

Block

7

NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL GROUPS-II

UNIT 29**National Movement and Women** **5**

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BLOCK 7 NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL GROUPS-II

Introduction

In this Block, we will discuss the ways in which the nationalist movement related to three important social groups in colonial India—women, Dalits and minorities, particularly the Muslims. Women formed a significant part of the national movement during the twentieth century. The participation of women in nationalist movement occurred with the growth of feminism in India. Increasing education among women also played an important role in inculcating nationalist consciousness. Many women's associations were formed in different parts of India which strongly took up women's issues, the most important political demand being right to vote. Many of these associations were influenced by and were closely allied with nationalist politics. Gandhian politics played a key role in bringing a large number of women in the national movement. Women from all walks of life joined the movement and some of them became quite prominent leaders. Many women also actively participated in the revolutionary and left movements. **Unit 29** will familiarise you with women's role in national movement.

The incorporation of Dalits as a group in the nationalist movement was again a challenging task. The conscious Dalit intelligentsia demanded that their demand for social equality be given equal weight as the demand for national freedom. The nationalist leaders, on the other hand, regarded the task of national liberation as primary, although they did consider social equality as an important goal. Removal of untouchability was put on the national agenda to be pursued by the Congress since 1917, and during the early 1930s, Gandhi vigorously launched an anti-untouchability movement. One of the important achievements of the nationalist leadership was to bring around the Dalit leaders in support of joint electorate in the national interests eschewing their demand for separate electorate. The Poona Pact contained reservation of seats for the Dalits within the frame of joint electorate. On the whole, however, Congress did not succeed in fully convincing the Dalit leaders, particularly Ambedkar, about its sincerity in solving the problems of the Dalits. **Unit 30** deals with these issues.

While the national movement was quite successful in making the women's presence public and in largely allaying the fears of the Dalit intelligentsia, its relationship with the Muslim minority was marked by a certain degree of failure. In the early years of the Congress, there was a lukewarm response of the Muslim leaders towards it. The formation of the Muslim League and subsequent provision of separate electorate for the Muslims in the Morley-Minto Reforms were in keeping with the British policy of creating a wedge between the Hindus and Muslims. The close relationship between Gandhi and Congress, on the one hand, and the Muslim leaders on the other during the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements was rather short-lived. The growing intensity of communal discord during the 1920s disrupted the spectacular harmony which had marked the period

from Lucknow Pact in 1915 to the withdrawal of Non-cooperation in 1922. Situation became worse during the 1930s, and during the 1940s an irreparable situation arose with the separatist politics of the Muslim League gaining large ground among the Muslims. It was the worst period of the relationship of the Congress with the Muslim minority. Congress was unable to prevent either the communal riots or the partition of the country. In **Unit 31**, we will discuss these problems in detail.



UNIT 29 NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND WOMEN*

Structure

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- 29.2 Women Leaders of the National Movement
- 29.3 Mahila Samitis (Women Associations)
- 29.4 Mobilisation of Women in the Gandhian Phase
- 29.5 The Civil Disobedience Movement
- 29.6 The Quit India Movement
- 29.7 Women in Jail
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29.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will discuss the role of women in the national movement. Women's role in history is not easy to document. Much has been written about the invisibility of women in mainstream historical accounts. The task of filling in the gaps, of putting women into the narrative, has been an ongoing one for the past few decades. Autobiographies, personal diaries and other writings by women in journals have played a major role in this reconstruction. Any account of women's role in the Indian National Movement too, would have to rely heavily on such sources. For the rest, private papers, published and unpublished, archival records, newspapers also contain references to women's activities. They have to be carefully scrutinised to look for any mention of women's participation and occasionally they have yielded significant results.

29.2 WOMEN LEADERS OF THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT

There is no doubt that women participated in the Indian anti-imperialist struggle in large numbers. If we were to recall the names of women leaders in our national movement, we will find that the list is a very long one. Starting with Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mridula Sarabhai at the national level, we may go on to provincial level leaders like Annie Mascarene and A.V. Kuttimaluamma in Kerala, Durgabai Deshmukh in Madras Presidency, Rameshwari Nehru and Bi Amman in U.P., Satyawati Devi and Subhadra Joshi in Delhi, Hansa Mehta and Usha Mehta in Bombay and several others. In fact, such is the nature of our nationalist movement that it is very difficult to distinguish between regional level and all-India level leaders. Many women began at the local level and went on to become players in the nationalist

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centre stage. Besides all these Indian women, there were also Irish women like Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, who brought their own knowledge of the Irish experience of British exploitation to bear on India.

The growth of feminism in India and women's participation in the Indian Nationalist Movement were part of the same process. As Geraldine Heng, the Singaporean academic based in the US, has noted: "feminist movements in the Third World have almost always grown out of the same historical soil and at a similar moment, as nationalism." Moreover, as the first wave of feminism swept America and Europe, it had its impact on India too. Women in different parts of the world were asking for the vote for women, and this became the rallying cry in India as well. Irish women like Margaret Cousins helped the Indian women to demand representation in the limited constitutional reforms being provided as early as 1917. That was the year in which the Indian Women's Association was formed, primarily with the intention of sending a delegation to Edwin Montagu, the then Secretary of State for India. The delegation asked for votes for women in the new constitutional reforms which would finally take the shape of the 1919 Government of India Act, popularly known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.

But let us first go back to the beginning of the twentieth century – a very significant period, not just because of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal with its repercussions in other parts of the country, but also because it was the time when girls' schools and ladies' clubs mushroomed in different parts of the country. In Delhi, the Indraprastha Girls' School was set up at this time on the outskirts of the Jama Masjid, in the *haveli* of one of the businessmen of Chandni Chowk, Rai Balkrishan Das. In the UP, Sayyid Karamat Husain was busy setting up a whole network of girls' schools from Aligarh to Allahabad. There is a close relationship between women's increased access to education and their nationalist consciousness. As will be shown later, it was on the journey to school and back, or in the classroom, that many women had their first initiation into the nationalist movement. On the other hand there were several illiterate women who also participated in the movement. In the course of their activity, they closely interacted with educated fellow nationalists, and were able to access education in a whole variety of unconventional ways. Quite often it would be within the confines of the jail barracks. The relationship between education and empowerment was being understood by many women across the length and breadth of the country by the early twentieth century.

29.3 MAHILA SAMITIS (WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS)

The early twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of many city and town-based women's associations. Unlike the girls' schools mentioned above, these were initiated by women themselves. It was as if there was something in the air at that time which made women want to reach out to each other, to do activities together and to broaden their mental and physical horizons.

