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# UNIT 2 WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY INDIA

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Unit, you studied women's issues in 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movement. You have already read in MWG-001, Block 1, Unit 2 about the questions related to women. However, in this Unit, we will look at the contribution of women's political participation in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a remarkable spurt in women's political participation in India. These were the times of political turmoil shaped by the nationalist movements against colonial rule and by the British promise of new political powers to Indians. These turbulent times witnessed an advancement of mass mobilizations along the democratic lines that challenged the caste system, landlordism and patriarchy. Women became a significant force in these struggles with the rise of educated women. These women struggled to assert their rights and to envision a new social order based on freedom and equality. This Unit seeks to map the different forms of political participation of women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the processes of government as well as at the community level- in voting and contesting elections or

rather in the fight to secure rights for this, in party and bureaucracy, in demonstrations and organizations, in mass struggles and in public debates.

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## 2.2 OBJECTIVES

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After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Describe women's political participation in nationalist movement;
- Examine the implications of women's political participation;
- Analyzing the representation of women; and
- Evaluate the various voices of women in anti- colonial movement.

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## 2.3 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

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The early 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the struggles of colonized people for enfranchisement and political representation in order to overcome the political and participatory deficit created due to the colonial rule. The question of women's entry into electoral politics and decision-making came up in this context. It became contentious as women's political participation meant unsettling of the notions about women's 'appropriate role' which was placed in 'family' and 'society'.

### 2.3.1 Emergence of Women's Organizations

Educated and politically assertive women begin to join the newly launched political organizations like *Arya Mahila Samaj*, Pune, *Stri Zarhosti Mandal*, Mumbai or *Anjuman-E-Khwatin-E-Islam*, Punjab, or the women's auxiliaries of Indian National Congress or National Social conference. Most of these were founded due to the efforts and encouragement of men. Through these organizations, the 'new women' pursued the companionship of women 'collectively' at the same time felt 'alienated' in the so called 'traditional families'. They got schooling in the scientific manner in which home-keeping also become the part of public conversation and social skills.

The 'new women' wished to engage themselves in one of the first national level women's organization, All India Ladies Association initiated by a group of elite women, primarily Muslim, in the princely state of Bhopal in 1918, in order to work for the rights of all women across geographic and sectarian boundaries. The Women's Indian Association(WIA) was formed in 1915 with theosophist influence and aimed to work in the areas of religion, education, politics and philanthropy. The National Council of Women in India (NCWI), a national branch of the International Council of Women, which was established in 1925, put forth the voices of women from wealthy and prestigious families, at national and international level and kept aloof from the nationalist struggle. While the All India Women's Conference

(AIWC), (about which you have read in detail in MWG-001, Block 1, Unit 2) the most influential women's organization emerged in 1927 with a commitment to women's education, to organizing public opinion on women's issues and legal disabilities, and with a decision to remain apolitical. Despite their middle class origins, many of these organizations attempted to bring lower class rural and urban women into its fold, and asserted the 'solidarity of sisters' and claimed to speak for an undifferentiated category of 'Indian women'.

### 2.3.2 Women's Campaign

The demand for women's vote was made as early as 1917 when **Montague-Chelmsford** reforms committee visited India. The demand for women's suffrage was presented to the committee in terms of women's usefulness for nation-building through social advancement. The Montague-Chelmsford reforms committee and consequent committees for political reforms were largely reluctant to support both universal adult franchise and women's franchise, considering it premature in a society practicing purdah and prohibitions against female education. However, major women's organizations in India including WIA, AIWC and NCWI continued their struggle for vote enthusiastically, using multifaceted strategies such as sending their delegations and active lobbying before these committees, conducting protest meetings, striking support of provincial congress committees etc.

Gradually women received the 'rights' in different provinces at different times; however, with the criteria of age and property, by and large only 1% of women could vote as compared to 11% of men. Further only 18.3% of these eligible women actually casted their vote in 1923 in Bombay, for instance (Singer, 2007). Thus, the removal of gender disqualification in vote remained symbolic due to the fixing of ratio of women voters to men voter. Ironically, the Simon Commission in 1927 proposed to replace property qualification for women by wifehood qualification—whereby wives and widows of property holders of over age of 25 years could vote; but women's organizations remained determined to oppose both property and wifehood qualification and demanded to have the right on their own.

