

Description of Module	
Subject Name	Women's Studies
Paper Name	Women's Studies as an Academic Discipline
Module Name/Title	Women's Participation in Nationalist Movement: Moderate Phase
Module Id	
Pre-requisites	The Reader is expected to have the knowledge of British Colonialism and Indian freedom struggle
Objectives	To make the reader understand the condition of Indian women, their issues and participation in public life
Keywords	Nationalist Movement, Indian National Congress, Moderates, Women Participation

Women's Participation in Nationalist Movement : Moderate Phase.

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Women's Participation in Nationalist Movement: Moderate Phase

- 1.1 Nationalist Movement of India
- 1.2 Foundation of Indian National Congress
- 1.3 Moderate Character of Indian National Congress
- 1.4 Women Participation in nationalist movement
- 1.5 Women's Organizations and activists
- 1.6 Moderate Phase of Congress and Womens Participation
- 1.7 Conclusion
- 1.8 References

1.1 Nationalist Movement of India

The national movement covered a time span of sixty two years starting with the birth of the Indian National Congress in 1885 up to 1947. But before that the freedom struggle against British rule started with the great revolt of 1857. Though this revolt did not succeed the way was planned yet it helped in raising the socio-political consciousness of the people of India and it made them realize the need to be free from an alien rule. The failure of this Revolt and its aftermath convinced Indian people that the method of 'blood and bomb' without proper organization and adequate preparedness would not be sufficient to challenge the might of the British Empire. The educated Indians realized that the political revolution in the country could not be brought about without psychological revolution. With this aim in view, concrete and far reaching steps were taken in the post-revolt years to generate among the masses a genuine desire to liberate themselves from the age-old customs, traditions and dogmas and ultimately to bring about their political, social and economic development.

After 1857, political nationalism developed in India as a result of several forces working simultaneously or in close succession. It is important to note that the birth of nationalism in India was as a reaction to selfish interests of the British rulers. As these interests came into conflict with those of the Indian people, and the British rulers sacrificed the interests of the Indians for their own sake, discontent and resentment grew. This naturally led to the growth of political nationalism. This new phase of national consciousness was manifested in the emergence of Provincial Political Associations. The Provincial Associations brought nineteenth century India on the threshold of modern politics though they had limited scope and programme. However, during the course of the century, a number of associations came to be established in different parts of the country by groups of men united by secular interests. The factors which held them together were common education, common skills and functions, common aspirations and resentment against the policies of the British rulers. They drew their support from certain sections of the society such as students, professionals, landlords, merchants and others. Their activities were limited to narrow geographical areas. But gradually more ambitious political organizations began to emerge extending beyond the narrow considerations. These were the Provincial Associations which began to search for ways and means of working together in India as a whole. This trend provided education to

the Indians in the politics of associations which culminated in the establishment of the Indian National Congress. Between the years 1843 and 1850, there were only two political associations in the whole of India, the Bengal British India Society and the Zamindar Association. (Sen, 1997) There was some attempt to organize branch associations in other parts of the country but without much success.

The British Indian Association with its exclusive character could not meet the aspirations of the rapidly growing middle class community in Bengal and failed to secure any substantial advantages for them. The middle class was developing new ideas of patriotism and politics. This new phase of political consciousness was manifested in the emergence of political Associations. Like Bengal there were some other associations established in Maharashtra and Madras. They were the British Indian Associations, the Indian Association, the Bombay Association, the Bengal British India Association, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, the Mahajan Sabha of Madras and the National Conference. Due to these associations the All India National Congress was established on 28th December, 1885 at Bombay.

1.2 Foundation of Indian National Congress

The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was not an isolated, sudden event or a historical accident. It was the result of the evolution of long drawn political ideas and organizations. The politically matured intellectuals broke the shackles of narrow groupism and regional interests and projected themselves as representatives of national interests. The all-India nationalist organization that eventually emerged served as the platform, the organizer, the headquarters and the symbol of the new national spirit and politics.

Allan Octavian Hume was the founding father of the Congress. Emphasizing the need to form an organization, Hume said, 'Scattered individuals, however capable and however well-meaning, are powerless singly. What is needed is union, organization, and to secure these, an association is required, armed and organized with unusual care, having for its object to promote the mental, moral, social and political regeneration of the people of India'. (Pandey 1997) The First Session of the Congress took place in Mumbai on 28th December, 1885, in the presence of 72 all India delegates. (Sen 1997: 60) W.C. Bannerjee, the President of the first session declared the aims and objectives of the Congress and passed several resolutions in the same session. The speeches of the delegates at the first session of Indian National Congress were characterized by moderation and loyalty to the British Crown. In his Presidential address W.C. Bannerjee expressed his belief that the Congress would be equally advantageous to the authorities and to people. (Mookerjee 1974)

