

Subaltern Voices in Agrarian Struggles: A Critical Study on the Role of Women in the Peasant Movements of Rajasthan (1900–1950)

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Abstract: The historical studies of agrarian movements in colonial India have largely been analyzed in an androcentric fashion and peasants' movements have been assumed to be a solely male affair. This has resulted in the multifaceted contribution of women, especially from the under-represented and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, not being fully represented in the different voices that have been heard. This paper examines the crucial participation of women in the peasant rebellions of the Rajputana (now Rajasthan) region from 1900 to 1950. Peasant women were subjected to a two-step act of subjugation, the first being economic exploitation and the second being a system of patriarchy, that existed in the region with a rigid traditional hierarchy, oppressive feudal exploitation (Thikana system) and colonial dominance. Women are bound into conservative female domesticity but are pushed towards the political by patriotic zeal and necessity of survival. This study critically examines the agrarian and economic factors that brought rural women into the movement and the consequent shift in their role from a mere agricultural worker to a political activist/agitator. On the basis of the examination of the major revolutionary events, such as Bijolia, Bengu and Shekhawati movements, the paper emphasizes how middle and lower class women sustained the agrarian economy during mass arrest, provided protective shelter to underground revolutionaries and also led the movements directly. In conclusion, the research suggests that the peasant struggles also were a forerunner to socio-political empowerment of women in Rajasthan which paved the way for inclusion of women in the larger Indian National Movement.

Keywords: *The agrarian unrest, women empowerment, Rajasthan historiography, Subaltern Studies, Peasant Movements, Rajputana Feudalism, Grassroots mobilization, Colonial India.*

1. Introduction

The Agrarian Unrest in Rajputana was a part of a larger movement. The Agrarian Unrest in Rajputana was part of a greater movement.

A dualistic system of exploitation was fulfilled in socio-economic life of Rajputana in early 20th century. The British colonial authority imposed suzerainty and the native ruling princely states and their feudal lords (Jagirdars and Thikanedars) imposed autocratic rule on the peasantry. There are prohibitive land charges and Begars (forced unpaid labour) as well as many arbitrary cesses (Lag-bag)

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that weighed heavily on this agrarian society. The agrarian turmoil led to a series of long-lasting peasant movements throughout the area, especially from 1900 to 1950, but the history of these uprisings has traditionally neglected the masses of women who formed the basis of the agrarian economy: the peasants.

What is the social positioning of peasant women? What is dual marginalisation of peasant women?

The women of Rajasthan were faced with a double whammy in a traditionally and extremely conservative society. They were disadvantaged socially because they were under the rule of feudal and colonial systems, and were affected by these systems' impact on the family's economic sustainability. Socially, they had a lot of limitations due to the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that limited them to the domestic sphere. There is a well-known history and sociological accounts of the enormous physical work undertaken by rural women in agriculture that has been very little documented.

The specific amounts of agricultural products women's groups access when compared to men's groups have not been well measured historically and in broader contexts, as has been argued by scholars such as Joan P. Mencher and K. Saradamoni.

In times of increased pressure on economic resources due to state policies, as well as in taxation (Thikana), it was the women who suffered most concretely. When lands were seized for failure to pay the excessive revenues, a large number of female farmers were taken up in agriculture with Mahajans (moneylenders), and were paid half the wages for doing the same work as male agricultural laborers. Many female farmers were compelled to work as agricultural laborers of the Mahajans (moneylenders), because their lands were seized on account of failure to pay excessive revenues, and they were paid half the wages for identical work done by male agricultural labourers.

Move from domestic to political activism

It was the first time these peasant ladies came to the public political platform and it was a turning point in the history of Rajasthan. The conversion wasn't pure ideological, but rather a process of mobilization out of a socio-economic demand and political approach. But male leaders of the movement like Vijay Singh Pathik and Manikya Lal Verma knew that it was impossible for mass mobilisation to achieve anything without the weightage of women. They pressured the peasantry to include women in the resistance to expand the resistance and use the demographic pressure on the princely states.

But for the women it was a fraught affair to be out in the square. Indeed, they were confronted with two huge problems: maintaining their households and working the land, and also with the taunts of society and the severity of the state police. Many middle and lower class women, however, started to take part actively and participated in the singing of revolutionary folk songs to awaken mass consciousness, in offering valuable logistical assistance and shelter to the absconding leaders and finally in leading the frontal protest when the male leaders were sent to jail.