Debate over vote reveals fears being expressed about the corrupting effects of enfranchisement. This panic was often articulated in terms of- 'meals would not be cooked' or 'sexes would mix promiscuously'—i.e. women would become 'manly' or 'like bazaar women' respectively to cause social disorder (Roy, 2005). Further, the women demanding vote were seen as apathetic, unable to comprehend and represent the so-called real Indian women who were rural, poor and traditional. The demand for women's right to vote continued to be asserted without challenging the assertion that in the home is the proper place for women. The most common argument was that women desired vote not for self-aggrandizement, but in order to

fulfill their duties and responsibilities in public life, which were complimentary to and not similar to those of men, owing to their being 'homely'. Thus 'equal but different' became the preferred slogan of women's organizations, insisting on keeping distinct qualification for men and women as little as possible. Respectable, domestic modern middle class women or 'ladies' became emblematic of true Indian womanhood and the legitimate claimants of the right to vote. Thus, the colonial state was held responsible for the lack of women's political rights and the critique toward the patriarchal social order in India was never addressed by these categories of middle class, elite women (Nair, 1996, Roy, 2005).

According to Geraldine Forbes women's organizations themselves were patriarchal in nature and tried to avoid any critical stance towards 'their' men and appealed to colonizers for suffrage along with the nationalist men. For instance, Sarojini Naidu in the Congress session in 1918 assured the congressmen that extending franchise to women was rational, scientifically and politically sound, consistent with human rights and compatible with tradition. Yet there was not just collusion but also conflict between women's organizations and nationalist movement, as the nationalist opinion towards Indian womanhood on other issues like family laws remained conservative. Rather Indian feminists were caught between the nationalist and nascent feminist stirring. While British suffragette feminists extended support to the Indian women's quest for suffrage, their 'sisterly' claims of solidarity came to be suspected due to their condemnation of the Indian tradition (Roy, 2005).

### 2.3.3 Women's Representation

With diverse impediments to women taking office in formal political institutions, the question of women's political participation has come to be inextricably linked with the tricky question of reservation for women. The demand for political representation of women emerged in the context of nationalist struggle. For example, Congress and many women's organizations were initially opposed to the idea of reservation, to separate electorates or nomination for 'women nominees' to the first roundtable. Those who supported reservation were seen as traitors. However, by the second roundtable conference, reservation came to be accepted as a transitional necessity.

In the elections of 1920s which did not have reservations for women, many women such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and others who contested, were defeated. It was in 1927 in Madras that S. Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first woman member to be nominated to the legislative council in colonial India. Reddy who came from the devadasi community was the first woman medical graduate from Madras presidency, and ardently pursued several bills concerning assumedly 'womanly' issues such as devadasi abolition, child marriage, medical and educational provisions for children

and women, training of destitute women etc. The legislative assemblies that emerged in post 1937 elections had reserved seats for women, but did not last long. The elected women, largely from Congress, were reduced to a token status in the legislature. However, those elections gave these women their first experiences of canvassing – travelling in public spaces, working with men who were not from family, and meeting with women of different classes. Nonetheless, the question of reservation or that of separate electorate whereby voters and candidates were from the same targeted group, continued to be contentious for various reasons. Even though most categories of reservation for electorates were of subordinated groups, such as Muslims or women, there was reservation also for selected elites such as Europeans and landholders.

One of the major questions that the separate electorate raised was whether candidates represented their geographical area or their social group. Hence when the Ramsay MacDonald Communal Award reserved 2.5% seats for women, distributing these on a communal basis, it was perceived as a divisive move (Singer, 2007).

Significantly, women's political rights were posed in opposition to the political claims made by 'untouchables' or depressed classes and Muslims. Insistence of major women's organizations on 'equality and merit, and no privilege' cannot be isolated from their stringent opposition to communal awards. Their rejection of special privilege as an impediment to growth, as an insult to the very intelligence and capacity of women led to the demands of Muslims and depressed classes for more equal just and democratic representation through separate electorates being seen as illegitimate. Thus, the claims of unity of women in political representation came to be maintained even when Muslim women were distanced, and the distinct political rights to 'untouchables' came to be effectively disavowed (John, 2000; Rege, 2006).

Women's participation in the formal political institutions thus marked 'social feminism' (Forbes, 1999) that justified women's autonomy in terms of their social obligation towards the nation and the family. This meant that women's political work became a mark of their power but it involved little rebellion against the patriarchal restraints that relegated them to domesticity and purity. The assertions of women's political rights were premised on a specific notion of modern and respectable Indian womanhood, while dismissing the claims of lower castes and Muslims as illegitimate.

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## **2.4 WOMEN IN ANTI - COLONIAL MOVEMENTS**

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The history and legacy of women's participation in the nationalist movement is rather complex. The association of women with the nation specifically with the legacies of Gandhian influence.

