

Women and Indian Nationalism

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I

The political role of women as a subject for research is of recent origin in India.¹ 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.² Analysis in this area so far has received insufficient attention in histories of India both before and after 1975 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.³

Studies published between 1968 and 1988 do touch upon various aspects and dimensions of women's participation in the national struggle for freedom. There are some factual accounts: most standard histories of the national movement mention women's entry into the Civil Disobedience Movement.⁴ Some historians have noted the emancipatory effects of such participation.⁵ Women in revolutionary terrorism have also been described⁶ and women have been occasionally discussed as a political nuisance.⁷ Some accounts of contemporaries who participated in the movement refer to the strength and broad base acquired by it as a whole through women's participation.⁸

It is important to note that in general, information on women in the work of modern Indian historians writing in English prior to 1975 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.⁹ 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 as early as 1907¹⁰ and repeatedly mentioned by Gandhi-has received so little attention from historians so far.

There are some exceptions to the general pattern; for Instance, Bipan Chandra,¹¹ who has discussed the women's movement, women's participation in peasant and trade union movements along with women's role in the freedom struggle. After Independence, state-sponsored directories of freedom fighters including women were compiled in Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. In general, the approach in these was laudatory and enumerative rather than analytical. Where analysis was attempted, it tended to be brief. Some references to women freedom fighters are scattered in miscellaneous sources all over India and in works on Gandhi.

Existing research on women and Indian nationalism can therefore be described as non-comprehensive, cursory in nature, and generally a "history from above".¹² 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. Some sources of data are outside this country.

Records of some political groups were destroyed by police action or otherwise through riots or careless maintenances.¹³ Some were ad hoc in nature or not systematic.¹⁴ We maintain that adequate search for and use of even conventional sources still remains to be done systematically.¹⁵

Analysis of the records of women's organisations has already yielded valuable insights into the national movement, and the attitudes of the British Government, the bureaucracy and political elites as perceived by the leadership of the women's movement. It is to be expected that elite women's organisations would have maintained detailed records.¹⁶ Many journals in India and Britain of this period (1857-1947) also contain highly useful material, with predictably more information for some regions than others. Other rewarding sources such as the journals of women's organisations which were mouthpieces and/or forums in which debates on women's issues were conducted; women's autobiographies: collections of speeches and essays by women leaders (e.g. Besant, Naidu, Cousins); regional literature, reflecting variations in social perception and the response of specific societies and communities to the movements; proceedings of local women's associations etc. would certainly need to be analysed in this massive effort.

Oral histories and reminiscences of women in the national movement are to some extent available on tape in some archives. Much more needs to be done in this respect. Interviews with family members of women who participated in the national as well as the women's movement, and in local women's associations could form a valuable source of data. If women who participated spontaneously in the struggles refuse to or find it painful to talk about that period now,¹⁷ what does that mean? Or when lower middle class women from small towns tell us that their mothers knew and encouraged or covered up their activities in revolutionary movements¹⁸ how should we interpret that fact?

So many questions need satisfactory answers and some answers lead to further questions:

1. How did participation affect the women's families and the women as individuals? Did it affect their position in the family? If not, why?
2. What were the changes that were brought into their lives as a result? Did social values change? How did society react then and later?
3. What were the facilitating factors-were they common to all women participants? In all regions? Why do most accounts mention male encouragement, and so few the attitude of other women, or children in the family?

