

Feminism and Muslim Nationalism in British India: A Study in Mutual Relations

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The changes that took place after the advent of colonialism in subcontinent radically transformed the Indian society particularly with reference to women's status and rights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The introduction of political institutions, modern education, legal and revenue systems, and improved means of communications on western model forced various Indian communities not only to guard their distinct identity but also demanding a change in their attitudes and outlook to keep themselves up with the pace of changing nature of new environment. Resultantly, social reform movements had ensued in the second half of nineteenth century. As the new political system had taken roots, feminist movement also emerged on Indian political scene in twentieth century. The introduction of constitutional reforms (of 1909, 1919 and 1935) forced Muslim community to formulate strategy for the protection of its political rights. The rise of Muslim nationalism coupled with the demand for a separate Muslim state necessitated the recruitment of women to support the cause. The active participation of Muslim women in the nationalist movement relegated their feminist movement and subordinated feminist interests to nationalist cause.

The political wind that was blown in pre-partition India was so strong that the question of women's rights was swept away

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with.¹ The feminist agenda was submerged in the movement for separate Muslim identity and struggle for Pakistan. However, the by-product of this movement was the milieu in which the Muslim women were able to break the centuries old bondage of traditions that kept them in the confines of home as non-entity and an opening to public sphere. There were different viewpoints on the issue of how women were incorporated into Muslim nationalism. A positive view,² projected in a study, draw a distinction between Islamic modernists and Islamic traditionalists in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in India. While the later is a conservative approach, the former is a social reformist advocated measures such as modern education to increase the social and economic position of Muslim in India. The Islamic modernists were important supporters of women's education and generally served "to evolve a socially progressive ethos which was particularly relevant for women."³ Muslim nationalism was a movement in which many women participated, shattered the traditional rules and roles, loosing restrictions on gender segregation and seclusion.⁴ On the whole they gained the experience of practical politics. This type and level of consciousness was affordable to their men, because they were fighting for their men beyond that — "the struggle for their rights — was not acceptable to men that created a direct confrontation with them. It seems that women's enfranchisement and the right to education were the need of the time rather than an actual acceptance of the oppressed conditions of all women, on the other hand men wanted to use women's these rights for the support of nationalist struggle. On the question of women's rights — like right to inheritance, end to dowry and resolution of polygamy — men had not paid heeds.

In contrast the other view suggests this political participation in the Muslim nationalist movement did not have a lasting impact on

1 Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Right in India, 1800-1990*, Kali for Women, (New Delhi: n.p., 1993), pp.93-94.

2 Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed. *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987).

3 *Ibid.*, p.6

4 *Ibid.*, p.47.

the lives of the majority of Pakistani women.⁵ This view argues that the symbolism used in the struggle for Pakistan and for Muslim identity created contradictions that strengthened conventional attitudes towards women. The experience of political participation of Indian Muslim women during the nationalist struggle with their men did not bring a “qualitative change in their lives”, however it was in itself a breathtaking experience. It did not undermine the conventional attitudes but caused them to be “reasserted with a fresh vengeance.”⁶ It opined that women were called upon in the time of crisis, ignoring the social norms and when the crisis is over women were forced again to go back to the precinct of home — to the private world. In the nationalist discourse, in which a distinct cultural identity was asserted, “the figure of women” was projected “as representative of the true self.”⁷

Another view⁸ visualizes no much difference in the arguments of Islamic modernists and traditionalists and Muslim nationalists with regard to women. It argues that there was actually a convergence of discourses among these different approaches with regard to women. All three advocated education for women in order to better prepare them for traditional roles and all emphasized that Islamic identity was to be maintained in the private realm of the family. Within nationalisms struggling against colonial powers women are portrayed as mothers, serving the family and home, and supporting the nation through self-sacrifice, by dressing properly, by remaining virtuous. However, it can be observed that, while women are mobilized in national struggles, nationalism is based on notions of brotherhood, masculine ideals and aspirations, and male subjects.⁹ Despite all these assertions and reservation women

5 Ayesha Jalal, “The Convenience of Subservience: Women and the State of Pakistan,” in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and State*, (London: n.p., 1991).

6 *Ibid.*, p.85.

7 R. Radhakrishnan, “Nationalism, Gender and the Narrative of Identity,” in Andrew Parker and *et al.*, eds., *Nationalism and Sexualities*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.84.

8 Shahnaz Rouse, “Discourses on Gender in Pakistan; Convergence and Contradiction,” in Douglas Alien, ed., *Regional and Political Conflict in South Asia*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992).

9 George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*, (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985); Andrew Parker and *et al.*, “Introduction,” in Andrew Parker and *et al.*, eds., p.6.

gained a confidence and political skill from the independence movement.

The incomplete social transformation initiated by British colonial rule, male dominance continued as a basic principle in the organization of formal social setup inside or outside the home. It developed the notion that activity in the household should be contained in personal and private spheres, properly separated from the public and the political. Consequently, it started a "long-term process of formal de-politicization of women."¹⁰ This de-politicization took place in India as political structures and ideologies of the state altered under colonial rule. Unlike pre-colonial predecessors, colonial state had not recognized a role for kinship in governance, so in political process the feminine element was absent. Men carefully guarded any appearance of women on the political scene. The norms of honour of individual man were embodied in the social convention that masculine control of feminine energy was essential for well being in both domains, public and private. Even though individual women could be wealthy and powerful, even though religio-political norms gave importance to women and femininity in the organization and empowerment of state, masculine honour and authority were partly dependent on control over women. The changes in the socio-political structures shaped the political discourse for women in colonial India. The consolidation of British rule in India resulted in the establishment of a centralized and bureaucratic regime whose principles of organization were strongly at odd with the women's entry in the public spheres. The Indo-Victorian model of the woman as the 'domestic angle of the house,' ever submissive and supportive of the efforts and career of her husband was projected.¹¹ The model woman was uncluttered, orderly, suitably educated, devoted to serve her husband and has duty of upbringing her children and obedient to her husband and a buttress of the emerging nation. Accordingly, woman has no place in new state structure and ousted from the political arena.