### 2.4.1 Women in Nationalist Movement

Along with a few women whose names usually appear in the accounts of nationalist movement, there are innumerable 'unsung' ordinary women who participated in the nationalist movement in different ways. These are the women who participated in *satyagraha*, who spun *khadi* at home, who supported revolutionary activities, who participated in daring attacks on the British state machinery and so on.

Initially women were largely a symbolic presence in the nationalist movement that was alienated from masses, and was socially orthodox, focusing mostly on an economic critique of colonialism. In the last decade of nineteenth century, when educated and politically aware women started attending annual meetings of the Indian National Congress mainly due to the efforts of Pandita Ramabai, they were allowed to attend but not to speak or vote in the proceedings (Kumar, 1993). Later in the twentieth century, women came to be engaged in *swadeshi* movement, in boycott of foreign goods, promotion of the use of indigenous goods. The ***Swadeshi movement*** with its predominant focus on *khadi*, an intimate part of the household, facilitated the location of focus on women.

With the 1920s, women became a vital force in the mass nationalist struggle, and its imitational politics. *Satyagraha* became the prominent site of women's nationalist participation even though women were initially excluded from salt *satyagraha*. Women mobilized themselves through various nationalist organizations all across India, such as *Rashtriya Stree Sangha*, *Desh Sevika Sangh* or *Mahila Rashtriya Sangh*. During Civil Disobedience and Non-Cooperation Movements, they marched, raised flags, demonstrated often in thousands, picketed shops selling liquor or foreign cloth, collected funds, donated their jewelry for the movement, formed support groups such as Mothers of Political Prisoners and so on. They even went underground and helped form parallel governments during Quit India movement. Women's participation became effective and their bravery during police violence and imprisonment shamed men and provoked them to join protests.

Yet, women could participate only with the approval of their husband and family, after fulfilling their domestic duties and with due deference to family honour. They operated in sex-segregated groups and embraced revised markers of modesty such as covering heads when out of purdah, so as to mark themselves as pure and respectable (Forbes, 1999). Hence, if the lower class *sevikas* complained of police brutality, their charges were often dismissed considering them as necessarily disreputable, while assumptions of the respectability of middle class women protestors protected them.

Gandhiji inspired women to join the nationalist struggle by extolling the greatness of supposed womanly qualities of ancient Hindu heroines, that of

purity, firmness, courage and sacrifice. Women were rather considered morally better suited than men for the nationalist project as the political space focusing on non-violence and truth was redefined as the extension of domestic, as the spiritual domain imbued with ideals of sacrifice and sacred duty. The value-based association of these terms with womanhood also problematizes the emancipatory approach to women's participation in nationalist movements.

Those women who were confined to home and engaged in spinning are also interpreted as 'political' in nature. Women's invisibility in public sphere did not mean their non-participation in the political arena. They maintained the nationalist households by adapting to changes, physical losses, emotional traumas and material hardships brought in by the nationalist participation of their men folk, sacrificed domestic peace, became pillars of support and strength, raised the 'children of the nation' i.e. nurtured and educated children as the future nationalist and responsible citizens, gave moral and material support to women activists, conducted secret activities and thus they used their domestic roles to nationalize the domestic spaces (Bjorkert, 2006). Rather women reconstructed the domestic life so as to support the civil-political life centering nationalism (Chakrabarty as cited in Bjorkert, 2006). With the successful governance of household through women, along the lines of education, personal and domestic discipline, food regimes and management of time, nationalists made claims for governing and sharing power in political life. Thus, the twin processes of domestication of public sphere and politicization of private sphere marked the women's participation in the nationalist movement.

#### 2.4.2 Ideal Nationalist Woman

The symbolic imagination of the Indian nation as 'mother' or 'Hindu goddess', as 'Bharat Mata' inspired people affectively to surrender their lives for 'her', significantly not only as the patriotic duty but also as religious one. There were 'respectable dutiful daughters' and also 'fearless revolutionary daughters'; but who would be her true daughters was a contentious question.

