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## THE INITIAL FOOTPRINTS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN MYSORE

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**Abstract:** Nationalism implies an awareness of Rights, development of consciousness, and a movement for establishing cultural identity. In this paper an attempt is made to trace the first steps of empowerment of women and also the foundations of a feminist movement which was going to emerge as a strong force after independence. Here women's question is discussed in the context of Karnataka with special reference to the Princely state of Mysore. Modern education created a new awakening and social legislations provided certain benefits to women. The first footprints of empowerment can be traced when women started working as journalists and entered legislatures. Freedom movement provided opportunities for women to emerge as political leaders. As a result a small group of women became the crucial beneficiaries of colonial modernity. Amidst all these developments, we can still find many unheard voices of women which still deserve proper recording in History.

**Keywords** Emerging Leadership, Freedom Movement, Modern education, Social Legislation, Unheard voices, Women Empowerment

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Nationalism or nationalist struggle implies an awareness of Rights, development of consciousness, and a movement for establishing cultural identity. "We must see this nationalism as part of a social, intellectual and moral revolution of which the aspirations to democracy and personal freedom are also products"<sup>[1]</sup>. We have to put the question of 'Women' in this broader, multi-dimensional context of Nationalist struggle. In this paper I have tried to trace the first steps of empowerment of women and also the foundations of a feminist movement which was going to emerge as a strong force after independence. Here, I have taken Women's question in the context of Karnataka with special reference to the Princely State of Mysore within the theoretical nationalistic framework.

### **New Awakening – Reform – Modern Education and Social Legislation**

Throughout nineteenth century women's question occupied very important issue in national debates because of the justification policy of the British. James Mill's writing on Indian history upheld the question of women. According to him 'Women', 'Modernity' and 'Nation' became essential and inseparable elements in a discourse of civilization. For the colonial rulers, the 'atrocities' practiced against women in India became at once a confirmation of their own modernity and a moral ground on which their 'civilising mission' could be launched. The Indian Reform Movement which had imbibed the impact of the British Rule on the one side and as a reaction to it on the other brought women's issue to the forefront. The reformists tried to answer the British critiques on two lines- on the one side they continued the Orientalist approach and justified that women had superior position in the earlier times. On the other they wanted reforms to improve the contemporary situation.

As a part of their civilizing mission the British introduced several legislations for the abolition of Sati, Age of Consent Bill, Widow Remarriage Act etc., Anyway the social reform movement addressed selectively the issues that affected high caste and upper class women and invoked change under the broad definition of 'Hindu Practice'. Brahminisation of marriage and other institutions impacted disastrously on the customary rights of low caste women and on their marriage practices. Anyway these developments highlight "the contradictory and dynamic processes of gender – definition that were linked, inextricably, with the colonial - nationalist encounter and which were to play a key - role in the embryonic moment of nation - formation."<sup>[2]</sup>

Female education is the most important among the women's issues that were taken up by colonial India. The development of modern education gave rise to a New male Elite, as a result there was a concern for creating a female counter part of the New Elite, the New Women, who would share sensibilities of men in the family and would be able to sustain their new class roles. The educated urban elite men "internalized Victorian attitudes towards women vital for the development of the right kind of Bhadra Mahila or Bengali Gentle Women"<sup>[3]</sup>. Education should inculcate 'orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy... the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world"<sup>[4]</sup>. New women should also develop virtues such as 'Chastity, self - sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love.' This was the creation of new femininity which was to be internalized through the decades to come.

Anyway the colonial education, administrative discipline, scientific discovery, and altogether a different lifestyle had a deep impact on all classes of

the society. People of all classes started finding different ways to free themselves from different exploitative systems.

The Princely State of Mysore also introduced female education and other similar social legislations. As a result a small group of elite women became the crucial beneficiaries of colonial modernity. They got access to education, employment as well as to aspire to political leadership. "On the other hand, the recasting of patriarchy in the image of high caste and upper class norms meant that the large mass of women were left out, not only from the benefits of modernity, but also deprived of their traditional rights and freedom"<sup>[5]</sup>.

#### **The first foot prints of women's Empowerment – Women as the first journalists, first working women and as members of legislatures**

Of course within a limited fold early educated elite women started taking up career as teachers in female educational institutions. It was of course inevitable because for girls schools if men were allowed to teach no one would have sent their daughters to the school. Smt. Puttalakshamma (wife of Venkatakrishnaiah) and her daughter Bhagirathamma taught as teachers in Maharani's School of Mysore. In 1890, Smt. Puttalakshamma delivered a speech in Town Hall which is a clear indication of women entering public spheres<sup>[6]</sup>. Later Smt. K.D. Rukminiamma and Smt. Srirangamma, became the first two lady graduates. Rukminiamma served as the Lady Superintendent of Maharani's College and Srirangamma became the Deputy Director of Public Instruction. Both of them played an important role in fostering girls education. Interestingly Rukminiamma was for English as a medium of instruction instead of vernacular at the secondary stage<sup>[7]</sup>.

Tirumalamba and Kalyanamma were the earliest women journalists. 'Saraswathi', 'Vidyadayini' of Kalyanamma and 'Karnataka Nandini', 'Sanmarga Darshini' of Tirumalamba voiced the ideas of these two lady journalists. Both of them were against early marriage, they propagated education for girls. Of course Tirumalamba's views on education were to produce ideal new woman who would fit into a new patriarchal framework. She insisted upon the inculcation of moral values. But Kalyanamma wanted more mundane skills like nursing and baby care.

