

**DC-1**

**SEM-2**

**Paper: Nationalism in India**

**Lesson: The Women's question: Participation in the  
National Movement and its impact**

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## 1.1 Introduction

Women's participation in the Indian national movement expanded the base of women's movement in India. The basic form of women's movement was triggered by nineteenth century male reformers. Later Women also took upon themselves the role of emancipators and fought cudgels for personal reforms and political rights. Their participation in freedom struggle strengthened not only the national struggle for freedom, it also provided the forum for women to bring forth the contestation and contractions of the patriarchal society.

Lets' begin our discussion with a small film clipping on and a quote, highlighting the role of women

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxoLVgLDLDY&feature=youtu.be> The Making of a Nation - Part VI: Women and the Nation 1sec-47sec

*"If only the women of the world would come together they would display such heroic non-violence as to kick away the atom bomb like a mere ball. Women have been so gifted by god. If an ancestral treasure lying buried in a corner of the house unknown to the members of the family were suddenly discovered what a celebration it would occasion similarly, women's marvelous power is lying dormant. If the women Asia wake up, they will dazzle, the world. My experiment in non-violence would be instantly successful if I could secure women's help". – Mahatama Gandhi, New Delhi, July 18.1947.*

Message to Chinese women, *Bihar Pachhi Delhi* , p.354

The above statement indicates the importance of women and their role in the political nationalism as envisaged by great leader like Gandhi.

However the empirical data of Indian population indicates a different picture. Then or now, the position of women in the Indian society remains to be worked upon. The number of literate women among the female population of India was between 2–6% from the British Raj onwards to the formation of the Republic of India in 1947. The life expectancy rate was 27 years for Indian women. Thus the women's question and their participation in Indian national movement (INM) had different

layers which need to be interpreted and understood in terms of actual events and also in terms of colonial historiography. It does unravel a paradox!

**An Interesting fact:**

The Indian literacy rate grew to 74.04% in 2011 from 12% at the end of British rule in 1947. There is a wide gender disparity in the literacy rate in India: effective literacy rates (age 7 and above) in 2011 were 82.14% for men and 65.46% for women. The census provided a positive indication that growth in female literacy rates (11.8%) was substantially faster than in male literacy rates (6.9%) in the 2001–2011 decadal period, which means the gender gap appears to be narrowing. Thus even after six decades of independence, gender equality still remains a target to be achieved.

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy\\_in\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy_in_India) accessed on 14.01.2014

The Indian society is marred with deep inequalities along the lines of gender, class, caste and community. As pointed out by Amartya Sen in 'The Argumentative Indian' (Sen, Amartya, 2005:6-7) "There can be little doubt that men have tended by and large, to rule the roost in argumentative moves in India". But despite this the participation of women in both political leadership and intellectual pursuits has not been all that negligible. The freedom struggle saw the participation of women from passive to active to an activists role.

It is worth noting that in the Congress there were more women in authoritative position than Russian and Chinese revolutionary movement put together. Sarojini Naidu was elected as president of Indian National Congress in 1925 and Nellie Sengupta in 1933. (In Britain it took 50 years for Margaret Thatcher to become the first prime minister of a major Political party in 1975!). But one should not forget that these women belonged to the privileged strata of society and were free from conditions of social subjection while most of the Indian women generally had little or no opportunity for self-expression. However efforts of reformers, both colonial and Indian, Gandhi and above all women themselves helped in broadening the base of women's participation in the freedom struggle and it also gave voice to many voiceless within the four walls of domesticity.



## Sarojini Naidu



(1879-1949)

Sarojini Naidu (born Sarojini Chattopadhyay), fondly known as the Nightingale of India, was a brilliant poetess and freedom fighter. She was also the first woman president of the Indian National Congress and the first woman governor of Uttar Pradesh. The Nizam of Hyderabad was greatly impressed by a play she wrote called Maher Muneer. He later granted her a scholarship to study in King's College, London, and Cambridge University. She died of a heart attack, while working in her office, in Lucknow.