Visualizing India through its emblematic motherhood – the repository of spiritual and moral values – led to the claims of cultural superiority of the nation, with an antagonistic polarity to the supposedly materialistic colonizing West. The nationalist movement could see this sacred motherhood as threatened by the 'demonic' British raping and prostituting women, pointing at the unworthiness of imperial rule. This grid of womanhood was a peculiar amalgamation of the Vedic brahmanical ideal of chaste, self-sacrificing *pativrata* and the modern Victorian model of companionate housewife. This gentlewoman or *bhadramahila* representing the Indian nation was located within the sphere of her home or private arena, and was viewed as the torchbearer of Indian cultural tradition which was considered an essence of

the nation. Simultaneously she also moved in the outside world or public arena albeit in feminine ways. Barring a few exceptions in Congress like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay who glorified the self-sacrificing peasant woman, the image of the nationalist woman drew from this 'respectable mother' of Hindu middle classes. This can be seen through the protests of peasant women of Oudh whose participation in *satyagraha* was seen disapprovingly despite them being members of congress (Kumar, 1989). Similarly, donations and demands for congress membership by women in prostitution at Barisal were not accepted by Gandhi.

This nationalist woman activist became both a symbol and a bulwark of women's emancipation (Kumar, 1993). She countered the colonial claims about Indian women being home-bound, ignorant and weak, claiming power from the great Indian culture. The nationalist movement gave legitimacy to women's presence in public political sphere, and claimed to have resolved the woman question (Chatterjee, 1999). It posited this emblematic womanhood and marked the reforms to end women's oppression as immaterial and unnecessary. The active nationalist participation empowered these women as the self-conscious arbitrators of their own destiny, rather than mere passive objects of social reform. They gained new dignity, confidence and self-view in public life, rather than being objectified as sex symbols, or stigmatized as inferior. However, these changes in moral conditions of women did not translate into changing their material conditions; and the separate spheres for men and women continued in different forms (Patel, 1988). Rather, women activists needed to sacrifice their demands, for the anti-imperialist cause, as it became difficult for them to engage with the colonial state for ensuring women's rights. However, there were other alternative spaces such as democratizing mass struggles where woman question was debated without forgoing it for the nationalist cause.

This idea of sacred womanhood shaped even women who participated in Khilafat movement. The Khilafat movement fighting against colonial rulers and seeking to preserve the political power of Khalifa from their clutches, joined together with the nationalist movement, and Muslim women came into its orbit. This became possible as both Khilafat and non-cooperation were seen as religious duty, and women involved themselves in a range of activities from fund-raising to imbuing their children with patriotism and religious faith through the networks of fictive extended family. Bi Amman became the mother figure touring in different parts of India for the Khilafat cause, significantly speaking even in mixed political gatherings without veil, invoking all gathered as her sons and daughters.

This ideal nationalist womanhood was disturbed when the effectiveness of non-violence and *satyagraha* as nationalist strategies was interrogated by the revolutionary movements with valiant participation of women. In different parts of India, especially in Bengal, a large number of young women were



inspired to become martyrs for the nation, who became engaged in armed attacks against the oppressive and draconian colonial state. Similarly, when Subhash Chandra Bose, in the milieu of the dynamics of British participation in World War II, formed the Indian National Army with Japanese help to fight for the liberation of India; the women's regiment was launched under the leadership of **Lakshmi Sehgal**. However even when these 1500 or so women, coming largely from lower class overseas Indians and immigrant plantation workers were mobilized and provided military training, there was often suspicion about their battle readiness. Further, these brave and heroic acts of revolutionary women were invariably seen as 'manly' and unsuitable for women, often subjecting them to police brutality. Hence, the revolutionary women though valorized, were largely not considered as respectable women. They were either considered as unsexed or bringing young men to the cause with their sexual allure (Forbes, 1999). Women's participation then came to be encouraged rather in their domestic roles which could disguise revolutionary activities, such as by hiding weapons, carrying messages, spreading propaganda, posing as wives or mothers of revolutionary men to protect them from police suspicion, sheltering fugitives, making explosives and so on.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, militant nationalism was promoted for instance by Saraladebi Ghosal who popularized gymnasium and physical fitness clubs for young men, by recasting Hindu mythical and local figures as nationalist warrior heroes through *Birashtami* festival etc. to celebrate masculine physical prowess and valour. Revolutionary movements specifically in Bengal drew from Hindu religious imageries of aggression and bravery. By invoking female deities like *Kali*, hostility and violence against the tyrannical colonial state came to be legitimized, and the significance of women in instigating men to fight for the nation became prominent.

The early twentieth century witnessed diverse models of nationalism in the arena of political action, which were in continuous contestations and negotiations with the Congress. While Congress disregarded the inner contradictions and conflicts within Indian society for forging unity within various forms of diversity, the non-brahman and dalit movements and communist movement foregrounded and challenged these. These movements emphasized eradication of caste and class hierarchies in the society along with an anti-colonial thrust. Women in these movements made concerted efforts along with the nationalist women activists of Congress in the agitational politics or in relief work for the defense of people. The divergences and alliances in these movements point out not just the crisis of unity in the anti-imperialist struggle, but also the strength of these different visions of the making of the nation.