4. What were the social strata of the women in each region to which the participants belonged? Who took care of their familial responsibilities (including earning) when women went to jail?
5. What was the relationship between nationalist ideology and women's issues in the minds of men and women? Did women participate only for the country's swaraj or also for women's freedom? Did political participation aid women's liberation?
6. What were the regional patterns in women's participation? For instance, in Bengal, many women expressed their nationalist feelings by joining terrorist organisations or supporting them in many ways, in addition to all the overt ways in which they were encouraged to participate.
7. What were the patterns of women's participation in other movements in different regions which fought against exploitation, and ultimately against imperialism? Why have they been ignored so long?
8. What was the role of the media-newspapers, films, local journals etc. in all this during this period?
9. What were the perceptions of the leadership about women's participation? Why, and how did gender equality get incorporated in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of 1931? What connections, if any, did it have with contemporary events within and outside India (Geneva Conference on Women's Equality, 1931, Resolution of Chinese Communist Party on the 'same line'. 1931: Lahore Conference of Asian Women for Equality, 1931 preceding Geneva), or with internal political imperatives?
10. Why did the Indian National Congress fail to take any follow-up action on the Resolution for nearly a decade?

This volume is an extremely modest attempt to begin filling some of the gaps and to begin posing such and many more questions.

II

In its report, *Towards Equality*, the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) accused the government, the educational system, social analysts, the media, political parties, trade unions as well as women's organizations - i.e. most members of the intelligentsia of a failure to understand the implications of gender equality guaranteed by the Constitution. The Committee was especially struck by the total invisibility and neglect of the economic roles played by the

"overwhelming majority" of women among the peasantry, in most rural industries and services, and among the urban poor in policies for agricultural, industrial and infrastructural development. Despite the growing evidence of a decline in poor women's economic opportunities and consequent distress available from Census and a few other sources, official planners, social scientists and others continued to view women as economically inactive and dependent consumers, whose basic needs were confined to "education, health and welfare" not employment.¹⁹

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",²⁰ 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 in the post-1975 period, however, added other dimensions to this explanation. The theory of 'sanskritisation'-explaining a long-established pattern of social behaviour among upwardly mobile social groups-offered a handy framework for the social status of a family being linked to 'non-worker' status of women. or their 'withdrawal' from the labour force, among families or groups (caste, community, class) seeking higher status within the social hierarchy.²¹ 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".²² Another scholar, examining the Interrelationship between the nineteenth century social reform movement, the debate on women's education, and the emergence of a new family ideology among the educated urban middle class, found that this 'dominant' social ideology bore considerable resemblance to the gender role ideology of the British middle class of the Victorian period. 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.²³

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.²⁴

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"²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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. We feel it therefore necessary to contextualize this collection within these new perspectives on the social reform movements.

Most of the nineteenth century social reformers were male and members of the learned elites. The majority were products of the new system of 'English' education, though some came from the indigenous traditional systems. All were scholars in their own right, who had mastered one or more of the major philosophico-cultural-religious systems that met in India, modified through centuries of acculturation in the Indian sub-continent. The amalgam of indigenous cultural pluralism-mediated by centuries of philosophical efforts to systematise or homogenise-for want of an alternative word came to be known as Hindu religion, philosophy and culture.

Reaction to the economic and political changes that were initiated or accelerated after the British emerged as the undisputed dominant power found many forms of expression. The cultural form, among the highly literate new middle class-pioneers as well as products and beneficiaries of the new social order-has overshadowed all others, because of (a) the prolific literature they produced; (b) the social debates that they stirred up: and (c) the consequent high profile which they acquired among the urban literati. There were many other mass stirrings, some of which even erupted into rebellions against British rule and its socio- economic consequences but they lacked the recording and publicising capacity of the literati. As a result, the link between these cultural movements as precursors of the growth of national

consciousness and nationalism has received much greater attention from historians and contemporary commentators.²⁸

It is interesting to note that while early twentieth century historians and analysts were effusive in acknowledging the contribution of the reform movements in improving women's status, some of the contemporary analysts²⁹ of the movements keep silent on this issue, not even mentioning why the status of women acquired such a centre-stage focus in all the reform debates. Especially when the critiques are set within the context of the discourses on 'modernisation', 'nationalism' or 'revivalism' this extraordinary omission appears to be doubly curious.