10 Pamela G. Price, Honor, "Disgrace and the Formal Depoliticization of Women in South India; Changing Structures of the State under Colonial Rule." in *Gender and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 2- August 1994. p.246.

11 *Ibid.*

Under the colonial economy a new Indian bourgeoisie emerged that felt the need to get modern-Western education. In the initial phase of modernization a very small portion of the men had received some education in the government school and colleges or educational institutions opened by the Christian missionaries and other private agencies. The system of education that was introduced by British Government in India was basically aimed at to train the men to feed the administrative machine.¹² However, the reform movements changed the outlook of men towards women. English education and Western ideas have played an important part in engendering this change. In the late nineteenth century Muslim circles were not ready to accept the new emerging outlook towards women. While urging Muslim men to Western education and jobs in the colonial government, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan—late nineteenth century social reformer—remained obstinately opposed to women's education outside the religious mode and prescribed for them only traditional education.¹³ Nevertheless, very little attention had been paid to further the education of Indian Muslim women. The socio-educational reforms movements that were started with the consolidation of colonial empire in India have defined the women's political discourse in the first half of the twentieth century that was, however, lopsided. The political consciousness was not meant for women's political empowerment but men to having fulfilled nationalist interests used it for.

The second half of nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century witnessed the appearance of feminist campaigns that were remained in the liberal- feminist premise. These feminist movements were striving to get equal rights for women as a category of human beings, within the existing socio-political structures. The feminist movements for rights accepted the gender differences and therefore, their roles, functions, aims and desires were different. Consequently, they had to be brought up and treated differently. Over the time, this gender difference was itself put forwarded as a major reason for reforming women conditions. This

12 Lajpat Rai, *A History of the Arya Samaj*, quoted in Radha Kumar, p.21.

13 Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, *Muslim Women's Role in the Pakistan Movement*, (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1981), p.6.

diversity in gender composition, reformers argued, made women socially useful and hence, proper care for their conditions was a social necessity. "As women themselves joined campaigns and formed their own organizations, this point of difference, being as mother, was again stressed, but this time as an argument for women's rights, to speech, education and emancipation."¹⁴

The Muslim modernist movement that was started during 1870s was predominantly male oriented. The forces of modernization forced Muslim community to readjust and redefine its value system. Initially, growing awareness among the Indian women was confined to common issues like education, health care and struggle against social evils, without the communal consideration.¹⁵ In the second decade of twentieth century first attempt were made for setting up all-India women's organizations. The earliest women organizations were urban and sectarian. From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century they were followed by local or regional women organizations.¹⁶ One of the first attempts coming together on a larger scale was made in 1908, when *Mahila Parishad* or Ladies' Congress was held at Madras, attended women from all over South India.¹⁷ Two years later, in 1910, Sarala Debi formed the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* with intention of forming an all-India women's organization, with 'the object of bringing together women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interest in the moral material progress of women in India.'¹⁸ However, the organization did not achieve all-India character and remained mainly limited to Lahore, Allahabad and Calcutta. These early women's organizations were basically established on non-communal basis.¹⁹ At the start, these women's organization struggled for reforms in social sector; gradually they were broadening their scope of activity and

14 Radha Kumar, p.2.

15 Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women: 1920-1947*, (Karachi: Oxford, 2000), p.168.

16 See for detail, Radha Kumar, p.54.

17 *Ibid.* and Sita Ram Singh, pp.206-7.

18 Radha Kumar, p.54.

19 *Ibid.*

expanding “in practice the feminist agenda from social to political right.”²⁰

In the early twentieth century the communalization of Indian politics had started, women did not remain immune from this. The presentation of Muslim demands to Lord Minto by Simla Deputation in October 1906 and the foundation of Muslim League in December 1906 were the major steps taken towards to guard the distinctness and individuality of Muslim community. The Hindu agitation for the annulment of partition of Bengal started in 1905; Muslim’s demands for separate electorate and reservation of government jobs in 1906 and foundation of Muslim League in the same year not only increased in Hindu-Muslim tension but also aggravated competition between educated Hindu and Muslim for government jobs. To counter the Muslim’s move for identity, Hindu communalization of politics began with new vigour in which women also participated. After few months of foundation of the Muslim League, Sarala Debi and Ran Bhoj Datta founded, in 1907, in Lahore *Hindu Sahayak Sabha*, on the plea that if Muslim had communal organizations to protect their rights then Hindu must have their own organization too.²¹ Later on, *Hindu Sayak Sabhas* founded in Multan, Jhang, Sialkot, Lyallpur and Gujranwala. This communalization of politics in India has one major effect on feminist politics that it relegated the feminist issues. Congress’s politics of nationalism and Muslim League’s politics of identity had put the Indian feminism on backbenches. It had not only created a division in women but also engaged them in nationalist politics actively.

The last two decades of nineteenth century and first two decades of twentieth century were witnessed a slow and gradual change in the attitudes of Muslim men folk regarding the status and role of women. Despite the opposition of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, a consciousness for women’s education and demand for women’s relatively greater participatory role in community was growing. Regardless of socio-cultural barriers the idea of women’s education progressively gained popularity, predominantly in upper class

20 Azra Asghar Ali, p.169.

21 Radha Kumar, p.41.

Muslim families. These changes in cultural perspectives developed a new responsiveness among women and created a need for joint action, which resulted in the formulation of the first Muslim women's organization — the *Anjuman -e-Khawateen-e-Islam*.