In the light of the Swadeshi agitation, women's associations like the Mahila Shilpa Samiti and the Lakshmir Bhandar were set up by the nieces of Rabindranath Tagore, Hironmoyee Devi and Sarla Devi. The Hitashini Sabha, a women's group, organised an exhibition of Swadeshi goods in 1907. Alongside with the

establishment of these women's organisations, women's journals like the *Bharat-Mahila* were also becoming extremely popular. Kumudini Mitra wrote in one of the issues that if the Indians rejected British goods in large quantities, then there would be a great upheaval in England and that would force the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, to revoke Partition.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, in her autobiography titled *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces*, describes how, in her home town, Mangalore, her own mother Girijabai set up a Mahila Sabha around 1911 to bring women together to discuss their problems and seek ways of resolving them. Even earlier, she would visit homes and read out newspapers to women. Slowly, the activities of the Mahila Sabha expanded – women were encouraged to read books, journals and newspapers from Girijabai's own personal collection. Kamaladevi goes on to add: "the discussions were later lightened by music, vocal or instrumental. Later, outdoor games such as badminton were added..."

Two years before Girijabai set up her Mahila Sabha in Mangalore, Rameshwari Nehru, wife of a cousin of Jawaharlal Nehru, was creating a similar organisation in Allahabad. Known as the Prayag Mahila Samiti, it tried to draw the women of Allahabad out of their homes to discuss political issues. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, has this rather evocative description of one of the meetings of the Samiti in 1917. The issue that was being discussed was the plight of Indians in South Africa:

'The meeting itself was, I imagine, unique for the time. It took consistent and patient efforts for many days to persuade women to leave their homes for one afternoon and go out to hear other women speak. Outings at that time were confined to specific social occasions when one dressed up in one's best and could look forward to a good meal, and this new idea was not appreciated. South Africa was very far away – it was a pity Indians were being discriminated against, but what good could result by some women getting together and talking about it in Allahabad? A packed hall finally rewarded the efforts of the organisers and the meeting was hailed by the newspapers next morning as a great step forward in arousing the social conscience of the women of the Uttar Pradesh! My own part had been confined mostly to serving water and in trying to keep crying babies quiet, but I had a feeling of participation in the cause and felt happy.' (*The Scope of Happiness*, pp. 61-62.)

Rameshwari Nehru had also set up a women's journal at this time: the *Stree Darpan*, which was extremely popular with the Hindi reading public. It had an interesting mix of political coverage of national and international issues, short stories, poems and other prose pieces. By the 1930s, there were several other Hindi journals, such as *Madhuri*, which had also made an appearance. We have given just one example here: if we were to look at other parts of the country, such as Andhra Pradesh, Bengal and Maharashtra, we will see similar processes at work.

During the 1920s, the issue of votes for women was debated in the Provincial Legislative Councils and ultimately, by the mid-1920s, all the Legislative Councils, from the more progressive Madras Legislative Council to the more conservative UP Legislative Council, had given their assent to the idea of women's suffrage and women's representation. It is worth noting that the British

Government, when petitioned on the matter, had avoided taking a decision (possibly because in England, despite the spirited campaign launched by the Suffragettes, women still did not have the vote) They had suggested that the newly-constituted Legislative Councils, under the 1919 Government of India Act, which had an Indian majority for the first time, should debate the matter and arrive at a decision. Fortunately for the women, these councils voted in their favour.

29.4 MOBILISATION OF WOMEN IN THE GANDHIAN PHASE

While these developments facilitated the growth of the women's movement in India and their active involvement in public life, it was the new direction and focus given to the Indian National Movement by Mahatma Gandhi that enabled them to come out of their homes. Vina Majumdar, the doyen of women's studies in India, has referred to Gandhi's "revolutionary approach to women's role in society and their personal dignity as individuals". Madhu Kishwar, another well-known feminist scholar and activist, develops this theme further. She explains that it was in the course of the Gandhian movement that the single woman acquired a sense of dignity and came to be respected for her political work. Women like Mridula Sarabhai, who chose to remain unmarried, could actually make this choice in the context of the Gandhian movement, where giving up one's personal life for the cause and opting out of marriage were seen as noble deeds. Such women were not pitied because they had not found husbands. Their actions in the political sphere were appreciated. Mridula Sarabhai was a trusted lieutenant of Mahatma Gandhi and was often sent out by him to various places to assess the political situation and even control communal riots. Aparna Basu's biographical account of Mridula Sarabhai gives us insights into the life of this remarkable woman. Another example is that of Sucheta Kripalani, who actively participated in the movement and was a true Gandhian. In her 'Unfinished Autobiography', she wrote:

"I saw this [women being given political responsibilities] again and again during his historic tour in Noakhali. I remember once he decided to send young Abha out to work alone in a difficult village. I was myself afraid. I pleaded with Gandhiji that she was too young to go to work in such a village where there was intense bitterness between the Hindus and the Muslims. But he was firm in his decision and said: "Abha shall go. Nobody dare touch a hair on her head and she is bound to succeed in her mission." He proved to be correct."

Women were therefore, not mere add-ons to the Gandhian movement, but were an important part of it. In fact, when explaining his strategy of satyagraha and how it worked, Mahatma Gandhi had often expressed the view that he felt women would understand the method better. Satyagraha required a great deal of patience and forbearance, as well as moral courage. Gandhiji felt that most women in India had these qualities.

Women's participation in the first major Gandhian movement, the Khilafat and Non-cooperation Movement of 1920-22, was limited but there were some important developments. The Khilafat Movement in the U.P. was marked by the energetic efforts of Bi Amman, the mother of the Ali Brothers, Maulana Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali. Bi Amman was the popular name by which she

was known. Her actual name was Abadi Bano Begum. A courageous woman who did not allow patriarchy and the *pardah* to come in her way, she took to active politics around 1914, when her sons were in jail, because she felt that the cause must not suffer. Despite her age – she was over sixty by then – she toured the Punjab, Bombay, the U.P. and Bihar during the Khilafat Movement, addressing several meetings and collecting large sums of money for the Movement. She would throw aside her *pardah* and address the gathering, asking women to come forward and participate in the Movement in large numbers. Her presence played a major role in attracting women to the public meetings held on the Khilafat issue.

Another important development was that women went to jail for the first time in the Non-Cooperation Movement. This was bound to happen, though Mahatma Gandhi was at first not at all in favour of women going to jail. But when the wife and sister of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das got arrested in Calcutta in 1921, Gandhiji had to revise his stand. He now began addressing women in different parts of the country, exhorting them to go to jail. “A yagna is incomplete without women taking part in it”, he told the women of Gujarat.

He drew them more actively into the mainstream of politics, asking them to attend the Ahmedabad session of the Indian National Congress, held at the end of 1921, in large numbers. The women of U.P. in particular responded to the appeal, setting forth from their distant homes, travelling third class to Ahmedabad, staying at Sabarmati Ashram and experiencing the rigours and austerities of Ashram life. Attending the Congress session, participating in the discussions and getting more deeply drawn into the spirit of non-co-operation were exhilarating experiences. Krishna Hutheesingh, the younger sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, has given us a rather vivid description of this journey in her autobiography titled “With No Regrets”. Besides her, her elder sister, Sarup (later Vijayalakshmi Pandit) and her sister-in-law Kamala Nehru, there were other women like Begum Mohammad Ali, Begum Hasrat Mohani, Mrs. A.M. Khwaja and Uma Nehru attending this session of the Congress. From Punjab came Sarladevi Chaudharani, the niece of Rabindranath Tagore and from Gujarat there was Anusuya Sarabhai.

