

Women's Movement in Colonial India: A Study

Dr. Pooja Kumari

M.A., Ph.D, B.R.A.B.U. Muzaffarpur, (Bihar) India

Abstract

The nineteenth century could well be called an age of women, for all over the world their rights and wrongs their 'Nature' capacities and potential were the subjects of heated discussion. In Europe, feminist consciousness began spreading during and after the French Revolution and by the end of the century feminist ideas were being expressed by radicals in England, France and Germany. By the mid-nineteenth century the 'Woman question' had become a central issue for Russian reformers and anarchists, while in India the wrongs of women began to be deplored by social reformers mainly in Bengal and Maharashtra.

Key Words: Reformer, Upliftment, Educationalist, Missionaries, Pioneer, Contemplate, Abolition, Movement

The Women's movement began in late 1800's and continued till around 1947. This stage involved two main stand-one was social reform movements led by men for upliftment of women from the 'shackles of tradition' and the other was women's involvement in the national movement. ¹The nineteenth century could well be called an age of women, for all over the world their rights and wrongs their 'Nature' capacities and potential were the subjects of heated discussion² In Europe, feminist consciousness began spreading during and after the French Revolution and by the end of the century feminist ideas were being expressed by radicals in England, France and Germany. By the mid-nineteenth century the 'Woman question' had become a central issue for Russian reformers and anarchists, while in India the wrongs of women began to be deplored by social reformers mainly in Bengal and Maharashtra.³ As an Indian bourgeois

social system developed under Western domination, this class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, prudish, child marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a 'pre-modern' or primitive identity. The importance of educating women was first discussed publicly in Bengal by the Atmiya Sabha founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1815 in the same year he wrote the first text attacking Sati to be published in an Indian language (Bengali).⁴ Yet the campaign for the Abolition of Sati garnered mainly British support, and was short-lived, while the women's education movement suggests that the nineteenth century Sati Abolition movement might have created the myth of an existing practice where none existed. The only example we appear to have widespread incidence of sati is in the early decades of the nineteenth century in Bengal. Sati Abolition Act was passed in 1829 when Bentinck had become Governor-General of India. If

the sati abolition movement provide one of the 'reasons' advanced in favour of reforming women's conditions, the women's education movement was to provide another. The first schools for girls were started by English and American Missionaries in the 1810s, in 1819 the first text on Vidyalankara, was published by the female juvenile society in Calcutta.⁵ By 1827 there were twelve girls schools run by missionaries in Hooghly district. The movement for women's education is generally described as having been formed by the need of a rising middle class to adapt its women to a Western milieu. The church missionary society was more successful in south India where it opened its first boarding school for girls in Tirunelveli in 1821. By mid century the missionaries in Madras were instructing nearly 8000 girls, the majority of whom were Christians, in day schools and boarding schools. The breakthrough came with the establishment of government schools, such as Bethune's, and schools sponsored by reformist religious institutions. First the Brahma Samaj, and later the Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Theosophical Society all supported female education. The Growth of women's education in the period following the Hunter Commission and the end of the century can be ascertained through the work of three pioneer educationalists-Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, founder of the Sharada Sadan in Bombay and Poona (1889), Mataji Tapaswini who began the Mahakali Pathshala of Calcutta (1893), and D.K. Karve who began a school for widows in Poona (1896). They highlight the involvement of women in structuring and defining female

education. Pandita Ramabai stands in direct contrast to these two educators. She was critical of her own society and renounced Hinduism to become a Christian. Ramabai wanted to make women capable of supporting themselves. It was an appealing idea as long as her focus was lower-class women, upper class/caste families were unwilling to contemplate economic independence for their wives and daughters.⁶ Between 1900 and 1920 "new women", that is, women who were the beneficiaries of the social reforms and educational efforts of the nineteenth century, stepped forward to begin their own schools. They too were aware of conservative attitudes towards female education, but picture had changed considerably. The demand for female education was growing steadily. The first generation of educated women found a voice they wrote about their lives and about the condition of women. The second generation articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions. The boundaries of the early nineteenth century had been stretched considerably by the early twentieth century. What was a deviant behaviour for one generation was acceptable behaviour for the next. By the early years of the twentieth century Indian women were full participants in the redefinition of their futures. For the first time in India's history women began to communicate with women outside their families and local communities. On the one hand there was a small group of women who shared English as a common language. On the other hand, there were growing numbers of women literate in the

