



Changing status of women in Indian politics (1917-1947): the role of civil society

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Abstract

The role and status of women in politics has been radically changed in the last century. The political activities of Indian women can be traced back to the second half of nineteenth century, which got a remarkable shape in the early twentieth century, more specifically during the Non Co-operation Movement in 1920's. The various social movements throughout the nineteenth century promoted the incorporation of women in Indian politics. It may be argued that these civil societal movements took an enormous role in promoting or enhancing the mode of mass participation in politics irrespective of men and women. Since mass participation is regarded as one of the most important ingredients of any political system, the significance of civil society in promoting the women questions should be acknowledged from this point of view. The main object of this paper is to focus on the role of various civil societal associations in pre-independent India to promote women's participation in politics.

Key words: *Women in politics, Indian politics, Civil Society Pre-independent India, Social movements*

Introduction: Statement of the Problem: The role and status of women in politics has been radically changed in the last century. The political activities of Indian women can be traced back to the second half of nineteenth century, which got a remarkable shape in the early twentieth century, more specifically during the Non Co-operation Movement in 1920's. The various social movements throughout the nineteenth century promoted the incorporation of women in Indian politics. It may be argued that these civil societal movements took an enormous role in promoting or enhancing the mode of mass participation in politics irrespective of men and women. Since mass participation is regarded as one of the most important ingredients of any political system, the significance of civil society in promoting the women questions should be acknowledged from this point of view.

The main object of this paper is to focus on the role of various civil societal associations in pre-independent India to promote women's participation in politics. In doing so it has been argued that various associations increase the civic engagements in various issues and these civic engagements promote more and more participation in non-political as well as political affairs. That is what happened to Indian women in the backdrop of so-called nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For this study the span of year 1917 to year 1947 is taken because 1917 was the year when the first organization founded and led by women was set up in India. Subsequently many women association were established and played distinct role in pre-independent India.

Hypothesis: The changing role of women in Indian politics is one of the important factors in such a gender-biased patriarchic society where women have been remained subjugated almost in every part of socio-cultural, economical and political spheres. It is the role of various associations and organizations which promoted the civic engagement of women and enhanced their political participation in pre-independent as well as post-independent Indian politics. So, civil society has played a vital role in promotion of women's status in the politics of India.

Women's Civic Engagement: The Role of Early Civil Societal Associations: The political participation of women in Indian politics can be traced back to late nineteenth century. After the remarkable role played by Raja Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar it was Keshub Chandra Sen, a

staunch leader of Brahma Samaj developed educational programs for women, published a women journal and arranged prayer meetings at Bharat Ashram. But soon he was alleged to be too conservative by the other members of the Samaj and they formed the Sadharan Brahma Samaj (Sashtri, 1974: 135-164). Almost at the same time the Prarthana Samaj was doing similar works in Bombay. Esteemed reformers like Bandavarkar, Narayan Chandavarkar, Govindo Ranade were associated with this association. Ranade's wife Pandita Ramavai Saraswati with the help of Ranade and his co-workers established the Arya Mahila Samaj which took significant role in the civil engagement of women in the contemporary society (Forbes, 1998: 66). This association promoted women in public welfare activities such as floods, famines and plagues.

Bharata Mahila Parishad, inaugurated in 1905 was one of the leading women association took significant role in the participation of women in the political affairs. Even in the then society around 200 women participated in the first meeting of the association which itself was a remarkable achievement. Ramabai Ranade newly widowed was the first speaker who encouraged women to side by side with men on various social issues. And in the subsequent annual general meeting the members of the association rouse to 700. One of the important civil associations was 'Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam' or the Muslim Women Association as it encouraged muslim women who were relatively more conservatives due to socio-cultural factors (Forbes, 1998: 68). The association was established by Amir-un-Nisa, the renowned mother of Begum Shah Nawaz. These associations stirred the society as their activities broke the so-called social taboos to some extent, which were imposed on women. But there were limitations too. Due to male dominance in most of the associations, the women, in some cases were unable to do whatever they wanted. Those religious-reform and communal associations dealt with women's problems as defined by male leaders. For example, Haimavati Mitra, a child widow from Bengal expressed her interest in education and urged to the Brahma Members who to the very surprise of Haimavati, tried to find a bridegroom for her. Even activist like Sarojini insisted her to get married and then start her study.

