OF FEMINISM, COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN INDIA: DRAWING A RELATIONSHIP

Raashida Gull
Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Kashmir
sheikhraashida@gmail.com

Abstract:
Indian tradition has for the major part encouraged the subservience of women, applauded their self-denial, and promoted their subjection. But it was only towards the colonial period that women’s question began to receive attention. This paper presents an analysis of attitudes developed out of contact with the liberal philosophy of colonial rule and how these attitudes shaped the women’s question in India. It was out of these attitudes that reform and nationalist movements came into existence which had a formative influence on feminist movement in India. It is in this background that this paper attempts to present a picture of how women’s movement acted in conjunction with such reform and nationalist programmes during the colonial rule.

Key Words: Colonial Rule, Feminist Movements in India, Nationalism, Status of Women

Introduction

The Existence of Indian women as independent individuals was always denied on the basis of customary practices and traditions. But it was only towards the colonial period that women’s question began to receive attention. It was felt that time has come for women to unite and strive towards a set goal of men and women enjoining equal status. Indian feminism has started reacting against the suppressing forces and protesting against unjust patriarchal practices (Tandon 2008).

The overwhelming preoccupation with women’s question began only in the nineteenth century social reform movement, crucially informed anti-colonial nationalism and continues to be a part of dominant discourses going on in political, cultural and social arenas. Like modernity and capitalism, feminism too entered India through colonialism. India’s encounter with the notion of liberalism (based on the rights of life, liberty and property) occurred as a result of its contact with colonial rule and subsequently formed part of nationalist discourse.

This encounter, resulting in broadening of the vision of some enlightened Indians, pushed India into an era of reform contesting the pathetic condition of Indian women and later on caused the sentiment of nationalism to germinate within Indians providing political space to women to fight for their country. The new economic and social relations unleashed by the British dominance in India undermined existing structures of patriarchy; wherein there were attempts to give intensified expressions to patriarchy on the one hand, and, on the other hand, there were attempts to reform patriarchy. Colonialism in India unleashed interplay between liberalism, nationalism and feminism which guided the course of women’s question in India. This interplay resulted in conferring status on Indian women which is characterized by a paradox. This paradox characterize the lives of Indian women wherein they are seen as markers of culture conferring on them submissive roles in society and at the same are rendered overburdened with modern roles. It is in this context, the present paper attempts to analyze the conditions in which women’s question was brought to the
foreground and present a picture of the forces which shaped women’s cause during the colonial era. Feminist movement in India witnessed a change in discourse in women’s question from definitions of the suffering of Indian women and the need for reform from early nineteenth century, with emphasis shifting to stressing women’s right to be treated as useful members of society by the early twentieth century (Kumar 1993). It is in this context that the present paper attempts to track the shifts witnessed by the women’s movement in India during the colonial period.

Colonialism, liberalism and social reform: Emergence of Indian feminist movement

Medieval India was considered the "Dark Ages" for Indian women. There were many foreign conquests during the medieval times which resulted in the decline in women's status. India witnessed an onslaught of foreign cultures when foreign conquerors like Mughals and the British invaded her, which in some cases adversely affected the condition of women and in some cases emancipated them. Such invasion resulted in the attitude of protection towards the Indian women on the part of Indian men creating a vicious circle in which women were at the receiving end. All this gave rise to some new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati¹, Jauhar² and restriction on girl education without a reflection on the part of Indian men on this pathetic condition of women. The notion of sanctity of women was observed within practices such as sati, child marriages and banning of education for women. The codes of Manu³ decided the social spaces for men and women which usually accorded a low status to women. There was a trend of publications which delineated the manner by which the women should live referred to as the domestic manuals (Ranganathan 2008). These were devoted to the work of constructing womanhood which was largely seen to be composed of jobs like child rearing, taking care of homes and husband and other household chores. It was only with the onslaught of colonialism that this indigenous traditional setup became the contested ground under the guiding liberal ideal of the British. This ideal was scientific in nature having a total reliance on reason as a guiding principle. This clash between two knowledge systems of indigenous knowledge versus an imported European concept of reason as a sole guiding force brought out the response both in confirmation of the new mode of thinking and a conservative counter-response to it (Ibid 2008).

