



Nationalism And The Women's Movement: An Analytical Review

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Abstract

The concept of nationalism in India developed significantly during the period of the anti-colonial struggle for independence. The Indian nationalist movement was essentially a movement aimed at achieving freedom from colonial rule. Any discussion of the Indian nationalist movement would remain incomplete without acknowledging the contributions of women. In the history of the national movement, women fulfilled their responsibilities both within the household and in the public sphere, demonstrating remarkable courage and determination. In a patriarchal society, it was not easy for women to stand alongside men and participate in the struggle as equal fighters. During that time, women's lives were largely confined to domestic responsibilities and child-rearing. However, despite these social constraints, many women overcame such barriers and actively joined the freedom struggle, participating in movements against British rule. Therefore, the participation of women in the freedom movement was in no way less significant than that of men. Prominent figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay played an important role in encouraging women's participation in the freedom struggle. They emphasized the idea of the "ideal woman," who would act as the bearer and preserver of civilization. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, in his conceptualization of nationalism, compared the nation to the image of a mother, thereby symbolizing the country as a maternal figure. Women's participation can be observed in various nationalist movements in India, including the Partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi Movement. Women also played an important role in the revolutionary or extremist nationalist movements, and their active involvement was evident in several Gandhian movements as well. Later, in 1946, many women participated in peasant struggles such as the Tebhaga Movement and the Telangana Rebellion. Women's participation in these various nationalist movements added a new dimension to the struggle. Many women displayed extraordinary courage in India's national movement, and the sacrifices of these individuals played a crucial role in achieving independence. Among them were figures such as Rani Lakshmbai, Sarojini Naidu, Matangini Hazra, and Pritilata Waddadar. In addition to these well-known personalities, thousands of other women participated in the freedom struggle, and their contributions remain undeniable. Alongside their involvement in nationalist activities both inside and outside the home, many of these women also engaged in various social welfare and women's welfare initiatives. However, in most cases, their contributions remained largely unrecognized and hidden from mainstream historical narratives. By analyzing reform movements, literary nationalism, Gandhian mobilization, and agrarian struggles, the article argues that women's participation in nationalist movements significantly contributed to political transformation while simultaneously exposing the limitations of nationalist ideology in addressing gender equality.

Index Terms — Nationalism, Women's Movement, Swadeshi Movement, Gandhian Movement, Tebhaga Movement, Telangana Movement.

Introduction

In Indian history, the role and status of women have been dynamic and diverse. The contribution and sacrifices of women in India's nationalist movement occupy a significant place in the historical narrative of the country. During the struggle for independence, women fulfilled their responsibilities both within the household and in the public sphere while actively participating in the fight for freedom.

They overcame numerous social barriers, hardships, and adverse circumstances and courageously resisted British rule. Women participated both directly and indirectly in various nationalist movements, demonstrating determination and resilience in the face of colonial oppression. Their involvement in these movements was in no way less significant than that of men. Through their active participation and sacrifices, women played an essential role in shaping the course of India's freedom struggle.

The Status of Women in India from Ancient Times to the Nineteenth Century: A Brief Discussion

Historically, Indian society has largely been characterized by a patriarchal social structure in which men enjoyed greater status and power than women. In such a patriarchal system, women have long been associated with restrictions, limitations, and confined social spaces (Menon, 1999).

In ancient India, particularly during the Vedic period, women enjoyed a relatively high social status and there was little discrimination between men and women. During this period, women were granted the right to education and were allowed to acquire Vedic knowledge as well as recite the Vedas. Women also enjoyed considerable freedom in religious matters and actively participated in various religious rituals, sacrifices, and intellectual discussions. They attended assemblies and organizations and even participated in political activities. Some notable women of the Vedic period include Lopamudra, Maitreyi, and Gargi.