When they returned after the Congress session, their lives had been transformed. The Non-Cooperation Movement was at its peak, most of the leaders had been arrested. The women took upon themselves the responsibility of keeping the movement alive by holding meetings, often in defiance of prohibitory orders, addressing large crowds, usually for the first time in their lives, and if need be, even going to jail.

What emerges, then, from the pattern of women’s participation in the politics of the 1920s is their being drawn into the movement, not in the first instance, but at one remove, i.e., after the arrest of their men folk. They were not cowed down by this punitive action of the Government. Instead, it strengthened their resolve to keep up the tempo of the movement and prevent it from dying out. The determined spirit of these women left the British authorities rather confused. What were they to do with these women? Should their actions be ignored or should they be arrested? If the latter course of action were to be adopted, would it cause further unrest? Very few women were arrested in the Khilafat- Non-cooperation Movement, and if they were, it was only for a very short period. Things were to change during the next mass movement, however.

In the course of the peasant movement in Awadh, which accompanied the Non-Co-operation Movement, women participated actively. Jaggi Devi, the wife of Baba Ramchandra, was an active figure. We also have some other names of peasant women who were part of the large crowds who gathered outside police stations to get their leaders released. The peasant historian, Kapil Kumar, in his article titled “Rural Women in Oudh 1917-1947” refers to women like Musammat Putta and Abhilakhi, who came into the peasant movement on their own and not at the initiative of their husbands. Sumitra Devi, on the other hand, had her husband and mother-in-law in the peasant movement.

29.5 THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-33 was undoubtedly a major landmark in women’s participation in political activity. We begin with the historic Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi in March 1930. When he set out from his Sabarmati Ashram with his group of 78 volunteers, he declared that no women would be part of the Dandi March. This was extremely disappointing for women like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay who has given us this account of what she felt: “As batches for the first Satyagrahis were to be selected, I asked that women be included. I was told that Gandhiji did not want them as he had other programmes reserved for them. I was flabbergasted.”

Kamaladevi rushed to Surat and then took a bus to Jambusar, where Gandhiji and his group of volunteers were expected to reach. She impressed upon Gandhiji the need to involve women in direct action during the Civil Disobedience Movement. After listening to her, Gandhiji finally held out a slip of paper on which he had written: “All may regard this as the words from me that all are free and those who are ready are expected to start mass civil disobedience regarding the Salt Law from April 6.” Kamaladevi took this as the green signal from Gandhi for women’s participation in mass direct action and this made it easier for the women’s sections of the Seva Dals (volunteer organisations of the Congress) to issue directions and organise participation of women volunteers in all the programmes of Civil Disobedience. Women’s meetings, processions, picketing of shops the making and selling of salt, all became generalised activities in all parts of the country. To quote Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay once again:

“The veil of centuries was torn asunder. Women, young and old, rich and poor came tumbling out in their hundreds and thousands, shaking off the traditional shackles that had held them so long.

“Voluntarily they went forward without a trace of fear or embarrassment. They stood at street corners with little packages of salt, crying out: “We have broken the Salt Law and we are free. Who will buy the salt of freedom? Don’t you want the salt of freedom? Their cries never went unheeded. Every passerby stopped, slipped a coin into their hands and held out proudly a tiny pinch of salt.” (Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, “The Struggle for Freedom” in *Women of India*, Publication Division, 1958, pp. 19-20.)

Quite often these activities took them to jail usually in rather unexpected ways. We have this rather delightful description from Munshi Premchand, the writer, of the arrest of his wife, Shivrani Devi, who was active in the Civil Disobedience Movement in Allahabad: “I saw her yesterday in prison and found her cheerful

as ever. She has left us all behind and I now appear smaller in my own eyes. She has gone up a hundred fold in my esteem. But until she comes and relieves me, I shall have to bear the burden of running the household.” (From Amrit Rai, *Premchand: A Life* (Translated from the Hindi by Harish Trivedi), New Delhi, 1982, pp. 260-61.)

These words capture the mood of many a household where the women had gone to jail – pride mixed with dismay at the inconveniences that had to be borne. Manmohini Sahgal Zutshi in her autobiography recounts the story of a woman who found herself in the Lahore Jail. She had been arrested in the course of a meeting and this had infuriated her husband who had threatened not to take her back when she was released from jail. Manmohini and her mother Lado Rani Zutshi, a well known Congress leader from Lahore, spoke to the husband who explained that what irked him was not the fact of his wife being in jail – in fact he was proud of her for that – he was upset because she had not sought his permission before going to jail!

This was a time when gender equations were undergoing change – women were making their choice of husbands, they were even choosing not to marry or to move away from husbands with whom there were compatibility issues. For example, the Bengali Sucheta Majumdar met and married Jivat Kripalani, a Sindhi who was a close follower of Mahatma Gandhi. They not only had to reckon with opposition from their own families but from Mahatma Gandhi himself, who was opposed to the idea of J.B. Kripalani, his right hand man, getting distracted with household responsibilities. The couple finally convinced Mahatma Gandhi that even though they would marry, they would devote their entire lives to nationalist work and would not raise children. They remained true to their resolve until the very end. Another example was that of Jayaprakash Narayan and his wife Prabhavati. In this case, the marriage was a traditional one, but once again they resolved not to raise children and spent their lives often away from each other, pursuing their own preferred forms of political activity. Prabhavati spent a great deal of her time in the Gandhian ashram at Sevagram, while Jayaprakash was drawn more and more towards Congress Socialism. A third example is that of the Delhi-based Congress leader, Asaf Ali and his wife Aruna Ganguly from Allahabad. Aruna was marrying out of religion, and like Sucheta, had chosen a man who was much older than her. These unconventional marriages gave women a great deal of space and it is not surprising that at least two of the women mentioned above: Sucheta Kripalani and Aruna Asaf Ali, became prominent leaders of the Congress. Both were extremely active in the underground campaign which sustained and gave a sense of direction to the Quit India Movement of 1942. As for women opting out of marriage due to incompatibility, we have Mahadevi Varma, the well-known poetess, who terminated an early marriage and went on to pursue a professional career even while being a staunch nationalist. The Communist leader, Hajra Begum, had been married to her cousin but soon found that she could not adjust to his ways. She left him and pursued her studies in England, in the course of which she met Z.A. Ahmed, whom she later married.