With the establishment of the Indian National Congress, the national movement and the struggle for freedom from the British rule was launched in an organized manner. For more than twenty years following the foundation of the Indian National Congress, the political life of the country was completely dominated by Moderates. It also gave shape and form to the ideas of administrative and constitutional reforms which were the main aspects of the political programme of the nationalists. However, it is not historically correct to say that the history of the freedom struggle in India is nothing but the history of the Indian National Congress. In fact there were other forces and undercurrents also which contributed to a

considerable extent to the freedom struggle of the country. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the Indian National Congress was the paramount nationalist organization which led the country to its final liberation from the British yoke. (Suguna 2009)

1.3 Moderate Character of Indian National Congress

The Congress provided a common platform for the nationalist leaders from different parts of the country to meet and voice their grievances and place their demands before the British Government. The early Indian leadership was represented by people like Dadabhai Naoroji, Justice M. G. Ranade, Sir Pherozshah Mehta and Gopal Krishna Gokhale and came to be described as 'Moderates'. These and other such moderate leaders, fascinated by British parliamentary institutions, hoped to introduce such kind of institutions in India gradually and through constitutional methods. They were reformers and not revolutionaries. The beneficence of British rule was the foundation of their political philosophy, but they laboured ceaselessly for the liberalization of that rule. The moderates voiced the demands of the English educated class which was drawn mainly from Bengal, Bombay and Madras, where English education was first introduced. (Ghose 1984)

It was the above method of political work of the early nationalists that earned them the epithet of 'moderates'. These methods can be summed up briefly as 'constitutional agitation' within the four corners of the law. They believed that their main task was to educate people in modern politics and arouse national consciousness and to create a united public opinion on political questions. For this purpose the moderates adopted several methods. They held public meetings, made speeches, passed resolutions setting forth popular demands. Through the press, the moderates carried on a daily critique of the government. They also sent a number of memorials and petitions to high government officials and even to the British Parliament. A second objective of the early nationalist leaders was to influence the British Government and the British public opinion to introduce the necessary reforms in various fields of administration. The moderates believed that the British were unaware of the real conditions of India. They therefore made all efforts to enlighten the British public through memorials and petitions and by carrying on an active political propaganda in England. The moderates have been considered the pioneers of nationalism in India. They tried for the first time to weld India into a nation. The British government created a geographical unity and the moderates created a 'we-sentiment' in India. (Stein 1998)

1.4 Women's Issues and Participation in Nationalist Movement

In Indian society, the coming of British rule led to the upsurge of women's question which figured prominently in their colonial discourses. While British rule projected the pitiable position of women in India to highlight their role of Civilizing Mission, the Indian reformers used the analogy of female goddesses to free *Bharat Mata* from the colonial rapists. The colonized society was considered to be 'effeminate' in character, as opposed to 'colonial masculinity', which was held as a justification for its loss of independence. But women's role *vis-a-vis* the family was looked through the patriarchal lens. However this journey of confluence and conflict of gender and colonialism in India was multidimensional and multi-layered. (Singh 2015) Traditional histories of nationalism have largely been written from

male perspective. Although mining of new kinds of sources – women’s writings, correspondences, biographical literature, interviews as well as the reworking of more standard historical document: organizational and private papers, official reports and correspondence widened the ambit and scope of women’s history. (Davis 1997)

In the Great Uprising of 1857, some Indian women boldly contributed, directly or indirectly, to the cause of freedom. Maharani Lakshmibai ‘the bravest of all rebels’ shines like a bright star on the horizon of that mass movement. She was, among others, very ably and wholeheartedly assisted not only by the Hindu women but also by the Muslim women. Nevertheless, the number of such dauntless women crusaders was very few. Thereafter came a period of Orthodoxism among both the Hindus and Muslims, particularly with regard to their womenfolk. The mobility of women was by and large restricted to the four walls of their dwellings. An average Indian woman had no access to school, college and other public places. A fairly large majority of them lived as deaf and dumb driven cattle. In a way it was Dark Age for the Indian women. It has been very often and correctly said that India’s struggle for independence has also been a struggle for Indian woman’s emancipation.