Sarojini Naidu 's speech to Indian Social Conference in Calcutta In 1906

*"Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for, as I have said, it is we, and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your Congressses and Conferences are in vain. Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself, for it is as true today as it was yesterday and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world"*(quoted in Kumar 1999: 50. )

Source :<http://www.edurite.com> accessed on 14.01.2014

## Nellie Sengupta



Nellie Sengupta and Jatindra Mohan Sengupta  
Detail from a stamp released in 1985

Born as Edith Ellen Gray, Nellie was brought up in Cambridge. It was here she met Jatindra Mohan Sengupta, married him against her family wish and later came to live in Calcutta with him. Nellie joined her husband in participating in the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921. During the turmoil of the civil disobedience movement many senior Congress leaders were imprisoned. Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya the President elect of the Congress was arrested before the Calcutta Session of 1931. Nellie Sengupta was elected in his place, thus becoming the third woman, and the second European-born woman to be elected.

Source: <http://www.kamat.com/database/pictures/philately/13273.htm>

## 1.2 Women and reforms

Colonial social reform of the nineteenth century tried to abolish abuses of social life and tried to usher in more progressive gender relations. "A new colonial education purveyed through the state, and Christian Missionaries, altered and modernized traditional social perceptions; a new religious movement revived and consolidated older humanitarian impulses and a sudden rise of a pool of human greatness eager to save the weak and helpless" led to enactment of social legislation by the government. (Sarkar.2007:2-5) For example : Abolition of Sati (1829), Widow Remarriage Act. (1856) Child Marriage Act. (1872) Banning of Devdasi (1925). Despite these positive progressive legislations the women's question was far from being answered by the women themselves. One also needs to remember that women's question and the concern for domesticity was very much a part of the *civilizational critique* of India. (refer to the article on Gender Question)

In the early nineteenth century, the liberal reformers or the revivalists, made women as the recipient of social change. Different communities started talking about educating women, but not as a right holder but as serving the bigger male-dominated community. The growth of militant nationalism saw the reviving of traditional women who come to be glorified as the last refuge of a threatened indigenous cultures. It was the growth of popular politics of the Gandhian congress mass movements that placed the trajectory of women's participation in a positive trend.

### **Interesting Fact :Revolutionary women**

#### **In Bengal**

Bagalasundari Devi, Kailashbsini Devi, Jagat Tara Devi were prominent during Swadeshi revolutionary movement. Bhubaneshwari Devi (mother of Vivekanand and Bupendra Nath Dutta) was supportive of the revolutionary activities of Bhupendra.

Kalpna Datta was directly involved in the Chittagong Armoury raids. Santi Ghose and Suniti Choudhary were involved in the murder of the District Magistrate of Comilla in 1931. Stree Sangh established by Leelawati Nag in Dacca played a crucial role in the recruitment and training of women revolutionaries.

Women revolutionaries thus changed from supportive to a more participatory role at times directly acting as comrade-in- arms.

## **1.3 Nationalism and women**

"The nationalist expressions of women in the freedom struggle needs to be analyzed from following standpoints:

1. That Women engaged with Nationalist politics despite constraints of social practices like the purdah system, backwardness and low level of female literacy.
2. That Women participated in INM through two parallel processes.
  - a) The domestication of the public sphere - women participated in the streets without compromising on their domestic values.
  - b) The politicization of the domestic sphere - women handled situations in their families when nationalism entered households through the activities of their husbands and sons.
3. That Women used the symbolic repertoire of the INM and the political language of Gandhi to facilitate their own participation."(Thapar-Bjorkert,2006,171)



### 1.3.1 Gandhi and women 's role in the freedom struggle

The participation of women in public domain remained negligible till the arrival of Gandhi, when women accepted the decision to enter the Congress. It was during **Non Cooperation Movement(NCM)** in 1920, that Gandhi sought to mobilize large number of women in the movement. However the participation of women was passive and in the public sphere was not significant during the Non Cooperation Movement because, women could participate only from within the domestic sphere. However the degree and intensity of this control or segregation within the domestic sphere varied from household to household, community to community, class to class and region to region. Though the domestic sphere and its fetter proved detrimental for women to participate in public space but this very segregation helped to organize their activities in the domestic sphere. In the absence of the male who would be jailed for his involvement in nationalist activity, woman became the emotional support. Women organized themselves as both imparters and recipients of national information.