However, toward the later part of the Vedic period, the status of women began to decline and various social restrictions were imposed upon them. In the post-Vedic period, women's social position deteriorated significantly. During this time, women's education gradually declined, and they lost the right to study and recite the Vedas. The Manusmriti did not grant women independent rights. Women were placed under strict patriarchal control and were denied personal freedom. It was believed that a woman should remain under the authority of her father during childhood, under her husband after marriage, and under her son in old age. As a result, women were largely confined to the domestic sphere and were deprived of many social opportunities.

During the medieval period, the status and authority of women in both Hindu and Muslim communities were significantly lower than those of men. Women were generally restricted from moving freely outside the household. Several social practices such as child marriage, polygamy, the purdah system, and the practice of Sati were prevalent in society.

However, during the modern period, some changes began to appear in the socio-economic, political, cultural, and educational status of women. Over time, women began to struggle for social reform and empowerment. Several prominent social reformers played important roles in improving the status of women in Indian society. Among them were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi.

The renowned Indian social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy, with the support of Lord William Bentinck, played a crucial role in abolishing the practice of sati through legislation in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated and facilitated widow remarriage, while Jyotirao Phule established the first school for girls in 1848. Later, the Constitution of India recognized the principle of equality between men and women and guaranteed equal rights for both.

Significant transformations in the lives of women in Indian society can be observed during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Over time, women's rights and social status have improved considerably. However, gender inequality continues to persist in many areas of society. As noted by Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "the place of women in Indian politics reflects both the opportunities and limitations associated with democracy" (Jayal & Mehta, 2010).

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Nationalist Thought and the Awakening of Women's Consciousness

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay was one of the pioneers of Indian nationalism. During the freedom movement, he inspired the people of India through his numerous literary works and novels. Within the conservative social structure of his time, he is often regarded as a distinctive figure who helped guide and inspire women's consciousness. In many of his writings, female characters occupy central and significant roles. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay sought to connect the idea of nationalism with the concept of womanhood.

In the European tradition, the nation is often imagined as the “fatherland,” but Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay conceptualized the nation as the “motherland.” According to Partha Chatterjee, toward the end of the nineteenth century Bankim Chandra compared women of ancient times with those of the modern era. He then listed and contrasted the qualities and shortcomings of the “new” woman with those of the “traditional” woman (Chatterjee, 1993). He also observed that in most societies men have historically determined and regulated women’s behavior.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s famous novels *Anandamath* (1882) and *Devi Chaudhurani* (1884) highlight the assertive and active roles of women. In *Anandamath*, he portrayed the nation as a mother figure. In this novel, he described three images of the Mother Goddess: “the Mother as she was,” “the Mother as she has become,” and “the Mother as she will be” (Bandyopadhyay, 2010). In the narrative, he chose the goddess Durga as the symbol of the future, as she represents both a warrior and a mother—one who protects and nurtures her children.

The famous song *Vande Mataram*, included in *Anandamath*, later gained immense popularity across India. In 1896, Rabindranath Tagore first sang *Vande Mataram* at a session of the Indian National Congress. The call to save the motherland was not necessarily a direct call for women to join political movements; rather, it established an ideological link between nationalism and the ideal of womanhood (Forbes, 2008). In doing so, Bankim Chandra simultaneously reflected the complex and sometimes contradictory patriarchal perceptions of women while symbolically associating the nation with motherhood.

Another of Bankim Chandra’s notable works, *Devi Chaudhurani*, highlights the bravery, courage, and heroism associated with femininity. In this novel, he presented the image of the “ideal woman,” who fulfills her responsibilities both within the household and in the public sphere, acting as the bearer and preserver of civilization. The story also portrays a courageous and powerful female freedom fighter who participates in the struggle against British rule. For ordinary women, the narrative served as an inspiring message that they could step beyond the confines of the household and participate in the broader struggle for national freedom.