Becoming the mothers of the nation- symbolized for instance through appointment of Sarojini Naidu as the Congress president in 1925-albeit

constrained women within the paradigm of purity. However, it also enabled women to urge the nationalist movement to commit itself to women's equality as can be seen through the resolution at the Karachi session of Congress in 1931 that recognized women workers in its conception of what *swaraj* would include.

***Check Your Progress:***

*Discuss the women's campaign and representation of political rights of women.*

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## **2.5 VOICES OF THE NATION**

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The world of politics in colonial India cannot be comprehended only through the framework of nationalism. The democratic aspirations of large subaltern masses were articulated outside both the electoral politics and the anti-colonial nationalist movement and women charted a significant presence for themselves in these spaces. As compared to nationalist and reformist movements, struggles of peasants, workers, dalits and non-brahmans, tribals and other subaltern groups seeking to overturn the dominant order, imagined India-in-the making differently. It envisaged India that was not just free from the colonial rule or from the so-called traditional backwardness, but also from the internal power structures of caste, class and community. While the former movements sought to modernize gender relations by locating women firmly within the home while enabling them a womanly access to public sphere; the latter attempted to democratize gender relations by recognizing women beyond their familial identities, as producers and workers seeking to transform hegemonic social relations.

### 2.5.1 Working Class Women

The discontent of peasants against colonial land and revenue policies and renewed landlordism of feudal order had stimulated several uprisings since the 19<sup>th</sup> century or even before. These were the earliest forms of protest against the oppressive aspects of colonial rule. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, peasant upsurge took myriad forms, and witnessed militancy of women from peasantry and landless agricultural labourers. Various classes of peasantry differentiated also in terms of caste and community meant that the class and community were intimately intertwined in the peasant self. The participation and even leadership of these women is often glorified, but only under the rubric of their contribution to the movement, using criteria modeled on formal male activism, and not as shaping or making the movements. How women articulated their demands for their recognition and dignity as workers/ peasants, for control over domestic economy, and for freedom from discrimination and abuse at home from their comrade husbands, and importantly from sexual oppression by landlords needs to be highlighted to recognize the political agency of these women.

The turbulent period of 1940s saw an upsurge and successive strikes of agricultural labourers from *Warli* tribals in Maharashtra against forced labour, for fair wages for grass cutting and tree felling. This was in continuation with the tribal revolts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century against British rulers and non-tribal outsiders, appropriating their local resources and land. More prolonged, intense, widespread and organized peasant upsurge in the context of the final phase of India's freedom movement was in the communist led armed struggles of Tebhaga, Bengal and Telangana, Hyderabad for fair share of the produce, and for the abolition of forced labour and imposed extraction and levies (Bandopadhyay, 2004).

Along with a vast majority of women from the peasantry propelled by a promise of free and egalitarian relations on land as well as in family, there were a few middle class urban educated women encouraged by the vision of economic and social justice joining the movements for awareness generation among village women or famine relief work or such. They formed women's fighting troops, *nari bahinis* or *dalams*, became martyrs and even confronted sexual torture with tenacity, solidarity and determination. They joined initially often with the support of men in their families to provide food and shelter to travelling male activists, to collect funds through cultural activities, to spread political propaganda, to act as spies or carriers and so on. Yet with entire villages of male activists going underground or getting arrested, they took over, specifically in Tebhaga in more autonomous and even leadership roles. They armed themselves often with local household instruments for the protection of men and families or in Telangana also joined the armed guerrilla troupes to fight and control land. Thus women's

heroic leadership, spontaneous and short lived as it was, came up interestingly with the weakening of the party, committees and the movement. The struggles were then withdrawn by the party leadership so as not to jeopardize stability of the new government that had turned against them.

Even though women often negotiated their participation in the movements by presenting subservient persona as helpmates, they saw these movements as possibilities of new man-woman relationships grounded in their political commitment towards their people, of critical tools to understand their social reality. They were driven by the joys of working together across rural-urban divide among the spirited community of comrades built on shared political dreams (Panjabi, 2002). However, the left party was unable to imagine and enable a new political culture and to redefine work and domestic relations in terms of gender for that. Women in these struggles were viewed as 'problems' of unwanted pregnancies, small children and physical weakness (Lalitha and Kannabiran, 1989) and hence denied opportunities. A protective attitude towards women hampered their chances to move ahead. Women felt disillusioned and betrayed by the authoritarian attitude of the leadership towards them. They were disheartened by its inability to transform material conditions of their life and their relegation to 'cooking and sewing machines' after having wielded weapons. Nonetheless, these struggles set a historical precedent of radical transformations that the left political activism could offer women.