29.6 THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT

If women came into their own in the 1930s, the 1942 Quit India Movement was one in which women’s participation was even more significant. Interestingly, women understood the complexities of this movement very well. Since the major

Congress leaders had been put in jail in a pre-emptive strike by the British government, they realised that what was needed now was to evade arrest and many of them successfully managed to do so until almost the end of the movement. Women also took the initiative in a wide variety of ways – from producing pamphlets, to circulating underground literature, to running a Congress radio. Usha Mehta, along with Vithalbhai Jhaveri, Babubhai Khakar and Rammanohar Lohia set up the Freedom Radio in Bombay which successfully broadcast from 3rd September 1942 until 12 November of the same year. This was how she explained the background to the setting up of the Congress Radio:

“The leaders had told us to do all we could. We had been given specific instructions regarding the programme. So each one had to exert his or her own brain to find out the programme that would be suitable, that would be appropriate for the type of struggle that had been launched. There were some friends who thought in terms of violent means also. And there were some sabotage cases in Bombay. Some friends wanted to prepare bombs. There were others who thought in terms of derailments. But our group of friends thought that as far as possible we would try to be non-violent. Not that every one believed in non-violence as a creed, but in their opinion, as we had accepted the Mahatma’s leadership, it was desirable for us to stick to non-violent means as far as possible. However, they did not like the methods which were ordinarily adopted, because they did not seem to be as effective as some of the other means. By studying the freedom movements of other countries, we found that, perhaps, a transmitter was the best way of spreading news regarding the movement, not merely in Bombay but all over India. At a time when the press was gagged and we had no control over the official transmitter (All-India Radio), we thought this would serve the purpose very well and, hence, we set out in search of a technical who could provide us with a transmitter.”

The broadcasts were usually of 20 minutes to half an hour duration and would end with the Bande Mataram. They were extremely popular and people used to wait for the broadcasts. Usha Mehta’s account of the ways in which they moved from place to place with their transmitters, often narrowly escaping detection, pre-empting the attempts by All India Radio to jam their frequency by jamming the AIR itself make fascinating reading.

In the Quit India Movement, there were women’s processions even in such unlikely places as Bannu in the North West Frontier Province. Girl students were active in Meerut, parts of Assam, Sagar and Wardha in Madhya Pradesh and different parts of the Madras Presidency.

There is an amusing incident of how the women of Mahila Ashram, Wardha, decided to embarrass the District Magistrate. Shortly after the beginning of the Quit India Movement, it was time for the Raksha Bandhan festival, when sisters usually tie *rakhis* around the wrists of their brothers. The Mahila Ashram women decided to call upon the District Magistrate and tie *rakhis* on him. The DM fully realised what the consequences of this action could be. It would mean that he would become their brother, and how could a brother arrest his own sisters? On the other hand, it would be extremely awkward for him to refuse their request. What was he to do? When the women arrived at his home, he sent his wife to receive them and ply them with food and *sharbat*. When the women asked for the DM they were told by the wife that he was getting ready. After they had waited for a long time they suspected that something was wrong. They realised

29.7 WOMEN IN JAIL

Women went to jail in large numbers both during the course of the Quit India Movement and the previous Civil Disobedience Movement. As we have explained earlier, these arrests often threw their domestic lives into disarray. However, for the women themselves, the jail came to signify a new world, the routine of which was quite different from the daily domestic grind. Here, they learnt to spin, sing nationalist songs, educate themselves, learn new languages and interact with women whom they would otherwise never have met in their lives. Many of the middle-class women had their first insights into the lives of ‘criminal women’ who had been convicted for murder and other serious offences. They learnt to empathise with them and bond with them as women. The ‘murders’, they realised, had often been committed by way of resisting patriarchal oppression. A drunken husband had been clubbed to death by the wife who had silently endured years of violence and humiliation. Such women in turn reacted to the political prisoners with curiosity and a certain amount of envy. They realised that the political prisoners were there only for a short period of time and would return to their normal lives after a year or two. There would be families waiting to receive them while their own lives were blighted forever. Even if their terms ended, who would accept a woman murderer back into their homes?

29.8 WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTIONARY AND LEFT MOVEMENTS

Until now we have concentrated on the Gandhian movement and women’s participation in it. As we know, our nationalist movement had several other ideological strains besides the Gandhian one. From the 1920s, under the auspices of the HRA which later renamed itself as the HSRA, a strong revolutionary tradition developed over large parts of Northern India. This revolutionary movement set itself up as a counter to the non-violent Gandhian movement, which, it felt, would not work in India. It believed that individual assassinations, especially of top officials of the British Government would be more effective because that would paralyse the British Government and make them leave India. These revolutionary groups worked underground and the harsh life that they led made it extremely difficult for women to be part of it. In fact, as women like Prakashvati, the wife of Yashpal, have explained, the men themselves discouraged women from joining their movement. Yet, in Bengal, there were women revolutionary groups who formed physical culture clubs and secretly read banned revolutionary literature. The Chittagong Armoury Raid of 19 April 1930. Greatly excited women like Pritilata Wadadar and Kalpana Dutt who became more actively involved in revolutionary activities.

The late 1920s and thereafter witnessed the emergence of a viable Left alternative within the Indian Nationalist Movement. Many women chose to join the Communist Party, because of its more radical programme which appealed especially to the youth and also because the newly emergent Soviet Russia was making remarkable progress through collectivisation of agriculture and the Five Year Plans. Hajra Begum from Rampur, a small princely state in UP, explained

that she was not at all attracted by the Gandhian programme. Her ideological affinity with Communism was further strengthened when she went to England to study and got an opportunity to visit the Soviet Union. The group of students whom she interacted with in London—Sajjad Zaheer, Z.A. Ahmed, K.M. Ashraf—were also similarly inclined. They all became the first Indian members of the CPGB: the Communist Party of Great Britain. They were instructed to return to India and work within the Indian National Congress (The Communist Party of India was under a ban at that time). Hajra Begum emerged as a labour leader, organising the railway coolies on Allahabad railway station. She was also a popular speaker at many student meetings during the 1930s.

In the course of the 1940s, the number of women who participated in the various subsidiary organisations of the Left, such as the Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association increased manifold. Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Rekha Jain and others made their mark in literature, theatre and music. All these cultural forms were used to mobilise the workers and the peasantry in different parts of India. This, combined with the very active role that women played in the Quit India Movement, indicates the extent to which women were becoming the “movers of history” by the 1940s.

29.9 SUMMARY

Women's participation in the Indian Nationalist Movement can be traced back to the Swadeshi Movement. The early decades of the twentieth century saw women's lives being transformed through education, formation of women's associations and increasing participation in political activity. The story of women's participation in India's freedom struggle is the story of making bold choices, finding themselves on the streets, inside jails and in legislatures, all of which empowered them in a whole variety of ways. The non-violent movement that gained India her freedom not only took women along but was dependent for its success on the active participation of women. At the same time, there were several other strands in the anti-imperialist movement, such as that of the revolutionaries, communists and other left groups. While the revolutionary movement offered little scope for women's participation, increasingly in the 1930s and 1940s, many women were being drawn towards socialist and communist ideas.

