
UNIQUE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN PRE-INDEPENDENT INDIA

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Abstract: At the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age, position of women was considered to be fairly satisfactory. The society as a whole showed proper concern and respect for women allowing them considerable freedom in different activities of the social and political life.¹

The women's movement has a long history in India. The Shakti cults go back centuries, and the concept of Shakti – the female power principle – was recognized thousands of years ago. In this form the women's movement represents, not merely an oppositional force fuelled by anger, a rather negative reaction to oppression, but the development of a distinctive female culture, a positive creative force inspiring men and women alike.

Pandita Ramabai was one of the 10 women delegates to the Indian National Congress in 1889 and she was instrumental in the setting up of several women's organizations, schools for girls, and homes for widows, apart from a host of her other contributions to society.

Endeavors of Social Reformers: The emergence of renaissance in the nineteenth century and other external factors such as the impact of English education, missionary activities, liberal ideas from the west etc. opened the eyes of Indian intelligentsia to the disgraceful social conditions of the times, which was nothing but a tale of suffering and humiliation from birth to death.

Gopal Krishan Gokhale (1866-1915) was deeply concerned with women's education. One of the clauses in the Constitution of the 'Servants of India Society', which he founded in Poona in the year 1905, provided for 'assisting educational movements, especially those for the education of women'. In a speech made before the education section of the Victorian era exhibition in 1897, he said, "...education is the only means of emancipating their (women's) minds from the degrading thralldom of ideas inherited through a long past and such emancipation will not only restore our women to the honored position which they at one time occupied in India, but will also facilitate more...The solution seems simple...but requires a delicate and patient handling."² Gokhale made the cause of women's education a part of his life's mission throughout his distinguished career.

There were some outstanding women, who also contributed side by side with men for women's cause. Pandita Ramabai (1858- 1922) was the first great woman pioneer who laid solid foundation for women's education and amelioration. In 1881, she gave evidence before the Education Commission, presided over by William Hunter, emphasizing the need for urgent reforms such as the abolition of child marriage and the promotion of women's education.³

On returning from England, she had a number of plans and schemes for the betterment of the status of women. By 1889, she succeeded in opening her first home-cum-school for widows called *Sharada Sadan* (Home of Learning) in Bombay. Another centre called *Mukti Sadan* was opened at Khedgaon, near Poona. She also opened a rescue home called *Kripa Sadan*. These centers were distinguished by their training schools for teachers, kindergarten, industrial school with garden field, oil press, dairy, departments for baking, weaving, sewing and embroidery.⁴ Her great aim was to bring joy and bliss into the lives of helpless women.

Swarankumari Devi (1856-1932), daughter of Devendranath Tagore, also engaged herself in removing the social disabilities of women through the formation of women's societies. In 1882, she started a women's association, namely the Ladies Theosophical Society for women of all religion. In 1886, The *Sakhi Samiti* was another women's association formed by her. The work of this association was: to promote friendly intercourse among Indian women and foster in them the growth of an active and enlightened interest in the welfare of the country, to provide a home for education of poor girls to enable them to become useful members of the society, to prepare them for employment and to help in spreading women's education by sending them out as *zenana* teachers.³⁴ In order to collect money to educate women and to improve their economic condition the *samiti* used to organize annual *mahila shilpamelas*.

Thus the contribution of Gandhi to the upliftment of the Indian women has been immense and immeasurable as he concerned himself not only with social reforms designed to get rid of the atrocious customs that were weighing heavily on women, but he also gave philosophical consideration to every aspect of the problem of women's emancipation and worked for it. He devoted himself so much to the cause of women that some began to speak of him as half woman (*ardhnari*). Once he himself declared that 'I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her heart.'³³ Gandhi's emphasis on women's moral superiority over men removed the age old stigma of women's inferiority and inspired them with a new self confidence.

Sucheta Kripalani, a follower of Gandhi undoubtedly regarded, "many leaders and reformers has espoused the cause of women in this country, but none held women in such high esteem as did the Father of the nation. With infinite compassion and love he held the women by the hand and led them forward to their rightful place in society."⁵ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a great woman leader and veteran soldier of the freedom struggle also remarked, "Never perhaps, since Buddha preached his message, has any single individual swayed and transformed the destinies of so many millions as did Gandhiji. Were it not for his leadership, with his wide vision and practical sense, women in India would have had to plod the slow way to the heights they have now been able to attain. He not only respected women, but also valued them."⁶

As a matter of fact, women had contributed remarkably in various non-violent movements started for country's freedom, which can be broadly analyzed in three different phases i.e. Non Cooperation Movement (1920-1922), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) and Quit India Movement (1940-1942). Before discussing these mass movements in detail, it would be pertinent to mention some local *satyagrahas* viz, Champaran, Ahmedabad and Khera *Satyagraha* as with these movements women commenced their participation.

In 1916, the Begum of Bhopal founded the All India Muslim Women's Conference with education of women as a prime agenda, apart from provisions of other remedial services for women and changing oppressive practices such as polygamy. We can site many such instances or special cases where individual women have been leaders in a struggle for women's rights, but whose voices have been accounted for in the patriarchal recording of history.

At the time of the Champaran *Satyagraha* in 1917 women came out, though in a very small scale, and lent a helping hand to Gandhi, when he went there with his selected band of workers to enlighten the masses against this injustice. Notable among them were Prabhawati (daughter of Brij Kishore Prasad), Rajbansi Devi and Bhagwati Devi (wife and sister of Rajendra Prasad respectively). These women propagated against the practice of *purdah*, untouchability, ignorance, illiteracy and also organized literary classes on the advice of Gandhiji.⁷

In the Ahmedabad Labour Movement¹⁰ of 1919, Anusuyaben Sarabhai, sister of Ambalal Sarabhai, one of the Ahmedabad's leading mill owner, fought a valiant battle on behalf of the workers even against her own brother. During the strike she along with other leaders and women workers spent every morning and evening vesting the worker's homes, inspiring and advising them, sending medical help and bringing back to Gandhiji the reports of their hardships and rumors. Her house became the venue for discussion among the leaders.⁸ She also addressed the meetings of workers and asked them to cooperate to make the strike successful.

Conclusion: Though these movements were local in nature, yet they marked a beginning of women's participation and made them politically aware about their capabilities, strength and potential. By 1920 women from all parts of India were prepared to take part in the all India non violent Non Cooperation Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi.

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