

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we looked at women's writing. The lecture explored key themes of gender, power, education, and utopia through the analysis of *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari Devi and *Sultana's Dream* by Begum Rokeya. In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari's secret pursuit of literacy within the domestic sphere is both a subtle act of resistance and a reinforcement of patriarchal ideals, as she frames her intellectual desire through religious devotion. Feminist scholars argue that her narrative reveals both individual agency and the limitations imposed by caste and class hierarchies, often excluding lower-caste and working-class women. This tension is further illuminated by nationalist ideologies that constructed a binary between the "respectable" upper-caste woman and the morally suspect "common" woman. Meanwhile, *Sultana's Dream* presents a radical feminist utopia where women, through education and science, assume power and redefine societal norms. The text critiques patriarchal structures, especially the purdah system, by inverting gender roles and offering Ladyland as a dreamscape of equality, efficiency, and harmony. However, Rokeya's vision is not without contradictions — it reproduces gender segregation and upholds hierarchical systems under a new guise. Both texts highlight how women's writing in colonial Bengal navigated complex intersections of conformity and resistance, offering critical insights into the construction of gender, the politics of education, and the imaginative possibilities of feminist futures.

In this lecture we will begin with women's activism, specifically Women and Indian Congress. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century in India saw women's participation in politics with the rise of Indian National Congress. Let me begin with a brief The Indian National Congress (INC), founded on December 28, 1885, by Allan Octavian Hume and other Indian leaders, played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence and post-independence governance. Initially, it sought constitutional reforms through dialogue with the British but shifted towards mass movements as nationalism grew. The Partition of Bengal (1905) fueled extremism within the party, leading to a split between moderates and extremists in 1907, which was later resolved in the Lucknow Pact (1916). Under Gandhi's leadership, the INC transformed into a mass movement, organizing key protests like the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), and Quit India Movement (1942). Launched in response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the disillusionment with British promises after World War I, Non-Cooperation Movement called for Indians to boycott British institutions, titles, courts, schools, and foreign goods. Gandhi emphasized non-violence and self-reliance (*swadeshi*). The movement mobilized millions across India but was abruptly suspended after the violent Chauri Chaura incident in 1922, where protesters killed policemen, violating Gandhi's non-violent principles. Sparked by the Salt March (Dandi March) in 1930, Civil Disobedience Movement protested the British monopoly on salt and other oppressive colonial laws. Indians were urged to defy British rules non-violently — by making salt, refusing to pay taxes, boycotting foreign goods, and resigning from government jobs. The movement saw widespread participation, including from women and peasants. Though temporarily halted by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1931), it

resumed after the failure of the Second Round Table Conference and continued until 1934. Launched during World War II, the Quit India Movement was a final, decisive push demanding an end to British rule. On August 8, 1942, the INC called for immediate independence with the slogan "Do or Die." The British responded with mass arrests, including Gandhi and other top leaders. Despite harsh repression, spontaneous uprisings erupted across the country. Though the movement was suppressed, it marked a turning point by demonstrating that British rule was no longer sustainable without Indian cooperation. After World War II, growing nationalist pressure led to the Mountbatten Plan (1947), the British proposal that led to the partition of British India into two independent dominions — India and Pakistan, resulting in India's independence and partition. Post-independence, the INC, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, focused on economic planning, socialism, and non-alignment.

Women have played a vital role in the Indian National Congress (INC) since its inception, contributing significantly to both the freedom struggle and the country's development after independence. In the early stages, Indian politics was largely a male-dominated space. However, the rise of social reform movements in the 19th century, which focused on women's education, the abolition of harmful social practices like sati and child marriage, and the promotion of women's rights, laid the foundation for women's entry into public and political life. This progressive atmosphere enabled educated women from elite and reformist families to engage in political discussions and activities.

One of the earliest women to participate in INC proceedings was Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore, who was not only a writer and intellectual but also a committed nationalist. A major breakthrough occurred in 1917, when Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Margaret Cousins formed the Women's Indian Association and demanded voting rights for Indian women. Their efforts marked the formal entry of women into Indian politics. Sarojini Naidu went on to become the first female president of the INC in 1925, setting a powerful precedent for women's leadership in the national movement.