29.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Why was Gandhian method of mass mobilisation effective in bringing out women to public life?
- 2) Discuss the relationship between feminism and growth of national consciousness among women.
- 3) What was the role of women in revolutionary and left movements in India?

UNIT 30 NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND THE DALITS*

Structure

- 30.1 Introduction
- 30.2 Contextualising Caste Identity
- 30.3 National Movement and Integration of Dalit Issues
- 30.4 Politics of Representation
 - 30.4.1 Communal Award
 - 30.4.2 Poona Pact
 - 30.4.3 After Poona Pact
- 30.5 Dalits' Perspective on National Movement
- 30.6 Summary
- 30.7 Exercises

30.1 INTRODUCTION

The challenge before the leadership of national movement was to integrate the divergent interests of different social groups in India in a united movement against the colonial rule. In this Unit we will explain the initiatives taken by the Indian National Congress to take up the issues affecting the lives of Dalits in order to have their support in the movement against colonialism. Administrative, political and economic changes in the wake of the British rule in India and specifically the initiative taken by the colonial government to protect the interests of Dalits gave an impetus to the latent discontent and resentment of Dalits against the oppressive caste system. Dalit intelligentsia at the regional as well as national levels tried to mobilise people belonging to their social groups in order to assert their social and political rights. Liberation from internal oppression rather than liberation from the British rule was the desired goal of Dalit intelligentsia. Indian National Congress realising the need of addressing the sufferings of Dalits advocated for the abolition of untouchability and also believed in social equality and justice. Attempt was made by the nationalists to support the demands of Dalit leadership for democratic rights. In this Unit you will be introduced to Dalits' efforts for creating an alternative ideological tradition in opposition to Brahmanical tradition. You will learn about the initiatives taken by nationalist leadership to address the problems faced by Dalits and how ultimately Dalit leadership agreed to the Poona Pact accepting joint electorate in place of their demand for separate electorate. You will also learn about the ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issues pertaining to the liberation and empowerment of Dalits and about the reservation of Dalit intelligentsia towards national movement.

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30.2 CONTEXTUALISING CASTE IDENTITY

Dalits in India faced different forms of oppression in the name of caste system irrespective of the province they belonged. It is also true that at various points of time people raised voices against exploitation in the name of caste. One can refer here to Buddhism, Bhakti movements and other anti-caste egalitarian movements. However, since late nineteenth and early twentieth century we witness the emergence of organised movements by Dalits in different provinces of India challenging their given social identity and also claiming their rights in decision making process. The great revolt of 1857 shook the foundation of the colonial rule and the British bureaucracy was seriously engaged in devising strategy to prevent any form of discontent in the local society which may become a threat to the empire. Analysing the complexities of indigenous society the colonial authority decided to make use of internal oppression within local society in the name of caste hierarchy. Along with identification and legitimisation of caste division through official documentation the colonial government adopted specific measures for the benefit of the socially oppressed groups. This friendly gesture of the colonial government aroused aspirations among Dalits to voice their grievances and with the support of government they wanted to defy the authority of upper castes. The policy of colonial government to protect the interests of Dalits and the values of liberty, equality and justice that educated Dalits had learnt from western education gave birth to a new consciousness among Dalits. Nineteenth century socio-religious reformers cautioned about social oppression in the name of caste system but in their criticism they could not come out with an agenda of action which could win over the confidence of Dalits. Early nationalists and even their successors were preoccupied with the oppressive nature of imperialism and their prime concern was to mobilise Indian public opinion for political liberation of India without giving much space to the concerns of Dalits. The aspirations of Dalits, independent of mainstream Indian polity, found expression in the writings of Mahatma Jotiba Phule (1827-1890) who in modern India first raised voice for the liberation of Dalits. Phule is considered the first ideologue of anti-caste movement in modern India. Re-interpreting Indian history and mythology he tried to demolish the ideological foundation of Brahmanism which he considered the key of upper caste hegemony. The journey towards nation building can not be possible so long the oppression continues in the name of caste hierarchy. In his book *Gulamgiri* (1873) he described Brahmans as Aryans who came from outside and subdued the indigenous people who were Shudras and he gave a call to discard caste. Through his writings and speeches Phule tried to construct a new history with the help of symbols and local stories situating Dalits in a powerful position delinking them from the past depicted in the Dharma-shastras and itihasa-purana tradition. Given his understanding of history Phule was a natural critic of nationalism which he equated with another form of Brahmanism. He made it clear: 'There cannot be a 'nation' worth the name until and unless all the people of the land of King Bali – such as Shudras and Ati-Shudras, Bhils (tribals) and fishermen etc., become truly educated, and are able to think independently for themselves and are uniformly unified and emotionally integrated. If a tiny section of the population like the upstart Aryan Brahmins alone were to found in the 'National Congress' who will take any notice of it?' Phule was critical of the reform initiatives taken by Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj and others to rationalise Brahmanical system and strongly argued that without emancipating the oppressed the reform initiatives ensured

domination of upper castes in other forms. Phule wanted to unite the ‘bahujan samaj’, the Shudras and the Ati-Shudras. Nationalism was seen by him an ideology created by upper castes to downplay the internal divisions within Indian society.

The colonial rule opened up educational and economic opportunities by making provision of reservation for socially oppressed groups. A small section of the oppressed people could take advantage of the new opportunities and became conscious of the exploitation they suffered over the years. They became vocal about the disabilities imposed over them in the name of caste hierarchy and took initiatives by mobilising their fellow caste members to challenge their existing sufferings. Thus in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in different provinces we find the sudden growth in writing of caste histories and establishment of caste associations to assert for new identity as well as protection of the interests of their respective caste members. The government initiatives of bringing administrative changes by involving local people through various reform acts further encouraged the socially oppressed groups to demand for political rights which they were denied so far. Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, E. V. Ramaswami Naicker and M. C. Rajah in Tamil Nadu, Narayana Guru in Kerala, Bhagyareddy Varma in Andhra, Mangu Ram in Punjab, Acchutanand in Uttar Pradesh, Panchanan Barma, Rasiklal Biswas, Jogen Mandal and others in Bengal challenged the caste-based discrimination and domination and were critics of the anti-colonial struggle by the upper caste elites without abolishing internal oppression in Indian society. The new political awakening of Dalits is reflected in the writings and activities of Dalit intelligentsia of that period. Emancipation and empowerment of Dalits became the major concern of Dalit intelligentsia which was not in the immediate agenda of mainstream political leaders whose immediate concern was political liberation from colonial rule.

