

## **CHANGING DISCOURSE ON INDIAN WOMEN IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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The history of women's question in India can be conveniently begun from the Nineteenth Century. This was the time when 'women's question' became an integral part of the ongoing social debate and social reform. We find the first generation of Indian male reformers charged and practicing with the idea of reform under a certain colonial environment. Largely the upper caste-middle class English educated gentry of this period was responding to the orientalist understanding about India and James Millian 'ladder of civilization'. James Mill in his book, 'History of British India' argued that 'women's position could be used as an indicator of society's advancement or backwardness. Thus, the Indian middle - classmen were facing criticism at the hands of the colonial state and western ideologues on cultural aspects particularly regarding the treatment of women in India.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, by the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we see the coming up of reform groups and organizations in almost all parts of British India initiated by a good number of male reformers in a way on behalf of Indian women. Eventually, women became the prime subjects in their discussions on social change. The major issues of discourse in the period of reform were centered around women's familial status – their position within the family and institution of marriage, their access to education, and legal rights<sup>2</sup>. The reform movement created enormous possibilities and to some extent it can be said that the male reformers and the reformist ideology and agenda of this period determined the future course of women's movement in British period.

The kind of discussions and debates on diverse issues concerning tradition, value system, family and marriage life, on women's' suppression and subjugation, their unimaginably low condition and so on held under the Nineteenth Century Reform Movement and which became subject of open debates, was totally unprecedented in India. Also, the way print media was adopted for

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<sup>1</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> Century is known as the 'Age of Women' as Woman became the center of heated discussion around the world (post revolution France, Russia and England). Colonial rule, Emergence of Middle-class Intellectuals, Modern Education, Ideology of Empire (oriental/utilitarian/liberals/evangelical), Civilizing Mission, Hierarchy of civilization are some of the major points of discussion to critically examine women's question.

<sup>2</sup> For better understanding on Indian Women in the Colonial period See the works of Radha Kumar, Geraldine Forbes, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid.

brain storming, highlighting and circulating women's issues, in consensus making or sometimes otherwise presenting the fissures or contestations was remarkable.

By a good number of scholars, Social Reform has been presented as a truly liberating force and emancipatory for Indian women,<sup>3</sup> leading to the abolition of sati, initiating female education, promoting widow remarriage, rise in the age of consent, eradication of purdah and so on. It is also to note and remember that Tarabai Shinde's *Stri-Purush Tulna*<sup>4</sup> and Ras Sundari Debi's *Amar Jibon*<sup>5</sup> was published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself.

However, it is also crucial to study this period with a critical pulse to uncover the limitations and loopholes of the reformist idea to understand the central discourse of this period. In consonance with that in the later historiography a more complex reading of the reform movement has been provided by the historians and scholars, wherein the limitations of the reformist ideology and conservative approach has been underlined.<sup>6</sup> For instance, it has been argued that the reformists at best could only offer the language of the elite on the matter of women's question. The dominant narratives of this period were concerning women of the dominant circles of society. It has been argued by historians that the reform was not about what do the women of Nineteenth Century India want, instead it became a project of modernization of women as desired and thought of by the male reformers in the wake of a very hostile, humiliating, competitive and challenging colonial environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Prominent scholars whose work established a positive teleology of Reform Movement included K K Dutta, B R Nanda, S C Sarkar among others. They argued for an evolutionary advancement of women during this period, and to them reform was emancipatory and liberating. These scholars have given credit to indigenous efforts for reform rejecting British initiatives. To them women's politicization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was linked to their advancement and emancipation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910) was a feminist activist who protested patriarchy and caste in 19<sup>th</sup> century India. She is known for her published work, *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men), originally published in Marathi in 1882. The pamphlet is a critique of upper-caste patriarchy, and is often considered the first modern Indian feminist text.

<sup>5</sup> Rassundari Devi was among the earliest woman writers in Bengali literature. Her autobiography *Amar Jiban* (My Life), which she wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is known as the first published autobiography in Bengali language.

<sup>6</sup> Latest historiography on reform developed under Marxist, sub-alternist and feminist schools pointed limitations of the reform and nationalist movement. According to these scholars, reformers belonged to mainly upper caste middle class elite Hindu men who were addressing the issues of the same class of women. They also highlighted the uneven nature of national movement and its various contradictions.

Nineteenth Century reformers were primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class, and therefore they concentrated most of their concerns and energies on the women of this class and their specific issues. By doing that, millions of ordinary Indian women who formed the back-bone of the Indian economy, and who were far greater victims of the colonial transformation of the economy and society were left out of the discourse and their issues could not be taken up.