Sir Muhammad Shafi was personality who campaigned for women's participation in different walks of life and advocated for more sweeping changes. His views regarding women's role were rather radicals and went against the established standards of Muslim society and he allowed his family women to renounce *purdah*. On Sir Shafi's initiative the *Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam* (Muslim Women's Organization) was founded in 1908 in Lahore at his residence,²² with the aim to counteract the pretensions of organizations claiming to speak for all Indian women.²³ Lady Shafi was elected its first president. The members of the *Anjuman* met occasionally in each other's homes. During these meetings they formulated proposals for the spreading of education, social reform and the rights of women under Islam. Besides working for the social and educational uplift of Muslim women, the *Anjuman's* main contribution was to popularize a new style of *burqa* patterned on the Turkish model.²⁴ The *Anjuman* claimed to represent the interests of all Muslim women, however, by the early 1930s, the *Anjuman* had practically faded into oblivion due to internal strives and lack of feminist ideology.

The Muslim reformist movement was also patronized at individual level. Many women belonged to well off, socially and politically prominent families, for instance, the famous Faizi sisters (Atiya Begum, Zuhra Begum and Nazli Begum), the Suhrawardy family of Bengal and many others took part in struggle for the uplift of Muslim women. These voluntary efforts for women education created an awakening amongst Muslim women all over the subcontinent. Women of the distinguished families began to come

22 Sarfaraz H. Mirza, p.21.

23 *Ibid.* p.21 and Ayesha Jalal, p.83.

24 Gail Minault, "Sisterhood or Separatism? The All-India Muslim Ladies Conference and the Nationalist Movement," Gail Minault, (ed.) *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, (New Delhi: Chankya Publications, 1981), pp.83-108.

out of *purdah* and take interest in the welfare of young Muslim women. In 1913, Begum of Bhopal inaugurated the Normal School for lady teachers at Aligarh, after the inauguration, a female conference were arranged which was presided over by the Begum of Bhopal. In this historic event many eminent women took part. This conference was indeed, a departure from the previous activities of Muslim women because never before had they thought of an exclusively separate gathering of themselves; it struck a new note in Muslim women's movement in the subcontinent. Later, an organization namely All India Muslim Women's Conference was set up and its office bearers were elected.²⁵ In 1917, seven years after the foundation of *Bharat Stree Mahamandal*. Mrs. Annie Basant and some other women founded Women's Indian Association. This organization could be termed as the first purely feminist organization to emerge on Indian scene. Mrs. Basant contribution was that she linked revivalism with feminine activism but the edifice of her feminine activism was built on women's self-sacrificing nature — a theme that was constant from the nineteenth century on, though it had changed in several important ways — as a source of strength. The Calcutta Congress, held in 1917, ushered a new era in feminist thinking of early twentieth century. In this forum women's role in nationalist movement was described as vital and different from that of men.²⁶ However, this role considered as supplementary rather leading. Perhaps it was making women's activism more palatable and unthreatening for patriarchal society.

Women had involved in nationalist politics, in large number, sometimes after the passage of Rowlatt Act in 1919. On the first anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh massacre, April 13, 1920, women in Bombay founded *Rashtreeya Stree Sabha*, the first organization devoted solely to nationalist activism. Later many women activists participated in organizational and activist politics.²⁷ The conclusion of First World War put disastrous impact on Ottoman Empire

25 Muhammad Amin Zubairi, *Muslim Khawateen ki Taalim*, (Urdu) (Karachi: n.p., 1956), p.128.

26 Radha Kumar, p.57.

27 *Ibid.*, pp.64-72.

particularly and for the Muslim world generally. Allied powers' treatment of Turkey shocked Muslims of India. They were bent upon the complete annihilation of the Ottoman Khilafat. In order to force British Government to change its attitude towards Turkey, an organized agitation was launched in the subcontinent, known as Khilafat Movement. The Khilafat Movement followed by civil disobedience movement seems to mark the time when nationalist began to consciously organize women. In the critical days of the Movement when Muslim leaders were in jail, Muslim women entered the political field under the leadership of Abadi Begum, the mother of Ali Brothers, commonly known as Bi Amman. With her sons in jail, she kept alive the fervour for the Khilafat Movement. She toured the country addressed large gatherings of people who gathered together to hear her. Bi Amman's active participation in politics had greatly influenced the future role of Muslim Women in fulfilling the wider agenda of Muslim's nationalist politics.

The Women's Suffragist Movement in British India

The colonial power was started to conduct the experiment of natives' representation in representative institutions at local level. To this end, for the first time in India, in 1882 election were held for local government though the process was controlled and limited. Before entering in political arena, the activities of Muslim women leaders, in the second half of nineteenth and first two decades of twentieth centuries, reflected their concern for education and social reforms. The vanguards of Muslim women's movement were the women belonged to particular and influential Muslim families.²⁸ However, the question of women enfranchisement was first raised in 1917 when a women delegation comprising of different women organizations, including Muslim women, Bi Amman and Begum Hasart Mohani, organized by an Irish suffragette, Margaret Gillespie Cousins, who was living in India at that time, and led by Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, waited upon the committee headed by Secretary of State for India E.S. Montagu and Lord Chelmsford to

28 These were, for instance, in Punjab Muhammad Shafi and Abdul Qadir families, in Bombay women, Rehamtoola, Chinoy and Tyabji families, Suhrawardy family in Bengal. Shahida Latif, *Muslim Women in India*, Kali for Women, (New Delhi: n.p., 1990), p.83.

