

# The Story of Women in Colonial India: Their Socio- Political Roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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**Abstract –** *The paper aims to illustrate the status of women in a situation in which even the best of male attempts were inadequate and their initiatives to lift themselves from a place of disrepute and neglect where society had denied them. The women's position was not only ignored but also underplayed between 1750 and 1900, when the imperial rule in India was at its height and sparks of agitation against colonial control began to moulder. Women like Rani Laxmibai, Rama Pandita Bai, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, Anandibai Joshi and Sarojini Naidu may be influential participants in a male controlled socio-political discourse. The popularity of certain well-known personalities, though, reflects a bad judgement showing the degree to which even the average women have transcended the challenges to elevating themselves from the downtrodden situation in which posterity has drifted them.*

*In the 19th century, the anvil of the socio-religious reform revolution came into being. Women's unique concerns shaped the foundation of these campaigns, which represent the onset of a modern era of awareness that began to infiltrate the community as a whole. Efforts to change in this era also culminated not only in immediate outcomes in changing the status of women both economically and constitutionally, but also in creating further opportunities for greater role for women in defining the anti-colonial stance of the 19th century. The phenomenon of the 19th century opened up the 20th century to a whole new environment for women, which eventually allowed the movement of Gandhi women in nationalist struggle. A brief narrative of the life stories of iconic women thus helps demonstrate that they have adapted to the existing world and opened up more opportunities in the 20th century for women's political mobilization.*

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## POLITICAL WOMEN

In order to dissipate any concerns regarding what is seen here it is necessary to distinguish between the terms 'political women' and 'woman in politics.' The inclusion of women in India's democratic process may only have begun in the early part of the past century, and is widely viewed as the advent of political independence, thereby involving the creation of nation states worldwide. Via their tremendous involvement in the struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi women played an important role, not cultivating the women's turmoil and the political inclusion of women at any stage of her movements (the 1922 Movement for Non-cooperation, the 1931 Civil Disobedience Movement and the 1942 Leave India Movement), In a more recent sense, Indian women's struggles have often failed to achieve political empowerment for the indigenous women for nearly seven decades and have only been able to get their demands for reservations included in political parties in the Indian parliament and state legislatures. It has been commonly claimed and denied here that the psychological characteristics of women (such as loss of self-esteem) and socio-economic, cultural and

political factors are primarily responsible for women's negligible political involvement. Another argument which must be explained from the beginning is that the public and private worlds were quite separated, formerly the masculine fortress and later the feminine realm under which women were restricted.

There is now the issue of what we mean by democratic control. It is commonly understood as the operation that seeks to take the government in a certain path to obtain certain outcomes. Politics allows citizens to defend their desires and privileges through political engagement and control. According to Laswell, the electoral process includes sharing and exercising authority. Conventionally politics meant government institutions, but now it has developed into political expressions like marches, demonstrations and struggles. In particular, feminist theorists have called for a redefinition of politics to encompass the private sector, even as its democratic essence profound, but in a secret way affects public life as a male practice. However, recognizing the various impacts of politics on different groups, cultures and nations is critical here. Thus, expressed the Indian

character of Frieda Hauswirth, a Westerner based in India:

'Underlying all the obvious fatalism of India, so often criticized by the Westerners, lies this cool, intensely hopeful lake, which is founded on ultimate religious faith and belief and realization in every life on earth of the imminence of divinity, both good and poor. The Indian recognizes that God's wheels are steadily grinding; he knows that they will never stop spinning and that the man's willingness is not to rush.'

This assertion by Frieda Hauswirth, an Indian foreign national, amply shows the facts regarding India and its Indians, their cherished ideals and their subsequent lifestyles.

## A NETWORK OF BOUNDARIES

Much has been said since ancient times regarding the role of women in India. It is a well-established reality that their condition, like that of other oppressed classes in society, has shifted better or worse in all periods - classical, feudal and new. However, the study era is distinguished by some characteristic's characteristic of the century. The most significant factor was the emergence of social and economic shifts that were the direct product of today's imperial phase. In the mid-18th century the British colonial sun appeared on the Indian horizon and the Mughal reign in India decreased by three hundred years. The latter had introduced significant cultural shifts to the Indian environment particularly in the lives of women who were mostly restricted to their homes and rarely went into public life. Their lives were not only pulled back into the obscurity of the private sphere, but were also characterized by all sorts of socio-political prospects for growth and advancement. Fundamentals like schooling and equality were ignored and relegated so far into the past that they never appeared. A transition happened in their lives, albeit steadily with the shifting socio-religious consciousness, recognized as the Indian Renaissance in the 19th century. It is enough to tell here that the renaissance of ancient Indian learning was influenced by the growing spirit of national consciousness, which arose under the control of British rule. In this sense, it will also be necessary to state that political nationalism was based on socio-political changes which actually went hand in hand." The inclusion of women's problems was part of the political mechanism that emerged in the 19th century and, clearly, women's lives were not influenced by trends all around them. Any of these women knew and understood the repercussions of the reforms and acquired confidence to move forth and raise themselves and their lot.

## THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT

The reform movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries in India is referred to as the Indian Renaissance. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his allies in

the Bengal area are commonly credited to the launch of this transforming activity, but the reforming zeal soon spread like wild fire and enveloped the entire world. This phenomenon is characterised by a slightly related cultural revival to the European Renaissance of the 16th century. In Indian and European cases, the major contrast being that the former was unwilling to confront the onslaught of colonisation by a foreign power, a colonialism that not only performed all manner of crimes in the colonised foreign country, but also cut off the colony of all its glory and prestige to the future. In more than one aspect, the Indian Revival is very distinct from the European one. This term for European history meant 'rebirth' and was used during the long spell of the "dark" middle ages in the sense of the renaissance of the Graeco-Roman learning in the 15th and 16th centuries. This was a Restoration with a distinction, heavily embedded by a revivalist composition in the pristine Hindu or Aryan holy spirit. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Revival strives, with the aid of contemporary Western rationalist spirit, to restore the pristine Aryan spirit, 'Unitarianism of God.'

This revolution created a new consciousness among the Indians who found an ideological-political way to eliminate rage, silenced by mistrust and betrayal. The reformers' biggest challenge was to hit conformists and existing norms and practices, particularly in relation to women and low castes. This led to the structure of marriage, dowry, sati or wife burning, age of marriage, infanticide for women, schooling for women and enclosure, all of which were scanned and debated by the knowledge and Reformers who called for rationalism to attain internal and external equality. The two major revolutions of this period, Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj, called for simplifying religions and rituals and emphasized the restoration of Aryan-Hindu traditions in the ancient Indian scriptures, portrayed by the Vedas. Finally, it seems that not so much the phenomenon of decline as of transition was expressed in these attempts to restore the social framework which gave this phenomenon of Indian history the nomenclature of "renaissance".

## THE POLITICS OF REFORM

Reforms in India have always had a prescriptive appeal. Indeed, changes became fundamental to our society. Through the years, Indian culture has continually taken in reformers; those who challenged have overthrown the old order and brought in real change. The reform phenomenon that has spread through much of India since the mid-19th century is generally regarded as the socio-religious or Indian Revival reform movement. Reform operation in the Indian culture was nothing new, although feminism evolved much later in the East. In grappling with the different discussions that have given rise to opposing opinions, the reality of Colonisation has been attacked. Although the social-religious reform trend has larger ramifications, women's particular

concerns are taken as a demonstration of how attempts to progress in that era have yielded not only concrete effects to strengthen the status of women both economically and constitutionally, but also long-term results to open up new opportunities and widen their borders. The phenomena of the 19th century opened up in the 20th century a brand-new women's culture known as the women's movement.

The 19th century became the beginning of the 'female revolution' in the West, and the 'female issue' originated in the East. This suggests that the feminism was founded far earlier as an organized movement in the West than it was in the East, where it was already early in the review era. But this does not suggest they were not interested in the developments that took place around them at a time when India was suffering from massive socio-religious upheavals, but which were very democratic in nature. In reality, this time of Indian history can boast the trend towards a future form, notably for the feminist movement that has begun to acquire political overtones in the extremely oppressive colonial climate.

Another fact that Indian women had to confront was that by the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries the topic of women's emancipation is inextricably combined with the struggle for national emancipation. In fact, colonialism had a significant impact on not just problems that have been tackled in order to strengthen the condition of women for example movements for satiety, polygamy, the quest for women's rights to possession, emphasis on women's education and the abolition of social malpractices impacting women. Reformers have stressed the need for legislation change and eventual codification to strengthen the role of women while at the same time reforming indigenous and customary rules in the face of it. Thus, problems such as sati prohibition, rising marriage age, widow remarriage and women's property rights, etc., fallen under the domain of codification and in the 20th century became the key plank of women's movement.

