

A Historical Study Of Women's Participation In Indian Politics In Pre-Independence Era

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Abstract:

The term 'political participation' has a very wide meaning. It is not only related to 'Right to Vote', but simultaneously relates to participation in decision-making process, political activism, political consciousness. It also means apart from exercising the right to vote, power sharing, membership of political parties, electoral campaigning, attending party meetings, holding party positions, contesting elections, co-decision making, co-policy making at all levels of governance of the state. In a nutshell, it is a process through which individual plays a role in political life deciding the common goals of the society and determining the best way to achieve it. Political participation is a function of numerous variables, but the nature of all these variables is dependent on the political climate of a country. Politicization and participation of women in a country will necessarily depend on the overall political situation. In our country, there are certain factors which favour politicization and participation of women in political life. The background of the freedom struggles, especially during the Gandhian era, was very conducive to this process. After independence, different political parties, for reasons best known to them, did not continue this healthy trend. Politics became more and more a business for 'men only'.ⁱThe current paper will trace the women's participation in the pre independence era and try to bring out the nuances of women's contribution towards their current status in the decision-making process from historical perspective. The paper will also throw some light on the current situation faced by women in Indian politics and bring out the reasons behind it as well as some solutions to overcome this disheartening situation of women in politics.

Keywords: Political participation, Women Status in Decision Making Process

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

The roots of women's participation in politics can be traced back to the nineteenth century reform movement.ⁱⁱThe dawn of the nineteenth century ushered in a new era, brought about by the interplay of several factors, introduction of English education, contact with the west andⁱⁱⁱ western thought, inspiration from resurrected ancient traditions and India's glorious past, resulted in the great awakening - the Bengal 'renaissance' which aimed, among other things, to put an end to the social oppression of women. The first efforts that had been motivated by a reformist consciousness to abolish repressive social practice affecting women were those of individuals like

Raja Rammohun Roy and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Rammohun's activities embraced various spheres of life, but he was primarily a great champion of the cause of the emancipation of women.

After all, we know that women participated in the freedom struggle from the very beginning. In fact, the best-known figure of the Revolt of 1857 - or what some historians term India's First War of Independence - is Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi. While Rani of Jhansi may have been an exception, a figurehead, there were many other women who played a notable part in the national movement, particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1885, premier organization of Indian nationalism, the Indian National Congress came into being. At its first session Alan Octavian Hume asked the political reformers not to forget that unless the elevation of female elements of the nation proceeds with the work, all their^{iv}labour for the political enfranchisement will prove vain. But until 1889 no woman joined the organization. It was mainly on the insistence of Dwarkanath Ganguly that the demand for acceptance of women delegates in the fifth session of the Congress was recognized and Swarnakumari Devi and Kadambini Ganguly, the first woman graduate of the University of Calcutta along with eight other women delegates from other provinces joined the Congress session of Bombay. The next session held in Calcutta in 1890 saw women taking a more active part.

During the swadeshi period of 1904-1911 attempts were made at mass mobilization and the tactful ingenuity of several leaders contributed to increasing participation of women in public affairs. The politicization of women began during the Swadeshi movement in response to men's call for their participation. Mrs. Ramsay MacDonald, who accompanied her husband in his tour of India, noted that Swadeshi movement could not have succeeded without the help of women, some of whom do not know how to read or write, but in spite of this swadeshi movement is spreading very much in the places where one would hardly think there would be an opportunity of its growth.^v

In this early period, not only individual women stand out but a number of women's organizations were also formed. In 1910, Sarala Debi Ghoshal formed the Bharat Stri Mandal in Calcutta. In 1913, Kumudini Maitra attended the International Women Suffrage Alliance Conference at Budapest as a delegate from India to represent Indian women. In 1917, the Women's India Association was founded by Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Saminathan, Mrs Dadabhoy and Mrs Ambujammal.

The entry of Mrs. Besant into Indian politics accelerated the process of women's participation in politics. Mrs. Annie Besant, the celebrated leader of the theosophic movement and known for her activities in social and educational fields, joined the national movement in 1914. She founded the Home Rule League in September 1915 with the object of achieving Home Rule for India. During the Home Rule agitations between 1914 and 1917 women began to wake up to a realization of their isolation from political movement. Mrs Besant's commitment towards emancipation of women was quite pronounced. She mentioned that the progress of India depended on women's emancipation. She was the first president of the Indian Women's Association founded in 1917, and was largely responsible for putting forward the demand for political representation of women.