30.3 NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND INTEGRATION OF DALIT ISSUES

As we have explained in the previous section that from the beginning of the twentieth century the Dalit leadership became very vocal for their rights. It is generally argued that the policies of the colonial government like the inclusion of caste status in the census, provision for welfare measures along caste lines, nomination of Dalits in local bodies, etc. encouraged the Dalit leadership to assert for social emancipation as well as empowerment. Take for example the resolution passed in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1928, ‘This assembly recommends to the Governor General in Council to issue directions to Local Governments to provide special facilities for the education of the untouchables and other depressed classes, particularly by reserving seats in teachers’ training classes for them and also for opening all public services for them’. In its early phase the nationalist leaders engaged themselves in taking up political and administrative issues rather than addressing social problems. There was the National Social Conference which was expected to deliberate on social issues. At individual level the Congress leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Lala Lajpat Rai were of the opinion that removal of untouchability and social reform were necessary for national regeneration. In its annual session at Calcutta in 1917 for the first time Indian National Congress passed the resolution for abolition of untouchability and appealed to the people for removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon Dalits. Emergence of Gandhi brought a significant change in

the character of national movement by bringing masses in the mainstream national movement. Gandhi was particularly concerned of the sufferings of Dalits and made the removal of untouchability an integral part for national liberation. In the Nagpur session of Indian National Congress held in 1920 it was resolved that

‘...the movement of non-co-operation can only succeed by complete co-operation amongst the people themselves, this Congress calls upon the public associations to advance Hindu-Muslim unity and the Hindu delegates of this Congress to call upon the leading Hindus to settle all disputes between Brahmins and non-Brahmins wherever they may be existing and to make a special effort to rid Hinduism of the reproach of untouchability, and respectfully urges the religious heads to help the growing desire to reform Hinduism in the matter of its treatment of the suppressed classes.’

Gandhi firmly believed that removal of untouchability was essential to attain Swaraj and he played a key role in incorporating the removal of untouchability in the resolution of the non-cooperation. Following the suspension of non-cooperation in 1922 the Congress party workers were instructed by the party working committee to encourage Dalits to send their children to national schools, to provide them same facilities as given to other citizens and also to assist in improving their social and moral condition. As president of the Belgaum session of the Congress in 1924 Gandhi said that Hindu Congressmen in particular should devote greater attention to anti-untouchability movement because the British government was exploiting Dalits for a political end. In 1924 Gandhi supported the Vaikom Satyagraha movement organised by the Kerala Congress Committee to secure the rights of untouchables for using the forbidden roads to the temple. The Congress Working Committee in its meeting at Delhi in 1929 appointed an Anti-untouchability sub-committee with Madan Mohan Malaviya as its president and Jamnalal Bajaj as the secretary to ensure Dalits’ rights to enter temples, to use public wells, to provide sanitary living and to remove restrictions which Dalit children were facing in schools. During the course of civil disobedience movement the campaign for removal of untouchability continued and Gandhi said that ‘Remember that in Swaraj we would expect one drawn from the so-called lower class to preside over India’s destiny’. [Young India, 3 April 1930]. Thus the nationalist leadership was very concerned with the sufferings of Dalits and made efforts to initiate actions for securing social justice to Dalits in order to have their support in the movement against the colonial rule. In the next section we will discuss that how the nationalist leadership succeeded in persuading Dalit intelligentsia to accept joint electorate system in place of their demand for separate electorate system for the larger interest of the nation.

30.4 POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

In the 1920s, when the process was set in for electoral reforms aiming at making the government more broad based and representative, the issue of representation of the Dalits created divergent views within the local society. Among the Dalits at the national level two major identifiable groups emerged in the late 1920s, one around M.C. Rajah and the other around B.R. Ambedkar. M.C. Rajah and his associates who dominated the All India Depressed Classes Association decided not to accept proposals of the Simon Commission in the absence of separate electorates. They were of the opinion that joint electorates would return only

dummy representatives of the Dalits backed by upper caste Hindus. However, in the ensuing struggle within the Dalits to represent them in the proposed round Table Conference in London, Ambedkar was nominated by the British government to represent the Dalits. In a bid to check Ambedkar, M.C. Rajah convened an All India Depressed Classes Leaders special conference in August 1930 at Allahabad. This conference disowned the resolutions taken at the first session of the All India Depressed Classes Congress committee under the leadership of Ambedkar and declared the All India Depressed Classes as the real body. But Rajah, failing to get the British support in favour of his claim, came close to the Indian National Congress. Indian National Congress was also seriously trying to get the support of the Dalits so that the unity among Indians remained strong. Equally anxious were the Hindu Mahasabha leaders to find some way out to check the disintegration of the Hindus. In this process M.C. Rajah and B.S. Moonje, president of the Hindu Mahasabha, entered into an agreement known as the Rajah-Moonje Pact in 1932, based on the principle of reservation of seats in joint electorates. Opinions among the Dalits were divided over the Rajah-Moonje Pact. A section of the Dalits made a statement that the All India Depressed Classes Association was not representative of the Dalits in India. They expressed their support in favour of separate electorate. Ambedkar was very much opposed to the Rajah-Moonje Pact and stated that the Dalits had repudiated the Pact.

30.4.1 Communal Award

Next important development on the question of ensuring political rights to Dalits was the announcement of Communal Award by the British government. The Communal Award gave the Dalits voting right along with caste Hindus in the general constituencies and also an extra vote in special 'Depressed Classes' constituencies numbering 71 for a period of 20 years. The announcement of Communal Award was considered as clear indication of widening the rift between the Dalits and caste Hindus posing a serious challenge to Indian nationalist movement. Gandhi opposing the segregation of the Dalits into a separate electoral group wrote,

'So far as Hinduism is concerned separate electorate would simply vivisect and disrupt it. For me the question of these classes is predominantly moral and religious....I feel that no penance that caste Hindus may do can, in any way, compensate for the calculated degradation to which they have consigned the Depressed Classes for centuries. But I know that separate electorate is neither penance nor any remedy for the crushing degradation they have groaned under.' (CWMG, Vol. LXIX, p. 191).

Gandhi in his letter to the British government informed his decision for going to fast unto death unless the government withdrew the scheme of separate electorate for the Dalits. He further explained that he might be wrong in taking this decision but to him the scheme of separate electorate was against the interest of the Dalits. Gandhi was supportive of adequate representation of the Dalits but he was not agreeable to the proposal of separate electorate. He differed strongly on this matter with the leaders of the Dalits. The weapon of fast used by Gandhi aroused strong public opinion and public meetings were organised in different places to bring the caste Hindus and the Dalits together. Even leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha appealed to their followers to demonstrate equality in religious and social matters towards the Dalits. Appeal was also made to the Dalits not to

press for separate electorate. Gandhi confided to his close associates that the Dalits would fail to understand his decision of fasting when they were granted some privileges. Ambedkar's response to Gandhi's decision of fast was different and he said, 'I do not care for these political stunts. This threat of Mr. Gandhi to starve himself to death is not a moral fight but only a political move. I can understand a person trying to negotiate with his political opponents on equal terms but I will never be moved by those methods....If Mr. Gandhi wants to fight with his life for the interests of the Hindu community, the depressed Classes will also be forced to fight with their lives to safeguard their interests.' The British government saw in Gandhi's fast a ploy to coerce the Dalits in accepting the Congress viewpoint.