demands a series of reforms in the condition of Indian women. The members of deputation for the first time demanded recognition for the principle of female suffrage “as would be extended to their brothers” in the forthcoming reforms.²⁹ They also demanded increased educational facilities for women, improved health and maternity services. Sarala Debi, head of *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* also made representation before the committee. In the representation, she added that government should set up special educational institutions for widows and enact laws protecting the inheritance rights of Hindu wives and daughters, extend opportunities for women to enter professions and see that school inspection committees be formed rather than foreigner women. In spite of this meeting no mention of women’s franchise was made in Montagu-Chelmsford proposals that simply said it was inadvisable to widen the electorate because the fear of opposition from the orthodox circle and the social conditions of India was not suitable to extend the franchise to women.³⁰

In 1918, both All India Muslim League and Indian National Congress favoured the demand of women’s franchise.³¹ Incongruously, there were the men of allegedly backward colony, rather than the enlightened men of supposedly advanced colonialist society, who supported the cause of women enfranchisement. However, the support of two major political parties of India to this demand was not a sign of capital change in their attitudes towards women rather it was “a product of political calculations.”³² Another women deputation presented this demand before the Southborough Franchise Committee in 1919. Their efforts proved fruitless, Southborough Committee did not support the cause of women enfranchisement and stated that it was not practical to extend the franchise to women in the prevailing condition in India. After this set back the women continue their struggle for enfranchisement, a deputation of women under the leadership of Mrs. Srojini Naidu put

29 M.E. Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, (Delhi: Kitabistan, 1947), p.29, quoted in Radha Kumar, p.54.

30 *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission*, Vol. 1, His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1930, p.49.

31 Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, p.34.

32 Ayesha Jalal, p.83.

their demand before the Joint Committee of both houses of British Parliament. The colonial power again refused to grant Indian women the right of vote and said that the current conditions of India were not favorable to it. However, the women kept their pressure and eventually when the government of India Act was promulgated, it was excluded women from the vote, but the question of women's franchise was left to the provinces, the statute granted the right to provincial assemblies to drop the exclusion clause if they so wished. Madras took the lead in this respect by giving women the right of vote. Among the India States, Cochin and Travancore were also among the first to do so. Mysore, Jhalawar and Bombay Councils followed suit. By 1925, except Bihar and Orrissa, all other legislatures had given to women the right to vote and in these two legislatures this right was granted in 1928. By this year the women in British India had the same voting right as men-propertied person, male or female, were allowed to vote. This not satisfied the Indian women; they continued to press for their demand of complete enfranchisement.

The debate on women's rights in 1920s was characterized by two different rationales. The one view held that biological differences between men and women affected the sexes qualitatively; hence women's rights should be recognized because of women's socially useful role as mothers. Gandhi emphasized self-sacrificing nature of Indian women,³³ defined as a special quality of Indian womanhood, and based on the women's existence as mother. According to him, the biological differences between men and women not only determined masculinity and femininity; they meant that each had a different role to play. Theses roles were complementary and each was equally important. The man's role was as breadwinner, the woman's as housewife and mother. The other rationale was being expressed that biological differences did not determine the nature of each sex, therefore, women, having the same needs, desires and capacities as men, were entitled to the same rights.

In the same period a shift in attitudes about working class women could also be visibly seen. Now there was rapidly growing

33 Radha Kumar, p.82.

consciousness about the conditions working women. Earlier attempts were rare and basically reformist. The attempts in 1920s were expanded both in scope and scale. The stress was not on women's role as mothers and wives rather now, changes were seen in the way this role was defined. Even within the workers' movements women begin to seen as a special category with distinct rights and a distinct role. To include working women in the task of nation building, the nationalists, consciously, tried to expand the scope of national activities on the bases of "women as nurtures rather than as wage-earners."³⁴ By the late 1920s the presence of women in workers' movements was visible. Several women trade unionist leaders emerged on the scene of trade unionism. Women not only organized themselves but also carved out special roles in the workers' movements. It is interesting to note that the increase in attending women workers' interest came at a time when large numbers of them were being affected from the economy drive in textiles and mining industries, the two major industries employing women. It has been evident that as process of industrialization progressed and labour market developed, a pool of reserved labour force to be made. Women were considered as secondary source of labour force, the primary role assigned to them was as nurturer and breeder of present and future generations of workers. It was claimed that women's wage work separated them from the home, resulting in poorer quality of work and generations of irresponsible and unreliable workers. Therefore, bourgeois ideology of motherhood was now expanded to include working class women. Because of this, it was quite possible, no real attempts were made for the re-inclusion of women into labour market, instead attempts were made to carve out the space of women's work centered on her biologically defined qualities of motherhood. Women's skills were seen as nurturing ones, such as nursing, cooking, cleansing, teaching; or those, which followed from their traditional household duties, such as food processing and handicrafts.

