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## **Hidden Histories: Peasant Women and the Indian National Movement**

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### **Abstract :**

*Women have been absent from history writing of almost every civilization, more so the peasant women. Indian National Movement was the most recent turning point in Indian history, which ushered in a modern age. However, in order to present a complete picture, there is a need felt to create a dialogue between women and the national movement. Hence, an attempt has been made in this research article to bring about the sublimities of this very discourse in the first half of the twentieth century.*

**Keywords :** Gender, Indian National Movement, Historiography, Awadh, Warli.

### **Introduction :**

The old age adage of absences of women from history is too of repeated to be mentioned again. In the similar wane, to reiterate writing women back in history

[1]

too has assumed a rhetoric position. The question appears more pertinent in case of 'low class' women, essentially women 'working' in rural areas. It is a known fact that there is virtually no record of women as active agents in various events that took place over the centuries in almost all the civilizations. To fill the gap the feminist anthropologists, sociologists and historians are trying to give women their due as contributors in the development of society and culture. However one approach could be to study the processes which reflect and later deflect the common perceptions. The common perceptions are that men are active where as women are passive, which can be attributed to according to Sherry Ortner's notion widespread across the cultures that women are closer to nature while men reside in the realm of culture. So women are associated with the 'domestic' or 'private' rather than the 'public' domain of social, political and economic life, which only men animate and transform.

The other approach is to study and articulate the processes of historical change through various mediums other than the traditionally accepted ones. Social theorists of the late 19th and early 20th century saw in the transformation in the relations between the sexes, epitomized in changing family structure, the clue to historical development.

The middle class women were involved in diverse nationalist activities, both within and outside the home. Within the home they spun and wove khadi, held classes to educate other women and contributed significantly to nationalist literature in the form of articles, poems and propaganda material. The mass participation of women in the nationalist movement is a well-recognized historical reality. Their activities within the movement were, however, diverse and almost marginalized in comparison to the men. While some women participated actively on the streets, others just gave support to the movement. Their participation in the national movement can be viewed from different angles. On the one hand there were women's organizations which sprang up all over the country with a view to further women's cause as well as that of the country's independence. On the other hand were the intense struggles of the lower class women (and men) against exploitation and oppression of the colonial government as well as that of the landlord-trader-forest contractor.

Thus to give a holistic point of view, this paper focuses on those movements which are not essentially struggles spawned by women but movements where women's participation have been traced and recorded by women and women emerge as the central players though the impact that is created does not remain remarkably women oriented. The first movement discusses the political participation of women in what has come to be known as the "Oudh Revolt" which was led by the Kisan Sabha in Uttar Pradesh or United Provinces. The second struggle discusses the Warli struggle of 1945-47, which was also led by the Kisan Sabha of the Communist Party of India (CPI) both carrying leftist cliché.

### **Peasant Upsurge in Awadh: Role of Women :**

After the Uprising of 1857, the dynamic of British rule changed and a need was felt to create an ally which would enable the upholding of their rule in India. Thus were created and buttressed a small class of feudal barons and their 'kinsmen' along with the rajas and maharajas of the Princely States. The taluqdars of Awadh were one such category which found patronage in the British Raj. The British Government was well aware of tire conditions prevailing in the Awadh areas. But any step taken to improve the peasants' lot was bound to annoy the taluqdars, which the Government could not afford as they were the upholders of the empire against 'seditious' national leaders.

The peasants of Oudh were ready to take to any means to achieve compensation of their grievances. They found a benefactor in the form of Baba Ram Chandra, whose real name was Shridhar Balwant Jodhpurkar, was a Maharashtrian brahmin. His political activities were already well known before his arrival in India from Fiji islands. Soon he launched an eight-fold agrarian program for the upliftment of the peasantry.

On the 19th of February 1925, in Pratapgarh, an all women conference was held under the presidentship of Jai Kumari. It was described as a "Kisan devi ki sabha" and the following resolutions were passed which focused on the issues which were closer to a woman

- a) A cow should be maintained by the Panchayat in every village so that milk is available for small children.

- b) After the death of the husband, and on confirmation of the proof of marriage, the wife should get her right. If the wife is not here then the son or daughter should have it.
- c) For achieving these demands of Kisanin (peasant women) we shall organize meetings in every village.
- d) We will contribute one anna per woman and for women panchayats in every village.

A Kisanin Panchayat was formed with Jaggi as its leader this organization functioned as a branch of the Praja Sangh organized by Ram Chandra.

The aims of the Kisanin Panchayat were:

- a) To face the grievance faced by them as a women.
- b) To fight the grievances faced as peasants and agricultural labourers.
- c) Political mobilization for the national movement.

Equally important was the pledge-almost a kind of demand charter-which a Kisanin had to sign and to promise to work for its attainment:

- a) After the death of the husband, without paying anything (this seems an indirect reference to nazarana), we should have full right over the holding. And there should be no eviction for five years.
- b) The women of the Kisan Sabhas should not be forced to work under the threats of lathis, dandas (sticks) chains, etc.
- c) Those who work as labourers should get full wages.