Historiographical Context and Literature Review

Subaltern women are only given a small space in the existing literature on the freedom struggle and the agrarian movements in the state of Rajasthan. The

contributions of a small group of educated elite and upper-class women, who were greatly inspired by national personalities such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi, Hansa Mehta, etc., have been emphasized in the mainstream history of women. The mainstream historical narrative has concentrated on a few educated elite and upper-class women who were inspired by national leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi, Hansa Mehta etc. Women, with their distinct political agency, have been studied intensively by scholars like Suruchi Thapar and Geraldine Forbes in context of the wider Indian Nationalist Movement, but regional agrarian histories (as found in those of Ram Pande and B.K. Sharma) tend to mention grassroots women as an undivided, unthinking category.

There are still gaps in the study of the involvement of middle and lower-class women in the peasant uprising in Rajasthan. It is this research which seeks to fill that void, looking beyond the-campus-section of society to the unrecorded, the heterogeneous and the spontaneous activities of the rural women whose driving forces were primarily related to their immediate economic survival and localized feudal oppression, rather than abstract urban nationalism.

Objectives of the Study

Considering the above, the following main objectives have been defined for this study in order to construct a complete picture of the existing historical discourse gaps:

To analyse the socio-economic catalysts: To examine critically the motivating and demotivating factors (taxation, Chanwari cess, patriarchal constraints etc.) that affected rural women's decisions to either be active or passive in the peasant struggles.

To document grassroots participation: To record the various ways women from different groups were involved in major agricultural movements in Rajasthan in the period 1900-1950, particularly their logistical, economic and leadership roles in times of crisis.

To compare class and political participation: To distinguish between the involvement of elite, educated women and the peasant women, lower to middle class, who were the base of the grassroots resistance.

To measure the effect on women's empowerment: To examine the role of these agrarian struggles in the breakdown of traditional gender orthodoxies,

raising political awareness and bringing rural women into the larger picture of women's rights and national independence.

The motivational and demotivational factors are called dynamics of mobilization.

This peasant women's mobilization in Rajasthan was a complicated mix of structural oppression and livelihoods. A number of intersectional factors influenced their transition from home to leading the agrarian resistance.

Community Justice and Norms of Social Control

The entrenched influence of patriarchy and rigid warrior social stereotypes were a major demotivator for rural women initially. In this extremely conservative perspective, women saw both the hierarchical oppression by colonial administration and the traditional feudal network as equally oppressive and limiting women's agency. The overall social mentality gave peasant women a lesser status mostly due to their engagement in the manual work of agricultural activities.

The main reason behind the movement of women was the economic hardships they faced. The state's excessive taxation severely cut family incomes, compelling families to make drastic cutbacks in their various budgets, which had a disproportionate impact on women's budgets. When the demands for additional land revenue were not satisfied, the land was taken away and women had to resort to manual labour on land owned by Mahajans, or moneylenders. In the process, the agricultural worker was divided into two wings: a male wing and a female wing; the latter was made a marginalized and exploited group at the bottom of socio-economic exploitation. In this new employment they were subjected to harsh wage discrimination and were paid one half of the wages of male workers for the same work in the agricultural sector.

The Chanwari Cess and Sumptuary Laws were enacted in 1806. In 1806 the Chanwari Cess and Sumptuary Laws were passed.

A turning point which was clearly significant in the Bijolia movement was the introduction of Chanwari cess, a tax on daughter's marriage imposed by the Thikana. This regressive tax, made marriage economically unviable, so that during the next two years no marriages were organised in the Bijolia region. In this way, around 2000 girls marched and protested directly at the Thikana headquarters

demanding the removal of the cess which were verbally abused by the Thikana chief.

In addition, the feudal lords enacted very strict sumptuary laws that prohibited peasant women from wearing traditional dresses and jewels. Wearing ornaments is an integral part of the Hindu culture and is very much linked to prosperity and good fortune. The Thakurs were repulsed by the sight of such ornamentation, and later prohibited it as a sign of peasant wealth. Their need to be allowed to wear these decorations and to claim their dignity became a potent mobilizing dream, and led for the first time to rural women standing publicly with men.