They read the newspaper and also literature like the works of Premchand (1880-1936). Some women, especially those of north India learned greatly from the work of Mahadevi Verma and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. They also listened to the conversations of their menfolk within the household. Occasionally the women would hold meetings in each other's homes. The women of a mohalla would invite other women to their homes to discuss political events and to sing patriotic songs.

*“Mard bano ,mard bano*

*sab Hindustani mard bano*

*Avtaar Mahatma Gandhi huye*

*Azaad Hindustan Karane Ko”-*

Transcript of poem sung by Kala Tripathi,,(H isar,Haryana,1930s) woman who stayed within domestic sphere.(Thapar-Bjorkert,2006:180)



Thus, Gandhi evoked the idea of collective sisterhood. Concepts like 'sisters of mercy' and 'mothers of entire humanity' epitomized the women's role.

"There were five ways in which women participated passively in nationalist activities:-

1. Constructive programmers like spinning khadi.
2. Familial sacrifice
3. Being supportive wives and mothers to activists
4. Being pillars of support and strength.
5. Conducting secret activities."(Thapar-Bjorkert,2006:181)

In the NCM Gandhi consciously involved women in the attempts to link their struggle with the struggle for national independence. But the programmes for women were devised in away that they could remain domestic and still contribute. He gave women a sense of mission within their domestic field. Thus women keeping their traditional role became the base of the freedom movement.

However with the progress of the freedom struggle even the women's question and consciousness was caught in the swirling vortex of political emotions but it still remained within the contestation and subordination of patriarchal structures. Through the two inter related processes, the domestication of the public space and the politicization of the domestic sphere, often the confining social practices of purdah and the norms of segregation and respectability, were turned around and at times re invented to become enabling one. If women could not confront or change their circumstances through formal channels, they contested those limiting spaces by doing what they wanted to do. By aligning those contestations for the benefit of the nationalist movement, they developed political awareness of their own abilities as mothers, sisters and daughters but within the disabling stricture of patriarchy.

### 1.3.2 Civil Disobedience Movement

Women's public activities were more pronounced during Civil Disobedience Movement. Though Gandhi visualized a supportive role for women , but they

started getting impatient and demanded more active role. Gandhi appreciated the impatience as 'healthy sign' but refused to increase their greater role for he believed that women can play higher role in picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops. He chose women for these tasks because of their 'inherent' capacity for non violence. He maintained that the agitation of picketing was to be "initiated and controlled exclusively by women. They may take and should get as much assistance as they need from men, but, the men should be in strict subordination to them." (Young India ,1920:20) Kasturba Gandhi initiated women's participation in the salt satyagrah by leading 37 women volunteers from Sabarmati ashram. Sarojini Naidu and Manilal Gandhi led the raid on Dharsana Salt Works. KamlaDevi led procession of 15,000 to raid the Wadala Salt works. Women thus participated actively in processions, picketing of foreign shops and liquor shops. Women were organized in Bombay, most militant in Bengal and were limited in Madras. In Bengal some women also participated in violent revolutionary movement and unlike Swadeshi Movement where they played a domestic supportive role, now they stood shoulder to shoulder with men with guns and shooting pistols at magistrates and governors.(Bandhopadhyay,2013:241)

#### **Did You Know about**

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya



"Kamaladevi's life marked an important period in Indian history; she personally lived the problems faced by the average Indian woman, and triumphed in the Indian renaissance."

Despite being widowed at a young age, she continued her studies and hobbies. She had a great artistic bent of mind and took keen interest in art and theatre. She became an active organizer and leader of the women and the youth wing of the Indian National Congress. She was instrumental in the surfacing of the changing faces of the Indian women throughout the twentieth century. During partition she worked relentlessly to mend the wounds of refugees by establishing co-operative societies and self-employment schemes. She went on to revive the ethnic Indian home industries like weaving, and handicrafts. As chief of the Board of Handicrafts, she founded the pension system for the craftsmen. She was also a great patron of Indian art and theater.