Irrespective of the presence of press and fashioning of the print culture in this period, we do not get much data on women's work and occupation, their health and other aspects of their life. We see a kind of a fixation of discussion around the familial life of the middle-class women and about that also we get a very microscopic idea. The 'invisibility' of women in history and in historical sources and the historical silences are much talked about topics, but in case of the Nineteenth Century one observes it more disappointingly on the matter of Sati-abolition. A very general reference was made about women in the discussion on this subject whereas a quite long period was invested by the intellectual class— both Indian and British—on the matter of sati, resulting into the production of sizable literature on this subject. Piles of government reports and records on sati, petitions and counter petitions, letters, articles and memoirs are produced, however, rarely women appear in this literature as the first person, on the contrary they are almost faceless.

The discussion on Sati focused more on the tradition of Sati and its validation or negation through scriptural reading. Women and their narratives are absent. At best women are presented either as victims of sati or heroines as willing sati or forced sati as good sati or bad sati.<sup>7</sup> The narratives are largely impersonal. The lives of even those women belonging to the middle class also haven't been historicized. Women's own voices were marginalized in a debate which was essentially about them.

Another significant example to understand the discourse of this period may be the creation of the image of 'new woman' in the Nineteenth Century which kept informing the vision of Indian society for a long time.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the Nineteenth Century there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile and increasingly involved in public activities. One can think about the women members of Brahma samaj in this context. These 'new women' as they

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<sup>7</sup> On Sati Discourse see the works of Radha Kumar, Lata mani, Tanika Sarkar, Andrea Mayer.

<sup>8</sup> Partha Chatterjee brings up the idea of division in culture between the east and west on two basis, which were the material and spiritual. material being external world the 'Bahir' and spiritual being inner the 'Ghar'. Women was considered to be the epitome of tradition and spirituality and her place was home, where as men had to adjust and accommodate with the materialistic world outside.

were called, were participating in the ongoing modernizing movement and they seem to be seeking for greater equality between men and women, so to speak.

In the creation of this new image of modern Indian woman the issue of education got the front seat. On the face of it, women's education proved to be a progressive idea aiming to create the new modern women, yet the regressive approach was equally pronounced in the educational curriculum of the period designed specifically for the women. There is no doubt that the reformers, irrespective of their ideological difference on the lines of reform/revival, golden-age/dark- age, modernist/traditional, worked relentlessly and made concrete efforts for women's education. However, the more recent critical analysis has revealed the limitations of the program of education.<sup>9</sup>

The new woman, the *bhadramahila*, was to be essentially an educated woman. Long debates were held on having a proper 'feminine curriculum' for women's education in the Nineteenth Century. Through education woman was to develop such virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion, kindness, patience and so on. Also, through education women were supposed to receive limited or controlled emancipation. The central focus of this new education for women was to strengthen their traditional roles within the household such as of mothers, wives, daughters. Besides some knowledge about the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, to develop the ability to run the household according to the new material and economic conditions was also included. Again, the larger discourse was around the maintaining and preserving of her uncompromised femininity through education.<sup>10</sup>

The new woman was to be presented as different from the western women, whose idea of freedom was more materialistic, and the other classes and categories and generations of Indian women. Therefore, this woman would be different from the illiterate, uneducated, rustic, unaccomplished and uncomposed vast majority of womenfolk – the ordinary women. This woman would also be different from her foremothers, as she would be a companion to her husband that she would match and complement the intellectual standard and faculties of her husband. She can't afford to be oblivious and ignorant from the developments and changes taking place around her and in the outside world.

Education and public exposure should not steal her femininity. Instead, education must ensure that her femininity is not at risk. She would be competent enough to organize the domestic space

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<sup>9</sup> On Gandhian ideology about women see the works of Veena Mazumdar and Madhu Kishwar and Sujata Patel.

<sup>10</sup> Sujata Patel argues that Gandhi's ideology relating to women developed over time and was contingent to his involvement in the political events occurring in the country and his response to them.

spiritually as well as materialistically. Her domain was to be the household and through education her faculties should be developed accordingly. There was a constant threat in the imagination of the educationist and reformers of this period for the westernization of Indian women under the influence of modern education. Therefore, the literature of this period is full of warnings on this matter.

It is interesting to note that how this new woman imbibed all of these codes of conduct offered to her. Especially from the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, the influence of revivalism on women's question was quite apparent and women became the custodians of traditional cultural values. Subsequently, the reformist zeal was adjusted with the new demands of nationalism and the debates on social matters and women's issues that had stormed Indian social atmosphere in the mid of the Nineteenth Century were gradually placed on the back seat.