In Oudh of 1920s, a militant peasant uprising emerged with a massive participation of rural women to fight for land control and economic emancipation, marriage and family reforms, and the nationalist cause. In this struggle under the leadership of Baba Ramachandra influenced by Congress, women and men were organized also through caste panchayats, who fought through *Satyagraha* and passive resistance, and simultaneously also through looting of grain stores, morchas at collector office etc. However, Congress sought to limit the movement by asking peasants to redress their grievances by treating landlords as friends, rather than resorting to social boycott (Sangari and Vaid, 1989) which meant agrarian structures repressive towards peasants, specifically peasant women remained intact. The struggle saw the formation of radical organizations of peasant women or *Kisanin panchayat*, first of its kind, which declared the charter of peasant women's demands as women, as peasant and agricultural labourers and as the colonized (Kumar, 1989). However, the new rural woman imagined by the leadership was bound by strict moral code of pure womanhood, albeit uniform for men and women, as a means of gaining respectability for lower caste peasants. This led to reforms in the family structure that impacted peasant women's freedoms negatively and sidestepped the issue of sexual humiliation of peasant women from upper caste landlords.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were also marking their presence in the working class; discontent in new economic spaces from textile mills to plantations across India. However, their participation was limited as their engagement in the new urban industrial workforce was very restricted in comparison to that in agrarian one. The unrest among workers took the form of disaggregated resistance with limited growth of trade unionism, as workers maintained a dual self of peasant and worker, and they continued to be hierarchized along religious, caste and gender lines. The state remained hostile towards working class activism, and the Congress remained ambivalent (Bandopadhyay, 2004). The strikes and labour disturbances saw participation of women workers as well as women trade union leaders from middle classes who fought against new workplace discipline, denial of holidays, low wages and so on. Yet not only women's participation remained marginal to the working class militancy, but their concerns came to be ignored for the benefit of male workers, as was apparent through the emergence of family wage that marked women as housewives and male workers as the primary breadwinners of the family (Kumar, 1993).

The resilience, selflessness and heroism of women in these struggles may have been glorified patronizingly, but no account was taken of their dissent and suffocation within the movement. Women could create some spaces within these struggles to assert some control over their lands, their work and wages and also their domestic and political relations. These instances need to be claimed as the radical legacies that we could extend further. Yet, the challenges put forth by them in terms of re-imagination of their sexuality, motherhood and domesticity were simply dismissed and transposed as their personal problems. And the need to reformulate the domestic familial arena so as to redefine the political material one was not recognized. The movements thus failed to consider the woman question as a political issue.

### **2.5.2 Women in Anti-Caste Movements**

These collective struggles of subaltern groups have often come to be celebrated for their anti-imperialist and anti-feudal thrusts; yet the anti-brahmanical movements of lower caste masses are largely overlooked. The latter are either seen as those which cannot be easily encapsulated within the framework of nationalism. Rather, have faced the penalty of being labeled as collaborative with the colonial state and betraying the nation by engaging with the colonial state for claiming socio-political rights. Further, the anti-caste struggles are also seen as primordial and identarian, as the invocation of caste in the public sphere was considered as illegitimate (Rege, 2006). There is a much needed focus on the progressive vision of gender equality of anti-caste leaders, namely Ambedkar or Periyar in the face of upper caste misrepresentations of their gender politics; but ironically

this has often led to marking women in these movements as secondary, as invariably mobilized and mobilizable subjects (Srilata, 2003). And hence the agency and critical voices of women participating in anti-caste movements needs more attention.

The movements challenging brahmanical order were initiated in 19<sup>th</sup> century for instance through *Satyashodhak* movement of **JotibaPhule** in Maharashtra which witnessed political agency of women in subverting the enslavement of lower castes and women. The caste associations of middle castes were seeking positional changes in the caste hierarchy, collectively appropriating some visible symbols of high ritual status. The women who were active in conferences wrote on the progress of their community, often linking it to education and articulated a model of womanhood combining uneasily the brahmanic and non-brahmanic values. One of remarkable campaigns before 1920s was that of *muralis* or lower caste women dedicated to the deity who being motivated by **ShivramJanabaKamble** in Bombay protested against the brahmanical practice of caste based prostitution.