Of the three cultural systems absorbed by the nineteenth century reformers, the Hindu system perhaps retained or demonstrated the maximum ambivalence between patriarchy and matriarchy.³⁰ Unashamedly anti-women practices like child marriage, female infanticide, polygamy various forms of oppression of widows etc. existed simultaneously with widespread worship of female deities and well-developed literature and rituals on cults of the mother goddess, in both scriptural and popular versions.³¹ 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 socioeconomic 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.

Most of the reform movements combined some elements of revivalism, to assert or reinforce a desired or perceived cultural identity, as distinct from that of the rulers, along with radical or reformist challenges to some facets of the inherited cultural systems. Intellectual

acceptance of the need for modernisation and progress, for national resurgence, and eventual overthrow of imperialism became increasingly marked, throwing up the need for new social ideologies, including a transformed social construction of gender.

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 CSWI pointed out that the projections of widows' oppression and the ban on divorce or remarriage as the greatest evils in Hindu society ignored the customs of the majority of the Hindu population. On the basis of ethnographic and Census data the Committee demonstrated that as late as 1931 only 13.9 per cent of the Hindu population, and less than 10 per cent of the total population of the sub-continent could be accused of such practices.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴ Similar role prescriptions were made for upper class Muslim women.³⁵

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.³⁷

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. Nor were they aware of the inter-relationship between patriarchal controls over women's freedom, roles and behaviour and the carefully preserved pluralist hierarchical Organisation of Indian society.³⁸ Issues such as the radical restructuring of the social order or of bridging the social gap between different classes/ castes/communities were very far from most reformers' aims. 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. Nor did he nurse any illusions about women's status having been high in ancient India as projected by revivalists, or nationalist historians later.³⁹ On the other hand, he declared that Mother India had always been unkind to her daughters. He deliberately selected for his anthologies for school students extracts from classical Indian literature that brought out women's subordination sharply.⁴⁰ An agnostic who rejected religious rituals, the caste system, and the monopoly of education by elites, he attached enormous importance to educating women and men equally through a system of mass education half a century before the introduction of compulsory elementary education in Great Britain and nearly a hundred years before some nationalists began to propagate mass education in India.⁴¹

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.⁴²

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."⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ She too advocated the critical necessity of educating women, but recommended 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.'⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

Contemporary debates on the content of women's education testify to the unanimity with which the subject was approached by all concerned: reformers, revivalists and the Victorian British. The goals of education for women were limited and cautious. It was considered adequate for girls/women to receive basic educational skills and training that would make them better wives and mothers. 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.⁴⁸ 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 of upwardly 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. Prejudice, apathy and orthodoxy were major hindrances, but within these limits some communities and regions did better than others. Hindus generally did better than Muslims, not necessarily because purdah hindered the latter as high caste, Hindu women, too, observed seclusion, particularly in North India which lagged behind Madras and Bombay Presidencies in women's education.⁴⁹

Muslim reformers arguing for women's education were not as successful as the Hindus⁵⁰ nor could they transcend the imperatives of their traditions, but they did establish major centres of education for women in Aligarh and Lahore. 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 (1917) 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 in 1986.

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.⁵² 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.⁵³

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.

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.⁵⁴ 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 patriarchy and hierarchy.⁵⁵

Participation in the anti-imperialist struggles however encouraged many middle class women to challenge and break out of these controls during the three decades before independence. They were also the first group of women to benefit from the gender equality clauses in the new Constitution of the Indian Republic.⁵⁶ Post-independence developments promoted the economic and socio-political dominance and expansion of the middle class. Instead of playing a vanguard role in eliminating socioeconomic inequalities and hierarchic power relations that needed the subordination of women to perpetuate itself, middle class women in the post-independence period came increasingly under the influence of expanding class norms. While conceding some share of the material benefits to women in the middle class, thus blunting their desire for a change in power relations, patriarchy acquired new forms of ideological and institutional control. The legacies of cultural ambivalence bequeathed by the nineteenth century movements, and the disintegration of the women's movement by the mid-1950s contributed to the eclipse of the nascent radicalism that sought to integrate gender equality as a critical element in the restructuring of Indian society on democratic lines. There was, as the CSWI described it a "regression from the norms developed during the Freedom Movement."⁵⁷