Her imprisonment in June 1917 generated political consciousness among women in various parts of the country. She was elected President of the Calcutta Congress Session in 1917. At that important session, three women - Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, and Begum Ammam Bibi, mother of the Ali brothers, Muhammad and Shaukat Ali - were on the dais, representing the women of India. That same year - 1917 Sarojini Naidu led a delegation of women to meet the Montagu-Chelmsford committee to demand a series of reforms in the condition of Indian women. Sarojini Naidu was the first Indian woman to go in for full-time participation in politics. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was her political guru and he persuaded her to join the Congress. As a member of the Home Rule League, she led a deputation of women to England. But Sarojini or Besant was an exception. The fact remains that in the late nineteen-twenties women were still not active participants in politics.

The non-cooperation movement marked the beginning of Gandhi's leadership of the Indian national movement. The ideas and activities associated with the Gandhian movement encouraged the growth of women's movement. His call to women met with unexpected response and galvanized mass mobilization of women in active politics. In 1920-21, groups of women participated in different parts of the country, picketing liquor shops and holding dharnas. In Bombay, for instance, Sarojini Naidu and Maniben Patel founded the Rashtriya Stree Sabha. In Bengal, C.R. Das started the Nari Karma Mandir in 1921 for training women in national service. Basanti Debi (Mrs C.R.Das), Urmila Debi, and Suniti Debi, were well known women organisers during the Non-Cooperation Movement. The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) session held in Chittagong in 1922, which was to play such an important role in the future revolutionary activities of the Chittagong group led by Surjya Sen was presided over by Basanti Debi.

Another famous name from this period was Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya who joined the movement in 1921. Sarojini Naidu was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1925, the first Indian woman to hold that post. The All-India Women's Conference was founded at the initiative of Margaret Cousins in 1926. Its initial objective was to promote women's education, but it soon enlarged its role and became active in the political movement.

By the late 1920s, the country was consumed by renewed political ferment revolving around the Simon Commission, which is boycott campaign. Students were in the forefront of the campaign, and girl students in Bengal were drawn to it in large numbers. In response to this, perhaps, the premier youth leader of the province - Subhas Chandra Bose changed the name of the All-Bengal Young Men's Association to All Bengal Youth Association in order to make women eligible for membership. He also opened a political organization called the Mahila Rashtriya Sangha the same year, 1928. It was not just the Gandhian non-cooperation movement that drew women into the freedom struggle. Although the revolutionary groups who believed in the violent overthrow of British rule comprised only of men, even here we find a handful of women who were active. Sarala Debi Ghoshal was a key figure in the early years of the twentieth century in revolutionary circles before either Anushilan or Jugantar came into being. She was not a participant but a patron

of revolutionary groups, and is said to have got her friends and acquaintances to take a pledge on the map of India that they would be prepared to sacrifice their lives for the country's independence. She patronised akharas (physical culture clubs) where young men were taught judo, karate, swordplay, and wrestling. Another famous woman who was involved with revolutionary groups abroad that were fighting for India's independence was Madam Bhikaji Cama. As far back as 1907, she attended the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart where she unfurled the flag of India (the tricolour had not been decided as the national flag then), and urged upon other delegates at the Congress to support India's freedom. She was part of the group that started the publication of a journal called *Bande Mataram* in 1909 from Geneva, advocating the winning of independence through armed struggle. Thus, both in the Gandhian movement and the militant struggle, women had been involved well before 1930.

In short, if the Gandhian movement encouraged women to become mass participants in the freedom struggle, the revolutionaries made them equal participants. As Pritilata Waddadar said in her dying statement: "Females are determined that they will no more lag behind and stand side by side with their brothers in any activities however dangerous or difficult. I earnestly hope that my sisters will no longer think themselves weaker and will get themselves ready to face all dangers and difficulties and join the revolutionary movement in their thousands."

The main reason behind Mahatma Gandhi's call to women was his belief that women were by nature peace loving, non-violent, and capable of immense suffering and sacrifice. It was this aspect of womanhood that he wanted to harness in his civil disobedience movement. Gandhiji launched the Civil Disobedience Movement with his famous Dandi March, which began from March 12, 1930 and ended on April 6.