Similarly, in his novels *Durgeshnandini* and *Kapalkundala*, Bankim Chandra imagined female characters who challenge contemporary social norms and customs and who are capable of resisting adversity and injustice. Through these literary representations, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay placed significant emphasis on women and sought to inspire them, thereby contributing to the awakening of women’s consciousness within the broader framework of nationalist thought.

The Role of Women in the Swadeshi Movement and the Anti-Partition of Bengal Movement

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, women in India began to participate in various political organizations and movements. In 1890, ten women attended a session of the Indian National Congress. In the early stages, most of the participating women belonged to the educated urban upper-middle-class group commonly referred to as *bhadramahila*. However, from the time of the Partition of Bengal and the subsequent Swadeshi Movement, participation was no longer limited to educated elite women; ordinary women from lower socio-economic backgrounds also began to participate both directly and indirectly in these movements.

Rabindranath Tagore called upon women to participate in the anti-partition Swadeshi movement and wrote an essay titled *Brata Dharan* to encourage the involvement of Bengali women. Tagore also composed songs in which Bengal was symbolically compared to the goddess Durga. In nationalist discourse, the motherland was often represented in various symbolic forms—sometimes as the goddess Durga, sometimes as a destroyer of enemies, and at other times as a protector of the innocent.

Women in Bengal actively participated in the Swadeshi movement. In both urban and rural areas, women from Hindu and Muslim communities took part in the movement either directly or indirectly. Although Muslim women’s participation in the early years of the nationalist movement was relatively limited, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain played an important role in inspiring women to support and engage with the Swadeshi movement, even though she herself did not directly participate in formal political activities.

Women contributed to the movement by boycotting British goods and promoting the use of indigenous products. In 1905, Bipin Chandra Pal established an extremist nationalist group known as the Swadeshi Mandali, in which both men and women participated actively. During this period, a strong wave of boycott of foreign goods and promotion of indigenous products emerged. The Swadeshi movement also encouraged the local production of indigenous goods.

Under the influence of the movement, various local associations of women were formed across Bengal, and women began to participate in the production and promotion of Swadeshi products. In this way, women contributed both directly and indirectly to the anti-British Swadeshi movement in several spheres.

On the eve of the Partition of Bengal, the participation of Bengali women in political activities was led by Swarnakumari Devi and her daughter Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. Sarala Devi played a crucial role in the awakening of women in Bengal and formed a women's organization known as Antarang to inspire and mobilize women. She also established training centers where young men and women were taught physical exercises, stick-fighting (lathi khela), and swordsmanship.

On 16 October 1905, in protest against the Partition of Bengal, a Raksha Bandhan ceremony was organized under the initiative of Rabindranath Tagore as a symbol of unity and brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims. Many women participated in this event. On the same day, Bengali women observed the ritual of Arandhan Brata, refraining from cooking as a symbolic act of protest.

Several women played important roles in these movements, including Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Kumudini Basu, Hemangini Das, Nirmala Sarkar, Sarojini Devi, Labanyaprabha Dutta, and Leelabati Mitra, who made significant contributions to the nationalist struggle.

The Role of Women in Gandhian Movements

Mahatma Gandhi played a crucial role in ensuring women's participation in Indian politics and the freedom struggle. He referred to women as the "better half of humanity" and strongly advocated for equal rights for women. In 1915, Gandhi met with women from the Bombay Social Service League who were actively involved in social reform. During his address, he emphasized that India needed women leaders who would embody the qualities of ancient heroines such as Sita, Damayanti, and Draupadi—women who were "pure, steadfast, and self-disciplined" (Forbes, 2008). Gandhi noted that these women had endured immense suffering yet maintained dignity and strength in their lives.

Gandhi called upon Indian women to awaken and reminded them of the courage and resilience of these ancient heroines. He believed that equality between men and women was essential and encouraged women to participate actively in the nationalist movement. At the same time, he reassured them that participation in the movement did not necessarily require abandoning their homes or neglecting family responsibilities. Gandhi often highlighted the diverse talents and capabilities of women in the struggle for India's independence.