III

Although middle class women's involvement with the outside world was limited by the ideology that limited their education, formal education led to the emergence of a group of women with a desire for organised action to improve the lot of women.⁵⁸ The early associational activities of elite women played a role in the identity formation of the new regional elites of all the major religious communities who were eager to provide evidence of the advancement, progress and potential of Indian women-within the colonial frame of reference-hoping to establish thereby the readiness of their class for increased influence, social leadership and political ascendancy.⁵⁹

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 from reformist, educated and privileged families.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

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 (1886). a women's association, was concerned with traditional women's handicrafts.⁶²

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's 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.⁶⁴

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."⁶⁵

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."⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷

The material superiority of the West had to be matched by learning modern science and arts - to overthrow colonial rule. 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." In addition, by associating the task of 'female emancipation' with the goal of 'sovereign nationhood', nationalism "bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination". Lastly, Chatterjee explains the 'disappearance' of the women's question from the political domain by the end of the nineteenth century as the result of nationalism's "refusal to make the women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state."⁶⁸

Tempting as these attempts at analysing nationalist ideology vis-a-vis the women's question are, they suffer from the basic problem pointed out in the earlier section viz. looking for a linear connection between the nineteenth century reform movements, the growth of nationalism on to the twentieth century and the roles prescribed for or played by women in Indian nationalism. Chatterjee's heroic effort to distinguish women's familial role ideology from their social responsibility (as defined by nationalism-in his Interpretation) ignores several aspects of history, which we propose to discuss in a later section. One important area totally ignored in this analysis is the way women themselves responded to the challenges of colonial rule. Surely the problem of an identity-crisis is not the monopoly only of men?

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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ Sarala Devi Chaudhurani became an accepted mobiliser 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-known revolutionary.⁷²

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 swadeshi period.⁷³ 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 in 1907, 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".⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵

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.

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) of India, established in 1875 in Calcutta, was the earliest of these bodies. It became a national body in 1896. Though its membership was confined to Christians, its objectives were broad in scope. The Women's India

Association (WIA) was formed in 1917 in Madras. In the same year Sarojini Naidu led a delegation of women formed by Margaret Cousins to the Constitutional Reforms (Montagu-Chelmsford) Committee, demanding universal adult franchise. The Indian women's movement believed that the enfranchisement of women would lead to legislation for social reform. The delegation's memorandum asked for women's franchise on the same basis as men and improved facilities for women's education and health care.⁷⁶

The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was formed in 1925, and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. By the mid-1930s the WIA and the AIWC claimed a membership of over 10,000 women.⁷⁷ The NCWI developed eight provincial Councils by 1934 and had 180 affiliated societies with a membership of over 8000.⁷⁸ The WIA was a vigorous Organisation that undertook to widen its scope of activities beyond fund-raising, social service and women's education and sought to influence government policy on equal rights for women in some areas, and was involved with the issues of suffrage, education and social reform. The WIA's founders included women like Margaret Cousins and Annie Besant, who were not merely suffragists, but political radicals and critics of imperialism in their own country.

This international dimension of the Indian women's movement is totally ignored by analysts like Chattopadhyay who underestimate the impact of Indian nationalism on politically disaffected groups in the West. Apart from the Western women who chose to adopt India as their home, and identified themselves with the nationalist, anti-imperialist struggles, there were many other women who played a supportive role from their own countries. Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi.⁷⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhikaji Cama etc. had many supporters among Western feminists who were politically radical. Unfortunately, the nationalist reaction to Catherine Mayo's *Mother India* has drawn a curtain of invisibility over these connections, and prevented historians of nationalism from examining the transformation of the women's question through the first three decades of the twentieth century, in India and elsewhere. This transformation influenced both the women's movement and a section of the nationalist leadership. Why else would a nationalist journal like *Malayala Manorama* carry regular reports of women's movements in different countries?⁸⁰

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. By 1932, however, the AIWC had become involved with women's political rights and all questions

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.⁸¹

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 from the 1920s onwards.