The grant of right of vote had not meant their full participation in politics that was still very limited. Women's unrelenting struggle for the expansion of suffrage continued through various

34 *Ibid.*, p.67.

organizations that demanded the removal of property qualifications.³⁵ Customarily, in India women had not allowed to have share in family property or owned and operate property independently. Very limited number of women had possessed property in their own right. Consequently, it had put severe restriction on women's political participation, particularly in electoral politics because of property qualification for franchise, in addition to it, another restriction for women was that they had not permitted to take part or to vote in the election of Council of State. Though the political reforms of 1919 were inadequate, but it was first major and successful step, according to any criteria, towards the goal of political empowerment of women. The acceptance of women's franchise right, though with limited scope, had provided a strong stimulus to women to struggle for adequate representation in political institutions. The first election on the basis of new reforms was held in 1920. In these elections Indian women for the first time exercised their right to vote, but property qualification limited their participation, for instance, only 0.3%, 0.4% and 0.5% of adult female population had the right to vote in Bengal United Provinces (UP) and Punjab respectively.³⁶

Again, the Simon Commission, which was set up in 1927 to examine the working of the Montagu Chelmsford Reforms, considered the question of women's suffrage. The boycott of Commission by the major political parties of India forced it to prepare the report on its own evaluation of Indian problem, which was published in May 1930. The Commission was sympathetic to feminists' demand of increase in the existing ratio of men-women voters. The Commission agreed to reconsider the expansion of women's franchise through the inclusion of new qualifications, such as: i) being the wife (of more than twenty-five years of age) of a man who had a property qualification to vote; and ii) being a widow over that age, whose husband at that time of his death was so qualified. Another recommendation was that the educated woman over twenty

35 Azra Asghar Ali, p.171.

36 Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, p.53.

one years of age be considered qualified in exactly the same way as men.³⁷

In 1928, the statutory Commission set up for the purpose of reviewing the working of the Reforms of 1919, stressed on the need for the expansion of women enfranchisement for future legislatures. The Commission recommended “no system of franchise can be considered satisfactory or as likely to lead to good Government where such a great disparity exists between the voting strength of two sexes. We feel therefore, that special qualification should be prescribed for women.”³⁸ Later, Begum Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz, daughter of Sir Muhammad Shafi, and Mrs. Kamala Subbaroyan of Madras, both women were belonged to pro reservation lobby, submitted a memorandum on behalf of the Indian women to the Round Table Conference during its first session convened by British Government held in 1930-31 at London. The memorandum hoped that the Conference would consider the question of women’s political status and that each and every citizen should treated as equal, there should be no discrimination on the basis of “religion, creed or sex in regard to the holding of any public office or in the exercise of any trade or calling.”³⁹ By presenting this memorandum, the Indian women sought the guarantee of equality for all citizens without any discrimination on account of sex. However, nationalist women opposed the reservation of seats for women on the grounds that women it would be harmful to the objectives of nationalist movement. When Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed in February 1931, the nationalist women changed their tune. Begum Shah Nawaz and Mrs. Sarojini Naidu attended the second session of Round Table Conference. In this session nationalist-feminists dominated the scene. They presented a memorandum to the Conference. The memorandum rejected all forms of concessions to women, whether of reservation, nomination or co-option and declared that, “to seek any form of preferential treatment would be to violate the integrity

37 Azra Asghar Ali, p.173.

38 Shyam Kumari Nehru, *Our Cause*, (Allahabad: n.d.), p.357, quoted in Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza. p.35.

39 Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, p.35.

of the universal decision of Indian women for absolute equality of political status.”⁴⁰

Nationalist agenda overwhelmingly influenced feminist politics of 1930s and 1940s of pre-independence India. Under the influence of Indian nationalism, nationalist feminists had put the feminist issues in backyard, and promoted nationalist feminism. Feminist divide had not stopped here; it further divided on communal lines. Women’s Indian Association, a nationalist feminist organization, was not only opposing the reservation of seats for women but also the reservation on communal basis too, because according to them it would be harmful for the national unity of India, even the women who were in favour of reservation of seats for women were now opposing the reservation of seats for women on communal basis, like Mrs. Subbarayan.⁴¹ In the highly charged political atmosphere of India, the feminists faced attack from two sides, one from growing communalization of politics and second from political parties of India who were trying to co-opt women for the support of their politico-communal agenda. These politico-nationalist forces overshadowed the Indian feminism till dawn of independence.

The working committee of All-India Muslim League passed, in 1932, a resolution in support of women’s rights.⁴² The resolution expressed the hope that all political and social obstacles and disqualifications in the way of female suffrage should be removed and for women’s social and political emancipation they should be considered equal to men and be given adequate representation.

In the following year women again advocated their demand and the All-India Women Conference sent its representatives to appear before the Joint Parliamentary Committee in London. They pressed before this Committee that their demands should be considered which had already been incorporated in their second memorandum.

To handle the franchise issue, the Franchise Subcommittee of the Round Table Conference recommended the formation of Indian

40 Radha Kumar, p.81.

41 Azra Asghar Ali, p.185.

42 *Ibid.*, p.36.

Franchise Committee. This committee reviewed the question of expansion of women franchise by applying same qualifications as to men in order to increase women's electorate. During Committee's visit to India in 1931, many women and women's organizations, like Women's India Association, Muslim Ladies Association, met the Committee and presented their demands.⁴³ They stressed the need for the introduction of adult franchise based on registration and payment of a small fee. They also demanded the enfranchisement of literate women of twenty-one years of age. On the other hand, All-India Women's Conference's and National Council of Women were obsessed with nationalist agenda and rejected the property or literacy qualification for women enfranchisement that was in conflict with the principle of equal rights and equal opportunities for all.⁴⁴

The Franchise Committee recommended the expansion of women electorate with the intention to politicize Indian women, to force candidates to take women's interests and opinion seriously, to rouse political interests in women and to use their vote as lever for providing reform for gender concerns.⁴⁵ As a result the Committee proposed two extra qualifications; first was the literacy defined as the ability to read and write a letter in any language. The Committee viewed this provision of literacy a relaxation and an opportunity to vote for unmarried Muslim girls who received education privately and did not attend school or take any public examination.⁴⁶ The second extra qualification made women eligible voters whose husbands were voters because of property qualification.⁴⁷ By applying these two new qualifications the base of women's franchise was consolidated. A visible improvement in male-female voter ratio has been witnessed, for instance, in Bombay. Bengal Assam, Madras and United Provinces it would become 4:1, in

43 *Ibid.*, p.183.