The tumultuous 1920s marked an emergence of non-brahman and dalit movements as a conscious and organized force in the social and political life of Madras and Bombay. The anti-caste struggles from the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra to the selfrespect movement in Tamil Nadu, saw brahmanical monopoly over knowledge, power and opportunities, division of labour as oppressing both lower castes and women. And hence, it not only enabled radical participation of women, but more significantly saw the woman question as integral to their challenge to the caste system, and thus marked a radical democratization of gender relations. Dalit movement under the leadership of **BabasahebAmbedkar** insisted on women's crucial role in the struggle against caste system, and thus women were a key part in all its campaigns from *Mahad Satyagraha* for access to water to *Dharmantar* or conversion to Buddhism. Women stormed temples, drew water from wells that were out of bounds for their castes, pursued education, thus fashioning new selves.

Women inspired by Ambedkar started rejecting practices embodying caste markers such as carrying gas lamps on their heads in processions, wearing caste-based costumes and other markers. They avoided being part of erotic music and dance performance in lavani-tamasha. Defying such abhorrent traditions, women sought to cast themselves in new attires of the self with dignity and self respect. They reacted publicly to any insulting and derogatory behaviour from savarana men and women. For instance, at Nagpur AIWC conference in 1938, they vehemently protested their humiliating segregation from caste women. From 1930s, separate political meetings and conferences of women came to be organized leading to the formation of **DalitMahilaFederation**. They demanded social, economic and political rights, passed resolutions for abolishing brahmanical practices specifically those

enslaving women and condemned atrocities against dalit women. There were fierce attempts by these women to establish schools and hostels, to commence mahila mandals or women's organizations, and to write and speak critiquing caste, to compose poems, songs, autobiographies and stories. Women's participation here has to be seen in the context of how Ambedkar underlined women as the gateways of caste system, and brahmanism as responsible for subordination of women specifically due to the restriction of endogamy, how he saw caste and women's subordination as intrinsically linked and as also the struggles challenging it (Pardeshi, 1997).

The decade of 1920s saw the launching of self-respect movement by Ramasamy Periyar in Madras presidency, as a radical critique of exclusion of lower castes from the nation by the makers of modern India eschewing the politics of subverting caste as the system of inequality and cruelty. It underlined abolishing caste focusing fearless questioning self, reason and resistance. Even here we see that women were not ghettoized within separate conferences and organization, but had a large scale, active and articulate presence in mass campaigns such as anti- Hindi agitation, and often addressed the self- respect conferences. They were an integral part of the movement and not just the objects of political education, acted upon by male leaders, merely supporting the cause of larger movement. Periyar had challenged the brahmanical reification of women into chaste wives and devoted mothers; and put forth self-respect in marriage wherein husband and wife were seen as comrades and friends; marriage was not a personal but political event orienting their ideas to the world outside; motherhood was by choice; women were not to be bound by domestic servitude.

Thus, women in the self- respect movement struggled both within and outside the domestic sphere as citizen-subjects. They put forth the sharp critique of brahmanism, its mindlessness and irrationality, its oppressive practices that regulated women's sexuality, and highlighted hierarchies between dalit and upper caste women. **Ramamirthammal Moovalur** coming from devadasi household, for instance wrote a hard hitting play on the devadasi practice, and vehemently campaigned for its abolition. They also attacked the vacuity of middle class reforms, education, and nationalism for women that invoked the conventional role models, and criticized the domination of Justice party by wealthy non-brahmans, and asserted new models of autonomy and equality.

What was remarkable about the anti-caste struggles was not just the radical politicization of masses of women, but the recognition of the woman question as political, concerning systemic power and as integral to subversion of caste system. Anti-brahman women activists challenged the stigmatizing and oppressive social customs, and demanded access to legislative and administrative bodies, and rights for workers. They underlined difference in the oppression of women of different castes. They wrote to demonstrate

the intimate connection between caste and gender and the overlapping nature of these hierarchies. More importantly the difference of their critical voice was in their unsettling of the divide of social and political, nation and community, private and public that was assumed by the modernizing movements (Rege, 2006).

***Check Your Progress:***

*Write in your own words the struggles of working class women.*

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## **2.6 WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS**

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Women's accord as well as critique of dominant voices in political discussion reveals how women 'wrote the nation' in multiple and critical ways. We see women voicing, commenting not only on the issues defined narrowly as women's concern but also on colonialism and nationalism, and caste and community considered as gender neutral issues.