It reveals a story of movement within a movement. Indian women contested for their legitimate space in society challenging the overarching patriarchal set up and also participated in the National Struggle for independence. It was a unique balancing act, wherein they had at times to compromise and console themselves with the partial fruits of their long and arduous struggle and other times to sacrifice it altogether. Women’s participation in the Indian national movement expanded base of women’s movement in India. Their participation in freedom struggle strengthened not only the national struggle for freedom, it also provided them a forum to bring forth the contestations and contractions of the patriarchal society. The freedom struggle saw the participation of women move from a passive to active to an activist’s role. The basic form of women’s movement was triggered by nineteenth century male reformers. Colonial social reform of the nineteenth century tried to abolish abuses of social life and tried to usher in more progressive gender relations. (Sarkar 2007)

In the early nineteenth century, the liberal reformers or the revivalists, made women as the recipient of social change. Brahmo samaj and Prarthana samaj especially did valuable work in educating women and gave them their first experience with public work. By the end of the nineteenth century women themselves took the role of emancipators and fought cudgels for personal reforms and political rights. The number of women in public sphere increased considerably. The novels of Nirupama Devi and Anurupa Devi were appreciated and being referred in Bengali literary circle. Maharashtra’s first woman novelist kashibai Kantikar, started writing in 1890 and first woman doctor, Anandibai Joshi qualified at the same time. In 1882, Tarabai Shinde, known as the first Indian feminist (Guha 2012), wrote the book ‘Comparison between man and woman’ and despite the fact that the book was greeted with hostility the reformist organizations and many reformers like Phule defended this book. According to *Gail Omvedt*, to Phule ‘the issue was the formation of a new and equalitarian husband-wife relationship; the goal was the breakdown of the old authority structure within the family.’ Many other women like Ramabai and Mai Bhgwati started working as a reformer and preachers in public meetings. It was in these years that women began to get involved in nationalist campaigns and organizations. (Kumar 2009)

Apart from the achievement of political independence, the second best benefit that flowed out of our nationalist movement has been the liberation of our women, particularly those hailing from urban settlements. However, the path shown by them is continuously being followed by the rural women also. Many of the enlightened women then plunged into India's freedom movement.

1.5 Women's Organizations and activists

Urvashi Butalia (1998), Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin (1998) have alleged that there was deliberate absence of a record of women's voice and contribution to political situations in pre-independence India and of the patriarchal nature of our documented history. Given the fact that in our history there is sufficient evidence that women were excluded from the formal education system, it is not surprising that their voices have not been reflected in the written texts that stand as testimonies of our history. We do not argue, therefore, about the general gender-biased nature of our history, but take that as given.

There are records, however, of cases of 'exceptional' women, women who challenged the norms of the times such as Swarnakumari devi, sister of Poet Rabindranath Tagore, an author in her own right and a novelist of distinction, who organized the Shakti Samiti in 1882. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, that remarkable woman from Poona, founded the Arya Samaj and went on to set up a series of woman's association in various towns of Bombay presidency. She also started the Sharda Sadan to provide employment and education to women, particularly to young widows. Women's organization were also started in Madras, Mysore, Bombay, Calcutta and Gujarat. Initially, these associations were confined to a locality or a city. The credit for starting the first All-India women's organization, the Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1901) must go to Sarladevi Chaudhrani. Being Conscious of their political rights and influenced by democratic values, all of these organizations worked actively to generate political consciousness among contemporary women during the early decades.

In a few reform efforts, issues of caste and class were also taken up. For example, Satyashodak Mandal was set up by Jotibha Savithribai Phule. It was meant to promote alliance between sudras and women of the upper caste. They built school for lower caste girls. This led to a questioning of upper-caste values based on the wisdom of the Vedas, as well as the callous treatment of women, irrespective of caste. The late nineteenth-century writings of women such as Muktabai and Tarabai Shinde can be quoted as instances of some early feminists' perspectives, appearing at the time of first attempts at reforming women's education, especially among the lower caste. (O'Hanlon 1994) Reform movements in different regions lead by the Brahmo Samaj, the Parthana Samaj, and the Theosophical Society supported female education and also marked a turning point for its growing acceptance and development. Major development took place in North India when member of Arya Samaj opened the Arya Kanya Pathshala and the Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Jallundher. In Bengal, the Bramho Samaj supported female education and progressive organization for women.

1.6 Moderate Phase of Congress and Women Participation

The early Indian National Congress, because it claimed to speak for all groups and all classes in India, decided to avoid issues which would foster antagonism. This meant that issues of women's status, education, child marriage, polygamy, purdah and widowhood were discussed on the platform of the National Social Conference. (Gordon 1973) Indian women played a role in the meetings from the very beginning. Attitudes towards social reform, development of educational institutions for women, women's journalism, and clubs for women had all contributed to the emergence of a new group of women in India. Although this was a small group and its members were not representatives of Indian women as a whole, their numbers were growing, as was their interest in women's issues and in political and social transformation. All the earliest women's organizations had some connections, either through their members or their parent organization, with Congress, and it is this connection that has bequeathed history the notion of the inseparability of the women's movement with that of the Indian National Congress.

