

Role of Women in the Non Co-Operative Settlement

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ABSTRACT

Many heroes have contributed invaluable to free India. Not only men but women also actively participated in the movement of freedom struggle. As a matter of fact women had contributed remarkably in various non-violent movements started for country's freedom. In order to liberate the country, women have also endured severe torture. On the one hand, where women participated directly in the freedom movement, on the other hand they were indirectly helping the freedom fighters. The contribution of women in freedom movement can never be forgotten. The present study has been carried out to study the role of women in the Non Co-operation movement with reference to Bengal, Madras and North India.

KEYWORDS: Women, Anti-Imperialist Struggle, Indian Politics, Non Co-Operative

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that women participated in the Indian anti-imperialist struggle in large numbers. If we were to recall the names of women leaders in our national movement, we will find that the list is a very long one. Starting with Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mridula Sarabhai at the national level, we may go on to provincial level leaders like Annie Mascarene and A.V. Kuttimalamma in Kerala, Durgabai Deshmukh in Madras Presidency, Rameshwari Nehru and Bi Amman in U.P., Satyawati Devi and Subhadra Joshi in Delhi, Hansa Mehta and Usha Mehta in Bombay and several others. In fact, such is the nature of our nationalist movement that it is very difficult to distinguish between regional level and all-India level leaders. Many women began at the local level and went on to become players in the nationalist centre stage. Besides all these Indian women, there were also Irish women like Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, who brought their own knowledge of the Irish experience of British exploitation to bear on India.

Non-Cooperation Movement saw an active participation of women, especially in Kolkata

(formerly Calcutta) district of the state of West Bengal, in erstwhile Bengal Presidency. The women of Calcutta had organized themselves under the organization of Mahila Karma Samaj or Ladies Organization Board of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. They started an open defiance of law, organized meetings and propagated the message of non-cooperation. Some of the activities they organized included selling khaddar on streets, picketing, taking out processions unaided by male counterparts. Several women leaders including Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, Nellie Sengupta, Mohini Devi, Labanya Prabha Chanda took charge of these activities and led the people. They bravely faced ramifications of their anti-British activities which included detention by the authorities. In Calcutta, women's participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement sent panic signals amongst the colonial administration. Their participation served as a model of protest and picketing which was praised by several leaders including Gandhi.

Significance of the Study:

When most of the men folk were in prison, a wonderful thing happened. Our women jumped into

the arena of freedom struggle. They had always been contributing in the freedom struggle, but the wave of their unprecedented enthusiasm had surprised the British Government. The Home Secretary of the British govt. had to confess that nothing had disturbed him more than the great awakening among the Indian Women and the part played by them in Indian politics. The consciousness of the women in the whole of India took a unique shape and the women of Bengal did not lag behind. The participation of the Bengali women in resistance movement had its origins and background in the social reforms of the 19th century. In this regard the present study is significant enough since it focuses on the women participation in the Non Co-operation movement.

Objectives:

The present study has been carried out with the following objectives-

- To study the role of women in the Non Co-operation movement with reference to Bengal, Madras and North India.

PHASES OF THE NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT:

The campaign for non-cooperation and boycott started with great enthusiasm from early 1921. However, we find some changes in the central emphasis of the movement from one phase to other. In the first phase from January to March 1921, the main emphasis was on the boycott of schools, colleges, law courts and the use of Charkha. There was widespread student unrest and top lawyers like C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru gave up their legal practice. This phase was followed by the second phase starting from April 1921. In this phase the basic objectives were the collection of Rs. one crore for the Tilak Swaraj Fund by August 1921, enrolling one crore Congress members and installing 20 lakh Charkhas by 30 June. In the third phase, starting from July, the stress was on boycott of foreign cloth, boycott of the forthcoming visit of the Prince of Wales in November, 1921, popularisation of Khadi and Jail Bharo by Congress volunteers. In the last phase, between November 1921, a shift towards radicalism was visible. The Congress volunteers rallied the people and the country was on the verge of a revolt. Gandhi decided to launch a no revenue campaign at Bardoli, and also a mass civil disobedience movement for freedom of speech, press and association. But the attack on a local police station by angry peasants at Chauri Chaura, in Gorakhpur district of U.P., on 5th February 1922, changed the whole situation. Gandhi, shocked by this incident, withdrew the Noncooperation Movement.