vernaculars which enabled them to learn about women's issues in the new women's journals. The first organizations for women were begun by men who belonged to the new religious reform associations. In Bengal, Keshab Chandra Sen, developed educational programs, a women's journal, prayer meetings, and 'Bharat Ashram', where families lived together and emulated the lifestyle of the English middle class. The Prarthana Samaj did similar work in Bombay. When Pandita Ramabai Saraswati arrived in western India in 1882, justice Ranade and his friends helped her set up the Arya Mahila Samaj for the general uplift and enlightenment of women. Women also met in the women's auxiliaries of general reforms associations. The Bharata Mahila Parishad was held in a hall packed with over 200 women. Within the Parsee community the Shri Zarthosti Mandal emerged.⁷ As these associations received publicity they spurred the formation of new organizations for women. After World War I national women's organizations were created. Three major organizations the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the all-India Women's Conference (AIWC) emerged between 1917 and 1927. The women who formed this organization decided to call it the Women's India Association because membership was open to both Indians and Europeans. Annie Besant became the first President with Margaret Cousins, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Malati Patwardhan, Mrs. Ammo Swami Nathan, Mrs. Dadhabhoy, and Mrs. Ambujammal as honorary secretaries. The most important of the women's organizations and the most truly Indian

of the three was the last to be formed. The All-India women's Conference first met in Poona in January of 1927, following more than six months of serious work on the part of Margaret Cousins and other women belonging to the WIA. By 1928 the All-India Women's conference on Educational Reform decided there could be little progress in educational matters unless harmful social customs were eradicated. The development of the various Indian women's national organizations their efforts to cooperate with one another, and their relationships with Indian males, British officials, and British women can be viewed through the issue of child marriage in the second half the 1920's. The women's organizations rejoiced when the Sharda Act was passed. The Child Marriage Restraint Act had a profound effect on the women's organizations. It was a consensus issue and this made it easy for women from different regions and communities to work together and for the three national organizations to coordinate their activities. The Women's India Association was the first women's organization to take up women's worker's demands and the group of moderate nationalists leave and benefits for women workers. At their 1930 conference in Gwalior, the AIWC held a special session on 'labour question' and at their 1931 conference in Lahore they passed a string of Resolution on labour' saying that all factories employing considerable numbers of women should provide a woman doctor for ante and post-natal care, a crèche and nursery school, and a maternity home. The Indian women who formed a deputation to Lord Chelmsford and Mr Montagu asked for

the franchise on the same terms as men. In August of 1918 Sarojini Naidu spoke on behalf of women's suffrage at the special session of Congress held in Bombay. When the thirty-third session of the Indian National Congress met in Delhi in December 1918, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani presented the resolution supporting the vote for women. Muthulakshmi Reddy the first woman legislator was appointed the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. The Simon Commission was the first step towards the formulation of a new India Act. The India Act passed in 1935 increased representation but not to the extent expected by organized women. In 1934 the AIWC, disappointed with the Sharda Act and the proposed India Act, asked the government to appoint an all-India commission to consider the legal disabilities of women. In January 1944, a committee was appointed to formulate a code of Hindu law. The report of the committee was published in 1946 but not re-introduced for consideration until the Constituent Assembly had become the Dominion Parliament. Gandhi appealed to Hindu and Muslim women to join the political movement.⁸ Women followed Gandhi because their men folk accepted his leadership. In emphasizing the self sacrificing nature of Indian women Gandhi was not being original, for the same had been done by the reforms and revivalists. He did however transform attitudes towards it. Women's participation in the civil disobedience movement of 1930-32 differed qualitatively and quantitatively from the early 1920s and won them a place in history. Bombay women's picketing and demonstration from 1930 to 1932 received more press attention than women's activities in any other part of