44 *Ibid.*, p.184.

45 *India Franchise Committee, Selection from Memorandum Submitted by Individuals and Oral Evidences*, His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1932, p.85.

46 *Ibid.*, p.86.

47 *Ibid.*, p.87.

Punjab and Central Provinces 5:1 and in Bihar and Orissa 9:1.⁴⁸ The second recommendation of the Committee was regarding the reservation of seats for women. For this purpose Committee was in favour of special constituencies delimited for women.⁴⁹ However, there were some issues the Committee did not consider them, like the number of seats to be given to Hindus and Muslims and the number of seats to be given to women.

The most important characteristic of all this exercise was the reservation of seats for women on communal basis. For this purpose, special women seats were delimited where the proportion of the population of a particular community was as high as compared to other communities. Therefore, in various provinces seats were reserved for Muslims women.⁵⁰ This decision created a stir in the circles of nationalist feminists. Different women organizations, like the All-India Women's Conference, started campaign against reservation of seats for women on communal grounds.⁵¹ When the British Government had not paid heed to the demand of the nationalist feminists, a sudden metamorphosis was visibly seen in their outlook. Now, they were demanding conversion of reserved general women seats into Hindu women seats, because they believed that if the general seats could be opened for all non-Muslim women then there would be less chances for Hindu women winning seats. Therefore, they were asking for a clear assurance that these general seats would be reserved for Hindu women.

As anticipated, the Government of India Act 1935 did not come up to the expectations of women. Under the new constitution, though fell short of the demands put forwarded by different organizations, six million women were enfranchised and provided a limited franchise base.⁵² The women were to have reserved six seats out of a total 150 for in (the Council of States and nine out of 250 in

48 Azra Asghar Ali, pp.187-88.

49 India Franchise Committee, p.89.

50 *Government of India Act 1935: Report of the Committee Appointed in Connection with the Delimitation of Constituencies and Connected Matters*. Vol. i. His Majesty's Stationary Office, London. 1936. pp.123-134.

51 Azra Ashar Ali, p.191.

52 Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, p.42.

the Federal Assembly. So for the first time in history of British India, women with prerequisite property and educational qualifications could exercise the right of political choice and take their place alongside men in provincial as well as the federal assemblies.

Submergence of Feminism in Muslim Nationalism

The growing interest in modern education among the female of elite Muslim families and communalization of 'female political identity' forced Muslim feminists to take interest in the growing politics of Muslim nationalism. The emergence of nationalism based on communal lines created a wide schism between two communities.⁵³ The entirely new environment transformed the whole feminist politics; the feminist issues were subordinated to the community interests and identity. Though the Muslim nationalism after 1930s activated Muslim women greatly but it retarded the growth of feminism among them.

The All-India Muslim League, the only major political party of Indian Muslim, had tried to enlist the support of Muslim women to its nationalist agenda. The Muslim League started to organize and involve women in politics. In its Patna session, 1938, the League established an all-India Muslim Women's Sub-Committee with the aim to co-opt Muslim women and to organize them for its cause.⁵⁴ It was for first time that an appeal was made to Muslim women to organize themselves with the parameters of the League. However, the new emergent Muslim female leadership was belonged to prominent, wealthy, and modern educated families of Muslim Leaguers.⁵⁵ It seemed that at that time the single criterion for the nomination of Muslim women to Women's Sub-committee was their relation to their men, not based on their own political qualifications. This new women leadership did, to a great extent,

53 Begum Shaista Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, (London: Cresset Press, 1963), p.87.

54 "Proceedings of the All-India Muslim League Twenty-six session Patna", in Sharifuddin Pirzada, (ed.), *Foundation of Pakistan*, Vol. 11, Karachi, p.318 and Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza. p.41.

55 The list of women nominated to Women's Sub-Committee divulges that all these women were Begumat or daughters or sisters of the Muslim League's leaders. In the list, for identification majority of the women's names were not given, their identity was just written as Begum (Mrs.) of Mr, ABC etc. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, p.42.

create political consciousness, not the gender consciousness, among women and spread the message of the Muslim League.

In the annual session held at Lahore on March 22-24, 1940, the All-India Muslim League demanded, for the first time, partition of India on communal basis. In addition to the demand of partition, it was reported that the “special feature of the Session was the appearance of such a large number of Muslim women in a public function of this sort.”⁵⁶ Quaid-i-Azam in his presidential address also stressed on the need of women’s role in the League and said “I believe that it is absolutely essential for us to give every opportunity to our women to participate in our struggle of life and death. Women can do a great deal within their homes even under *purdah*.”⁵⁷ On this occasion, from the women section, Begum Muhammad Ali Johar spoke in favour of inclusion of Muslim women into the League politics, according to her, in the political field “men could not do anything without the help of women.”⁵⁸ The net result of these efforts of the Muslim league was the participation of Muslim women in mainstream politics.