#### **Warli Struggle 1945-1947 :**

To understand the despondency of tribal a brief history is necessary to understand the circumstance in which these tribal women went up in rebellion. The Mughal rule was replaced by the British and the result of this political change was that it threw the tribes of the place into disarray, resulting in “gang robberies” due

to confusing variety of land revenue systems on the one hand, and "gang robberies" by the tribal on the other. To settle the matter the British, attempted to evolve a uniform land settlement for the district as a whole. By 1866, Ryotwari settlement was introduced in the area, which made them more dependent on the money-lenders.

What hit the hill tribes of Thana hardest was the 'forest conservation policy' of the government. Due to the havoc caused by the merchants for gathering timber, by 1878, the Forest Act was passed and nearly 4,01,566 acres of free grazing land was included in the forests of one description or the other, and this amounted to nearly 50 percent to the forest areas of the district. Due to the policies of government and the acquiring powers by the landlords and moneylenders the exploitation on the adivasis increased.

By 1940s most adivasis had been reduced to the position of tenants or agricultural labourers, bonded to the landlord-money-lender in one way or the other. The women suffered the worst. The landlords used their power over the adivasis to exact forced labour, Veth, for as many days as was necessary for the former's requirement. The adivasi women along with the men suffered the exploitation of their class. The Warli women experienced and bitterly resented class exploitation as also gender oppression. Sexual harassment and violence was the main component of gender oppression perpetuated by the non-adivasi landlord and his musclemen and by the nonadivasi petty government officials like the talati, police and the forest guard. Many Warlis had to work on Veth for as much as a fortnight in a month. Violation of adivasi women by the landlords was so common that the progeny was given a special name. They were called 'watlas', a special caste. The two agencies which helped the landlords to keep thousands of Warlis in subjection were the local government officers and the-privately employed pathans and bhaiyyas who terrorised the Warlis into obedience, by sexually oppressing their women and inflicting physical torture on both men and women.

The component of Warli revolt indicates that it was a struggle primarily of the Warlis, though a few other tribes, too, joined the struggle marginally at different points of time. While Dahanu and Umbergaon Talukas in Thana district, were the scenes of most intense struggle, its effects spilled over to other talukas namely

Palghar and Jawhar. The struggle was the strongest in Dahanu and Umbergaon, where, Warlis formed 55 per cent of the total population, gave it a distinctly a Warli identity. In 1941, the Warlis also formed 48.5 per cent of the adivasis in the district.

This composition gives it a unique character of class struggle and thereby the protest was directed by the leftist parties. The revolt was led by the Kisan Sabha and two names, among others, inextricably linked with the struggle are those of Godavari Parulekar and her husband, Shamrao Parulekar. Members of the CPI, the Parulekars who came from an educated, urban middle class background, entered the Warli region in 1944 in order to mobilise the peasants for the first Maharashtra State Kisan Sabha Conference to be held in Titwalla in Thana district in January 1945.

There were general causes of the revolt in which the issues of women were left out unlike the previous movement under the general issues.

1. To remove forced labour or vat- The first conference of the Maharashtra State Kisan Sabha held in January 1945 at Titwalla in Kalyan taluka in Thana district was attended by nearly 10,000 peasants. Twenty or thirty adivasis attended the conference. At the end of the conference, the adivasis picked up a few red flags on their way home. They spontaneously went from village to village with red flags, shouting the slogan "Down with forced labour".
2. To abolish the system of lagnagadi- the system was in operation due to the efforts of the women. In this system the married couple was forced to work on the estate of the landlords free of cost.
3. To increase their wages.

### **Conclusion :**

The oppression and exploitation of the Warlis by the landlord-trader-forest contractor were the primary issue, and the need to organize the Warlis to struggle against the domination the primary task in 1945. It was strategically necessary to unite both Warli men and women against the common class enemy, which indeed Kisan Sabha succeeded in doing. The shortcomings of the Kisan Sabha as in the case of the Warli struggle were, precisely the following. First, women were not

involved in the same way or to the same extent as their male counter parts even during most intensive phase of the struggle. The militancy, commitment and ingenuity of women, of which there was ample proof, were neither fully absorbed nor developed, and women were, by and large, assigned a mere 'supportive' role. Second, the Kisan Sabha did not treat as important issues relating to gender oppression of women particularly by their own men (gender oppression of women by the men of the exploiter class was perceived as a class issue and therefore taken up) even when women spontaneously questioned male domination in the family and the community. A separate organisation of women could have facilitated the task of building a women's movement to deal with problems faced by tribal women both as part of the oppressed class as well as that of the oppressed sex. On the contrary, the Kisan Sabha allowed women to recede into the background once the struggle had passed its peak. Much later, however, a tribal women's organisation called Adivasi Mahila Jagruti Mandal was started by the Kisan Sabha in Thana, in 1976.

The study of both these movements from the gender point of view throws certain common trajectories. The leftist agencies as is an established fact is more sensitive to the issue of women, though in a restrictive manner and women were seen within the fold as a class and not as a category "women". However what is remarkable in both the movements is that the women were conscious of this fact and attempted to level it out in their own way by passing resolutions to institutionalize some of the rules to their favor. The caste divisions do not come in the way while homogenizing the issues of women. Both the movements though failed to create any long term impact but left clues for further researches and more space for locating and historicizing women.

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