30.4.2 Poona Pact

The British government justified its action of announcing the Communal Award on the ground that Indian leaders failed to arrive at an agreement on the issue of representation of the Dalits in the Round Table Conference. In the given situation to protect the interests of the Dalits the government had announced this scheme. But Gandhi's moral weapon forced various sections of Indian leaders to work out a compromise formula between the separate electorate and joint electorate. Gandhi in principle was opposed to reservation of seats either through joint or separate electorate. But sensing the prevailing mood of the Dalits, he agreed to accept reservation of seats in joint electorates. In spite of opposition to Gandhi's approach to the issue of representation of the Dalits, Ambedkar agreed to consider Gandhi's proposal provided that the scheme guarantees better than the Communal Award. Ambedkar after meeting Gandhi who was at that time at Yeravda jail got the assurance of Gandhi that the interest of his community would be safe in the proposed scheme. Gandhi assured that he would end fast as soon as the separate electorate was replaced by joint electorate. This softened Ambedkar's attitude. After prolonged deliberations between the leaders of the two groups a formula based on the principle of joint electorate was devised. In place of 71 seats given by the Communal Award, 148 seats were reserved for the Dalits in the provincial legislatures. As regards the central legislature 18 per cent of the total seats meant for general electorate would be kept for the Dalits. It was also decided that continuance of reservation would be decided in future by mutual agreement. On 24 September 1932 the Poona Pact was signed between the leaders of the Dalits and caste Hindus and the same was sent to the British Prime Minister for acceptance. The major provisions of the Poona Pact are as follows:

'There shall be seats reserved for the Depressed Classes out of general electorates. Seats in the Provincial Legislatures shall be as follows – Madras 30; Bombay with Sind 15; Punjab 8; Bihar and Orissa 18; Central Provinces 20; Assam 7; Bengal 30; United Provinces 20 (Total-148).

Election to these seats shall be by joint electorates subject, however, to the following procedure:

All the members of the Depressed Classes, registered in the general electoral roll in a constituency, will form an electoral college which will elect a panel of four candidates belonging to the Depressed Classes for each of such reserved seats by the method of the single vote; the four persons getting the highest number of votes in such primary election shall be candidates for election by the general electorate.

Representation of the Depressed Classes in the Central Legislature shall likewise be on the principle of joint electorates and reserved seats by the method of primary election in the manner provided for in clause 2 above for their representation in Provincial Legislatures.

In the Central legislature eighteen per cent of the seats allotted to the general electorate for British India in the said legislature shall be reserved for the Depressed Classes.'

At a conference of the Hindu leaders in Bombay to ratify the Poona Pact Ambedkar said,

'I was immensely surprised that there was so much in common between Mr. Gandhi and myself....My only regret is why did not Mr. Gandhi take the attitude he took now at the Round Table Conference. If he had shown some consideration and the same attitude as he took now, I think it would not have been necessary for him to undergo the ordeal.' (*The Times of India*, 26 September 1932).

In the same conference the president made a resolution in the following words:

'This Conference resolves that henceforth amongst Hindus no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth and that those who have been so regarded hitherto will have the same rights as other Hindus in regard to the use of public wells, public schools, public roads, and all public institutions. These rights shall have statutory recognition at the first opportunity and shall be one of the earliest acts of the Swaraj Parliament, if it shall not have received such recognition before that time.'

'It is further agreed that it shall be the duty of all Hindu leaders to secure, by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by caste-men upon the so-called untouchable classes including the bar in respect of admission to temples.' (*The Times of India*, 26 September 1932).

As promised Gandhi ended his fast after the signing of the pact. He found in this victory of his political and social goals. This further encouraged him to carry forward his movement for social equality. The promise of a large number of seats for the Dalits aroused the hope of strong voice of the Dalits in public life.

To Ambedkar rights of the Dalits were most important compared to political independence, whereas Gandhi was fighting a two-pronged battle, one for India's independence, the other for maintaining the cohesiveness of Hindu society. Gandhi explained the essence of the settlement in the following words:

'The settlement is but the beginning of the end. The political part of it, very important though it no doubt is, occupies but a small space in the vast field of reform that has to be tackled by caste Hindus during the coming days, namely, the complete removal of social and religious disabilities under which a large part of the Hindu population has been groaning. I should be guilty of a breach of trust if I did not warn fellow reformers and caste Hindus in general that the breaking of the fast carried with it a sure promise of resumption of it if this reform is not relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measurable period....the message of freedom shall penetrate every untouchable home and that can only happen if reformers will cover every village.' (CWMG, Vol. LI).

30.4.3 After Poona Pact

Apart from the importance ensured by the Poona Pact in representing Dalits in decision making process, it was proclaimed in the Poona Pact that one of the earliest legislations in free India would be to provide for the statutory recognition of equal rights for Dalits. In 1932 the Harijan Sevak Sangh was founded and next year it started a mouthpiece called Harijan. Removal of disabilities of Dalits through constructive programme of social, educational and material development of Dalits was the objective of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Securing the entry of Dalits in temples as equal citizens was the other major agenda of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Although Gandhi succeeded in drawing large number of people to the Harijan movement but there was also reservation within the Congress towards Harijan movement. There was also opposition to the legislation for temple entry and removal of untouchability. Seeing the opposition to the passage of anti-untouchability legislations Gandhi observed three weeks fast in 1933. Gandhi travelled various parts of country during 1933-1934 to create awareness among people for temple entry and removal of untouchability. In some places Gandhi faced bitter opposition from orthodox people. The joint electorate and the harijan movement definitely succeeded in making an impact in society in general and the massive victory of the Congress candidates from reserved constituencies in the general election of 1937 may be considered as indication of this impact.

30.5 DALITS' PERSPECTIVE ON NATIONAL MOVEMENT

Efforts made by leaders of nationalist movement succeeded in bringing a section of Dalit leadership in the fold of national movement besides the participation of Dalit masses in various popular movements against the colonial rule. But majority of Dalit intelligentsia was critical of the lack of commitment on the part of the Congress to share power with Dalits and expressed serious doubt about the commitment of upper caste leadership to bring social equality. The best example of this was Ambedkar's book he wrote in 1945, titled 'What Congress and Gandhi had done to Untouchables'. Ambedkar was so much concerned about oppression and exploitation faced by Dalits that any form of struggle without referring to the abolition of internal oppression had no importance to him. To Ambedkar, without ensuring equal rights of Dalits political freedom had no meaning. Gaining political freedom from the British was not adequate to him unless the struggle for freedom ensured the dignity of life and equal rights to all its citizens. Ambedkar said, 'the freedom which the governing class in India was struggling for is freedom that rules the servile classes in India'. He wrote:

'Words such as society, nation and country are just amorphous, if not ambiguous, terms....Nation though one word means many classes. Philosophically it may be possible to consider a nation as a unit but sociologically it cannot but be regarded as consisting of many classes and the freedom of the nation if it is to be a reality must vouchsafe the freedom of the different classes comprised in it, particularly those who are treated as the servile classes.' [BAWS, VOL.9, PP. 201-2].