The fourth major theme was "Strategic leadership and ideological awakening." The fourth theme was "Strategic leadership and ideological awakening."

The leaders of the agrarian movement such as Vijay Singh Pathik and Manikya Lal Verma, strategically saw that the inclusion of women was crucial to the growth of the movement's constituency as well as its pressure on the princely states. After being released from prison, Vijay Singh Pathik actively promoted the cause of women empowerment and during a meeting, stated that the literate girls had taken the pledge to teach reading and writing to three other girls each.

At the same time educated women of the upper class, inspired by the leading figures of the country like Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Devi, Hansa Mehta and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, were actively promoting the participation of women from rural areas in the movement. By 1920, the mental climate of the peasantry had been shaped by the slogans which, as part of the ideology of the resistance, spoke of "SAMASYA ANEK UPAY EK" (Many Problems, One Solution) and convinced the masses that mass agitation would be the only way to protect their land, lives and livelihoods.

Chronology of the main agrarian movements in which women were involved

Women's participation in the care of nature changed a lot over the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century. In the years 1890-1900, the role of the women was very limited, they distributed revolutionary literature, established contact between leaders and organized food supplies, all this under the cover of darkness. Their traditionalism ideology kept them from leadership or standing in formal

committees. But from 1900 to 1950, their engagement turned into the active, confrontational political protest against the heavy land revenue, Lag-bag (cesses) and the oppressive Begar (forced labour) system.

The Bijolia Movement

The Bijolia movement was the first and longest peasant movement in Rajasthan where women participated in the full-time struggle. Women were very much a part of all the basic functions of the movement. Along with women activists, Rama Devi, under her leadership, was able to take the movement to new heights and was arrested with many other female activists in 1931.

The Bundi Movement

The Bundi movement was directed by the Rajasthan Seva Sangh and it was a movement of the masses of females who protested against the atrocities of the State. On July 13, 1922, after the arrest of 17 farmers from the villages of Rajpur, Naroli and Lambakhoh, women staged a direct action against the State police of Ganeshpura village to free the arrested farmers. A violent clash led to serious injury of 14 women and tragic death of two female protestors. This led to an investigation by Ramnarayan Chaudhari and Satya Bhagat, which resulted in a critical report titled "Atrocities done on women in Bundi state". The resulting furor compelled the British government to take action and send Swaroop Narayan and Superintendent of Police Ikram Hussain to Bundi to look into the administration.

The Bengu Movement

The farmers of Bengu were highly motivated by the achievements of Bijolia and decided to take steps towards their own struggle against the exploitation of Thikana. A turning point came at the time when the Farmers Panchayat was formed in Govindpura village by the Rajasthan Seva Sangh. On 13th July 1923, on the instructions of Seth Amritlal, the state police opened fire on the peaceful gathering. Revenue Commissioner Tranche upped the ante and told the village that it be set ablaze. In this state sponsored repression, armed soldiers raided private homes and brutally attacked women with shamelessness.

The Shekhawati Movement

The Shekhawati movement is a tremendous demonstration of the solidarity of women in

Shekhawati. More than 10,000 women gathered for an unprecedented meeting in Katrathal, Sikar on 25 April 1934 against state atrocities and extortionate land revenue. It was a large gathering which was successfully organised by a strong leadership of Uttama Devi and Kishori Devi. The momentum was to be sustained on the next day, at a conference in Kudan village, where four farmers were killed by the police at the order of Captain Webb. The enormity of the feminist mobilisation and the repression that followed to the extent it got international attention and was formally debated in the House of Commons of the British Parliament.

The Agrarian Struggles and the path of the women empowerment.

In all of these peasant movements which took place in various parts of Rajasthan there was a great sense of confidence among the women who participated. One of the main positive roles played by this engagement was to help rural women to cross the traditional barriers and figure out their own place in the national movement and the developing women's rights movement going on in the country. Not only were they politically resisting, they were also socio-economically active and started protesting against the all-pervading discrimination they found in the agrarian society. As a result, their involvement sparked a line of socio-political progress for women:

Increase of Gender Parity: Women were increasingly coming out of the home and were actively involved in social activities and politics. Women Committees and political wings were set up at different administrative levels. There was a visible paradigm change in the attitude of the society towards gender discrimination; the society which previously did not allow any woman to go beyond the narrow boundaries of her house and family roles of mother, sister, wife and daughter, began to accept her as a public speaker and an organizer.

