



Original Research Article

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 original research article to bring about the sublimities of this very discourse in the first half of the twentieth century.

Key Words: Gender, Indian National Movement, Historiography, Awadh, Warli.

INTRODUCTION

The old age adage of absences of women from history is too oft repeated to be mentioned again. In the similar wane, to reiterate writing women back in history 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. The much recorded history is about men, where women are absent or silent. Apparently women's invisibility was a matter not so much of fact but of perspective which was more androcentric or male-centric in nature. The question then arises how historical events from the point of view of women can actually come to have representations which are shaped to present the omitted picture? There is no specific answer to this question, 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. [1] 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. [2]

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. It is possible, to retrieve the agential capacities of women that may sometimes defy neat categorizations in terms of conventional classifications of social and political action. In that women's public roles are characterized by a politicization of their private roles. The medium to explore is usually visible in "specific articulations of

consent and resistance", which enables as well as constrains women from making their own history. The history by women and of women also has considerable levels and issues which are addressed in accordance with the need of the time and hour. The Indian Freedom Struggle and the various movements that were carried within its fold had multiple affects and effects on the society which was gradually becoming more conscious to the idea of 'nation' and 'freedom'.

India's struggle for independence is of tremendous importance in the history of anti-colonial movements. The nationalist movement set the precedent of achieving independence through non-violence and thus a whole new philosophy based on ahimsa was born. The culmination of the movement in the partition on religious grounds of a country as big and culturally diverse as India was also significant. However, arguably the most important aspect of this movement which need to be brought forth for independence from a historical point of view was that it saw mass participation by Indian women, women who had till then been confined to the domestic sphere whether they were of upper class, middle class or lower class. On the other hand Partha Chatterji makes it clear to us that "*The nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. It is a discourse which assigns to women a place, a sign, an objectified value; women here are not subjects with a will and a consciousness. We now have to ask very different questions to allow women in recent Indian history to speak for themselves*".^[3]

The contributions of women especially of the middle class to the Independence movement are reflected in the number of studies that have been carried out so far. 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. Shelter and nursing care were also provided to nationalist leaders who were in hiding from the British authorities.^[4] Outside the home *Prabhatferis* were organized in which women from all castes and classes would walk to the local temple singing songs to rouse the nationalist and patriotic feelings of the people. In addition they held meetings and demonstrations, took part in satyagraha, picketed toddy and foreign-cloth shops, went to prison and also suffered brutalities at the hands of the British police. Lastly, when the nationalist leadership was in jail, the women took over the leadership roles and provided guidance to the movement. 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.^[5] The women emerged as an important force in support of the national movement under the leadership of Gandhi,^[6] who in his attempt to create a wider mass participation opened up floodgates of women's political activism. However the underlying problem is that these women cannot be simply assumed to be a homogenous group. 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.

The recent feminist historians have paid quiet deservedly so, deliberate attention to history of middle class women's participation in the national movement. However, apart from sporadic works, the historical records are silent about the

participation of lower class women in the freedom struggle. The superfluous justification can be the lower classes were unable to cope with their miseries, which was the result of the exploitation at the hands of the upper classes or castes. However the more apt justification can be felt in the absences of recorded material regarding the involvement of the lower classes in the national movement. The word freedom struggle naturally had a different connotation to the lower classes, which assumed the form of people's struggle. The woes of recording the history of the lower classes women were much intense and deep due to the issue exclusive to them which focused more on meeting exploitation from their own community members apart from the others, thereby apparently extricating their issues from the larger national cause or even the popular peasant struggles or tribal movements. Also, the historiography of popular struggles in turn like the general histories, considered women under the category of 'man' thereby marginalizing their roles as the central players and negating their capacities of leadership and profound involvement. While written histories of peasant/tribal struggles are few, most of those available having been produced in the last two decades, they clearly display the male perspective.

The central argument of this paper is that the studies of much celebrated Indian national movement falls short to take into its fold the role played by lower classes especially lower class women on various accounts. This could be because firstly the ideological base of these movements did not agree within the broad-spectrum of the political demands of the time. Secondly the other inherent forces like patriarchy prevented such inclusions in the historiography itself. This problematic predicament can be resolved only through looking at various struggles within the national movement from gender perspective.