`source: <http://en.wikipedia.org>

## Active Participation of Women

### Women of India carry on Gandhi salt campaign



Source: [http://www.ARS\\_womenIndia.doc](http://www.ARS_womenIndia.doc)

### 1.3.3 women's participation in Quit India Movement

The female activism was visible most significantly. The important leaders of congress being behind bars, made it contingent for the women leaders to take upon themselves the responsibility of directing and taking forward the national movement. Sucheta Kriplani: coordinated the non- violent Satyagraha while women also participated in underground revolutionary activities. Aruna Asaf Ali provided leadership for these activities. The movement also witnessed large participation of rural women and also women who had joined the communist movement. Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti or women's self defence, was in 1942 in Bengal by leftist women lads, who mobilized the rural women.

For example, the Tebhaga Movement 1946, saw the formation of women and Brigade as Nari Bahinis to fight against colonial policies. Subash Chandra Bose also added a women's regiment to his INA (1943) called the Rani of Jhasi Regiment. He believed in the power of mothers and sisters. Thus assigning a new role to a passive roles of the mythic Sita to a heroic valorous role of the Rani of Jhansi.

### An interesting Fact



Latika Ghosh (1928) a congress volunteers corps organised a full uniform march in Calcutta .She was nicknamed as Colonel Latika Ghosh.

### **Women's procession during Quit India Movement in 1942**



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org>

## **1.4 Muslim women**

Among Muslims- Women had more intense, fight in the domestic sphere 'Purdah' was epitome of their culture and any contradiction to it was considered to be blasphemy . However the history does record the defiant efforts of Muslim women leaders like Bi Amman, mother of Shaukat and Muhammed Ali, who participated in khilafat Non Cooperation Movement at a meeting in Punjab. At a meeting in Punjab she lifted her veil saying that one does not need a veil in front of her children, thus giving shape to idea of quaaam. In the case of Muslims, the personal laws too,were

less problematic than Hindu social reforms. They did not demand widow immolation and contained no strictures against widow remarriage. The Faraiji reformers of the mid-nineteenth century attributed the prevalence of such norms in Muslim to Hindus and thus encouraged Muslim to popularize widow remarriage. Similarly with the growth of education, Muslim women, were instigated to eradicate female rites and customs that Muslims shared with Hindus. However soon enough the muslim women activists outran the original intention and they started criticizing absolute female seclusion. By 1930, they also started demanding inheritance rights and by 1939, Muslim women got the right to initiate divorce. Growth of communalism often worked in favour of women creating a competitive mobilization whereby women emerged as a significant constituency. In 1938 Muslim league started a women's sub-committee to engage Muslim women. With the emergence of 'Pakistan Movement' more and more Muslim women got sucked into the political movement. Their participation in this public spaces itself was moment of emancipation and liberating for them.

## 1.5 Women's Organizations

In the early, twentieth century many women's organization came into picture who were active in the public arena and also focused on women's political and legal rights.

- Rashtriya Stree Sangha or Das Devika Sangha was started as auxiliary body of Congress.

- 1910 Sarala Devi Chaudhurani 'Bharat stree Mahanandala' tried to spread education

- In 1917, in Madras women's Indian Association was started by enlightened European and Indian ladies – Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant.

-1925, the National Council of Women in India was formed as a branch of the International Council of Women. Lady Mehribai Tata was an active of this society.

-1927, All India, Women Conference came into existence which championed for all sorts of women rights, from franchise to marriage reform and the rights of women laborers..

- In 1920 in Bengal, Bangiya Nari Samaj campaigned for women's voting rights.

- All Bengal Women's union campaigned for legislation against trafficking of women.