Gandhiji's view of women as the epitome of non-violence is clearly stated in his April 10 call. He said, "If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman."

The Chittagong Uprising marked a completely new stage in the participation of women in the militant stream of the freedom struggle, in which the traditional role of women as the supportive mother and sister supplemented the woman as activist and comrade.

But it is important to realise that women in the 1930s - in the Gandhian Civil Disobedience Movement or the revolutionary stream - played a pioneering role in changing the image of woman without consciously emphasising on gender.^{vi} In as orthodox a country as India, these women showed that a woman's place was not just inside the home; that women could fight shoulder to shoulder with men in the streets and in the battlefields. But these women saw themselves as freedom fighters first, and only then, if at all, as women. They did not seek any special privileges or considerations. It was by their actions and their courage that they gained the respect of their

male comrades, and inspired countless women. In the decades after independence, many of these women returned to a life of domesticity. That is another story. But today, as women continue to struggle for equality and justice, it is important to remember the path traversed by the women freedom fighters and revolutionaries. Most observers agree that Indian women achieved their greatest social progress during the heyday of Indian nationalism 1920s 30s and 40s. Women were encouraged to participate in various campaigns first by Annie Besant, the English women elected as Congress President in 1917 and later by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.^{vii}

THE MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the establishment of women's associations all over the country. These organisations took up the issues concerning women like right to vote. The role of Indian feminist agency in the reconstitution of the nationalist project, however, has not received the kind of attention that it deserves. To be sure, scholars have examined the emergence of an independent women's movement-dominated by three major all-India women's organizations.^{viii}

- The Women's Indian Association (WIA): WIA concentrated its work over religion, education, politics and philanthropy. Annie Besant became the first president of WIA along with Margaret Cousins.
- The National Council of women in India (NCWI): it was established in 1925 as a national branch of the International Council of Women. Due to its elitist nature, the NCWI failed to become a vital national organisation.
- The All-India Women's conference (AIWC): AIWC materialised due to the dedicated work of Margaret Cousins and other women of WIA and it first met in Poona in January 1927. It worked for female education and opposed social customs that restricted female education such as child marriage and purdah.

The foundation formed during the national movement helped women to participate in democratic process after independence. Various legal, social and economic measures were taken by the government of India to raise the status of women in India after independence. Women began to participate in national and state politics.

The movement for women's suffrage began in the early 1900s in response to a national movement for suffrage, even though vast majority of neither men nor women had a right to vote the British colonial rule before 1947. Prior to universal suffrage, provincial legislatures had granted women the right to vote.

Madras was the first to grant women's suffrage in 1921, but only to those men and women who owned land property according to British administration's records. The rights granted in response to the movement towards suffrage were limited to qualifications of literacy and property ownership, including property ownership of husbands. This excluded vast majority of Indian women and men from voting, because they were poor. This changed in 1950 when universal suffrage was granted to all adult Indian citizens.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POST INDEPENDENT PERIOD

The Constitution of India guaranteed justice-social, economic and political, liberty of thought, and equality to all citizens. The Constitution provided for equality of women and called State to take measures to neutralize the socio-economic, educational and political disadvantage faced by women. The [Constitution of India](#) establishes a [parliamentary system](#) of government, and guarantees its citizens the right to be elected, freedom of speech, freedom to assemble and form associations, and vote. The Constitution of India attempts to remove gender inequalities by banning discrimination based on sex and class, prohibiting human trafficking and forced labour, and reserving elected positions for women.

The first assembly after independence saw the presence of very few women (about 2%). Women members included Masuma Begum, who later on became the Minister of Social Welfare, Renuka Ray, veteran social worker, Durgabai, a veteran Gandhian, Radhabai Subbarayan, who was appointed as a delegate to the first Round Table Conference. As per various accounts, men in the assembly listened carefully to the speeches made by women. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur became Union Health Minister in 1947. Sucheta Kriplani became the general secretary of Congress in 1959, labour minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1962 and subsequently Chief Minister of United Province in from 1963 to 1967. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was selected as a delegate to the UN and was appointed as ambassador to the erstwhile USSR in 1947 and later as ambassador to the US. She was also elected as president of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953.

