

Reimagining Political Activism Through Gender in Colonial and Postcolonial India

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Abstract—This paper investigates the connection between gender and political activism in colonial and postcolonial India, examining the significant role played by women and gendered identities in nationalist, anti-colonial, feminist, and subaltern movements from the nineteenth century to the present. It contends that women's participation in political struggles was not simply secondary to nationalist agendas; instead, gender became a crucial arena through which issues of colonial domination, social reform, nationalism, and citizenship were debated and redefined.

Adopting an interdisciplinary historical perspective informed by feminist historiography, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies, the study analyzes women's involvement in social reform campaigns, Gandhian movements, revolutionary politics, anti-caste activism, post-independence feminist organizations, and contemporary forms of resistance. The paper also argues that although colonial and postcolonial states created certain opportunities for women's political engagement, they continued to sustain patriarchal structures in different forms.

By exploring both continuities and changes in political cultures across the colonial and postcolonial periods, the study demonstrates how women activists reshaped discussions surrounding rights, citizenship, caste, labour, sexuality, and democratic participation. In doing so, the paper contributes to existing historiography by emphasizing intersectional perspectives, regional variations, and the recovery of marginalized women's voices and experiences within Indian history.

I. INTRODUCTION

Histories of political activism in India have often been written from a male-centered perspective, focusing primarily on elite nationalist leaders, constitutional developments, and processes of state formation. In such narratives, women are frequently depicted as symbolic figures representing the nation rather than as independent political actors. Feminist

historians and gender scholars, however, have critically revised this view by showing that women actively participated in anti-colonial struggles, social reform initiatives, labour movements, anti-caste mobilizations, and democratic politics in post-independence India. Their scholarship highlights women as key contributors to India's political transformations rather than marginal participants.

The link between gender and political activism in India developed within the broader context of colonial modernity. British colonial rule reshaped existing social structures through legal interventions, census classifications, educational reforms, and the regulation of personal laws. At the same time, Indian reformers and nationalist thinkers placed the "woman question" at the center of debates on civilization, modernity, and national identity. Controversies surrounding practices such as sati, widow remarriage, women's education, suffrage, and domestic roles became closely tied to nationalist discourse and anti-colonial politics.

This study explores how gender functioned simultaneously as a system of control and as a foundation for resistance in both colonial and postcolonial India. It traces the trajectory of women's political engagement from nineteenth-century reformist movements to contemporary feminist activism. It also examines how factors such as caste, class, religion, and region shaped women's political experiences and forms of agency. Rather than presenting women's participation as a simple progression toward emancipation, the paper argues that it was shaped by continuous negotiation with patriarchal structures embedded in both colonial administration and nationalist ideology.

The paper is structured into seven sections. The first discusses feminist historiography and theoretical frameworks. The second focuses on gender and social reform in colonial India. The third examines

women's involvement in nationalist and revolutionary movements. The fourth analyzes questions of gender and citizenship within constitutional debates. The fifth explores feminist politics and state relations in postcolonial India. The sixth addresses subaltern and intersectional movements. The final section reflects on contemporary developments and ongoing historiographical discussions on gender and political activism.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The historiography of gender and political activism in India has undergone significant transformation since the 1970s. Early nationalist historiography celebrated exceptional women leaders while neglecting broader structures of gendered oppression. Women appeared primarily as symbols of sacrifice, motherhood, and patriotic virtue. Feminist historians criticized these narratives for reproducing patriarchal assumptions and excluding ordinary women from political history. Subaltern Studies scholars further challenged elite-centric historiography by foregrounding marginalized voices and everyday forms of resistance. However, feminist scholars also critiqued Subaltern Studies for insufficiently theorizing gender. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued that the "subaltern woman" remained doubly marginalized within colonial and nationalist discourse. The famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" exposed how elite narratives appropriated women's voices while claiming to represent them.

Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the "inner" and "outer" domains of nationalism remains influential in understanding gendered nationalism in colonial India. According to Chatterjee, nationalist discourse preserved the domestic sphere as the repository of authentic Indian culture while accepting colonial modernity in the public sphere. Women thus became symbolic bearers of national tradition.

Padma Anagol critiques the "imperialism-nationalism paradigm" for privileging male nationalist politics while obscuring women's agency. She argues for a re-periodization of Indian history that recognizes women's activism beyond nationalist frameworks. Feminist historiography has since expanded to include labour histories, oral testimonies, sexuality studies, Dalit feminism, queer activism, and regional

political cultures.

Intersectionality has become central to contemporary scholarship on gender and political activism. Scholars increasingly emphasize that "woman" is not a homogeneous category.

Caste, religion, class, ethnicity, and sexuality profoundly shaped political experiences. Dalit feminists particularly criticized upper-caste feminist narratives for ignoring caste oppression within nationalist and feminist movements.