Radha Kumar calls nineteenth century an age of women when issues related to women were the subjects of heated argument all over the world (Kumar 1993). In India too social reformers, mainly in Bengal and Maharashtra, began to deplore the wrongs of women in the nineteenth century. The concepts of equality and freedom were alien to Indian situation. It was introduced into Indian culture through the exposure of western-educated Indians to European liberalism through colonial contact. With new administrative and economic structures being introduced into the Indian society with the onslaught of colonial rule, a new middle class began to emerge in the Indian situation, exposed to the liberal philosophy of the colonizers. This encounter and exposure stimulated them to reflect upon their own value system (Chitnis 2004) and to examine and analyze the ills of their own society which they

¹ It is an ancient Indian tradition of the immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre.

² It was a practice followed by Rajput clans whereby mass self-immolation was practiced by women in order to avoid capture, enslavement and dishonor at the hands of Muslim invaders.

³ Manu is a title accorded to a progenitor of humanity in some Hindu traditions.
considered was a Civilizational lapse and question some of their practices and customs which were responsible for the oppression of vast masses of people and to go ahead in the direction of reform. This bourgeois class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against polytheism, animism, idoltry, purdah, cate, child-marriage, sati and many other ills seeing them as elements of primitive or pre-modern identity. Emancipation of women dominated the agenda for social reform. This focus on condition of women by social reform itself rested on a commonly held assumption that women’s position was an excellent indicator of the advancement of a society (Chaudhuri 2003, Chaudhuri 2011). For reformers, women’s emancipation was a prerequisite for national regeneration. It was this impulse that prompted reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Malabari, Ranade, Phule, Keshav Chandra Sen and so on to champion the cause of women. There were efforts on their part to abolish the practice of sati, the custom of disfiguring widows, the custom of child marriage, the ban on the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows and a host of other evil practices. These reformers pushed reform on behalf of women in the face of total unwillingness on the part of the British government to interfere with Indian traditions (Chittnis 2004). This reluctance on the part of the British was due to the simple reason that they feared that tampering with tradition would result in their unpopularity and destabilize their rule. But the tenaciousness of effort on the part of these enlightened Indians compelled the British to go ahead with the reform programme. Women also helped the cause of fighting for their rights and among the first to recognize the problems faced by women and to seek to organize them was Pandita Ramabai, joined by women like Parvati Athvale, Ramabai Ranade, Dr Anandibai Joshi Toru, Swarna Kumari Debi and so on (Lateef 1977). Although move towards such reforms is largely considered the outcome of colonial contact, but Radha Kumar suggests that recent research has contested such a view. It has been pointed out that not all issues of social reform were engendered by the British encounter alone, though they were restructured by it like the anti-caste movement in the nineteenth century Maharashtra (Kumar 1999).

The social reform movement was not a uniform one as different campaigns and issues were taken up at different times in different regions (Jackson 2010; Kumar 1993). Campaigns for reform first appeared in Bengal. With many new structures being introduced in Indian society coupled with the spread of British education, which was part of the policy of creating a class which would be loyal to their new rulers, introduced the native elite to ideas which were creating ferment in Britain. Calcutta became an exciting intellectual centre and most of the early campaigns were launched here by a developing intelligentsia like the radical students inspired by Henry Derozio, a young Anglo-Indian inspired by the ideas of liberty and equality in the French revolution. Raja Ram Mohan Roy undertook the crusade to campaign against sati which was the first women’s issue to receive public attention (Chaudhuri 2011). Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s persistent struggle for the abolition of sati (beginning of the reform movement) constitutes an important landmark in the reform programme meant for emancipation of women. If sati abolition movement provided one of the reasons advanced in favour of reforming women, the women’s education movement was to provide another. According to Radha Kumar, the importance of educating women was first discussed publically in Bengal by the Atmiya Sabha, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1815 (Kumar 1993). The movement