the country. April 6, the anniversary of the Amritsar massacre, was chosen for the formal breaking of the salt laws. A frontline of seven people, including two women, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Avantikabai Gokhale, were the first to step into the beach, light fires, and boil sea water.⁹ The participation of women legitimized the Indian National Congress. It also shaped the movement for women's rights. It also legitimized their place in the governance of India. The Government of India Act 1935 Granted the vote to women twenty-one years of age who qualified because they owned property or had attained a certain level of education. However Congress was reluctant to back aspiring women politicians as candidates. Nationalist policies had been feminized but election politics remained male-dominated. Hajrah Ahmed joined the Communist party in 1937 after years of working with AIWC. A new awareness of the conditions of working class women led Hajar Begum to the party. On August 8, 1942, the All India Congress Committee met in Bombay and passed a resolution for British Withdrawal from India. When the movement spread to the countryside, large numbers of peasant women joined men in protesting against taxes, land tenure, and landholders rights too.¹⁰ Aruna Asaf Ali became a leader of the underground movement in 1942 and was forced to remain in hiding until 1946. During the Bengal famine of 1943-44 women were visible both as victims and activists. The first Rani of Jhansi training camp opened near Singapore on October 22, 1943, with Subhas Bose presiding. In the post-war period a number of educated young women joined peasant movements. It

was a revolutionary vision that anticipated far women's organizations.¹¹ The period between the campaign for the 1937 legislatures and the first election in free India saw women come alive politically. No longer were their activities confined to 'women-only groups' as women broadened their scope two things happened. As women broadened their scope two things happened. First they lost their identification with the goddess. Also Women lost their privileged position when their numbers in political parties and movements increased. However as women had become more active and their contribution real, as opposed to opposed to symbolic, they undermined the hegemony of the women's organizations and the myth that women spoke with one voice. However while women had begun working with a wide range of parties and organizations, but none of these were seriously interested in gender justice.

Unfortunately, the ideologies which replaced social feminism for activist women did not advocate emancipation from patriarchy.¹² The women's movement in pre-independent India has been often called the first wave feminism. In this phase, women blamed tradition and religion for their suffering and sought redress in education and legal change. They were feminists in the sense that they recognized women as oppressed because of their sex. They looked upon women as biologically, psychologically and spiritually different from men and based their claim for representations in public life on the basis of this of this difference. They argued that women could bring special knowledge of the household and family matters to forums where public policy was debated and formulated. This view fitted well with Gandhi's views on women and the nationalist desire to bring women into the freedom movement.¹³

Notes and References:

1. B. Ramaswamy, 'women movement in India', Isha books, New Delhi, 2013, pp 21-23.
2. Radhakumar, 'The History of Doing, an Illustrated Account of Movements for women's rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990' for women, New Delhi, 1993, pp 1-3.
3. Ibid, pp, 7-9.
4. Geraldine Forbes, 'Women in Modern India', Cambridge University press, Cambridge, 1998, pp 10-11.
5. Radha Kumar, 'The History of Doing, an Illustrated Account of Movements for women's rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990' for Women, kali for Women New Delhi, 1993, pp. 14-15.
6. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (ed.), women and social Reform in Modern India, permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2015, pp. 249-251.
7. Gabrielle Dietrich, 'Reflections on the women's movement in India, Religion Ecology and Development', Horizon India Books, New Delhi 1992, pp.21-24.

8. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, 'India Women's Battle for Freedom', Abhinav publications, new Delhi, 1983, pp.47-50.
9. Ibid, pp. 120-124.
10. Aruna Asaf Ali, 'The Resurgence of Indian Women', New Delhi, Radiant publishers, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 50-54.
11. Manmohan Kaur, 'Role of Women in the Freedom Movement, 1857-1947', Sterling, New Delhi, 1968, pp.61-55.
12. J.M. Everett, 'Women and Social Change in India', Heritage, New Delhi, 1981, pp.201-205.
13. Geraldine Forbes, 'Women in Modern India', Cambridge university press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 252-254.