Postcolonial feminist theory further interrogates the relationship between colonial discourse and gender. Colonial administrators frequently justified imperial intervention through claims of "saving" Indian women from indigenous patriarchy. This "civilizing mission" simultaneously erased women's own political voices while legitimizing colonial domination.

III. GENDER, SOCIAL REFORM, AND COLONIAL MODERNITY

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of social reform movements that placed women at the center of debates about civilization and modernity. Colonial officials and Indian reformers alike identified practices such as sati, child marriage, female infanticide, and restrictions on widow remarriage as markers of Indian backwardness.

Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated the abolition of sati and promoted women's education. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned for widow remarriage, while Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule challenged caste and gender hierarchies through educational activism. Savitribai Phule's work remains particularly significant because it linked women's emancipation with anti-caste struggle, thereby prefiguring later intersectional feminist politics.

Colonial reforms, however, were deeply ambivalent. While British authorities claimed to advance women's rights, colonial governance often strengthened patriarchal institutions through legal codification and community-based personal laws. Feminist historians have shown that colonialism did not simply liberate women from indigenous patriarchy; rather, it transformed and institutionalized new forms of gender control.

Women's education became a crucial site of political

negotiation. Reformers promoted female literacy to produce “modern” wives and mothers capable of nurturing nationalist households. Education did not necessarily imply gender equality; instead, it frequently reinforced domestic ideals. Nonetheless, educational access enabled many women to enter public life and articulate political demands.

Muslim women reformers such as Begum Rokeya challenged both colonial stereotypes and patriarchal restrictions within Muslim society. Rokeya advocated female education and critiqued purdah practices while envisioning emancipatory futures for women.

The reform era also witnessed the emergence of women’s organizations and journals. Elite women increasingly participated in literary societies, educational associations, and philanthropic activities. Although often constrained by class and caste privilege, these initiatives laid the foundation for later feminist activism.

IV. WOMEN AND ANTI-COLONIAL NATIONALISM

The anti-colonial movement significantly expanded women’s participation in public politics. Mahatma Gandhi played a transformative role by mobilizing women in mass nationalist campaigns such as Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India. Gandhi portrayed women as embodiments of moral strength, sacrifice, and nonviolence, thereby legitimizing their participation in nationalist struggle. Thousands of women participated in protests, picketing, boycotts, and prison satyagrahas during the Civil Disobedience Movement. Activists such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali emerged as prominent political leaders.

However, Gandhian mobilization remained gendered. Women’s participation was often justified through maternalist language emphasizing sacrifice, purity, and service. Nationalist discourse celebrated women as symbolic mothers of the nation while limiting challenges to patriarchal family structures.

Revolutionary and militant movements offered alternative political spaces. Women in Bengal, Punjab, and Maharashtra participated in underground nationalist networks, revolutionary organizations, and armed resistance. Kalpana Datta and Pritilata Waddadar challenged conventional gender norms

through militant activism.

Women also participated in peasant and labour movements linked to anti-colonial struggle. Tribal women, agricultural labourers, and factory workers engaged in strikes, protests, and anti-tax campaigns. Yet their contributions often remained absent from elite nationalist historiography.

Communist and socialist movements introduced new frameworks for understanding gender and class exploitation. Leftist women activists organized workers, challenged landlordism, and criticized bourgeois nationalism. Nevertheless, patriarchal attitudes persisted within radical political organizations themselves.

V. GENDERED CITIZENSHIP AND CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

During the late colonial era, debates on suffrage, citizenship, and political representation gained significant momentum. Women activists increasingly demanded electoral rights, legal equality, and formal inclusion within constitutional frameworks. Organizations such as the All-India Women’s Conference played a key role in articulating and advancing these demands for political recognition.

Anupama Roy notes that discussions on women’s enfranchisement exposed underlying contradictions between nationalist ideology, feminist aspirations, colonial authority, and conservative social thinking. While some nationalist leaders supported extending voting rights to women, others resisted the idea, fearing that political equality might unsettle existing social hierarchies and family institutions.

In contrast to many Western democracies where suffrage was gradually extended, independent India adopted universal adult franchise immediately after 1950. This marked a significant democratic departure in a deeply unequal social structure. The Constitution of India guaranteed equality before law, non-discrimination, and equal political rights irrespective of gender.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, real social equality remained limited. Laws governing marriage, inheritance, and family relations continued to reflect patriarchal assumptions. The debates surrounding the Hindu Code reforms revealed strong resistance from conservative groups to changes in women’s legal status.

B. R. Ambedkar explicitly connected caste oppression with gender inequality, arguing that the liberation of women required the dismantling of Brahmanical patriarchy. His constitutional vision placed social justice at its core, enabling later movements of Dalit women to emerge at the intersection of caste and gender struggles.