---

4 The anti-caste movement which developed in the nineteenth century Maharashtra had a long history of precedents and grew partly out of the crumbling of Brahmanic hegemony with the disintegration of Peshwa rule around the turn of century.
for women’s education is generally considered to be the outcome of the need of the rising middle class to adapt its women to a western milieu. Gandhi too advocated education for women but he did not intend that it should be limited to the domestic arts (Ryland 1977). There was also the growth of reform movements in Bombay Presidency in the mid-nineteenth century. If Raja Ram Mohan Roy is remembered for his anti-sati movement, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is more often remembered for his campaign favouring widow remarriage (Chaudhuri 2011). In the early 1850s Vidyasagar launched a campaign to remove the ban on widow remarriage. Though the bill favouring widow remarriage was passed in 1856, very few remarriages resulted from it and it was called a ‘dead letter’ by the social reformers. The campaign against child marriage was launched by Behram Malabari in the late nineteenth century and the argument forwarded was that child marriages resulted in the debilitation of the race. Although the counter arguments against the campaign considered child marriage as necessary to the preservation of the Indian social order, the debate grew more heated as women entered the fray and provided their support in favour of social reform argument for raising the age of consent. Dayanand Saraswati’s Arya Samaj also worked towards betterment of women’s lives by advocating widow remarriage and working towards educating the women folk. D.D. Karve also worked for the widowhood reform movement. First attempts to reform prostitutes were made by Michael Madhusudan Datta, a member of the young Bengali group, who proposed to rehabilitate them by turning them into actresses. Though social reform campaigns began to develop late in South India only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they remained relatively weak towards the turn of the century. Many associations were started in south associated with the reform programme like a widow remarriage association was started in Madras in 1871; Rajahmundry Social Reform Association was started in 1878 which focused on widow remarriage; the Hindu Social Reform Association was started in 1892 and so on.

In this programme of reform, the matter of gender difference was treated differently over time. The liberal-democratic premise (that it was both wrong and unfair that certain categories of human beings should be treated as inferior to other categories) guided most of the campaigns for an amelioration of women’s conditions. However, the relationship between this premise and the matter of gender difference was always an ambiguous one (Kumar 1993). While early nineteenth century reformers held that the difference between women and men was no reason for women’s subjection but later reformers like Gandhi argued that it was this difference which made women socially useful. Radha Kumar argues that Indian women’s movement switched from mobilizing around women’s identity as mothers to women’s identity as daughters, thus shifting the focus from sacrifice and suffering to strength and rights (Kumar 1993 cited in Ray and Kortewag 1999).

The distinctiveness of this movement lies in that it was initiated by men and later on towards the end of the century was joined by women. There were women like Swarnkumari Debi, Sarala Debi Goshal who joined in with men to lead the reform campaign and were also involved in nationalist activities towards freedom. A series of campaigns resulted in passing of laws like permitting widow remarriage in 1856 and abolition of sati in 1829 and so on. But a major section (Orthodox section) recoiled from this reform rhetoric. They were so much entrenched in tradition to recognize the oppression of women. On a few occasions, social reformers were even beaten up. In many cases they faced ostracism and were excommunicated by their castes but they continued to stick to the ideology they preached (Lateef 1977). Jyotirao Phule faced enormous hostility from caste
Hindus while carrying out his programme of reform meant to raise the status of untouchables especially girls and he was ostracized by many members of his own community. And by 1850s orthodox Hindu reaction to social reform campaigns had also grown considerably stronger (Kumar 1993). This reaction was partly a natural corollary of the growing strength of these campaigns, and partly a reaction to the support the British were providing to them and the way they were used to fuel European contempt for natives. V.S. Chiplunkar’s ‘Nibandhmala’ series, published from 1874, attacked both social reform and individual social reformers. Some incidents in 1880s brought the revivalists out in full force against campaigns to reform women’s conditions. One such incident was involving a man named Dadaji Bikaji, who had filed a suit for the restitution of conjugal rights, because his wife, Rakhmabai, married in childhood and subsequently educated, refused to live with him when she grew up. Though Bal Gangadhar Tilak had signed a reformist pledge in 1889 to educate his daughters and not to go for their marriage until they were eleven, by 1891, he led the agitation against the Age of Consent Act, which merely raised the age of consent from ten to twelve. There was also the attack through revivalist literature which constructed the image of ideal Hindu woman. But constructing such images was often double-edged where some preferred to dwell on the flower-like qualities of the child-bride; others described the great strength of Hindu women when acting as mothers or wives. Social reform movements were beginning to show effects by the late nineteenth century as the numbers of women in the public sphere had increased considerably but instances of personal revolt on behalf of women were still rare. Despite such a progress in conditions of women, the milieu in which women lived was often a harsh and hostile one. In 1832, a booklet by Tarabai Shinde was instrumental in arousing a heated debate between two members of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Krishnsrao Bhalekar and Jyotiba Phule. This book, written in defence of women, although couched in traditional sentimentality was hostilely greeted even within a reformist organization such as Satyashodhak Samaj. Women began to get involved in nationalist campaigns and organizations, though there was the need on their part to overcome a certain degree of resistance from the men surrounding them to do so. Despite opposition from from Ranade and other leading reformers, ten women delegates including Pandita Ramabai participated in the 1889 Congress session in Bombay but they were not allowed to speak or vote on resolutions.