Associations Founded by Women: The Intermediate Agencies: It would not be an exaggeration to note that the organizations started to change the social status of women in the early twentieth century. Most of these associations were defining women's issues like female education, child marriage, the observance of *Pardah* and most importantly the status of women in family as well as in broader society. By the first three decades of the last century apart from socio-cultural activities relating to the eradication of gender discrimination the women associations pushed women to the national issues. It must be admitted that the different social reformation movements of 19th century created some affirmative conditions for women and as a consequent women were getting part of national liberation issues. At the initial stage the women movements were sponsored by men, mostly the women belonging to the social reformer's families, who could not challenged the traditional patriarchal system.

With the beginning of the twentieth century two *Mahila Samities* were founded by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani in 1910 and Saroj Nalini Dutta in 1913 to assert the independent identity of women. After the First World War three national level Women Associations were emerged: the Women Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) between 1917 and 1927 (Mukhopadhyay, 2014: 4). It was Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, theosophist and musician who, after coming in India met with Dorothy Jinarajadasa, an Irish feminist married to Singalis theosophist C. Jinaradasa and they decided to form a women organization. Many of the Indian women already belonging to Tamil Women Association joined them to form the National Women Association (Forbes, 1998: 72). The basic object of this association was to promote female education, female's status in society etc. The association directly influenced and enhanced the women's participation when Dorothy Jinaradasa wrote to Theosophical Lodge Secretary through Madras Presidency explaining that a local branch of the association would play a key role in effecting the regeneration of India (Forbes, 1998: 73). Anyway this association took an important role in promoting the condition and political participation of women in the early 20th century by creating a self-respect movement among women.

The National Council for Women in India (NCWI) was another remarkable women's association to stand for women question in pre-independent India. It is noteworthy that by the 2nd decade of 20th century women of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras had utilized a network among themselves while engaging in the war-work. The International Council for Women, established in 1888 at Washington

D.C. invited Indian Council to join them and subsequently in 1925 the National Council of Women in India was established to advance women's socio-cultural, economical and political engagement in society. But because of its elitist nature, expensive membership and rigid structure the association was failed to grow and become a vital women organization.

Among the civil organizations for the promotion of women's status in society the All-India Women's conference (AIWC) was most significant. AIWC first met in Poona in 1927. This association took an enormous role in promoting education of women. In 1929 this association included all questions of social welfare. It is needless to say that it enhanced the mode of women participation in political activities too. They maintained that in ancient India women had almost equal access to education, political power and other social issues. But gradually women's position in society degraded due to social construction of patriarchy. Though the AIWC began with educational reforms in favor of women soon it incorporated issues which cause the degradation of women's position in society; viz. child marriage, *pardah*. As a consequent the scope of its functions increased to a considerable form. By the mid-1930s the list of sub committees included labour, rural reconstructions, indigenous industries etc. (Forbes, 1998: 80-81).

Simultaneously along with the social issues these women's associations took significant role in the freedom struggle by participating into various national liberation movements. It took a perfect shape during the non co-operation movement under the leadership of Gandhi who pulled women into politics. He in the 1920s was able to achieve mass participation of women in non Co-operation Movement, in Civil Dis-obedience Movement, and further in the Quit India Movement. During the Khadi Movement women wore Khadi, made salt, and made picketing of liquor and other foreign goods (Mukhopadhyay, 2014: 4). Later in the peasant movements of Tebhaga and Telengana women participated actively in politic.

Thus, it may be argued that the engagement of women in many civil associations really made them participate in the then socio-political issues. This remarkable role of civil society should be acknowledged here. They by mobilizing themselves through these intermediate associations created an impact on the political sphere. This civil society argument of participation can be developed from two arguments as developed by thinkers like Toqueville, Putnum, Partha Chatterjee, Edwards and Foley.