VI. POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST ACTIVISM

In the decades following independence, women's activism in India developed through both continuity with earlier patterns and significant transformation. The early postcolonial period was largely shaped by state-led development policies, with many women's organizations functioning within welfare-oriented frameworks aligned with government initiatives.

A major shift occurred in the 1970s, when women's movements became more independent and openly critical of state structures. Campaigns against dowry-related deaths, custodial violence, domestic abuse, and systemic oppression led to the emergence of an autonomous feminist movement. Groups such as Saheli, Vimochana, and the Forum Against Oppression of Women became central in challenging gender-based violence and demanding legal reforms. The Mathura rape case (1972) became a turning point in feminist legal activism. Widespread protests questioned judicial interpretations of consent and sexual violence, eventually influencing major reforms in rape and custodial violence laws.

The Emergency period (1975–77) further highlighted the authoritarian dimensions of the postcolonial state. Women participated actively in struggles for civil liberties, workers' rights, and democratic freedoms. Feminist analysis increasingly recognized that state power itself could reproduce gendered forms of oppression.

The Naxalite movement also revealed the complex intersection of gender and class struggle. Although women participated actively in revolutionary politics, their contributions were often underrepresented in mainstream historical accounts.

Grassroots environmental and social movements expanded feminist politics in new directions. The Chipko movement demonstrated women's leadership in ecological resistance, while anti-liquor campaigns led by rural women addressed domestic violence as well as state economic policies.

VII. CASTE, RELIGION, AND INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM

Contemporary scholarship increasingly uses intersectionality to analyze women's political activism. Dalit feminism emerged as a critique of both mainstream feminist discourse and caste-based political systems. Dalit women activists argued that dominant feminist frameworks often ignored caste violence, economic exploitation, and sexual oppression faced by marginalized communities.

Writers such as Bama and Urmila Pawar foregrounded the lived realities of Dalit women, challenging universalized ideas of womanhood and exposing deep structural inequalities within Indian society.

Muslim women's activism has similarly questioned both patriarchal norms and communal stereotypes. Events such as the Shah Bano case and debates on the Uniform Civil Code exposed tensions between gender justice, minority rights, and secular constitutionalism.

Adivasi women's movements have linked gender struggles with issues of land rights, displacement, and environmental destruction. These movements often confront both state repression and exploitative development policies.

Queer and transgender activism has broadened the scope of gender politics in contemporary India. LGBTQ+ movements challenge heteronormative assumptions embedded in nationalist and patriarchal ideologies. Legal changes such as the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018 and ongoing struggles for transgender rights reflect evolving understandings of citizenship and equality.

VIII. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SHIFTS

Recent feminist historiography has moved beyond elite political narratives to recover everyday resistance through oral histories, autobiographical writings, prison narratives, and vernacular sources. Scholars now increasingly emphasize regional diversity, non-elite participation, and the emotional dimensions of political life.

Digital platforms have reshaped feminist activism in contemporary India. Movements such as #MeTooIndia, anti-caste online networks, and student

protests demonstrate the continued importance of gender in political mobilization. At the same time, digital spaces also reflect rising misogyny, communal polarization, and surveillance practices.

The rise of Hindu nationalism has intensified debates around gender, citizenship, and secularism. Women's bodies and identities continue to serve as symbolic sites of political contestation, raising concerns about the appropriation of feminist language for exclusionary political agendas.

Current historiography increasingly adopts transnational, comparative, and decolonial perspectives, situating Indian feminist struggles within broader global histories of colonialism, capitalism, and resistance.

IX. CONCLUSION

The history of gender and political activism in India demonstrates that women have been central actors in shaping modern political processes. They participated actively in anti-colonial movements, constitutional debates, labour struggles, caste-based mobilizations, feminist campaigns, and democratic resistance.

Colonial rule restructured gender relations through legal reforms, education, and nationalist discourse, while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal systems in new forms. Nationalist politics expanded women's participation but often confined them within symbolic roles rooted in domesticity and motherhood. Postcolonial democracy established formal equality, yet structural inequalities based on caste, class, religion, and sexuality continued to persist.

Feminist historiography has fundamentally reshaped understandings of Indian history by challenging male-dominated narratives and recovering marginalized voices. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that gender must be analyzed alongside intersecting structures of caste, class, religion, and region.

Persistent inequality and gender-based violence in present-day India show that the struggles initiated in the colonial era remain unresolved. At the same time, ongoing feminist and intersectional movements continue to redefine democracy, citizenship, and political resistance. Ultimately, the history of gender and political activism in India is also a history of how politics itself has been continuously reimagined.

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