IV

Even the most cursory examination of women's organised activism from the beginning of the twentieth century explodes the myth still being pursued by many that women's role in the national movements against imperialism was male-dictated or male-manipulated. Once mobilised, women moved on their own, acquiring new confidence and articulating new priorities. The number of women directly involved in the revolutionary movements that developed in Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and the erstwhile Madras Presidency from the turn of the century may have been small but the inspirational support base of the revolutionaries included far more women whose names will never feature in the dictionaries of freedom fighters. The women who provided shelter, food and cover, carried messages or arms, or instilled a passion to 'serve the country' among their children, telling them about the 'heroes' and 'martyrs' who had sacrificed their lives for the country's freedom did not all belong to the elites. Many were not educated, and still more were used to poverty. They played such roles without waiting for any 'social sanction'. They provided a communication channel for the message of nationalism, when nationalist literature, and even news of revolutionary activities were sedulously proscribed, censored and withdrawn from circulation. Even the writings of persons of the stature of Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Nazrul Islam and

many others, did not escape such bans. But the stories continued to spread and the songs and poems were observed eagerly by young people, often from women in their homes.

The few who played such roles more overtly, like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, were marked by the Raj's intelligence arm, but women's invisible participation which provided greater force has received little formal acknowledgment. The one source which tried to record this invisible role of women was creative literature - through fictionalized characters who could not be prosecuted.

Similarly, women's active, even militant roles, as participants and leaders in quasitionalist peasant and workers' struggles remained strangely invisible till farly recently.⁸² 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 neighbours.⁸³

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 in 1984. 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.⁸⁴

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. Why then do we still have this persistent myth? Is it because women's participation left so many issues of women's subordination unarticulated or unresolved, or because the women's movement was believed to have lost its autonomous character by becoming involved with the national political struggle?

The nationalist movement was a multi-layered, multidimensional process, which involved different sections of people, with different aims and visions for the future. In the light of this fact, Partha Chatterjee's claim regarding the "resolution" of the women's question by nationalism presents a strange logical discontinuity. Firstly, which group of nationalists formulated that solution? Certainly not the women. Secondly, using his own definition of the nationalist project - which, we presume, included building a nation as one of its objectives- we may ask: was there only one model or vision of the nation? Even the cultural nationalists or revivalists, whom he appears to regard as the only other group distinct from the half-hearted liberals suffering from an identity crisis, did not have a uniform goal. Were there not other radicals who cannot be neatly classified into either of these camps? Finally, what was the women's question that the cultural nationalists are supposed to have "resolved"? There is no definition of this question in his paper.⁸⁵

In an earlier book⁸⁶ 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 of 1931, or the shifts in Gandhi's statements about women through the 1920s.

Unlike the social reformers, Gandhi had realised some of the negative consequences of colonial rule on women's economic status⁸⁷. 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.⁸⁸ 200 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.⁸⁹

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 ...⁹⁰

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.⁹¹

...whether we wish to boycott foreign cloth through the means of khadi or through mill-made cloth it is women who are the spinners.⁹²

The entire khadi movement depends on the women. This movement would collapse today if the women were to refuse to extend their cooperation to it.⁹³

Calling khadi essentially a women's movement served many purposes. It brought the women an income basic for their survival forced men to acknowledge women's higher skills in this activity, and unleashed women's aspirations to break through purdah and other barriers of inequality. It also enabled Gandhi to challenge the dominant upper caste and middle class value that equated the family status with women's non-involvement in productive work. He exhorted well-to-do women to support the movement in their dual capacity as consumers and producers, by criticising their lifestyles. It was their duty to help their poorer sisters who had lost their livelihood on account of the import of foreign cloth.⁹⁴ Why had they given up spinning, which "even queens used to do", and become idle dependents? Why had they abandoned a skill which brought them so much pride and happiness? Why should they not spin to earn something for themselves, contribute to the family's income, or at least gift it to the poor weavers? Such involvement in productive work would also contribute to the nation's wealth.