What resulted was not dramatic restructuring of Indian society but resistances to such reforms from the major orthodox section protesting colonial interference. Colonialism had brought out the problems of an indigenous knowledge system that was sanctified by age-old customs and social codes. Equally important was the issue of cultural pride for a colonized society (Chaudhuri 2003) and the lower status of women constituting an important ingredient of the Indian culture, the abolishing of the same would have meant cultural defeat of Indian masses. By protecting women from the modernizing forces, an attempt was made to prevent cultural onslaught. The result was some concessions for Indian women in the form of reforms without restructuring of gender relations in the Indian setup. They argued that upliftment of women is necessary because they are the mothers of future generations. Moreover, sometimes the issues concerning women were raised by nationalists not for the sake of women but for the sake of national honour. With the increasing incidence in the rape of Indian women by British soldiers towards the end of the nineteen century, nationalists began to use rape as an example of imperialist barbarism. It was seen by them as a violation of community or national honour, rather than an act of violence against women (Kumar 1993).

While women were urged to come out of homes and work for the nation, there was no questioning of the
traditional roles of mother and wife. Infact it was stressed that if they were educated they would become better mothers and wives. Most advocates of women’s education agreed that it should be functionalist and the emphasis was on household accomplishments which would benefit both husband and children. A less dominant view which was later to grow influential emphasized the role the mother played in forming child’s consciousness, arguing that women should be educated so that they could educate their children. Thus, women needed reform not only because of the hardships women were subjected to but also for the sake of their husbands and children. The argument forwarded to justify this stance of men folk may be cited here as given by Radha Kumar (1993:23):

“The conditions under which women gave birth to and brought up children were such that the ‘Indian race’ had ‘degenerated’, sickly children were born who grew up to be stunted adults; the ignorance and superstitiousness of their mothers led whole generations of Indians to lose the ‘entrepreneurial spirit’; this was what had allowed India to be colonized by the British; therefore it was important to the Indian nation that its children be born and brought up in the right conditions.”

The story of women’s oppression clearly cannot begin with colonialism, but colonialism has recast many of our traditional hierarchies; and self-conscious feminism as we understand it today, in its variegated form, is a modern entity. A discussion of feminism, therefore, does proceed from the colonial context within which the ideas of modern Indian nationalism and feminism took shape (Chaudhuri 2004). Although such reforms taking root in the colonial period weren’t immune from controversies (these were considered as sacrilege of tradition by the orthodox section) but these enabled women to claim attention. Although men initiated (as these reforms were) but these enabled women to understand, interpret and define their situation of inequality and devise strategies that advance gender justice, thus, shaping the course of Indian women’s movement.

**The birth of nationalism and the women’s question: Indian women towards nation-making**

To locate the position of Indian women in the Indian National movement, it would not be an act of exaggeration to say that they acted as agents of struggle against the Colonial rule alongside with men, thus creating a space for themselves in the nationalist political frame. This participation, struggle on behalf of the Indian women in the Indian national movement, which was fought for freedom and civil liberties, was an act towards seeking such liberties and freedom. The women’s movement in India has to be located in the colonial past as the starting point when nationalist consciousness kindled in them the desire to aspire for their salvation as they desired for their own country. It is this historical past which shaped women’s movement in India.