Moving to the Twentieth Century period of nationalist movement one may observe that by the second decade of this century the discourse started changing in some broad ways. 1) The first generation of educated Indian women came forward to take up their cause. 2) Emergence of some of the most impactful organizations established and run largely by women themselves. AIWC, Women Indian Association, along with many Mahila Samaj and lady's clubs which were initiated and led mostly by the upper and middle class, urban and educated Indian women. 3) These organizations provided an institutionalized platform and support to women to raise their voices in a more organized manner. 4) The scope of the discourse was widened in terms of the issues raised.

They moved from the single objective of reforming domestic space to the need for opening up and democratizing public arena for women. Such issues were raised which transcended the boundaries of household and women's traditional roles, including a clear understanding about the suffrage rights, representation of women in local bodies, political participation and so on, although marriage reform, maternal health, ideals of motherhood and wifehood and women's education also constituted a major portion of the discourse of this period and there we see a continuum.

What is more important to note is that these associations became the symbols of solidarity among women which gave them a platform to act on their own exercising their agency in some sense. However, the agency was realized and used by only a selective limited class of women who had privileged background in some or the other way that had made them come forward as the first generation of women activists. Although the political voice that they found at this stage should not be mistaken for gender equality. Women still had to go a long and difficult way.

With the arrival of Gandhi women became even more involved in mass struggles. Gandhi quite brilliantly helped them realize and use their agency through their active involvement in the political struggle and also within the domain of household. Gandhi saw women as an embodiment of suffering and sacrifice, he believed in the value of 'feminine virtues' so much and he found women to be more suitable for the practice of non-violence and for peaceful protest as compared to men. Gandhi inspired thousands of women, educated and illiterate, urban and rural, housewives and widows, peasant and middle class to come forward and take part into the freedom movement. And this changed the whole pattern of discourse without much knowing of anyone and almost overnight.

Thus, national movement brought important changes as the ability to act and participate on their own recently realized by a selective class of middle- class women was now extended to the ordinary women of India as well. Gandhi gave them a whole programme of action and a platform to stand and speak in public. Ordinary women went to prison, boycotted foreign goods, formed solidarity groups, and joined street protests. Recent studies have looked into the problematics of Gandhian philosophy on women.

Gandhi's views on women were a mixed bag and the contradictions between his statements and actions are well known. He empowered many women to join the public domain for the first time and yet believed that domestic sphere is the sphere for women. Gandhi preached this idea through his speeches and writings which made a great influence and which made it more difficult to oppose this idea and to break the historical divide and binary of public and private since it was coming from Gandhi, the champion of women's emancipation!

The relationship between early Indian feminism and nationalism has been uneasy and complicated. The nature as well as agenda of women's movement in colonial India was largely determined and dictated by the ideology and practice of nationalism. It is difficult to separate women's struggles of this period from freedom struggles. If the nationalist movement offered an active platform to the Indian women, it had also set patriarchal boundaries within which they were supposed to operate.

Nationalism as a multifaceted idea was charged on the one hand by the vision of progress whereas on the other by the romantic ideals of motherhood. However, it is difficult to deny that nationalism also enabled feminist politics to emerge and sustain. The upper/middle class women activists of the early twentieth century must not be projected as mere victims of nationalist politics. Women who participated in the national struggle could never be the same.

What is more significant is that this is when the discourse on women transformed and transcended from social reform, revival of the tradition to the creation of a political

consciousness of women's right to equality. Also, a major change happened in the widening of the scope of discourse by including various new concerns, such as women's role as revolutionaries, as fighters for freedom, as organizers, as *karyakarta* and party member and also widening up of the base by including the ordinary women – a break on the middle-class identity of issues and participants.

With Partition the narrative was changed yet again. Throughout the freedom struggle a more desexualized image of Indian women was created–them other figure as per the need of the freedom struggle. However, this de-sexualized image of Indian women was torn almost overnight in the wake of partition riots. In the colonial period any discussion about women's sexuality was largely in the context of age of consent, conjugal rights and birth control. But sexual violence against women during partition was horrifying. Bodies of women became sites to teach lesson to the opposite party. Large-scale abduction, rape, stripping of women, and the gendered process of transfer of population and later the recovery and restoration of women was painfully eye opening. Partition and its effects have lingered in collective memory.

Disappointingly, during the period of Partition and related catastrophe in 1947-48, the women's movement could not organize itself in productive ways. The years when women were wronged so much, so much of atrocities they as a class had to undergo, their bodily integrity was so battered and mutilated, surprisingly, the first wave of Indian women's movement not only ended rather followed by a lull for at least the next three decades till 1974-75. One answer to this lull and silence may be the optimism created by the constitution and the constitutional promises and guarantees to equality and justice. However, scholarship on the social history of partition and feminist approach towards that has recently begun which aims to enrich our understanding on this subject in a better way.

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