You have two or three hours in which you do nothing. You spend them in temples. Telling the beads in temples is dharma, but at the present time real bhakti consists in this work for cloth.⁹⁵

For women to provide leadership in the movement, feeling virtuous by wearing khadi was not enough. They had to understand the dignity that came from being productive and independent. Such an understanding would help them to identify with poor women, emancipate themselves and achieve the new identity necessary for nation-building. Gandhi

believed that only women could influence the growth of that new identity, and better values in the next generations.⁹⁶

In 1917 he stated that "woman ... (is) ... mother to the Nation..."⁹⁷

The economic and the moral salvation of India thus rests mainly with you. The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation... The destiny of India to far safer in your hands than in the hands of a Government that has so exploited India's resources that she has lost faith in herself.⁹⁸

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 beneficiaries.⁹⁹ Between 1921 and 1925 Gandhi had added India's political salvation as a goal for women in nation-building.

... unless women of India work side by side with men, there is no salvation for India, salvation in more senses than one. I mean political salvation in the greater sense, and I mean the economic salvation and spiritual salvation also.¹⁰⁰

This speech was made before a group of young Christian women, at a time when the fragile unity of the nationalist struggle was threatened by many divisive forces of interest groups based on religion, caste or class. Many years later, angry with some negative reactions to Indira Nehru's engagement to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsi, he commented, "As time advances, such unions are bound to multiply with benefit to society" and rebuked the critics for their ignorance, intolerance and prejudices species of untouchability, dangerous because not easily to be so classified.¹⁰¹

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",¹⁰² he did not understand the critical connections between the controls over women and the maintenance of that differentiated and hierarchical social structure.¹⁰³

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,¹⁰⁴ 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 in India.¹⁰⁵ Though he piloted the 1931 Resolution on Fundamental Rights through the Congress, his actions or statements in the years that followed-before or after independence-reveal little understanding or observation about the complexities of the situation or aspirations of women in different sections of society. However, being more sensitive to international opinion, he reiterated his support for the removal of all disqualifications and hindrances imposed on women by law or custom on several occasions. While he introduced the emphasis on women's rights in the Constitution, he did little to reduce the controls of the collectives that determined the boundaries of women's lives and behaviour-the family, community, caste, class and religion.

The inequalities inherent in our traditional social structure based on caste, community, and class have a very significant influence on the status of women in different spheres. Socially accepted rights and expected roles of women, norms governing their behaviour and of others towards them vary among different groups and regions. They are closely affected by the group in the social hierarchy. All this makes broad generalisations regarding women's status unrealistic.¹⁰⁶

V

One unfortunate legacy of colonial modes of thought is the continued- influence of the Raj's classification of Indian nationalists into the two neat categories of 'extremists' and 'moderates'. These terms only sought to define them by the methods they adopted for dealing with the colonial state, and not by their vision of the nation they sought to construct. Some post-independence analysts, while using the terms liberals and cultural nationalists, or radicals are still imprisoned by the old classification. As a result, Gokhale remains a neglected, discarded liberal, because the Raj viewed him as a moderate while Tilak, Vivekananda, Gandhi and the revolutionaries all get clubbed together as extremists/revivalists. One wonders where such analysts would place M.N. Roy, Ram Manohar Lohia, Iqbal Nazrul Islam. Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Subhash Chandra Bose and a host of others? Was Bhikaji Cama a liberal or a revivalist? Some writers seem to have classified Sarojini Naidu as a revivalist and a supporter of women's traditional role, as she utilised traditional language to urge women to enter the national movement.¹⁰⁷ One of her political associates, however interprets such behaviour as a necessary strategy to draw women into the national movement.¹⁰⁸ Had these writers ever seen Sarojini telling her Mickey Mouse (her name for Gandhi) where his authority ended, or known that she

ignored or defied virtually all the rules in the code of cultural norms such a classification might not have been made.

