



Research Article

Women's Participation in Boycott and Swadeshi Activities

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Abstract

Women's participation in the Boycott and Swadeshi movements marked an important transformation in the history of India's freedom struggle. The Swadeshi movement, particularly after the Partition of Bengal in 1905, encouraged Indians to reject foreign goods and promote indigenous products. Although women had traditionally been associated with domestic responsibilities, the movement created new opportunities for them to participate in public and political activities. Women contributed to the boycott of foreign cloth, sugar, salt, and other imported products by refusing to purchase or use them. They promoted Indian-made goods and encouraged families and communities to adopt Swadeshi practices. Many women participated in spinning, weaving, and the promotion of indigenous handicrafts, thereby connecting household activities with nationalist politics. Their homes became important spaces for spreading nationalist ideas and strengthening economic self-reliance. Women also participated in public demonstrations, processions, meetings, picketing of shops selling foreign goods, and collection of funds for nationalist organisations. Educated women helped spread political awareness through social networks, schools, literary activities, and community organisations. Their involvement demonstrated that the freedom struggle was not confined to political leaders or male activists. The participation of women in Boycott and Swadeshi activities also challenged prevailing gender norms. By entering public spaces and taking part in political campaigns, women gradually developed greater political consciousness and a sense of citizenship. At the same time, their participation remained closely connected with domestic responsibilities, as the household became a major site of economic nationalism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian freedom struggle was not merely a political movement led by prominent male leaders and revolutionary organizations; it was also a broad social movement in which women played an increasingly important role. Among the significant phases of anti-colonial resistance, the Boycott and Swadeshi movements occupy a special place because they connected political nationalism with everyday economic and social practices. Women's participation was particularly important because the household was a major site of consumption, production, cultural transmission, and socialization. By changing what they purchased, wore, produced, and encouraged their families to use, women transformed domestic practices into instruments of nationalist resistance.

The Swadeshi movement gained particular momentum following the partition of Bengal in 1905. The decision by the colonial government generated widespread political opposition and encouraged the promotion of indigenous goods. Boycott of foreign products became an important form of protest, while Swadeshi emphasized the use and production of goods made within India. The movement therefore had both political and economic dimensions. It sought to weaken colonial economic interests while encouraging self-reliance and national consciousness.

Women participated in these activities in a variety of ways. They rejected foreign cloth and other imported commodities, encouraged the use of indigenous products, participated in spinning and weaving, joined public meetings and demonstrations, assisted in fundraising, and helped spread nationalist ideas within families and communities. Some women also participated in picketing and other forms of public protest. Their participation represented an important transformation in the history of Indian womanhood. Women who were traditionally expected to remain within domestic spaces increasingly entered public life and acquired political identities. However, their involvement did not simply mean abandoning domestic responsibilities. Instead, women often converted domestic work into a form of nationalist action. The kitchen, household, clothing choices, and social networks became important sites for the practice of nationalism.

Historical Background of the Swadeshi Movement

The Swadeshi movement emerged most prominently in Bengal following the partition of Bengal in 1905. The partition was widely perceived by Indian nationalists as an attempt by the colonial government to weaken political unity. Opposition to the decision generated widespread protests and encouraged the development of new forms of political mobilization.

Boycott became one of the principal methods of resistance. Indians were encouraged to refuse foreign goods, particularly imported textiles. Swadeshi activists promoted indigenous industries, handicrafts, weaving, spinning, and local production. The movement represented a significant development in nationalist politics because it connected political independence with economic independence. Nationalists argued that colonial

economic policies had weakened indigenous industries and increased dependence on imported products. Supporting Indian production was therefore presented as an important contribution to national regeneration.

Women became significant participants in this process because many decisions concerning household consumption were made within domestic settings. Their choices could directly influence demand for foreign and indigenous goods.

Women and the Boycott of Foreign Goods

One of the most visible forms of women's participation was the boycott of foreign products. Women refused to purchase or use foreign cloth and encouraged members of their families to adopt indigenous alternatives. Clothing had particular symbolic importance. Foreign cloth was associated with colonial economic domination, while hand-spun and hand-woven cloth came to represent national self-reliance. Women participated by replacing imported garments with locally produced textiles and encouraging others to do the same. The importance of this action extended beyond individual consumption. When large numbers of people refused foreign goods, they challenged the economic interests associated with colonial trade. Women therefore transformed personal purchasing decisions into collective political statements.