Under Gandhi's leadership from 1920 to 1947, women's political participation witnessed a massive surge. Gandhi's vision of nationalism and his emphasis on non-violent mass movements encouraged women to step out of their homes and take active roles in public protests. Women played essential roles in key nationalist movements, such as the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), and the Quit India Movement (1942). They led marches, picketed shops selling foreign goods or liquor, spun khadi, and courted arrest. Gandhi believed in women's moral strength and their ability to lead by example, which gave many the courage to challenge social norms and claim a political voice.

Prominent women leaders emerged during this time. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet post and later became the first female President of the United Nations General Assembly. Aruna Asaf Ali famously hoisted the Indian national flag during the Quit India Movement. Kasturba Gandhi was actively involved in the Sabarmati Ashram and various grassroots campaigns. Kamala Nehru was instrumental in organizing women in the Allahabad region. Other unsung heroines like Matangini Hazra, who was shot dead while leading a procession in Bengal, symbolized women's fearless dedication to the cause.

The political landscape significantly transformed the objectives and roles of organized women. While education, social reform, and women's rights resonated with some progressive women, the broader nationalist movement—aimed at freeing the country from foreign

rule—drew support from diverse social classes, communities, and ideologies. Nationalist leaders strategically built alliances with peasants, workers, and women's organizations to showcase widespread public backing. Many women were surprised to find their political involvement endorsed by men who otherwise expected them to conform to traditional domestic roles, as prescribed in religious texts. Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, a freedom fighter imprisoned in Lahore in 1930, recounted the story of a woman who participated in a protest and was arrested while her husband was at work. Upon hearing of her arrest, the husband sent a message to the jail stating that she was not welcome back home after her release. Manmohini's mother, Lado Rani Zutshi, stepped in to advocate for the woman. The husband eventually took his wife back, though he remarked that while he considered it an honor for her to be arrested, she should have sought his permission before leaving the house. This incident served as a powerful lesson on the challenges faced by women in the freedom movement.

After independence, women continued to shape the political landscape. The most notable example is Indira Gandhi, who became India's first female Prime Minister in 1966. Her leadership during key moments like the Green Revolution, 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, and the Emergency period highlighted both the power and the controversy that could come with strong female leadership. Women's increasing presence in Parliament, cabinet positions, and social reform committees over the years reflects a gradual but meaningful shift from symbolic participation to substantive roles in decision-making and governance. This gave rise to different facets in women's participation—inclusion of women as token; women as citizens and not necessarily as gendered citizens; women aspiring to be political leaders.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. This lecture explores the significant role women played in the Indian National Congress (INC) and the broader Indian independence movement, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The INC, founded in 1885, initially focused on constitutional reforms with the British but soon shifted to mass movements as nationalism grew. With the rise of the INC and its evolving strategies, women became increasingly involved in the political process, influenced by the broader social reform movements of the period.

Key themes of this lecture include the evolution of women's participation in politics, their contributions to major nationalist movements, and the impact of these movements on their political and social roles. Initially, politics in India was dominated by men, but the social reform movements of the 19th century, which focused on women's education and rights, created a foundation for women's political engagement. One of the earliest women to engage with the INC was Swarnakumari Devi, who actively participated in nationalist discourse. In 1917, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Margaret Cousins formed the Women's Indian Association and demanded voting rights for women. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet post, and Aruna Asaf Ali, who famously hoisted the Indian flag during the Quit India Movement, exemplify the significant roles women played in these movements.

However, women's political participation was not without challenges. Despite the push for women's rights and education, traditional gender norms often placed limitations on their involvement in politics. The nationalist movement, while drawing support from diverse social classes, included women from different walks of life, many of whom were expected to adhere to domestic roles. One example of these challenges is seen in the story of Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, a freedom fighter who was arrested during a protest. Upon her arrest, her husband initially rejected her return, expecting her to follow traditional gender roles. This incident

illustrates the tension between women's growing political participation and societal expectations.

The lecture highlights two key facets of women's participation in politics: the inclusion of women as citizens, not necessarily gendered citizens, and the aspiration of women to become political leaders. It shows how women, despite societal constraints, became powerful agents in the fight for independence and in shaping the post-independence political landscape.

In the next lecture we will talk about women's movement in the post-independence era and different kinds of women's movements.

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