Unfortunately, the most active women worked with the support of their husbands and families and generally the women in the women's movement were the same who involved themselves with politics. To see them as puppets (came out of purdah into political agitation) or dupes (tricked or coerced into abandoning feminism for nationalism) ignores the legacy of the nineteenth century and denies both the intelligence of these women as well as the complexity of their relationship with Congress. It also overlooks the way in which consciousness and ideology developed. For many women, political involvement spurred their feminism, while commitment to improving the status of women encouraged their involvement in the freedom struggle. (Forbes, 1988- p 56)

Right since its inception the Indian National Congress had no reservations about women becoming its members. Though there were no women delegates among those who entered their names in the register at the inauguration of the Indian National Congress (Ali 1991), in the fourth session of the Congress at Bombay in 1889 ten female delegates graced the assembly, one elected by men at a public meeting, the other by various women's associations. Among these ten women who attended the fourth session were Europeans, Christians, one Parsi, one orthodox Hindu and three Brahmos. Pandita Ramabai, a social reformer, educationalist and noted Sanskrit scholar, Swarnakumari Devi, a well-known Bengali writer and editor of *Bharati*; Kadambini Ganguli, Bengal's first woman doctor; and a number of Bombay women were other participants. In fact the participation of women in this congress session appears to have been chiefly due to Ramabai's initiative. She responded to the suggestions of Charles Bradlough that women should join the congress from this time on. However, though the women delegates were allowed to sit on the platforms, they were not allowed to speak or vote on resolutions. (Kumar 2009)

The following year, when the Congress met in Calcutta, both Swarnakumari Devi and Kadambini Ganguli attended as delegates and Miss Ganguly was allowed to present a vote of thanks to the President and she thanked him for allowing her to speak (Basu 1976). In 1901 a song, 'Hindustan', written by Swarnakumari's younger daughter Saraladevi, was performed by a chorus of fifty-six girls representing all regions of India. The following year the National Congress anthem was sung in Gujarati by Lady Vidyagauri Nilkanth and her sister Sharda Mehta (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 1967). This remained the Congress anthem

until 1905 when Saraladevi sung Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 'Bande Mataram' at the Banaras session. Sarojini Naidu attended the first session of Congress in 1904 in Bombay where she was invited to recite her poem, "Ode to India" before Congress. When Congress met in Calcutta in 1906 Sarojini's fiery speech so impressed Gokhale that he urged her to dedicate her life to the country. By this time she was clearly established as a forceful public speaker who linked the cause of India's freedom with the need to improve women's status. Later she emerged as a strong woman leader of the Congress.

In addition to providing Congress with a few observers and delegates and the spirit of song, a number of Bengali women organized meetings and social events to encourage women to participate in political and social issues. Saraladevi introduced festivals and rituals to celebrate Bengali heroes and arranged a swadeshi exhibition for the Bombay Congress in 1904. Kadambini Ganguli arranged a Mahila Sammelan (Women's Conference) in Calcutta for the wives of Congress members gathered at the Annual Session in 1906 (Bagal 1954).

On a larger scale the protest movement against Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal gained the support of many women. The boycott agitation, begun earlier, finally received Congress approval at the Banaras session of 1905. While some of the Swadeshi movement actions fit the traditional pattern of meetings, speeches and petitions, the press and the platform were used 'to preach the new creed, of radical nationalism' and reach an audience previously untouched by political action (Sarkar 1973). And this new audience included Bengali housewives who were neither formally educated nor had the autonomy or leisure to attend political gatherings with any regularity. The moderate phase begins with the formation of the Congress in 1885 and continued till the 1907 Surat congress where the extremists appeared on the political scene.

1.7 Conclusion

However, despite the contributions made by the women, it would be fair to say that in the early stages of the Congress, though women played a significant role in agitation politics, they did not develop their own political organizations nor were they integrated into decision-making bodies in Congress. The impact of their activities was primarily symbolic both for the British and for Indians. They neither placed any demands before the Congress, nor did they express any independent opinion on any issue. They were thus symbols rather than full fledged political participants. Moreover, in view of the fact that the Congress proceedings during the moderate phase were mostly conducted in English, most of the Indian women could not identify themselves with these meetings. Only some well educated urban women initially took part in the early Congress sessions. Furthermore, the constraints of physical mobility, financial resources and knowledge of English were factors which discouraged the middle class women to actively associate themselves with the Congress in its early stages. Significantly, out of a hundred delegates who participated in 1904 session, only 20 were women. But at Banaras Congress session of 1905, as many as 600 women representing different parts of the country assembled with the purpose of 'demonstration of female solidarity across India and the mobilization of women's support for the nationalist movement.' (Borthwick 1984)

Thus notwithstanding the fact that women's participation in the moderate phase of Congress was symbolic rather than active involvement, yet their very presence at Congress sessions served as a great source of inspiration for women of future generations who were more actively involved in the later period of nationalist movement.

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