Women also influenced consumption patterns within their households. As mothers, wives, daughters, and household managers, they could encourage children and other family members to adopt Swadeshi practices. In this sense, nationalist politics entered everyday family life.

Promotion of Indigenous Production

Swadeshi was not simply about rejecting foreign goods. It also emphasized the development and promotion of indigenous production. Women contributed to this objective through spinning, weaving, sewing, embroidery, and other forms of household production.

Traditional skills that had often been treated as domestic activities acquired political significance during the nationalist movement. Spinning and weaving became associated with economic self-reliance and national dignity.

Women's participation in indigenous production also demonstrated the relationship between gender and economic nationalism. Domestic labor was no longer viewed exclusively as private work; it could be understood as contributing to a broader political cause. Women's production of indigenous goods helped sustain local markets and encouraged communities to value traditional crafts. In this respect, the Swadeshi movement contributed to a revaluation of indigenous skills and local economic resources.

Women's Participation in Public Demonstrations

The Boycott and Swadeshi movements also created opportunities for women to enter public political spaces. Women participated in meetings, processions, demonstrations, and other forms of collective action. Public participation was significant because women's mobility and political activity

were restricted by social customs in many communities. Participation in nationalist activities enabled women to cross some of these traditional boundaries. Women's presence in public demonstrations also had symbolic significance. It showed that the national movement represented not only male political interests but the concerns and aspirations of wider society. Women's participation could inspire other members of their communities to become involved. Their visibility challenged the assumption that politics was exclusively a male domain.

Picketing and Protest Activities

In some areas, women participated in picketing outside shops selling foreign goods. Picketing involved persuading consumers to avoid imported products and encouraging traders to support indigenous goods.

Women's participation in such activities was especially significant because it brought them into direct contact with public political action. It required confidence, organizational ability, and willingness to face opposition from authorities or supporters of colonial economic practices.

Picketing also demonstrated the importance of nonviolent forms of political pressure. Rather than relying exclusively on armed resistance, activists attempted to change economic behavior through persuasion, social pressure, and collective action.

Women therefore contributed to the development of political protest as a form of mass participation.

Women and the Household as a Political Space

One of the most important features of women's participation in Swadeshi activities was the transformation of the household into a political space. Nationalism was not confined to public meetings, political organizations, or newspapers. It entered kitchens, wardrobes, family conversations, and daily consumption practices.

Women could influence what their families purchased and wore. They could teach children about national identity and encourage them to value indigenous products. They could also organize informal networks through relatives, neighbors, and community groups.

This domestic dimension of nationalism is particularly important from a sociological perspective. Political movements become successful when political ideas enter everyday social practices. Women played a crucial role in this process by connecting public political objectives with private household behavior.

Women's Role in Spinning and Weaving

Spinning became one of the most important symbols of Indian economic nationalism. Women had long possessed skills related to spinning and textile production, and the nationalist movement gave these activities a new political meaning.

The spinning wheel eventually became strongly associated with the broader philosophy of self-reliance and the promotion of indigenous production. Women who spun yarn contributed not only to household production but also to a political campaign

against colonial economic dependence. Weaving similarly became a symbol of indigenous industry. Women supported local textile production and encouraged the use of hand-made fabrics. These activities demonstrated how economic nationalism could be integrated into everyday life. The ordinary act of producing or wearing indigenous cloth became a statement of political commitment.

Women and Political Awareness

Participation in Boycott and Swadeshi activities increased women's political awareness. Women who previously had limited opportunities to engage with political affairs began discussing national issues, attending meetings, reading nationalist literature, and interacting with political activists.

Political participation helped women develop new identities as citizens. They increasingly viewed themselves as participants in the political future of the country rather than merely members of private households.

Education also played an important role. Educated women helped disseminate nationalist ideas through schools, literary circles, social organizations, and family networks. Women's education therefore contributed to the expansion of political consciousness.

The growth of political awareness during this period laid foundations for greater female participation in later phases of the freedom struggle.

Women's Organizations and Collective Action

Women's collective action strengthened the Swadeshi movement. Informal networks of women could mobilize resources, spread information, and encourage participation in nationalist activities. Women's organizations also created spaces where women could discuss political and social issues. These organizations gradually expanded the meaning of women's public participation. Collective organization was particularly important because individual acts of boycott could have limited impact. When women acted collectively, their influence became more visible and politically significant. Such activities contributed to the emergence of a broader women's movement that increasingly connected national independence with questions of education, social reform, political rights, and gender equality.