He placed significant emphasis on women's education. Gandhi argued that when a man is educated, only an individual becomes educated, but when a woman is educated, an entire family benefits from that education. Consequently, he promoted education among women and worked toward integrating basic education into the broader framework of national education. Gandhi also emphasized the importance of educating mothers so that they could provide proper guidance and education to their children. He believed that the progress and development of the nation depended largely on the empowerment and education of women.

Gandhi brought women out of the confines of the domestic sphere and encouraged them to participate in public life. Under his leadership, women joined men in large numbers in the freedom struggle and in Indian politics. One of the key reasons for this widespread participation was Gandhi's principle of non-violence, which enabled women to participate in political activism without engaging in violent confrontation.

In 1922, among the 350 participating members at the general session of the Indian National Congress, sixteen were women representatives. Under Gandhi's leadership, the Champaran Satyagraha began with twenty-five satyagrahis, twelve of whom were women. Later, in 1921, women also took part in the Non-Cooperation Movement. However, women's participation was particularly significant during the Civil Disobedience Movement, in which a large number of women actively engaged in protests and acts of resistance.

Sarojini Naidu was among the prominent leaders who actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement and promoted the boycott of British goods (Sarabhai, 1998). When Gandhi and his followers reached the end of the Dandi March during the Salt Satyagraha, Naidu's presence beside him symbolized the central role of women in the nationalist struggle (Parr, 2023).

Gandhi firmly believed that women and men should enjoy equal rights in society and that women's participation in the freedom struggle was essential for achieving independence. Following the path shown by Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu became the first woman president of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Even Muslim women from conservative families joined Gandhi's Khilafat Movement. Similarly, Sucheta

Kripalani contributed to the movement by organizing non-violent campaigns and mobilizing people for the nationalist cause.

Gandhi once stated that when the history of India's freedom struggle would be written, the stories of women's bravery would occupy the highest place in that history. Historian Ramachandra Guha also observed that Gandhi's greatest contribution to women's awakening was bringing women into the spheres of politics and social movements.

The Role of Women in the Tebhaga Movement

The Tebhaga Movement was a significant peasant movement that emerged on the eve of India's independence and the partition of Bengal. The movement began in 1946 under the leadership of the All India Kisan Sabha, the peasant front of the Communist Party of India. The term Tebhaga literally means "three shares." The movement was initiated by sharecroppers who demanded two-thirds of the produce from the land they cultivated, instead of the existing system where the majority of the produce went to the landlords.

Women played a significant role in this movement. Their participation greatly expanded the foundation of women's activism in rural political struggles. As noted by historians, "proletarian and semi-proletarian women belonging to tribal and Dalit communities demonstrated remarkable independent activism during the movement" (Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

Landless and poor peasant women organized themselves into militant groups known as Nari Bahini (Women's Brigades) and actively resisted colonial authority and landlord oppression. Rural poor women were at the forefront of the rebellion, playing a crucial role in protecting the movement and resisting state repression. The formation of the Nari Bahini, composed of women fighters, was one of the most distinctive and important features of the Tebhaga movement (Custers, 1986).

In several regions of Bengal, the Tebhaga movement intensified considerably. In the Dinajpur district, police firing resulted in the death of twenty-two peasants, among whom two were women. When the police arrested several peasant leaders, a woman leader named Yashoda Rani Sarkar organized a large women's brigade in protest. Police opened fire on the gathering, resulting in the death of fourteen people.

In the Narail subdivision of the Jessore district, another prominent woman leader, Sarala Devi, formed a "Broom Brigade" (Jhata Bahini) consisting of around 250 to 300 women. Their primary weapon was the broom, symbolizing both resistance and collective strength. On two occasions, the police forces were compelled to retreat after confronting this group of determined women.