The highly electrified Muslim politics of pre-partition India in 1940s involved Muslim women in the political movement for Pakistan and forced them to take part in the politics of agitation to support partition agenda of the League. In Lahore, on April 23, 1940, for the first time, a small group of Muslim women left their homes and took out a procession and protested against the arrest of Muslim leaders and the banning of the *Khaksars*. All the women participants in the procession were wearing *burqas*. On June 16 ten *Khaksar* women and on June 18 men and women took out processions. One thing was clear that all these processions and demonstrations had nothing to do with the women’s rights. However, for the first time, the whole process got involved Muslim women in street agitation. The street politics was the place where the invisible line between

56 Syed Sharif-ud-Din Pirzada, *The Resolution and the Historic Lahore Session*, (Karachi: n.p., 1968), p.35.

57 Quoted in Sarfraz Hussain Mirza, p.45.

58 G. Alana, *Pakistan Movement: Historical Documents*, (Karachi: n.p., 1968), p.252.

what was acceptable and unacceptable for women was drawn and women had finally crossed it over.⁵⁹

To broaden the base of women's political activities, the Muslim League decided to form the Muslim Girl Students Federation. The girl's federation was proposed and launched by Lady Abdul Qadir, Fatima Begum, and Miss M. Qureshi. These women were very active in organizing the support for the idea of Pakistan and creating political awareness among the Muslim girls.⁶⁰ The Girls' Federation had become the vanguard of the Women's Sub-Committee touring the countryside holding public meetings and spreading the League message to Muslim women.⁶¹

The mounting political activity that swept the whole country provided little space for individual woman to take decision on political issues on her own while taking gender consideration before deciding, in August 1941, the Working Committee of the Muslim League in a resolution called upon the Muslim representatives⁶² to the newly formed National Defense Council to resign from the Council within ten days. The Premiers of Bengal, Assam and the Punjab resigned from the Council, but Begum Shah Nawaz refused to do so, on the plea that she had been nominated as representative of the Indian women, not the representative of the Muslim League. The Muslim League subsequently rejected her plea and expelled her from the Muslim League.⁶³ The Women's Central Sub-committee of the League also endorsed this decision. The political milieu snatched the power of self-assertion from the Muslim women. In this situation a woman has no right to take gender issues, but has political rights, as a member of Muslim community, defined by political necessities of her male-dominated community and

59 Khawar Mumtaz and Fareeda Shaheed, p.44.

60 Begum Shaista Ikramullah, "Women in Politics", *Quaid-i-Azam and Muslim Women*, Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan, (Karachi: National Book Foundation, 1976), pp.34-35.

61 Khawar Mumtaz and Fareeda Shaheed, p.45.

62 The Muslim representatives to the National Defence Council were Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, Maulvi A.K. Fazl-i-Haq and Sir Saadullah Khan, Premiers of the Punjab, Bengal and Assam respectively and Begum Shah Nawaz as the representative of the Indian women.

63 Sarfraz Hussain Mirza, p.56.

endowed to her. The community was struggling for a separate state; therefore, out of this parameter Muslim women have less scope for gender manoeuvrability.

Under the political exigencies, in 1942, Quaid-i-Azam took direct interest in the Muslim women committees' affairs. During tours he addressed various gatherings of Muslim women and involved them in Muslim nationalist politics with new vigour.⁶⁴ At this time Muslim women's political activities were at peak. Keeping in mind the depressed conditions of Muslim women, Jinnah also took interests in women issues. Consequently, the Women's Central Sub-Committee appointed a sub-committee, in April 1943, to draft a programme of social, economic and cultural uplift of Muslim women.⁶⁵ In the same meeting the Women's Central Sub-Committee took up important feminist issues. The Committee passed resolution in connection with housewife's problems and the shortage of foodstuffs and urged the Government "to nominate women on Food Committees."⁶⁶ The Committee also urged upon the Government to allocate specified sums in the grant-in-aid to various schools and institutions to be spent exclusively on Muslim females. It also demanded suitable amendments in *Shariat Bill* (1937), which had been passed by the Central Assembly in respect of inheritance.⁶⁷ In the middle of 1943, a terrible famine swept the province of Bengal causing considerable loss of life. In response to Bengal famine women organized relief committees to collect funds and supplies.

By outlining women's uplift programme and taking up the housewife's problems and the issue of food shortage by the Women's Sub-Committee started the process of recognition of women's peculiar issues which were ignored for the sake of Muslim nationalism's necessities. Discussing and debating on the fundamental issue of women's inheritance was the big step towards starting the movement for getting legal rights. Acknowledgement of women's issues particularly the question of inheritance by the women themselves was a breakthrough in a society where men were

64 *Ibid.*, pp.61-63.

65 *Ibid.*, p.65.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*, pp.65-66.

not ready to accept even religious injunctions on the issue and preferred *rawaj* (custom) instead of *Shariat*.

The number of Muslim women involved in the League's activities was increasing day by day. Five thousand Muslim women attended the annual session of the Muslim League, held in December 1943 at Karachi.⁶⁸ Well-dressed band of newly formed Women's National Guard was also present there and inspected by Quaid-i-Azam. The presence of Women's Guards indicates the approval of a completely new role for women; it denotes that they were marching towards the end of their isolation at home and there was no need to live under heavy protection. By participating in public meetings, collecting funds, promoting the idea of Pakistan. Muslim women and girls were interacting with strangers and appearing in public. These women and girls were violating the rule of *pardah* -- seclusion and confinement -- which was enacted for women. The politics of Muslim nationalism has introduced new norms though unwittingly and indirectly and gradually accepted by Muslim community.

The Muslim League and its various committees were providing the stage to women for expressing their concerns. They could discuss and pass the resolutions on the various women's as well as national issues. The Muslim women were not allowed to form exclusive feminist organizations or to join other feminist organizations, so they have to remain in the confines of Women's Sub-Committee. The Committee called upon all Muslim women to join the League and to cease all connections with all other women organizations and advised all the members of the Committee to sever the relations with All-India Women Conference and the communist organizations of women in India.⁶⁹

The 1946 elections had become the culmination of Muslim Politics in united India. In these elections the Muslim League had not only to be proved itself as a sole representative organ for the Muslims of India but also through these elections it has a chance to achieve its long cherished goal -- an independent Muslim state.