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 ^[7]

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. ^[8] Besides general exploitation numerous humiliation were exerted on the peasantry to carry out their extortionate demands. The outbreak of the First World War resulted in scarcity and high prices, adding to the existing problems of poverty, unemployment and underemployment. In Awadh, the loyal supporters of the Empire-the *taluqdars* - squeezed the peasantry dry by forcibly raising war loans and recruits to aid their masters, leading to increased discontent. 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. [9] Soon he launched an eight-fold agrarian program for the upliftment of the peasantry. The peasantry was stirred into action in May 1920. This soon involved women also as we find the first instance of active political participation by women in the peasant struggles in August-September 1920. When Ram Chandra was arrested for the first time, about 40,000 peasants surrounded Pratapgarh jail and the government was forced to release him. Women had taken an active part in this agitation and after this there was no going back. Incidentally, Ram Chandra and thirty two other peasants had been arrested by the police on the complaint of a woman taluqdar-Chabiraj Kunwar-who was notorious and very oppressive. As the revolt thickened, women were the major sufferers. In December 1920 the Ajodhya Kisan Conference was held in which 50,000 to one lakh peasant men and women were present. For the first time Satya Devi spoke from the stage on behalf of women and assured their participation in the movement. This was greatly applauded from all sides. When there was resistance from the authorities women offered satyagraha and sustained the struggle.

The peasant movement in Oudh assumed the dimensions of a class war as the desperate peasantry resorted to militant action on a large scale in Rai Bareilly district. The year 1921 began with thousands of peasants moving from one estate to another destroying the crops of the *taluqdars*. The women on their account restricted the police by pelting stones. 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
- e) We shall hold meetings in our villages and for the redressal of our grievances we shall get our own laws constituted from the government.

There are trajectories seen from the resolutions passed by women, which were articulated by women through the words of Baba Ram Chandra. The issues that were singled out and resolved had a little in common with the central issues and can be said to be apolitical in nature and were 'women's' issues intrinsically. Each resolution spoke about the concerns of women of those times, i.e. their children, property rights, social rights, legal rights etc. In the 1930's as per the resolution, concrete efforts were made to form peasant women's organizations. Among the activists who took the initiative were the wives of the Kisan Sabha leaders. 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.

Traditional customs and ceremonies like *yagya* were used by the Kisanin Panchayat to mobilize women. The Kisanin Panchayat also organized exhibitions to educate the *kisanin* and these were financed by the other bodies. Kapil Kumar has recorded two incidents "We have on record two meetings (3rd September 1933 and 25th April 1934) of the Praja Singh which were largely attended by women from the three *tahsils* (district subdivisions) of Pratapgarh." [10] The Kisanin Panchayat would send separate invitation slips to women for such meetings. *Kisanin ki panchayat mein kisanon ke mang ke sath milne ka utsav kiya jayega* (in their meeting the women will celebrate their joining the peasants in their demands). [11]

The late 1930's witnessed a sharp ideological struggle within the Indian National Congress. The right wing leadership was particularly hostile towards the Kisan Sabha and at many places, peasant membership of the Congress were not allowed to vote in the organization elections. In the Pratapgarh countryside women had enrolled themselves in large numbers as four *anna* members of the Congress. These women were not just passive members. They played an important part not only during the direct action struggles but also in organizational matters. When a large number of women found their names missing the voters list for organizational elections they flooded the D.C.C. (District Congress Committee) office with representations during 1938-39. Kapil Kumar also mentions that since 1930's women had been making representations to the National leaders. Sometime in the mid or late 1930s a petition titled "Anath Ablaon ki Pukar" (the helpless

woman's appeal) was sent to Prof Braj Gopal Bhatnagar. [12] The petitioner had signed herself as a "*dukhit praja ki abla*" (A helpless woman of the oppressed masses). The petition listed five grievances which entailed that they were beaten with lathis or stick; ogled upon or leered at by the landlords and their agents; pushed into forced labour; faced evictions on the death of their husbands; and faced unemployment.

After the lifting of the Civil Disobedience Movement, there are instances of some of the Kisanin offering individual Satyagraha, in which the oppression of the peasants emerged as their major concern amongst the others. All the women who offered individual satyagraha were from poor peasant families and belonged to different castes. The caste composition is very important development as these women had joined hands cutting across rigid caste norms and demonstrated through this that satyagraha could be a combined effort of the oppressed.