Another remarkable example of women's courage was seen in Sundardighi in the then Jalpaiguri district (now located in Bangladesh). An elderly Rajbanshi widow named Purneswari Devi played a heroic role in the movement and became popularly known as Burima among the peasants of the region. When the police began persecuting peasants in the Debiganj area, she raised the slogan "We will give our lives, but we will not give our paddy," and led women farmers in harvesting the crops while resisting police repression.

Women such as Shikha Nandi and Tilak Tarini Devi from the Panchagarh region also played crucial roles by carrying messages to peasant leaders and warning them about impending police actions. When the police attempted to arrest peasant leaders, these women often confronted them and forced them to retreat.

In the Sylhet region, a medieval system known as the Nankar system functioned as a form of bonded or semi-slave labor within the feudal structure of society. Under this oppressive system, Nankar women suffered severe exploitation and humiliation at the hands of landlords. These women eventually organized resistance against the zamindars and participated actively in the broader peasant movements.

It is noteworthy that in movements such as the Tebhaga, Tonk, and Nankar struggles, peasants from different communities—including Hindus, Muslims, Santals, and Garos—participated collectively and in solidarity. In these struggles, several communist women leaders worked alongside male activists and inspired rural women to join the movement.

One of the most prominent leaders was Ila Mitra, who played a leading role in the peasant uprising at Nachole in 1946, which formed an important part of the Tebhaga movement. The extensive participation and sacrifices of women in the Tebhaga movement contributed significantly to the strength and success of the struggle.

The Role of Women in the Telangana Movement

The Telangana Rebellion began in 1946 under the leadership of the Communist Party of India as a peasant uprising against the autocratic rule of the Mir Osman Ali Khan, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the oppressive feudal system. The movement continued from 1946 to 1951. During this period, women fought alongside men for greater dignity, fair wages, and a just taxation system (Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

Women played a crucial role in the Telangana movement, and without their active participation it would not have been possible to sustain the movement for such a long period. They participated actively in various struggles, including movements for land rights, campaigns for higher wages for agricultural laborers, and the confiscation of grain from oppressive landlords. Women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in resisting the forces of the Nizam, the police, and the Razakars.

In fact, women were among the most severely oppressed during the conflict. They were subjected to widespread violence, harassment, and sexual assault by the Razakars, the Nizam's forces, and the police and military authorities. In many cases, women were forced to witness the torture and killing of their husbands and children (Sundarayya, 2006). Despite these brutal conditions, they courageously resisted such oppression and fought to protect their dignity.

One of the central objectives of the Telangana movement was to challenge the social order based on exploitation, inequality, and humiliation. The movement demanded a broader socio-economic transformation of society (Cherupally, 2020).

Conclusion

Women played a vital role in India's struggle for independence by actively participating in various nationalist movements. Thousands of Indian women sacrificed their lives in the defense of their motherland. Despite numerous social barriers and hardships, they joined the freedom struggle and demonstrated extraordinary courage and determination.

During this period, women from different regions of India participated in the independence movement. However, many of them remained largely invisible in historical narratives, and their contributions were rarely recorded. In promoting women's participation in the freedom struggle and challenging regressive social practices, several prominent reformers played important roles. Figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made significant contributions toward social reform and the improvement of women's status in society.

Despite the active participation of women in nationalist movements, certain limitations remained. Most of the women who led or prominently represented the freedom struggle belonged to educated upper- and middle-class Hindu families. The participation of women from marginalized communities and Muslim backgrounds was comparatively limited in historical records. In many cases, these women did participate in the movement but remained in the background and were unable to emerge as visible leaders. Consequently, their contributions often went unrecognized.

In several instances, women were not able to participate independently and were instead guided by party leadership or male leaders. Nevertheless, the history of the Indian nationalist movement would remain incomplete without acknowledging the contributions of women. The sacrifices of Indian women occupy a significant place in the history of India's independence. By courageously overcoming social constraints and hardships, they actively participated in numerous movements and played a crucial role in the eventual success of the struggle for freedom.

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