

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

WOMEN, CASTE AND POLITICS IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(9). ISSN 1567-214x

Introduction:

In the social process of inclusion and exclusion of a community in India, it is generally designated with a particular political act while attaching privileges, rights, and disabilities within a framework of ideology. Many times, the caste ideology designated the Dalit at a particular place in the caste hierarchy and even resists them to attain their share of wealth and even social esteem. The British provided the Dalit reservation benefits which helped them to win their struggle against the designator. At the later stage, the Dalit initiated sub-caste identity movements while demanding respectable identity and equal share in different spheres in Indian in general and in the politics, particularly which has now become a significant sphere to study while emphasizing on identity politics about which the scholars, researchers, and even the policymakers have keen attention. It is not only a study of the Dalit identity but also in large perspective, is a study of women in the political set up, as she has also been deprived of various required just rights not provided to her in political sphere respectively.¹

The leaders who grew up in upper and middle-class families are likely to have a different political perspective from those leaders who are brought up in lower-class families who generally favor the interest of those social groups from which they come.² Caste as a category has played an important role in the analysis of Indian politics. In the colonial discourse when India is transforming itself into a modern society, it is the sub-caste that has acquired priority over the broader category of caste in Indian politics. The caste has been an important dimension of political mobilization in the sphere of electoral politics. The great change in the politics of the untouchables is that over large parts of India they can no longer be taken for granted as a dump vote bank now, they have begun to

¹ P. Muthaiah, "Politics of Dalit Identity" in *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 65, No. 3, (July-September, 2004), p.385.

² Robert D Putman, *The comparative Study of Political Elites*, New Jersey: Princeton Hall, 1976, p. 42.

shape their politics.³ In the post-colonial period, caste has not only assumed an active role but also become a topic for intense debates, as referred to in different committees and commissions on the reservation and their recommendations.⁴ Under the influence of liberal democratic thought and re-evaluation of Indian ancient scriptures, the liberal-minded intelligentsia coined a new definition of women's role in the family from that of total medieval subjugation to a kind of some partnership, through a movement elaborated as the modern Indian renaissance. Now a day, the focus is on poor marginalized women belonging to rural Dalit communities and their role in the Indian political sphere.⁵ Political participation means not only contesting elections and decision making but it also includes the gamut of voluntary activities with a bearing on the political process which includes voting, support of a particular political group, communication with the legislature, diverse opinion among the electors, and some other such activities. Therefore, the participation includes the tendencies to influence attitudes of those who have the power of decision making. The attention to the problem of participation of women in general and the Dalit women, in particular, has become crucial in the light of the present situation where an increased awareness is needed to do away with the inequality.⁶ Similarly, women are considered more religious in comparison to men. Religion plays an important role in the life and growth of people. It has been a tool that the people have used as an agent of bondage or liberation. India has been a cradle of religions for centuries as many religions found the Indian soil fertile and flourished here. The Dalit joined the religion which preached equality. They converted to egalitarian religions in a search for equality and human dignity.⁷ So there is a need to study women in the context of religion.

Politics and Women in Pre-colonial Period:

In the pre-Aryan Indian civilization, generally known as the Indus valley civilization, the position of women was superior. Even during the Vedic and Upanishadic period, women enjoyed equal status with men. Great women from ideal wife to warrior queen and *Vidhushi* to stateswomen can be seen in Indian civilization. It is also elaborated in the Hindu religious scriptures that women had an honorable status in society during the Vedic age. But with time, she became a subject of protection by her father in childhood, husband at a young age, and sons in old age. The values of equality and dignity for women were gradually thrown overboard. The position of women has weakened afterward due to some internal socio-political factors, some dominant conservative attitudes in gender relations, foreign invasions, and misrepresentation of old religious texts. This idea propagated women as domestic slaves or a plaything.⁸ In the course of the

³ Virendra Pratap Yadav and Brijendra Bahadur Srivastava, "Problems and Prospects of Dalits" in *The Asian Man*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (January-June, 2010) p. 67.

⁴ Yagati Chinna Rao (Ed.), *Dividing Dalits*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2009, p. 1.

⁵ Govinda Radhika, "The politics of the marginalized: Dalits and Women's Activism in India" in *Gender and Development*, Vol. 14, No. 2, marginalized Peoples (July, 2006), p. 183.

⁶ Rehamol P R, "Political Participation of Dalit Women and Inclusive Democracy in India, a Critical Analysis" in *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, Vol. 3, Issue 4, (2017), p. 2005.

⁷ Himansu Charan Sadangi, *Dalit – The Downtrodden of India*, Delhi: Isha Books, 2008, p. 41

⁸ Aruna Asif Ali, *The Resurgence of India women*, New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1991, p.16.

medieval period, the status of women has further deteriorated. Social evils like the Sati system, purdah system, child marriage, the prohibition of widow remarriage, and depriving daughters of education came into force. It resulted in the economic dependence of women which made them politically and socially more backward.