It was in political struggles against imperialism that large numbers of Indian women of all social classes began actively to participate in life outside the home (Jackson 2010). Gandhian struggle and left wing politics played a crucial role in mobilizing women and provided them with enough opportunities to enter the public sphere. Equality for women was one of the central objectives of the Gandhian Political programme and his emphasis on Stree Shakti (the moral power of womanhood) urged women to come out in large numbers to participate in the struggle for freedom (Chitnis 2004). Because of his self-feminization and his feminization of politics, Gandhi was acclaimed as the parent of the ‘Indian women’s movement’, and his depiction of and admiration for women’s innate qualities was eagerly
received by many feminists as expanding and detailing many of their self-definitions (Kumar 1993). Gandhian feminism which developed in the 1920s became majority feminism in 1930s. But prior to his appearance on the Indian Scene to promote the cause of Indian women, there were women who were active and were drawn by proliferating nationalist ideas and campaigns. With the growth of nationalist sentiment in the Indian context, a serious split was witnessed in Indian leadership over the issue of reform (Chitnis 2004). There was a growing estrangement of social reform from nationalism towards the end of the nineteenth century and debates were going on over the relative importance of social and political issues and their interconnections. The loyalist social reformers felt that the field of social reform was divided by political allegiances, and politics ought therefore to be avoided, for others social and political spheres were distinct but inseparable. The activities involved during the freedom struggle showed a mixture of orthodox social reform and nationalism, sometimes even leading to radicalism. There were women like Swarnkumari Debi, Sarala Debi Goshal, Kumudini Mitra, Lilabati Mitra, Prabhavati Mirza, Kamini Roy who were involved in nationalist activities. Swarnkumari Debi had started holding annual mahila silpamelas (women’s craft fairs) in the 1880s where handicrafts made by Indian women were sold to do fund raising for the Sakhi Samiti, an organization started by her for women, and also to promote indigenous cottage industry as means of developing both atmasakti and swadeshism, considered necessary for the freedom struggle. Her daughter, Sarala Debi Goshal, was one of the architects of a militant mother-centred nationalism. Radha kumar is of the view that it was in the 1905-08 Swadeshi movement in Bengal that women participation in the nationalist activities can be seen on larger scale and the first steps to woo women were taken in this period (Kumar 1993). Women’s support for Indian liberation movement was considered essential by Madame Cama and statements to this effect were made by nationalists all over India. However, women’s activism wasn’t restricted to the freedom struggle only and they were also actively involved in promoting the cause of women. The rhetoric of motherhood was used by women like Madame Cama to appeal to Indian women to unite by virtue of their common divine quality of motherhood and this role of motherhood was also stressed while raising the issues of working class women. Kamini Roy, active in nationalist politics, joined Banga Mahila Samiti and worked in various social reform projects for women. Aghorekamini Roy started a social welfare women’s organization (Aghorekamini Nari Samiti) and ran a girl’s school and also campaigned against the teaplanters’ ill-treatment of women workers in Assam. A good number of works were being produced by the women writers during this nationalist phase and a good number of journals for women (Stree Darpan, Kumari Darpan, Grihalakshmi) also came up during this period. The programme of national education, an essential part of the Swadeshi movement, was repeatedly criticized for its neglect of female and mass education. This movement of women’s education was given a new fillip by the entry of nationalsit women. Radha Kumar notes that if the earlier period showed the influence of nationalism on reformist women, from about 1910 on there were women who were involved in extreme nationalism began to get more actively involved in women’s rights issues (Ibid 1993). Kumudini Mitra, a supporter of revolutionary terrorism, was invited to attend the International Women Suffrage Alliance Congress at Budapest in 1913, as a delegate from India to represent Indian women. Sarala Devi, a revivalist and extremist, also turned her attention to social reform and formed the Bharat Stri Mahamandal. In 1917, a delegation organized by an Irish suffragette, M.E. Cousins, and led by Sarojini Naidu demanded a series of reforms in the condition of women before a committee headed by Mr. Montague and Lord Chelmsford.
Sarala Debi made representations before this committee on behalf of the Bharat Stree Mahamandal and demanded reforms like setting up of special educational institutions for widows, enacting laws protecting the inheritance rights of Hindu wives and daughters and so on. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was one of the women leaders of the Satyagraha movement of the 1930s. By the 1920s a second generation of feminists was growing up, several of whom were growing under the influence of their reformer mothers.