A huge international uproar over 'Mother India', an expose by an American journalist, **Katherine Mayo** brought out different voices of women in India. Mayo's controversial book published in 1927 detailed various unequal and discriminatory practices such as child marriage, premature maternity etc. imposed upon women by the patriarchal Hindu culture and conclusively discredited Indians and their demand for political self-determination. Thus,



underlining the need for continued civilizing influence of the colonizers. There were unprecedented mobilizations of middle class women all over India writing responses, passing resolutions protesting against the book, such as Chandravati Lakhanpal's 'Mother India Ka Jawab' or Charulata Devi's 'The Fair Sex of India: A Reply to Mother India'. Significantly, the most prominent voices that claimed to be the authentic voice of modern Indian womanhood vehemently challenged Mayo's conclusion about questioning the nationalist demand for political self-determination, and further hotly disputed western women's patronizing politics towards women of colonies. Most importantly by invoking the glorious cultural ideals of Indian womanhood, it underlined that women in India were capable of redeeming themselves, and simultaneously legitimized new arenas for women's political activism for legal right of women (Sinha, 2000).

However, the model of women as 'domestic mothers' upholding the Indian tradition and representing Mother India was not the only model that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from women's political work. With the commitment to equality declared in 1931 session of Indian National Congress, the National Planning Committee appointed a sub-committee of many prominent women of that period under the chairpersonship of **RaniLakshmibai Rajwade**, which published its report as 'Women's Role in Planned Economy' (WRPE). This was the first plan document that recognized women's role as productive workers for nation-building. It made radical demands for enabling women to be part of wage work even after marriage, to control their own earnings and to have an inalienable right to property. It critiqued the protective legislations that actually prohibited women from work. It also recognized women's unpaid family labour and even argued for men to be trained in domestic work. Yet, this imagining of radical futures for women remained largely unnoticed in post-independence period (Chaudhury, 1996).

Women's writing in this period brought out dramatic tensions and struggles of women caught between public promises of freedom, equality and responsible citizenship held out to them and personal lives that were bound anew into private spheres. On the one hand, women were imagined to be more fitting homemakers, mothers and companions for emerging urban middle class men; on the other hand they also wrestled with these nationalist and reformist projects, infusing those with their aspirations (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991). Through their writings, for instance in widely circulated journals, they reasserted their self and autonomy and its interweaving with the campaigns for overturning colonialism, class and caste hierarchies while simultaneously confronting the corrosive hostility towards them. Thus, diverse voices of women can be mapped in the political arena. While debates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on political and social reforms were marked by an absence of women's opinions, the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked active and very different, often conflicting articulations of women in the political arena.

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## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we discussed the significance of thousands of unsung heroines who were active politically but could not mark their foot-prints in the history of political participation in colonial India unlike those few women on the nationalist frontlines. Yet, this was not just an attempt to recover how women contributed to the public-political life, breaking varied barriers. Rather, it sought to rescue the history of women's political participation in colonial India from the dominant trope of nation so as to unpack different frameworks, those of gender, or class or caste through which this history can be comprehended. It tried to unearth the radical implications of women's political agency in the women's anti- brahman, and peasants' movements. It asked whether and how women became more than 'nationalist patriots', challenged and transformed gender relations, with its complex entanglement in caste and class hierarchies.

This Unit focussed on women's participation in the political arena was premised on the emblematic Indian womanhood, that was respectable, glorious and 'serving', marking women's 'residual citizenship' that included them in the political differentially, as 'citizen-consorts' or on the basis of their socially useful roles as mothers (Roy, 2005). It sought to foreground the radical and dissenting women of democratizing movements, who were often overshadowed by the nationalist construction of 'mother India', unsettling the dichotomy of private and public women's political activism was thus significant not for women forming critical mass in the political arena, but for women's engagement in critical action.

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## 2.8 GLOSSARY

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- WIA** : The Women's Indian Association was formed in 1915 with theosophist influence and aimed to work in the areas of religion, education, politics and philanthropy.
- NCWI** : The National Council of Women in India a national branch of the International Council of Women which was established in 1925 put forth the voices of women from wealthy and prestigious families, at national and international level and kept aloof from the nationalist struggle. While the All- India Women's Conference.
- AIWC** : All India Women's Conference, the most influential women's organization emerged in 1927 with a commitment to women's education, to organizing public opinion on women's issues and legal disabilities, and with a decision to remain apolitical.

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## 2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) How did women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century struggle to participate in the formal political institutions. Examine.
- 2) What were the diverse ways in which women contributed to the nationalist movement? Discuss.
- 3) How did women in democratizing movements articulate their political agency? Explain.
- 4) How can one challenge the dominant trope of nation to study the political participation of women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Examine.
- 5) What was the model of womanhood that was posited through women's political participation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Analyze.

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