The participation of women though does not bring forth any ideological impact on the course of national movement or on the Women's Movement in India as the movement collapsed with the death of Baba Ram Chandra in 1950. However it has immense historical significance which brings women within the vertex of a movement which achieved India its freedom.

Warli Struggle 1945-1947 [13]

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 moneylenders.

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. Several orders were issued in the subsequent years with the object of preventing the use of timber and firewood for agricultural and domestic purposes, with little regard for custom which granted the people the right to use forest produce unrestrictedly from generation to generation. 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 non-*adivasi* 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. The *adivasi* women, along with the men, suffered the exploitation of their class. They had to perform *Veth* for the landlord. Incidents like the following were a common feature. An old woman, because she was too ill to do *Veth*, was dragged to the landlord's house, and forced to work till she fainted. Another young woman who had recently delivered a baby was beaten by the landlord because

she had not turned up for work. The landlords considered their tenants' wives and the wives of their marriage servants to be their personal property. They believed that they had the hereditary right to enjoy these women whenever they wished to do so. The landlord often used her as his mistress and "for entertaining his official and non-official guests". 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 women had to meet with dual plight when they were also oppressed by their own men and the community as a whole.

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.^[14] 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 Titwala in Thana district in January 1945. As leaders, they, especially Godavari Parulekar, associated very closely with the *adivasis* throughout the period of the struggle 1945-47, giving them confidence, courage and political consciousness. She so endeared herself to the *adivasis*, that she was affectionately called "Godutai" (elder sister) by them. [15]

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 Titwala in Kalyan *taluka* in Thana district was attended by nearly 10,000 peasants. Twenty or thirty *adivasis* attended the conference. Inspired by the atmosphere, one of the Warlis spoke passionately of how they had suffered under the labour system, "... *but the Warlis will not put up with persecution*", he concluded. They heard the slogan, "*Down with forced labour*" for the first time at the conference. At the end of the conference, the *adivasis* picked up a few red flags on their way home. They were transformed by the conference. 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. This issue was enmeshed more with saving the honour of women and women had no direct say in the matter.
3. To increase their wages

The police and the government came heavily down on them women especially were the object of the wrath of the police and the landlord's *goondas*. Warli women displayed great courage in withstanding physical torture, molestations and threats of rape by the police and the landlord's

musclemen. An important Kisan Sabha activist in the region reported that during this period women played a very important role in hiding the underground party members. They were careful not to give any information to the police. Many women, too, went into the jungles, but most stayed at home with the children and the aged had to bear the brunt of police brutalities. As one old woman reported, "*We used to face the police and the saukar's goondas collectively. We used to snatch their lathis from them and chase them out of the pada (hamlet). We used to carry bhakris (a type of bread) to the jungle in small packets and tie these packets to branches of trees so that our men did not starve*". [16] The struggle continued and just before the independence on April 5, 1947, the Chief Minister B G Kher, announced the release of arrested *adivasis* and offered some concessions.

The contribution of the women in this movement is multifold. At one level, the women displayed as much militancy and courage as their male counterparts. They along with their men struggled courageously against the exploiters and the police, who aided the former. On the other level they were important members and functionaries of Kisan Sabha, women had a voice in selecting local leaders of the Kisan Sabha. However they themselves were not members of the Kisan Sabha. Only after 1950 were they made members. Nor was there a separate organisation for women. This was due to the fact that there was no political consciousness about gender issues in the party and also amongst the tribal as such. *Adivasi* women were oppressed by their own men. They would drink and beat their wives. What the women were spontaneously doing was to bring the 'political' to prevail upon the 'domestic' a task neglected by the Kisan Sabha and the party. This is illustrated by the incident when during a kisan women's conference, an old kisan hearing all the talk of women participation in the work of the Kisan Sabha asked, "How can the Kisan Sabha help you?" The answer was prompt "Your

members can stop beating their wives' The kisan shook his head and replied, "That, of course, we can do. But it had never struck us before. I suppose it was because we all did it" Under pressure it may have passed resolutions banning wife beating or enrolled women as members, but its perspective on women remained largely unaltered and the Communist Party's position confirms this. [17]

To sum up, 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. It is my contention that the Kisan Sabha could have taken up issues pertaining to gender oppression far more seriously than it actually did during and especially after the peak of the struggle, 1945-1947, given that women had demonstrated a high level of consciousness. 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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