There was a sense of great achievement among women regarding the new spaces opening up for them. With the intensification of the nationalist movement, the women’s question was slowly but definitely witnessing a transformation from that of social reform to that of political question (Chaudhuri 2011). Women’s movement was heading towards a discourse of equality that was developing among women active in women’s rights or nationalist campaigns (Kumar 1993). Some women even were of the view that women, in order to be free, had to engage in a struggle with men. By 1920s two different rationales were being projected to defend this demand of women’s rights: the one was that women’s should be recognized because of their socially useful role as mothers. This view held that the biological difference between men and women affected the sexes qualitatively. The other view was that the women having same needs, desires and capacities should be given the same rights as enjoyed by men. This view held that biological differences did not determine the nature of each sex. The 1920s also witnessed a shift in consciousness of and about working class women. There was also a growing interest in working towards maternity and child welfare. Radha Kumar asserts that none of the women active in nationalist politics seems to have made mainstream attempts to organize women workers and their attempts at employment generation for women seem to have assumed that women’s wage work was subsidiary activity to supplement the male wage rather than to earn a living wage (Ibid 1993). The Women’s Indian Association was the first women’s organization to take up workers’ demands and issues of maternity leave and benefits for women workers were raised by a group of moderate nationalists whom they were associated with. Though the issue of maternity benefit was raised at different times but it was only with the effort of R.S. Salve, when he introduced a private Member’s Bill for Maternity Benefit in Bombay, that the Bombay Maternity Benefit Act was passed which was followed by similar legislation in other provinces. Through recognition of the fact that women could improve their position through cooperation, presence of women in workers’ movements was noticeable by the 1920s with women like Maniben Kare, Parvati Bhore, Ushabai Dange acting as leaders leading the movement. In South India, women were more active at this time in social reform programmes than in the nationalist ones. Labour issues were again taken up at the 1930 conference of AIWC in Gwallior which held a special session on labour questions. This interest in women workers was coming at a time when large numbers of them were being retrenched from industries. The recognition of different classes of women having different conditions and needs also began to be recognized in the women’s movement, although in a limited way. This concern for difference was explicit in the charter of the All India Women’s Conference for Educational Reform, which was formed in 1926, which uneasily juxtaposed the statement that they wanted an education for Indian women enabling them to best perform their roles in the home, with a demand for vocational training for poor women.

The women’s organizations in India also have witnessed an evolution. By the turn of the century, many women’s societies were operating but without an all-India body to coordinate their efforts (Lateef 1977) and the first attempts at setting up all-
India women’s organizations were made during the decade 1910-1920. The earliest women’s organizations were both urban and sectarian because they were Arya Samajist or Brahmo Samajist. These were followed by the emergence of local or regional women’s organizations from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century such as the Banga Mahila Samaj and the Aghorekamini Nari Samiti in Bengal, the Mahila Seva Samaj in Bangalore, the Satara Abalannati Sabha in Maharashtra, the Bharat Mahila Parishad in Benaras and the Prayas Mahila Samiti in Allahabad. Some of these acted as practical social reform organizations like the Aghorekamini Nari Samiti. Other organizations were mere discussion platforms for women like Bharat Mahila Parishad organized discussions on various issues related to women. One of the first attempts at coming together on a larger scale was made in 1908, when there was a ‘Mahila Parishad’ at Madras attended by women from all over South India presenting nineteen papers in different languages. Two years later, Sarala Debi, with the intention of bringing together women of all castes and creeds and forming an all-India women’s organization, founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal. But she failed in her effort of giving this organization an all-India character and it largely remained confined to its three branches in Lahore, Allahabad and Calcutta. Seven years later, women’s India Association was founded by Annie Besant, Malati Patwardhan, Ammu Swaminathan, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Mrs. Dadabhoy and Mrs. Ambujammal in 1917, an organization having an all-India character. By the early twentieth century women’s own autonomous women’s organizations began to be formed and within a few decades a special category of women’s activism was constructed (Kumar 1993). The Women’s India Association (WIA) together with other organizations such as the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW), and the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) which were formed was concerned with the eradication of the social problems of women and fight for the emancipation of women. At the same time, a strong nationalist trend ran through them, resulting sometimes in contradictions and conflicts within these organizations (Sen 2004). But these organizations remained confined to the intelligentsia. It was in the freedom struggle that women from all walks of life took part and participated in movements like Civil Disobedience. This was a proof of commitment to women’s equal rights and women emancipation which resulted in progressive measures like adoption of the Fundamental Rights Resolution at the Karachi Congress session in 1931. But this is debatable how far this participation resulted in the liberation of women.