India's poor record on women's representation is starkly revealed by the World Economic Forum's [Global Gender Gap Index 2021](#), where it has slipped 28 places, ranking 140 among 156 countries. India is the third-worst performer in South Asia, only ahead of Pakistan and Afghanistan, behind Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Bhutan. The biggest slump is in the political empowerment sub-index, where India ranks 51, dropping from 18 last year.

WOMEN WHO DEMONSTRATED THEIR BRAVERY DURING FREEDOM MOVEMENT FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO GAIN GROUND IN ELECTORAL POLITICS DUE TO THE FOLLOWING REASONS:

- Problem of party backing. The political parties are reluctant to provide more seats to women candidates. Women are not able to change social attitudes about women.
- Women have begun to dislike the tough life offered by politics. While many are ready to endure the hardships provided by the political life, they have not been able to change the social stereotypes and attitudes about women's place in the society. Many women have expressed their dislike for political process and has opted for the gentler working atmosphere provided by social welfare work.
- Cultural environment puts maximum emphasis on men. Apart from its criminalization of politics and the political environment of instability and personality traits are the primary causes for marginal participation of women in politics.

- Political parties should come forward to increase women representatives. The absence of critical mass of women representatives has pushed women to the fringes in power sharing and has adverse impacts on their overall political status.
- Gender stereotypes which perceive women as weak representatives should be changed through awareness and education. Efforts need to be taken to enhance the participation of women in governance in large numbers.
- Women's Reservation Bill which reserves 33% of seats for Indian women at the legislatures has to be passed soon in the Parliament.
- Women's leadership and communication skills need to be enhanced by increasing female literacy especially in rural areas. They should be empowered in order to break socio-cultural barriers and improve their status in the society.
- Women Panchayati members have to be trained to analyse and understand their roles and responsibilities given in the 73rd amendment act.
- In the larger society, violence and the threat of violence affects many women's ability to participate actively in many forms of social and political relationship, to speak in public, to be recognized as dignified beings whose worth is equal to that of others.
- Although the Constitution of India removed gender inequalities among caste and gender, discrimination continues to be a widespread barrier to women's political participation. Discriminatory attitudes manifest in the limitations presented to Indian women including low access to information and resources. Women rely on receiving information from male members of family or village.
- Women also lack leadership experience due to the fact they are burdened with household duties. The burden of household duties is a significant reason why many Indian women do not participate. Unlike men, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved in organizations to gain leadership skills.
- Discrimination is further perpetuated by class. [Dalit](#) women, of the lowest caste in India, are continually discriminated against in running for public office. The Government of India requires reservation of seats for Dalits and [Scheduled Castes](#), but women suffer from abuse and discrimination when serving as elected officials. Dalit women experience harassment by being denied information, ignored or silenced in meetings, and in some cases petitioned to be removed from their elected position.

PROBABLE SOLUTIONS

To overcome issues of discrimination and violence, women's organizations have focused on the [empowerment](#) of Indian women. Empowerment is tied to the support of family and improved status within the household, which is undermined by the threat of domestic and sexual violence.

Socio-economic conditions, such as poverty and illiteracy, prevent the entrance of women into running for public office, and even voting. Inability to understand the rules of Panchayat Raj undermines the self-confidence to participation in public office. Empowerment of Indian women can also occur through "bridging gaps in education, renegotiating gender roles, the gender division of labour and addressing biased attitudes".

Women can also be empowered to by family, and when familial support is present, they are more likely to run for office.

The *Women's Reservation Bill* seeks to amend the constitution to set aside for women one-third of all seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house, as well as in all state legislatures.

India's failure to include enough women in politics is evident. The world's largest democracy has barely begun to draw on half its pool of candidates. There is no dearth of women workers in India's major political parties, but they are regularly side lined and denied a party ticket to contest elections. In India, political participation of women is not impressive when compared with men. This is the case in most of the countries across the world. However, women's political participation now is quite encouraging compared to the older times. Today it remains stronger than ever. But, in India, women who have decision making powers invariably hail from urban and elite groups. Even today, representation of women in Indian Parliament is far from satisfactory. Women have been demanding for more space in legislative bodies.

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