thousands of women have learnt to come out of their homes. The full freedom of India will be an impossibility unless your daughters stand side by side with the sons in the battle for freedom and such an association on absolutely equal terms on the part of India's millions of daughters is not possible, unless they have a definite consciousness of their own power.

The 1920s and 1930s represent a transition in Gandhi's views on women from the concept of women's rights to the far more dynamic one of role. Women's energy would be unleashed for the nation-building process through an assertion of their productive and creative roles as equal partners, participants, leaders, conscience keepers, and beneficlaries . Gandhi had added India's political salvation as a goal for women in nation- building. In comparison to Gandhi's evolving. even changing views on women and the nation- building process, Nehru's understanding of women's subordination was both limited and static. Though fully aware of the problems of building a democratic and egalitarian society on the foundations of a social and cultural structure divided by multiple allegiances (or identities) religious, linguistic, caste and tribal and hierarchical beliefs that prevented a "sense of equality", he did not understand the critical connections between the controls over women and the maintenance of that differentiated and hierarchical social structure. While he certainly accepted the emancipation of women as a value in itself, and claimed improvement in Indian women's status as his greatest achievement, it has been argued in some recent studies that his approach to the women's question reflected the elitist vision of social reformers, relieved to some extent by his fascination for socialism, with little or no understanding of the deeper causes of women's subordination inIndia.

Since the theoreticians have not cared to define the women's question-we have to adopt a common sense one, contextualised in the Indian historical process of change. To the nineteenth century reformers it represented an amalgam of social practices and issues (e.g. child marriage, child widows, sati polygamy etc.) that was a source of much humiliation for the Indian middle class from their colonial masters and models. For the nationalists, however, the question related to women's role and status In the nation-building project. Was their participation necessary? If so, in what capacity-as equal partners, leaders or subordinates? Nation-building called for a resolution of the problems of a multi- ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious population within a hicrarchical, social order. Gokhale, the 'moderate' liberal. identified the problem of the 'depressed classes' as standing in the way. Why would these people identify themselves with the new nation he asked, if they did not have a stake in that new identity? Equality all citizens was thus more than half-digested liberal ideology-it was a pragmatic political necessity. And eventually, it was Gokhale whom Gandhi acknowledged as his political guru not Tilak.

7. Common Attribute and Problem of all Women-Gender Inequality

Cutting across class, caste, ethnic groups, language, culture and religion was the common attribute and problem of all women-gender inequality. The subordination of women. manifested in restrictions on their lives, occupational, marital and other relational choices, as Jyotiba Phule pointed out in the nineteenth century, was an "essential instrument" for maintaining caste hierarchy and Brahminical dominance in Hindu society. But the status of higher class/caste women was more problematical than that of women of the lower classes/castes. The problems of widows' oppression, purdah and the growing gender gap in education which had preoccupied the nineteenth century reformers did not affect the majority of Indian women. The majority, i.e. nearly 90 per cent of the total female population was deeply involved in the agrarian, manufacturing, or the trading economies of the subcontinent-as partners in household or family based enterprises, or as independent workers producers or traders. The rights and roles of women of these classes mainly depended on local or community customs, which often gave them far more freedom than what was available to their higher caste/class sisters whose lives were defined much more by the Code of Manu.

Neither Islam nor any of the other religions had really managed to radically alter the life styles, or the gender role prescriptions of this vast majority in the same way as the political economy of colonial rule did. Deindustrialization, land alienation, deforestation and capitalist transformation of the economy, with monetisation of wages and revenue not only increased the impoverishment of the people, but forged new instruments for the devaluation and subordination of women through, for example, wage discrimination, exclusion from some sectors which had been open to them before, loss of usufructuary rights to community property and resources etc. without a compensatory gain in rights elsewhere. All these changes strengthened the age-old system of hierarchical patriarchal norms and values which enforced control over women to keep various groups separatedfrom each other.

Some of these facts many have remained unknown to the nineteenth century reformers, but they were not entirely unknown to the twentieth century nationalists. Gandhi did not win the response of poor working women - rural or urban - by his ideology alone. They recognized his awareness of much of their plight - a direct consequence of the economic depredations of colonialism . Nationalism, too, experienced numerious internal tensions of class, community, sectional interests, ideologies and organizations that threatened the carefully constructed, fragil unity of anti-imperialist forces. Set within this complex historical perspective, the women's question acquires totally new dimensions and political depth that most analysis have missed so far, because they continue to view it through the myopic, pale and static vision of nineteenth century reformers. For example, there has been no research to trace the connections between the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Congress - which accepted gender equality as a basic principle - the Lahore Congress of Asian Women for Equality, the Geneva International Conference on Women's Equality, and the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party which also adopted a resolution on gender equality. Since all these meetings took place in the same year, the absence of any enquiry into possible connections appears exceedingly strange.

C0NCLUSION

It is important to note that in general, information on women in the work of modern Indian historians writing relates to women in elite sections of society. The lives and conditions of the large majority of women, or their response to changing historical forces have consistently been unexplored and thus marginalised in history. Apart from a few autobiographies of women leaders, mostly from elite groups, we know little about the lives, the beliefs or the social background of the mass of women who entered the movement in the different regions, as virtually no work has been done in this area, except in the last few years. Most of the accounts of women's role in the national movement are descriptive not critical or analytical. They do not examine either the reasons or the implications of this spontaneous upsurge of political activity by women of all classes. The dominance of elite perspectives is best demonstrated by the efforts of most historians to link women's participation in the struggles with women's education or the social reform movement, ignoring the large number of women from the peasantry and the working class, including prostitutes, who took part in the various struggles directly, or the thousands of housewives mostly mothers and wives-who provided indirect support by shouldering family responsibilities when their men went to jail or got killed. It is surprising that the socioeconomic impact of colonialism on women's lives and beliefs, turning them into sources of radical inspiration for the youth of East Bengal recorded by a British administrator and repeatedly mentioned by Gandhi-has received so little attention from historians so far. Existing research on women and Indian nationalism can therefore be described as non- comprehensive, cursory in nature, and generally a "history from above". Proper reconstruction of this period of Indian history, with a special focus on women's political participation and the women's movement which was a concomitant part of and yet separate from the national movement, is now essential for a reinterpretation of these movements which were entangled with one another. More local and regional studies are required to provide in- depth data, but macro-level analyses also need to be pushed forward to eliminate simplistic generalisations that continue to be prevalent. For example, better explanations are required for regional variations in the level and nature of women's participation than the single factor of female literacy.

The relevance of a study of women's role in the national movement cannot be over estimated for either the discipline of history or the study of women. But where do we start and what are our sources? There is a scarcity and unevenness of material in terms of region and time periods. Recent works on the women's movement and women's political participation have used a multiplicity of published and unpublished archival records but we cannot say that such sources have been fully utilised. Government documents form a major source of information. Including secret police and intelligence reports, not all of which have been analysed. Many private collections are still not open to scholars. The political significance of the women's question vis-à-vis the nation-building project, however, needed far more complex understanding. Articulation remained incomplete and unclear. An attempt to express and define a women's perspective on restructuring Indian society was made by members of the Sub-Committee on 'Women In a Planned Economy' constituted by Nehru as a part of his National Planning Committee (NPC) but the Report was never considered in the entire history of planning in independent India. The reasons for this strange omission also need to be researched. In the history of Indian nationalism the Fundamental Rights Resolution was an attempt to defeat the forces of disintegration which threatened

the nationalist movement. Most of its provisions, especially those rejecting inequalities based on gender, caste and religion, represented a total 'departure from the inherited social tradition' in the Interests of constructing a new national identity.

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