Bengal:

Women of Bengal came forward at this time but their demonstrations were smaller and their activities more radical than those of Bombay women. The capital city was also the heart of revolutionary struggle and women's colleges became centers for recruiting new members. In district towns and villages women joined processions, wore Khaddar, and hid fleeing revolutionaries. Bengali nationalism had always valorized violence and this ethos profoundly influenced the participation of Bengali women in the freedom struggle. The Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (MRS), begun in 1928, was the first formal organization to mobilize women for political work. The MRS had goals similar to the RSS in Bombay; they wanted to achieve Swaraj and improve women's status. The first step to Swaraj was the education of women to their double oppression as colonial subjects and inferior sex. Calcutta women formed the Nari Satyagraha Samiti (NSS) in 1929 in response to the congress call for women to be ready to serve the nation. Urmila Devi, one of the first women arrested for political activity was named president; this group had a core of 15-20 women who were willing to picket and risk arrest. They were educated, from professional families, and had all observed some form of Purdah. In October of 1930 the British decided to apply special ordinances allowing them to search and detain individuals without proving reasonable suspicion. Rigorous application of these ordinances made it dangerous to join even peaceful demonstrations. By 1933 most of the women revolutionaries were in prison. There had been between sixty and seventy women who had aided the revolutionary groups, and of those approximately forty were imprisoned. They were patriotic young women and their aim has been to arouse the masses to action. Educated, Knowledgeable about political issues, they also wanted to prove that women could be as brave as men. Saraladevi acknowledged men's role in bringing women into the freedom movement but she doubted they really cared about improving the lives of women. Women were rewarded with flowery speeches but no appointed to subcommittees and councils summing up women's experiences with politics she said Congress "assigned to women the position of law-breakers only and not law-makers." Women must demand equal treatment and equal status. She spoke to an audience more conservative than herself and in their final session they reiterated the usual demands, rejected resolutions favouring birth control and equal treatment for women, and decided not to form a separate women's Congress.

Madras: Women's political demonstrations in Madras were less dramatic than those in either Bombay or Bengal. Women picketed and marched in processions but it always difficult to mobilize large numbers of women for action. Madras women never joined the revolutionary movement, nor were they subjects of extreme police violence. The explanation for this rests with the nature of politics in Madras as well as the facts of nationalist movement in this province. First, there had been considerable debate within the Madras Congress as to whether or not to accept Gandhi's leadership. There were many leaders who did not support his plan. Second, Congress was seen as a party of Brahmin elite. Third, in other parts of the country women were especially successful in enforcing the boycott of foreign made cloth.

North India: In North-India women from Allahabad, Lucknow, Delhi and Lahore joined public demonstrations and shocked a public unused to seeing respectable women in the streets without veils. In these northern cities demonstrations occasionally attracted as many as 1000 women but most of them were much smaller. In Allahabad women from the Nehru family were important leaders. They made public speeches and went door to door urging women to join the movement. Swarup Rani Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru's old and frail mother, emerged from a life-time in the zenana to walk through the streets in Khaddar. In Lahore demonstrations against the Simon Commission were marked by violence. Lado Rani Zutshi, the wife of Motilal Nehru's nephew and three of her daughters, Manmohini, Shyama and Janak led the movement in Lahore. Manmohini became the first woman president of the Lahore student Union and served as a volunteer at the Lahore Congress. In Delhi Satyavati Devi, the granddaughter of Swami Shraddhanad, became one of the leaders. The Swami, or Munshi Ram as he was known in his earlier years, was deeply influenced by Swami Dayananda, converted to the Arya Samaj, and worked with his brother-in-law Lala Devraj of Jullundar to promote female education. In the north, the political movement engages elite women and women without any education. They belonged to two different worlds but they shared the burden of social norms that inhibited their autonomy. Women leaders wanted to mobilize their less sophisticated sisters for political action and they knew this would be impossible without the permission of husbands and fathers. Therefore, it was expedient to concentrate on nationalist issues and leave feminist issues out of their speeches. The role of women in the Non-Cooperation movement of the 1920's and the civil disobedience movement of the 1930's called into question Britain's

civilizing mission in India. Beginning in the 19th Century (nineteenth century), British rulers justified their rule by calling attention to the degraded status of India's women. They regarded their efforts to provide education and medical care and pass laws to protect women as proof of their moral purpose.

Conclusion:

The involvement of women in the nationalist struggle severely challenged the notion that the British were the legitimate rulers of India, and at the same time lent full support to the Congress as the rightful heirs to political power. The participation of women in the freedom movement also shaped the movement for women's rights. Most important, it legitimized their claim to a place in the governance of India. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani posed the question: "How can we attain rights?" and answered: "By the strength of our agitation. We must force menfolk to concede to our demands and at the same time carry on propaganda among our-selves." So, we can say that in national movement's role of women were important.

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