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 hierarchical, 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 for 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.

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.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ The rights and roles of women of these classes mainly depended on local or community customs,¹¹¹ 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.

As for the educational gap-the sex ratio among the illiterate population remained virtually at par till 1931, when illiterates made up 80.5 per cent of the total population. According to the three reports on the state of indigenous education in the 1820s-the gender gap

in the traditional institutions for elementary education was not as high as it was become under the English system. Of the 36 schools started by Vidyasagar in the 1830s, 20 were for girls. And they taught the same curriculum as in the other 16!¹¹² Demographic indicators like average life expectancy, mortality and work participation did not show such wide gaps as in the twentieth century, especially after 1921. In fact, while life expectancy was appallingly poor for the total population women were still slightly better off than men- a pattern which changed only after 1921.¹¹³

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 separated from each other.¹¹⁴

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 deprivations of colonialism. But while pleading for reviving khadi - an instrument of war against imported textile, and as a method of employment generation for the masses of the people - he preached gender equality in economic rewards and in political decision-making as well.

The cultural or religious revivalists, Hindus and Muslims alike, on the other hand, were totally apposed to gender equality. Their visions of the future nation demonstrate virtual unanimity on many issues, including women's roles.¹¹⁵ Liberalism as practiced in the West too and no models to offer, since demands for gender equality had been defeated repeatedly during and since the French and the American revolutions. Suffrage, conceded in a few countries just before or after the Ist World War, did not promise equality in legal or economic rights.¹¹⁶

Some models of gender equality or women's emancipation, however, became available with the Russian Revolution (1917), its extensive to the Asian Republics in the 1920s¹¹⁷ and Kemal's measures for the emancipation of women in Turkey in the same period.¹¹⁸ In the last two cases, political strategy - to undermine established power structures based on clan

organizations in alliance with a religious clergy - played as important, if not a greater role than ideology, Indian nationalist leaders were not altogether ignorant of these developments. The extent of such influence needs to be researched.

The 1920s represented a period of major changes affecting women in the subcontinent - internal socio-economic transformations which reinforced and heightened their opposition to alien rule, and external political changes that affected women's lives in other parts of the world, providing new ideas and challenges to the expanding women's movement. Nationalism, too, experienced numerous internal tensions of class, community, sectional interests, ideologies and organizations that threatened the carefully constructed, fragile 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 in 1931 - 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.

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) set up in 1939¹¹⁹ 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 of 1931 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.

Endnote

- ¹ Dasgupta, Kalpana, 1976, *Women on the Indian Scene*, New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, p. 16.
- ² Examples are: Tarachand. 1961-72. *History of the Freedom Movement in India*. 4 Vols., Delhi, Government of India. Publications Division; and E.M.S. Namboodiripad, 1986, *History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, Trivandrum. Social Scientist Press.
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- ⁴ Manmohan Kaur, 1985, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, Delhi, Sterling Publishers, S.R. Bakshi, 1988, *Mutiny to Independence*, New Delhi, Deep and Deep Publications.
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- ⁶ Majumdar. R.C., 1963, op.cit., Vol. 111, pp. 280-281, 414, and Suda, op.cit., pp. 243-244.
- ⁷ Brown, Judith. 1972, *Gandhi and the Civil Disobedience Movement*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 146, 168.
- ⁸ Desai, Mahadev. n.d., *The Story of Bardoli, among others and Jawaharlal Nehru, 1945*, Discovery of India, Calcutta, p. 32.
- ⁹ Dasgupta, op.cit., p.5.
- ¹⁰ Le Mesurier, *Unrecorded Confidential Proceedings, Morley and Minto Papers*, Home Department, Government of India, India Office Library, London, and National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- ¹¹ Bipan Chandra, 1971, op. cit.
- ¹² Alexander, Rajani, 1984, "Participation and Perceptions: Women and the Indian Independence Movement", *Samya Shakti*, Vol.1, No.22, pp.1-5.
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