During the debate of the numerous reform measures, the social, religious and legal conflicts create a very interesting triangular fight among Conservatives, liberals and officials. It is widely accepted that the British discarded their earlier pro-reformist role after 1857 and were much more prudent about playing the reformer. Another main factor that weakens reformists' arguments was that no one was particularly involved in changing the condition of women or in their privileges or position per se. The most critical driving element was the understanding of scriptures and customs that influenced personal laws directly. Both these changes had a significant political effect in order to set the scene for the politising of women and their concerns which would benefit the much broader Gandhian revolution in the 20th century for liberation of the country.

## **SOME POLITICAL WOMEN OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

A number of case studies such as those by Pandita Rama Bai, by Savitribai Phule, by Tarabai Shinde, by Anandibai Joshi and by Sarojini Naidu enable one to understand the storey of so-called political women, and of the associated phenomena of the utility of the self, which this paper attempts to unravel. It will also help to illustrate the argument regarding the role of women in politics and their contribution to the Indian democratic process.

Gauri Parvati Bai was one of Travancore's two queens, who reigned between 1810 and 1829. Gauri Lakshmi Bai (1791-1814) has been credited with modernising Travancore and Parvati Bai administrations whose rule saw Travancore's boundaries expand apart from other income-related reforms. Her government has rendered an income settlement and the elimination of the gramme export duties has brought the farmers tremendous relief. She adopted a tolerance agenda against all faiths and provided Christian missionaries with services in the building of churches and colleges. She was a very effective administrator and has skilfully suppressed all usurpation patterns. Her biggest success in the region of restructuring was however. The Rani understood that societal change could not be accomplished until the citizens were aware. She was the first Travancore monarch and one of the first Indian rulers to invest large amounts on education in order to meet the population.

The 19th century in India represented the beginning of its upheaval and the second period of its rebuilding. Rani Laxmibai (1835-58) of Jhansi was a remarkable woman leader from the very first time, seeing the outbreak of the 1857 revolt of all India. She had been married to Subandar Gangadhar Rao, head of the Peshwas' tiny state of Jhansi in 1743. After being a widow, she dropped on her shoulders to take charge of the Jhansi house. Not only did she perform her responsibilities and duties as Head of State, she lost her life in an attempt to save her kingdom against the British.

Pandita Rama Bai (1858-1922) is regarded as one of the "makers of modern India" and one of the most great modern-produced women's in India." She was granted or learned the title of 'Pandita' as a learned scholar and Sanskrit exponent. She toured regularly both domestically and globally, accepted Christianity and tirelessly campaigned toward the societal inequality of women in society. She is renowned for her efforts to provide sanctuary for widows despite all odds and also to render them self-sufficient on education and training. Savitribai Phule (1831-1797) was another influential woman who along with her partner, Jyotirao Phule, played an important part in improving women's conditions through the focus on women's rights in India. She was the first female teacher at Pune's first female college. In 1852, a

school for untouchable girls was opened. Both husband and wife worked hard to teach and advocate for the poor. In Tarabai Shinde, a female activist who campaigned against sexism and the caste system, Jyotiba and Savitribai backed the rebellion of the downtrodden people, Phules got a good helper. She was an outstanding novelist, Stri Purush Tulana, best known for her work (A Comparison between Women and Men). It is a critic of upper-caste patriarchy which was published in 1882 and is known as the first modern Indian feminist text that questions the Hindu religious scriptures as the root of the female ills. The number of women who have done this is not thin, but can also be counted on their fingertips. In reality, quite the reverse is valid since many cases of women of all kinds and groups join the ranks of nationalists in fighting the political battle for independence on one level and on the other tales of everyday heroism and hardship to deal with the politicians on a personal level.

## CONCLUSION

Between 1750 and 1900, the above-mentioned tale of women from a cross section of Indian society unveils a new dimension not only to the quality of women's lives but also to their efforts to regain their lost honor and glory. In comparison to their Colonial equivalents in Britain Indian women had to fight harder and had a longer journey ahead. As Antoinette Burton points out, claims for British women's emancipation have traditionally been created, made public, and disputed at a moment when the United Kingdom has encountered the trust of obvious diplomatic superiority and the fears of imperial permanence and stability.

In arguing that the women's revolution and imperialism was somewhat unacceptable, Burton refers to the reality that the former culminated with the height of British imperialism, a phase that was often perceived to be the constant attempt by women across the centuries to get back from the bleak pit into which society had reduced them over the years.

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