68 *Ibid.*, p.67.

69 *Ibid.*, p.68.

Consequently, it was imperative that maximum number of voters be mobilized to extend their support to the League, in election campaign the Muslim women actively participated and disseminated the League's message to the urban as well as rural women effectively. In urban areas the mobilization of voters was not a big problem because in cities Women's Sub-Committee has, to some extent, sufficient organizational infrastructure, but the League was facing a serious challenge in rural areas. The women taken the challenge and toured the rural areas canvassing for the League. In the electoral politics women were not only campaigning and canvassing but also contesting the elections. In Punjab the League awarded tickets to two Muslim women. Begum Salma Tassadduque Hussain and Begum Jahanara Shah Nawaz. Both won the election with thumping majority.

After the elections, in Punjab, the governor did not invite the Muslim League, the majority party in the assembly, to form ministry. This led dissensions in the League's workers and created a commotion among them. The League workers started agitation against newly formed Khizr Hayat Ministry. On March 8, 1946, protesting against the governor's attitude, five hundred women, in Lahore, led a demonstration.⁷⁰ This kicked off radicalism in Muslim women of the Punjab. When in January 1947, the Punjab Provincial Muslim League had launched a civil disobedience movement; the Muslim women actively participated in this movement. They led demonstrations, took out processions, and were harassed, baton charged, tear gassed, dropped out of the city, arrested and jailed by the police.⁷¹ The Punjab Muslim League had succeeded in bringing down the Khzir Ministry that resigned on March 2, 1947.

The civil disobedience movement that was started in the Punjab also has spillover effects on the women of the other provinces, like Sindh, and enlivened them politically, however, they were not visible in the political field until relatively late. The movement has even successfully mobilized the women of the NWFP -- the most conservative area of the Subcontinent. For the first time, during this movement, Pathan women marched unveiled in a public procession.

70 *Ibid.*, p.86.

71 *Ibid.*, pp.85-93, and Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, pp.46-47.

On April 3, 1947, a procession of about fifteen hundred picketed Dr. Khan Sahib's (Chief Minister of NWFP) residence and hoisted the League flag on his house. In addition to these activities, the Muslim women formed a secret organization known as "War Council." The War Council set up an underground radio station called Pakistan Broadcasting Station and was operated without being traced until August 14, 1947.⁷²

Conclusion

The contours of Indian politics, before independence, had radically changed the premises of Indian Muslim women's existence. From being docile, submissive, passive and silent less than human being, they surfaced as active political conscious and to some extent assertive individuals, they participated in political movements, at same time, they became aware of and fought against their own oppressed conditions as women. The feminist struggle, that was started from the second half of the nineteenth century, brought fruits for them in the shape of, in addition to receive education and own property, the grant of right to vote. Voting is sometimes understood as the first step in a succession of increasingly demanding political acts. Although enfranchisement of Indian (Muslim) women may have its limitations as a criterion of political participation, women's exercise of the vote has especial meaning against the backdrop of suffragist struggle. After getting voting right, however, women did not vote with the same ratio as men. On the other hand Muslim women participated in nationalist struggle and used their new right not in favour of achieving their gender rights but for a political struggle that was male-dominated. Their representation in the high echelons of political party — the All-India Muslim League — was insignificant. As a result, they were out from the political decision-making process and management of affairs of the party. The Muslim women's participation in Pakistan movement can be termed as *ad hoc* participation that means "participation in political campaigns that are relatively short-lived."⁷³

From participation in politico-nationalist movement, however, Muslim women gained political awareness and a certain modicum of political skill. They learned the ability to organize, demonstrate, mobilize, collect funds and provide relief services in time of crisis. Their abilities were recognized by men and used. Muslim women

72 *Ibid.*, p.111, and; *Ibid.*, p.47.

73 Vicky Randall, *Women and Politics*, p.41.

proved themselves as an indispensable factor in nationalist movement and recognized “as a powerful potential source of political activity.”⁷⁴

Muslim women’s contribution to Pakistan movement was perhaps outstanding. Women had participated in nationalist movement, directly or indirectly, through their men folk. The strictures and social norms of the Muslim society that restricted women to private sphere provided less space for women in public world. Conversely, the introduction of new state structure, political institutions and norms opened avenues to public world for women and resulted in the emergence of feminism. The politico-feminist movements that gained momentum during 1920s and 1930s took feminist issues and achieved some of them like right to vote did not keep the pace in 1940s.

In the first three decades of twentieth century the feminist movements and nationalist movement were operating on mutual co-existence basis. The Muslims of India were trying to preserve their communal identity within the existing political system. In this period the Muslim League was not projecting the idea of partition of India as its political goal. Therefore, it created enough room for the growth of Muslim feminism and the articulation of feminist issues. Muslims’ politics of identity and feminism were functioning not only parallel to each other but also supportive of each other. After the adoption of partition of India as an ultimate goal of Muslims of India on March 23, 1940 by the Muslim League, the equation between feminism and Muslim nationalism has been altered drastically in favour of nationalism. In forties the Muslim nationalist movement was so strong that it engulfed the feminist movement. Muslim women were allowed by their men to enter public world but only for the sake of nationalist interests. Muslim women political activists were urged to leave other feminist organizations; the only option for them was All-India Muslim League’s Women’s Sub-Committee. They have to work and support the League agenda. Nationalism is so encompassing ideology that it swept away or submerged all others. The Muslim feminist movement faced the same fate. The feminist interests were subordinated to nationalist interests and feminist movement was submerged in the Muslim nationalist movement. This process of submergence has greatly influenced the feminist movements in Pakistan after independence.

74 Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, p.47.