Women's organization appealed to both government and nationality for support. However government support was often a compromise. The nationalists on the other hand were more sympathetic for the women's question, since 1920, because they needed their participation in the nation-building project. Women too privileged these "pieces of universalisation" by placing nationalism before women's issues. The women's fight for suffrage was granted in Government of India Act 1935 where the ratio of female voters was raised 1:5 and women also got reserved seats in legislative. Similarly, various social legislations and acts tried to improve gender parity. For example : The Sarda Act. Of 1929 – which fixed the minimum age of marriage for females at 14 and male at eighteen, laws defining women's women's right to property, inheritance, divorce, to restrain dowry and control position. (Bandhopadhyay,2006:394)

## 1.5 Women and Partition

Thus by the pinnacle of INM Indian women across class, caste and religions barriers started participating in the anti imperialistic and democratic process.

Irrespective of the fact whether it was Hindu or Muslim women, the issue of women's emancipation was always treated as subordinate to that of national liberation, community honour or class struggle. According to Sumit Sarkar it was women and peasants who represented the ultimate site of purity unspoiled by the modern world and western education. This form of purity, chastity of the female body has been linked to the nation state. It's for reasons like this that women have been seen as the symbol and repositories of group or communal national identity. The link between honour of community leads to two forms of control over women's labour, their fertility, their sexuality and their mobility. The first is internal form of control by their own community itself since the loss of control over their own women is seen as threat to their masculinity, their family and their community. Secondly women find themselves more vulnerable of violence by other community. Since they are seen as repositories of their community honour and their rape, control and other forms of violence against them is seen as a more effective manner of humiliating and subjugating that community. Women thus become more vulnerable to violence in communal riots. The partition of India in 1947 revealed a similar story when women from both sides became victims of sexual aggression and control in order to avenge the hurt and injury on the community in question. Thus communal violence has seen the participation of women thereby proving that women are not necessarily a collective but are well entrenched in their own caste and community identities.(Bandhopadhyay ,2006:398)

It was even more evident in the partition. As pointed out by Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin, they were caught in 'continuum of violence' where they had the choice either to be raped, mutilated and humiliated by the men of the other community or to commit suicide instigated by their own family members and kinsmen to prevent the honour of their community from being violated by the enemy. Empirical data supports this fact when in a span of few months seventy five to one hundred thousand women were abducted or raped.(Butulia,2001:208)

## 1.6 Conclusion



The colonial historiography indicates that in India the modern notions of gender rights in the public domain were premised on the public private split whereby private disempowerment and the subordination of Indian women were masked and reinforced by the bestowal of public rights. Colonial reforms were modern but at the same time the underlying throes of patriarchy were not questioned. It was merely the recasting of male domination. Even after Independence, the reality is quite harsh. Despite citizenship rights being guaranteed by the Indian constitution egalitarian society is a myth for majority of women. Legislations have not been able to change societal attitudes and perceptions about women. Thus a fight for new values, new perceptions and a new egalitarian based society- the women's movement- continues. Till the paradox exists the movement will and should continue!

*The land that provides grain and clothes is referred to as 'motherland' and the cow that gives milk, ghee and other dairy products is called mother-cow (gaumata). In the west the country is referred to as father – land but in India it is referred as "motherland" (Thapar-bjorkert,2006:236)*

## Summary

- Women in India participated in the National movement from a passive to an active role to an activists role.
- Reformers : British and Indian played a role in fighting the heinous acts against women.
- Gandhi played an instrumental and catalyst role in making women an important adjunct of mass nationalism.
- Women leaders belonging to privileged class soon demanded more than a supportive or adjunct role. Thus by salt satyagrah women , both urban and rural donned on the role of active freedom fighter.
- Muslim women too became aware of their status bargained for more equal status within the larger goal of independence

- Women 's organizations played a key role in championing the women's cause and their emancipation.
- However with partition and independence women of both the religious communities got sucked in the vortex of communal riots.
- Thus despite the political freedom women still continues their tryst with true freedom .

## Exercises

- 1.1 Trace the trajectory of women participation in the freedom struggle of India.
- 1.2 Mahatma Gandhi gave new dimensions to women question in freedom struggle. Elaborate.
- 1.3 Participation of women in the ' public sphere' during the freedom struggle brought changes in the 'private/domestic sphere'. Illucidate
- 1.4 Analyze the role of Indian social and religious reformers in the 'women's question' during Indian national Movement.

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