Increase of Political Awareness: Farmers movement made rural women aware of political power and independence by their direct involvement. This ideological consciousness was to equip women to be actively involved in the parallel Praja Mandal groups and the entire national struggle for freedom and to take up sustainable leadership roles in the agrarian organizations.

Profiles of Prominent Female Leadership in the Resistance.

The movement was certainly grassroots and mobilized most by the masses, but a number of key female leaders appeared, giving it both strategic and ideological guidance:

Anjana Devi Choudhary, born in Shrimadhapur (Sikar district), was married to Ramnarayan Chaudhary, a sincere worker of Rajasthan Seva Sangh. She led the Bijolia and Bengu farmers' movements, and was a key figure in their leadership. She was a great promoter of the spirit of nationalism and social reform among the women of the Mewar and Bundi states during the period 1921-1924. In 1924, she defied by organizing an army of around 500 women in Bijolia to successfully free peasants from the unconstitutional police force of the princely state. She was a militant, and as a result, the first woman across all the princely states of Rajputana to be arrested; she was later exiled from the Bundi state. She stayed in the Naroli Ashram at Ajmer from 1934 to 1936, and was active in the Harijan service there.

Ratan Shastri: She is a native of Khachrod, Madhya Pradesh, and was the wife of Hiralal Shastri, a well-known leader. In 1939 she was actively involved in the Satyagraha movement of the Praja Mandal of the State of Jaipur. In the critical year of the Quit India Movement, 1942, she was able to render critical services to underground leaders and their families. She received Padma Shri in 1955 for her huge socio-political contribution and in 1975 she was awarded as the first lady of Rajasthan for the same contribution with Padma Vibhushan.

Kishori Devi was the wife of freedom fighter Sardar Harlal Singh Kharra and was the Chairperson of the historic women's conference at Katrathal (Sikar) in 1934. This historic meeting galvanized some 10,000 women from the area to raise loud protests against the inhuman exactions imposed on the peasantry.

Satyabhama: Bundi freedom fighter Nityanand Nagar's daughter-in-law, who led the Beawar-Ajmer movement in 1932. Historically she is considered as the "Manas Putri" (spiritual daughter) of Mahatma Gandhi, because of her strong nationalist ideals.

Narayani Devi Varma was born in Singoli, Madhya Pradesh, and was married to Shri Manikyalal Verma who was a strong supporter of the Bijolia peasant

movement. She was detained in Kumbhalgarh fort because of her strong activism. After the movement, she founded an educational and awakening organization at Bhilwara in 1944 and progressed in her journey of politics leading her to the Raja Sabha in 1970.

Khetubai Vaidya: She was Vaidya Magharam's sister and had led the mobilisation of women in the Dudhwa Khara Kisan movement and had taken a lifelong commitment to wear Khadi as a symbol of her nationalism.

Conclusion

The women from different social strata from all the princely states of Rajputana joined and contributed immensely in the agrarian movements in the region. They were not only aware of the parallel socio-political changes taking place in other provinces of India but had also made significant contributions towards strengthening the local resistance. In practice these women were the backbone of the movement, providing refuge for leaders and activists from police brutality, managing the logistics of food and ensuring the safe transfer of key information at the most crucial moments. In addition, they organized the production of foodstuffs in the long absence of men and maintained the economic viability of the peasantry, thus strengthening the continuity of the peasant movement.

Though women had been active in society and politics before this, the agrarian movements represented their unprecedented and active involvement in the political arena in this case, at the local level. Unfortunately, the amazing support given by these grassroots women is not being given the recognition it deserves from mainstream history. However, their involvement was a crucial training ground to train active female cadres for future integration into the national and Prajamandal organization. Women, who formed 50% of the population, were integrated, and this multiplied the base and efficacy of the resistance by powers of two. But there continued to be a class divide within the movement's wake. Upper class women were often given more significance and were made to perform important functions in formal organisations like Congress, Praja Mandal Committees and specialised Women Committees and their role was often forgotten by the middle and lower class. Taking all these historical biases as a whole, the contribution of women — both unsung and sung — in all the

farmer's movements of Rajasthan can be regarded as one of the most important and undeniable facts in the historical continuum of women's empowerment that ensured their entry into the mainstream politics of post-independent India.

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