The actual entry of women in political action altered the parameters of imagining women’s role in the nation (Chaudhuri 2003). But the relationship between women’s movement and Indian National Movement was never simple. This role of participation of Indian women in the public sphere was allowed without permitting the redefinition of the traditional roles of domesticity and once again to be a housewife was recognized to be a full time natural vocation for woman. Ethel Crowley considers the nationalist movements conservative with regard to sex roles and usually advocates the maintenance of women’s traditional role as homemaker and mother so as not to upset the moral code or divert people from the cause (Crowly 1991). The opponents of women’s political participation warned of traditional gender roles breaking down (Jackson 2010).Thus, the mobilization of Indian Women occurred within precisely defined limits set by the nationalist leadership and feminism had to align itself with the broader forces of nationalism so as to protect the public spaces permitted to women. The independence of the country and of women had become so intertwined as to be identical (Vina Mazumdar nd cited in Chaudhuri 2004). Women like Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant emphasized the sustenance women could give to the nationalist movement but they
emphasized that this activist role of women was supplementary rather than leading. Radha Kumar views this tagging of women’s role by women leaders as supplementary to men’s role to render women’s activism acceptable and to make it appear unthreatening (Kumar 1993). Gender discrimination wasn’t the only fundamental inequality witnessed by women. There was imperialist rule that was discriminating against the whole masses of India. So Indian women had to fight for their own salvation as well as the salvation of their nation. The national movement was wedded to the notion of equality on the one hand where both men and women were to bear the responsibility of freeing their nation from the clutches of foreign rule and on the other hand, to traditional cultural practices which prevented this idea of equality from blooming into full reality.

We need to appreciate the changing contexts within which women’s question was articulated. Women’s movement never bore a consistent relationship to the freedom movement and was experiencing change with change in the discourses characterizing the freedom struggle. Women’s question got expression first in the form of reforms demanded by men folk to bring an end to the pathetic condition of women towards the late nineteenth century and ultimately subsuming itself into the dominant discourse of national freedom prioritizing national identity to women’s identity. Then where should we locate women’s movement in the larger story of reform and nationalism? The answer lies in the fact that feminism in India during this period was in an incipient stage and it was because of reform and nationalist movements that women’s movement began to take its roots in the Indian scene. Bharati Ray maintains that women’s consciousness did expand in unexpected ways and women’s emancipation was directly served by the struggle for Indian independence (Ray 1988 cited in Ray and Korteweg 1999). With the change in discourse there was also a change in the definition of emancipation of women which meant freedom from suffering by virtue of reform from early nineteenth century and stressing on women’s right to be treated as useful members of society towards the early twentieth century. Annie Besant’s description of feminine activism dwelt on women’s self-sacrificing nature, a theme constantly used to project justification for allowing women the public space. These movements played a formative role in the emergence of feminist movement in India and in the process there have been consistent efforts to brush aside internal differences in this reformist-nationalist-feminist model. When towards the end of the nineteenth century the interests of the reform programme clashed with that of the nationalist movement for freedom, several of the reformers accorded priority to reform but the major section prioritized national programme to women’s question. This conflict between the commitment to reform and the commitment to national struggle for independence was crucial in shaping the future struggle of women in the twentieth century.

Resistance and women’s agency during the colonial era

The absence of an alternative approach to analyze the unique experiences of third world women has resulted in Eurocentric bias (Anagol 2005) in charting the self-assertion movements in Afro-Asian women’s history. Padma Anagol even cites the examples of studies (Meredith Borth Wick’s study of Bhadramahila, Ghulam Murshid’s work on the response of Bengali women to modernization) conducted in the Western impact-Indian response paradigm, thus, displaying the absence of any feminist consciousness in these women. The gains that Indian women enjoy today were both hard fought for and hard won by women. However, this is rarely acknowledged, credit for their emancipation usually going to men (Lateef 1977). Even with the growth of feminist scholarship in the 1980s, the idea of ‘women as subjects’ was far from the chief area of concern
resulting in the neglect of the women’s voices during the colonial period. Looking at the history of India, the neglect of the women’s agency becomes apparent. Jo Freeman while analysing the various types of social movements is of the view that most social movements have very inconspicuous beginnings and the significant elements of their origins are usually forgotten or distorted by the time a trained observer seeks to trace them out, making retroactive analysis difficult (Freeman 2003). Such a distortion is apparent in case of presentation of Indian feminist movement which has been usually analyzed using a Eurocentric approach. Analysing the Indian situation, Padma Anagol (2005:3) writes:

“The position of women in Indian society has been looked at either as part of broader studies in the social and cultural history of India or more directly, in the attempt to trace the changing role of women in colonial India. Such scholars have argued that improvements in the status of women came about from the nineteenth century onwards, not as the product of a process of conscious assertion on the part of Indian women, but through programmes of social reform devised and carried out by Indian men and the colonial state. In many ways the image, which emerges of Indian women as passive recipients in these processes, has been predetermined by the approaches, which scholars have adopted. In the ‘Western impact-Indian response paradigm’ that informs their work, there is little room for women as conscious agents. Instead, Indian women are projected as a monolithic and oppressed entity and reduced to mere beneficiaries of the ‘awakening’ experienced by their men folk because of contact with Western influences.

Offering a refreshingly different analysis by treating autobiographical writings as personal narratives, Malavika Karlekar in Voices from Within has effectively demonstrated how literacy and education enabled at least an elite section of Bengali women to question male constructions of female femininity in the nineteenth century (Karlekar 1991 cited in Anagol 2005). Indian women were engaged in contesting the patriarchal discourses on womanhood. Maitrayee Chaudhuri illustrates the example of debates on women’s suffrage in colonial Bengal to contest the view that political space for women in India in the past was granted to women without resistance. Oppositions to woman’s right to vote was made on grounds like she is quite unfit for defence and administration of a country, giving her voting right would lead to discontent with domestic duties and neglect of husband and children and so on. It was only because of the active intervention and struggle of women’s organizations that women were able to achieve the right to vote (Chaudhuri 2003). Women were not only attempting to enter and legitimate their entry in the public sphere but also were working towards blurring the divide between the public and private spheres (Anagol 2005). Anagol considers it as an important task to study the women’s ideology and work in the early nationalist era prior to the Gandhian-led movements in order to understand the connections between the present and past forms of feminisms.

There has been a relative unease with the term patriarchy in the Indian feminist circle when taken note of men’s role in the emergence and growth of women’s question in India. If early attempts at reforming the conditions of Indian women were largely conducted by Indian men, by the late nineteenth century women had themselves joined in movements (Kumar 1993). Swarnkumari Debi,
Rabindranath Tagore’s sister, started a women’s organization called the Sakhi Samiti in 1886 which was meant to train widows to teach so that they could become self-reliant and aid in the spread of women’s education. She was also instrumental in holding annual Mahila Silpamedas (women’s craft fairs) where handicrafts made by Indian women were sold. Her daughter, Sarala Debi Ghoshal, one of the architects of a militant mother-centred nationalism, had to overcome considerable family opposition when, at the age of twenty-three, she intended to take a job at a girls’ school in Mysore. Pandita Ramabai, through her work, *The High-Caste Hindu Women*, published in 1887, had drawn attention to the issue of widows’ conditions and the Sharada Ashram which she started for the widows was based on a kind of Tolstoyan concept of the model of self-sufficient community. A good number of works were being produced by women writers like Mankumari Basu, Nagendrakala Mustafa, Kamini Roy ranging from novels, poems and plays to essays on women’s education, women’s duties and women’s morality. Mary Bhore, Godavari Samaskar, Pandita Ramabai, Kasibai Kanitkar, Parvatibai and Rukminibai were popular women writers in Maharashtra. Whether it was through political participation or reform or writing or any other activity, Indian women were actively involved in creating and enlarging spaces for themselves in the public arena.

**Conclusion**

The rationale for tracing the indigenous roots of Indian feminism urges us to look at its specific development in the colonial context. Through contact with the colonial rule, Indian masses encountered an intellectual world that resonated with the ideas of liberalism, freedom, civil rights and so on. This encounter resulted in enlightened Indian masses whose concern was to work for the salvation of their women as well as their country. Nationalist movement did offer spaces for women. But most of the times, women’s question had to efface itself in the light of more urgent nationalist concerns and Women’s question was constrained by the women’s movement’s alliance with the nationalist movement. It was such complementariness and at times contradiction between these movements which shaped the evolution of Women’s movement in India.

**References**