Regional Dimensions

Although Bengal was central to the Swadeshi movement, the idea of Swadeshi spread to other parts of India. Women in different regions participated according to local social, economic, and cultural conditions.

In many places, women promoted indigenous textiles, local handicrafts, and traditional forms of production. Their activities helped adapt the broader nationalist message to regional contexts. This regional diversity is important because Indian nationalism was not experienced in exactly the same way everywhere. Women interpreted and practiced Swadeshi through their own communities, occupations, family structures, and cultural traditions.

Economic Significance

The economic dimension of women's participation was highly significant. Boycott attempted to reduce dependence on imported products, while Swadeshi encouraged indigenous production. Women's consumption decisions could influence household expenditure and local markets. By choosing indigenous products, they supported local producers and contributed to the economic objectives of the nationalist movement. However, indigenous products were sometimes more expensive or less easily available than imported goods. Therefore, adopting Swadeshi practices could involve economic sacrifice. Women who chose to participate demonstrated that political commitment could influence economic decisions even when doing so created practical difficulties.

Challenge to Patriarchal Norms

Women's participation in Boycott and Swadeshi activities challenged patriarchal expectations. Traditional gender norms often confined women to domestic responsibilities and discouraged direct involvement in politics.

The nationalist movement created new opportunities for women to participate in public affairs. Their involvement demonstrated that women could organize, mobilize communities, communicate political ideas, and engage in protest. Nevertheless, the relationship between nationalism and women's emancipation was complicated. Nationalist movements sometimes presented women as symbols of cultural purity and national tradition while continuing to expect them to fulfill conventional domestic roles.

Women and the Construction of National Identity

Women played an important role in constructing national identity. Through clothing, household practices, cultural traditions, education, and community participation, they helped communicate ideas about what it meant to be part of the nation. Swadeshi products became symbols of national pride. Indigenous textiles, handicrafts, and local production were connected with the idea of national self-respect. Women helped transmit these values to younger generations. As mothers and educators within families, they played an important role in passing nationalist ideas from one generation to another. This cultural dimension of women's participation was as important as their direct involvement in political demonstrations.

Limitations and Contradictions

Despite their important contributions, women's participation was not uniform. Social class, caste, education, economic position, location, and family circumstances influenced the ability of women to participate. Urban educated women often had greater access to political organizations and public activities than women living in rural or economically disadvantaged communities. Therefore, historical narratives should avoid treating women as a homogeneous category. Furthermore, women's nationalist participation sometimes remained connected to traditional gender roles. Women were praised for sacrifice and moral influence, but they did not

always receive equal political authority. These contradictions demonstrate that the Swadeshi movement was simultaneously a site of political empowerment and a space in which existing social expectations could continue.

Sociological Significance

From a sociological perspective, women's participation in Boycott and Swadeshi activities demonstrates how social movements transform everyday behavior into political action.

The movement connected economic practices, gender relations, family structures, cultural identity, and political nationalism. Women's participation shows that political mobilization does not occur only through formal institutions. It also occurs through households, communities, markets, schools, and social networks. The Swadeshi movement also illustrates the concept of collective identity. Individuals were encouraged to understand their consumption choices as contributions to a larger national project. Women were particularly important in this process because they occupied social positions that connected household life with wider community networks.

Long-Term Impact

The participation of women in Boycott and Swadeshi activities contributed to the expansion of women's political consciousness in India. It created precedents for women's involvement in subsequent phases of the national movement. Later mass movements provided women with increasingly visible roles in demonstrations, civil disobedience, constructive programmes, political organizations, and social reform activities.

The experience gained during the Swadeshi period helped normalize women's presence in public political life. It also contributed to broader debates concerning women's education, political rights, citizenship, and social equality.

Their contribution was particularly important because they connected nationalist politics with everyday life. The household became an important site of political action, and ordinary consumption decisions acquired national significance.

The movement also challenged traditional gender roles. Women increasingly entered public spaces, developed political awareness, and asserted themselves as participants in the national struggle. At the same time, their participation remained shaped by social class, family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and patriarchal structures. From a sociological perspective, the Swadeshi experience demonstrates that political transformation can occur through everyday social practices. Women were not simply supporters of nationalism; they were active agents who helped translate nationalist ideas into economic, cultural, and social behavior. Ultimately, women's involvement in Boycott and Swadeshi activities contributed to both the anti-colonial struggle and the gradual transformation of women's political identities. Their participation helped establish an important connection between **economic self-reliance, national consciousness, gender participation, and political citizenship**, making women an essential part of India's broader struggle for freedom.

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