The Civil Society Argument: The civil society plays a vast and significant role in the discourse of democracy and political participation. The dense network of civil society in most of the giant democracies in contemporary world is playing an important role in promoting the mass-participation in politics. The various political or non-political associations in civil society have become one of the inalienable ingredients in democratic polity all over the world. Many political sociologists, especially A.D. Tocqueville (1966: 223), in his *Democracy in America* described how the active civil society including various political associations promotes the mode of political participation in west. He analyzed the extremely self-dependence or individualistic character of the Americans make them well concern of various affairs in social life. Whenever they face any trouble in society they use to associate in some organized manner which lead them form various association. With a clear role of combating or fighting social problems the various associations, largely the civil society take the central role of deliberate mass-participation in favour of the public-interest. Hence, an assimilation of diversity of minds creates a particular goal in each association. In associations the members, in spite of different opinions generally united themselves to a unanimous point. Hence, the civil society approach raises some important questions: What does civil society do? Does it promote or decrease popular participation irrespective of men and women? Is there any difference between civil societies in west and in East? If so, then how does it influence in popular participation in west and in East?

Foley and Edwards (1996: 38) have made an important contribution in 'Civil society arguement, where they made a distinction between two broad versions of civil society argument. The first version started with Tocqueville's, *Democracy in America*. Antecedents of this school may be found in the works of eighteenth century Scottish moralist including Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and Francis Hutcheson. This school of arguments, which emphasizes the associational life and civil participation as an important ingredient of promoting participation is called civil society argument-1. The second version articulated most explicitly by Jack Kuron, Adam Michnik and their associates to formulate a strategy to resist Poland's communist regime in the 1980s. This version gives much importance on civil society as a sphere of action independent from the state and is capable to promote resistance to a

tyrannical regime. It is civil society argument- II. That is what happened in India during the first half of the 20th century, which promoted women participation to a considerable form.

On the question of the introduction of the civil social associational activities Partha Chatterjee noted an interesting story how Nabin Chandra, one of the most eminent figures in Bengal's literary, declined the proposal of presiding over the condolence meeting in memory of Bankim Chandra on the ground that it was artificial. To him, it was ridiculous enough to arrange a public condolence meeting on one's death and opposed the very English imitating culture in this regard. Rabindranath Tagore, who attended the meeting and re-called the memory of Bankim Chandra later wrote in the journal *Sadhana* that the practice of Public Condolence meeting was an imitation of European culture and was totally unknown to Indians but due to the European contact, the external and subjective feeling of Indians were undergoing a change (Chatterjee P., 2001: 165-166). He further argued that the domestic society of India had been drastically changed in terms of public sphere as a sharp stir was felt among not only men but also among the women.

The first civil-societal consciousness, it may be argued, was felt in Calcutta by the end of eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee (2013:13) has rightly marked this new trend as traditional-modernity which had two explicitly different ways. The first one seen in late eighteenth century was state-oriented that intended to impose sovereign power of state; while, on the other hand, the second trend was 'anti-absolutist' which tended to establish and protect civil and political rights of people against the absolute power of the state. The only way to reach the second goal was to form civil societal movement free from the authority of the state. Though, in Western Europe and Northern America, this civil societal movements was highly powerful in eighteenth century, in India it took birth during the early nineteenth century at Calcutta due to the vigorous activities of new intelligentsia, the Christian missionaries, the Eurasians and some well wisher British (Chatterjee, 2012: 105-129). Their social and political activities (mainly reform movements) led to the establishment of a good number of *sabhas* and *samities*, (social, cultural and political) educational institutions, print media etc. Of these, the most significant role, to build civil societal awareness, was taken by numerous debating societies established by the both contemporary trends—liberal modernizers and traditional Conservativists (Bagal, 201:155). In colonial India the formation of Indian National Congress (1885) was one of the most significant attempts to include the common mass in anti-colonial civic engagement. It may be regarded as one of the significant examples of civil-society argument-II, which emphasize the role of civil society as a sphere independent of the state and an example of resistance to potentially tyrannical state power. Thus, it may be claimed that the women's participation in political activities during the first half of 20th century is one of the great achievement of civil societal associations of the contemporary society.

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