In 1930 a landmark was achieved when women members made an entry into the Representative Assembly. Kamalamma Dasappa, Secretary, Mahila Seva Samaj, Bangalore and Sakamma, President, Kuruhinashetty Sangha, Bangalore – represented Women's interests and made suggestions to improve the position of women. In the budget session of 1936 K.D. Rukminiamma deplored the lack of better education facilities for women and urged the government to take special interest for the

advancement of women. Kalyanamma went a step further by making a plea for providing provision for women for all appointments in the state in the medical and education departments. Thus women legislative members were giving constructive suggestions for the progress of female education in the State.

#### **The Role of Samajas in the Economic and Social Empowerment of Women**

Another notable development was the rise of Women's Organisations which became 'critical training grounds for women, allowing them access to education and their first experience with public work'<sup>[8]</sup>. There were innumerable Mahila Samajas. *Akkana Balaga* of Bijapur, *Bhagini Seva Samaj*, *Mahila Sadana* in Mysore, *Mahila Samaj*, *Sharada Stree Samaj*, *Basavanagudi Ladies Club* in Bangalore. The samajas concentrated upon educational training of those women who needed it badly but being too old could not go to the schools. Fortunately, it was possible for women to sit privately for the seventh and S.S.L.C. examinations. These coaching classes taught Kannada, English, Sanskrit and Hindi, Science, Mathematics, History and Geography, Young daughters joined their mothers in learning new languages like Hindi and Sanskrit. Mahila Samajas helped the needy to learn some craft or the other and earn money. There were tailoring, embroidery, classes, mat-weaving, doll making, Type Writing classes. During the National Movement Mahila Samajas took up Khadi work. Mahila Samaja in Mysore became a branch of All India Women's Conference. Parvathamma Chandra Shekhar Iyer, its founder was one of the delegates who met Montague in 1917. She organized a deputation of Ladies in Mysore and met the Dewan in 1920 and pleaded for the enfranchisement of women<sup>[9]</sup>. Anyway the Samajas became the cultural centers and offered scope for a woman's personality to develop.

The Kasturaba Trust of Yashodhara Dasappa worked as an economic empowerment centre for the downtrodden women. This trust worked in the most backward villages. Two famous women leaders of Isoor incident Govindamma and Eswaramma who were given the life imprisonment after their release got shelter in the trust. They were given necessary education and training in social work. Later on they served Isoor and Budanoor villages as Grama Sevakas. The Trust aimed at the setting up of Balavadis, imparting female education, development of home industry and providing midwifery service for pregnant in the remote places. This is indeed a great step forward in the emancipation of women.

**Emerging Leadership :** The Gandhian movement forged linkages with the peasants, workers and women's organizations in order to demonstrate the mass support. Now women's political participation

was socially legitimized. Gandhiji 'Feminized' nationalist political through his emphasis on satyagraha and passive resistance and thus created a special space for women. As a result middle class women derived many social benefits. Within the moral framework of nationalist movement, they were able to redefine gender roles.

In Karnataka many women rose as leaders with unstinted commitment to their ideology. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Yashodhara Dasappa, Umabai and others. Karmal Devi became a national level leader. She was the Chief Secretary of All India Women's Conference and later became its president. She was the first lady to contest for the legislative council in 1926. Yashodhara was so much committed to the Congress ideology that she voted against her husband openly.<sup>[10]</sup> This is an example of growth of strong personality and leadership.

**Unheard Voices :** The ideas, emotions and subconscious impulses constitute in their totality the mentality of a given society. The shared ideas, submitted sentiments and repressed wishes constitute the mentality of a particular culture<sup>[11]</sup>. An emotional fervour swept throughout the country during the Gandhian movement affecting different sections of society in one way or the other. We can find many voices which still deserve proper recording in the history.

In the Princely State of Mysore the upper caste / class women participated directly in the nationalist struggle within the ideal framework of nationalist politics. But women from lower strata also started participating in nationalist programs such as No. Tax campaign, Charaka movement, Prohibition, Forest Satyagraha so on. For them the movement opened new vistas for getting their individual freedom. In this way the participation of women from different strata of society reflects their attempt to find ways for their social salvation. Such participation is

represented in the history records only as collective representation in terms of numbers. Eg. in 1927 August there was a public meeting held at the Glass House in Lalbagh. Here the Bangaloreans gave Rs. 6,000 for Khadi fund to Gandhiji. In this meeting out of 8000 people, 2000 were women.

Many touching humane experiences projecting the strong commitment of low caste women to the nationalist fervour are found mentioned in the writing of contemporary freedom fighters. In the writings of Belegere Krishnashastry we find an interesting character of Paravva, a devadasi from Gokak who unfurled the tricolour flag on the public office and had to undergo imprisonment. Later on inspite of her stinching poverty she refused to take freedom fighters pension<sup>[12]</sup>. This is the strong voice from the culture of the soil. The folk literature reflects the nationalist values which had penetrated into the household realm creating an emotional nationalistic atmosphere. These women were even aware of the economic impact of the British Rule. Anyway nationalistic struggle can not be limited to a particular time frame. It is a continuous process a struggle for establishing the political and cultural identity, fighting for political rights, struggle to free themselves from exploitative systems and so on. Such unheard struggles of lower strata of society deserves greater research and proper placing in the historical studies. Dalit and Tribal movements are good examples.

To sum up we can say, the seeds of feminism were sown during the colonial period. It started sprouting during the nationalist struggle. The first wave of feminist movement was intertwined with the political struggle. It was a period of organisation and mobilization of women and remarkable unity was achieved of course at the cost of major social and ideological exclusions. Anyway it gave firm foundation for the second phase of feminist movement to come.

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