Politics and Women in the colonial period:

With the initiation of the British rule in India, the socio-economic base began to change. The requirements of the newly educated section of the society in clerical cadre in public and commercial administration, craftsmen for manufactories, and contacts with the liberal traditions of western civilization, particularly amongst the educated elite led to a reappraisal of prevalent social evils. In the 19th century, significant socio-religious reform movements were initiated in India which added impetus to women's awakening. The social reformers reinterpreted the original religious texts while condemning social evils and supposed religious sanctions for women in Indian society. They opined that without uplifting the position of women, it was not possible to attain the all-around development of society. They even promoted widow remarriage and education for women by opening schools for the girls. Under the influence of such an approach, Lady Rani Harnam Singh of Kapurthala State started an infant welfare center at Jalandhar. Such a change took place in the socio-economic and political structure of India brought women on to the political stage as a significant segment of Indian society. In 1855, in the course of the *Santhal* revolt, the women came out to protest in large numbers. They fought very bravely, just because they were poor tribal women, hence their political activity finds hardly any mention in official history. In the course of the *sanyasi* revolt, the women '*sannyasins*' participated as an army wing against the marauding British soldiers. In the revolt of 1857, Rani of Jhansi Laxmibai, Begum Hazrat Mehal of Lucknow, and Begum Zeenat Mehal are all examples of struggling women leaders. In 1905, the movement against the partition of Bengal was initiated and we find again the women in the political arena, singing *Vande Mataram* and going out in processions to register their protest. By the second decade of the 20th century, the Indian women started organizing themselves in powerful women organizations to demand their just political rights from the British. Women's groups formed by the mass organizations involved in the course of the National Movement have taken up specific gender-related issues like domestic violence, property rights, land rights, inheritance rights.⁹ The Women's India Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 which was the first Indian women organization that demanding voting rights for Indian women. The significant members of this organization were Sarojini Naidu, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, and Hirabai Tata. They met Secretary of State Edwin Montagu to attain the right to vote for the Indian women. Their demand was later on partially recognized in the Government of India Act 1919.

⁹ Supriya Akerkar, "Theory and Practice of Women's Movement in India: A Discourse Analysis" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 17, (April 29, 1995), p. WS13.

The women's equal right to participate in politics, including their right to vote, was accepted very gracefully in India much earlier than most of the western societies conceded to this demand. The Indian women did not even have to fight for this right, unlike their western counterparts.¹⁰ In 1921 voting right was given to the women in Bombay and Madras which were followed by the women in United Province in 1923, women in Punjab and Bengal in 1926 and women in Assam, Central province, Bihar and Orissa in 1930. In 1925 Sarojini Naidu became the President of the Indian National Congress and under her able guidance, the women all over the country organized themselves to work for their judicious rights. Mahatma Gandhi also gave support for the political rights of women. Now the Indian women got the right to vote and the right to be elected. Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins demanded from the government that the women should be granted the same rights as that of the men in the legislatures. The British government predictably considered this demand as quite preposterous because in their views many of the western countries had not yet given the right to vote to women and they argued that in a society like India, where the *purdah* system and sanctions on women education are in practice, how it is possible to provide equal political rights to the women in such a society. The British skirted this issue to the state legislatures while assuming that it will not be accepted at the provincial level to give the women equal political rights.¹¹

By 1930 a split was visible in the women's movement between those who were aligned to the Congress and others not involved in nationalist activities. The Congress group adopted an 'equal rights demand' whereas the others too on the 'women uplift demand. The Indian National Congress in its Karachi session in 1931 passed a resolution on "Declaration of Fundamental Rights" which included women in its guarantee for equality. In 1931, the British government appointed Indian Franchise Committee popularly known as Lothian Committee to make an idea regarding franchise rights to the Indians. All India Women's Conference submitted the memorandum which was passed in the Karachi session of Indian National Congress based on equal rights perspective. Total 311 witnesses were given before the Lothian Committee out of which 29 were women and 17 supported equal rights for men and women. The Communal Award of August 1932 explicitly applied communal principles to women's franchise and representation. While passing this Award, a justification was given that the British are not in favor to have women members only from one community which they presumed as the Hindu.¹² The women organizations in India gave a joint representation to the Joint Select Committee of the British Parliament in London in March 1933. The issue of the joint electorate was again the point of disagreement. The joint committee on the Indian Constitution published its report in October 1934 and most of its suggestions were incorporated in the Government of India

¹⁰ MadhuKishwar, "Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 43 (October 26, 1996), pp. 2867-68.

¹¹ MadhuKishwar, "Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 43 (October 26, 1996), p. 2868.

¹² Jana MatsonEverett, *Women and Social Change in India*, New Delhi: Heritage publishers, 1985, pp. 123-24

Act 1935 with some minor changes. The application requirements for those women who had already got the franchise right through wifehood qualification in provincial assemblies were eliminated and the literacy was replaced with educational qualifications for women in five provinces. Wifehood qualifications were the primary mechanism for female enfranchisement and now 41 seats allocated among the communities were reserved for women. It was decided to have no discrimination based on sex while fixing the eligibility for any fundamental right.¹³ In the election of 1937, 8 women from common constituencies and 42 women from reserved constituencies got elected. These were still the elitist organizations and leaders who had raised the voice for property rights and reforms in marriage laws related only to a limited group of women. 1937 elections were fought on this basis and the women won 56 seats. The constituent assembly was also elected on the same basis. This movement initiated by the women in India for franchise right and representation came to succeed in 1950 with the adoption of the Indian constitution which guaranteed equal political rights to them and later on the seats were also reserved for them in local self-government.

It is visible in this study that the women in India since ancient times are well aware of their rights and duties. While honestly performing their duties they raised the demand for their just political rights and became the pioneer to achieve such rights even to their counterpart in many western countries. It was their wisdom and the strength seen in the colonial period which proved helpful for them to attain more rights in independent India and it is sure that soon they will get even more political rights in the coming times.

¹³ Jana MatsonEverett, *Women and Social Change in India*, New Delhi: Heritage publishers, 1985, pp. 132-33.