'I am sure, many have felt that if there was any class which deserved to be given special political rights in order to protect itself against the tyranny of

the majority under the Swaraj Constitution it was the Depressed Classes. Here is a class which is undoubtedly not in a position to sustain itself in the struggle for existence. The religion to which they are tied, instead of providing for them an honourable place, brands them as lepers, not fit for ordinary intercourse. Economically, it is a class entirely dependent upon the high-caste-Hindus for earning its daily bread with no independent way of living open to it. Nor are all ways closed by reason of the social prejudices of the Hindus but there is a definite attempt all throughout the Hindu society to bolt every possible door so as not to allow the Depressed Classes any opportunity to rise in the scale of life. Indeed it would not be an exaggeration to say that in every village the caste-Hindus, however divided among themselves, are always in a standing conspiracy to put down in a merciless manner any attempt on the part of the Depressed Classes who form a small and scattered body of an ordinary Indian citizen.' [BAWS, vol.9, p. 311].

'We feel that nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can, and we cannot remove them unless we get political power in our own hands. No share of this political power can evidently come to us so long as the British government remains as it is. It is only in a Swaraj constitution that we stand any chance of getting the political power in our own hands, without which we cannot bring salvation to our people. [BAWS, v.2, pp.503-06].

In the high noon of India's struggle for freedom Dalit intelligentsia in a big way expressed its support to the British government on the ground that the upper caste Hindu leaders were not inclined to share power with Dalits. They felt that, without social revolution giving equality to Dalits, change in political leadership would further strengthen the hold of the upper castes over Dalits. Analysing Dalit movements in Maharashtra, Andhra and Karnataka Gail Omvedt has observed that '...the Dalit movement and the overall radical anti-caste movements were a crucial expression of the democratic revolution in India, more consistently democratic – and in the end more consistently “nationalistic” – than the elite-controlled Indian National Congress.' [Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, p.16].

Valerian Rodrigues argued that 'irrespective of their other differences, dalit-bahujan thinkers conceive the nation as a good society where its members, considered as individuals or collectivities, respect one another, protect mutual rights and show concern and solidarity. Self-respecters, therefore, felt that as long as there is the existence of untouchability, all talk of freedom and self-rule is empty. Periyar argued that the liberation of the Shudra was contingent on, and would be complete only with the liberation of the Panchama'. [Valerian Rodrigues, *Dalit-Bahujan Discourse, Critical Quest*, Delhi, 2008, pp. 24-25]

What is important to note in this context is that strong advocacy of Dalit intelligentsia for giving primacy to their socio-economic and political rights and not to anti-colonial struggle was primarily rooted in their experiences of living in an unjust society. Their notion of nationhood was based on abolition of existing inequalities and also having equal rights in every sphere of life. To the mainstream nationalist leaders uniting Indians against the atrocities of the colonial rule and to compel the British to leave India was the major goal before the nation. It is also important to note that Dalits were not a homogenous group and there were differences at various levels within the Dalit leadership and in many popular

revolts like Tebhaga movement in Bengal Dalit masses in large numbers took part in movement against the wishes of their caste elders.

30.6 SUMMARY

Historical tradition of anti-caste ideology in the form of Bhakti, Buddhism or other religious traditions along with the changes brought in by the British rule encouraged a section of Dalits to challenge their given social identity and to assert for socio-economic and political rights. Through the creation of alternative tradition to legitimize their claim social dignity and justice Dalit leadership engaged themselves in bargaining for political power in decision making process and also support for education and employment opportunities. Leadership of the national movement, particularly Gandhi, viewed the problem of Dalits as predominantly a religious matter and in no way he wanted any division within the Hindus for the greater cause of political emancipation. Gandhi said, 'Without eradicating untouchability root and branch the honour of Hinduism cannot be saved. That can only happen when untouchables are treated on par with caste Hindus in every respect.' In spite of his concern for Dalits Gandhi could read the design of the government in creating division within Indian society by announcing the Communal Award. This forced Gandhi to announce his decision for going to fast unto death to resist the contemplated separation of Dalits. This decision of Gandhi succeeded in bringing different groups together and the outcome was the Poona Pact which ensured for the first time 148 reserved seats for Dalits out of general electorates in Provincial Legislatures. Whereas Gandhi and other mainstream nationalist leaders were concerned with uniting divergent sections of Indian society against the British, the visible section of Dalit intelligentsia strongly believed that without liberating and empowering Dalits from their existing state of sufferings any form of political freedom was not going to make them equal. The efforts made by nationalist leadership to create public awareness about the sufferings of Dalits and the initiatives taken by the Congress through anti-untouchability movement, constructive programmes and temple entry movements paved the way for taking direct action to empower Dalits. Therefore it is essential to understand the challenges before the mainstream nationalists to integrate Dalits in the national movement and also the dilemmas of Dalit leadership towards the upper castes.

30.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Why were the important Dalit leaders in favour of separate electorates?
- 2) Discuss the provisions of the Poona Pact.
- 3) Discuss the manner in which the nationalist leadership tried to integrate the Dalits within the mainstream of the national movement.

UNIT 31 NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND THE MINORITIES*

Structure

- 31.1 Introduction
- 31.2 The Major Historiographical Questions
- 31.3 Congress and Muslim Minority Relationship from 1885 to 1914
- 31.4 Unity at Lucknow
- 31.5 Congress and Minorities during Khilafat and Non-Cooperation
- 31.6 Congress and Minorities after Non-Cooperation Period
- 31.7 The Communal Award of 1932 and the Congress
- 31.8 Congress and the Sikh Minority
- 31.9 Summary
- 31.10 Exercises

31.1 INTRODUCTION

A minority is a sociological category within the demographic profile of a country. The term usually refers to a category that is differentiated and defined by the social majority, that is, those who hold the majority of positions of social power in a society. The differentiation can be based on one or more observable human characteristics, including, for example, ethnicity, race, gender, wealth or sexual orientation. However, the minority may be based on real or assumed sense of suffering discrimination and subordination, physical and/or cultural traits that set them apart, and which are disapproved by the dominant group, and a shared sense of collective identity and common burdens. In a colonial society where power belongs to the powerful alien rulers, minority/majority distinction is based not on the real power differences among groups, but may show the differences in population size among groups as well as their relative socio-economic position within the colonial society. Prior to the British conquest, relations between regional polities and the sovereign power had never been defined wholly by religion. Despite a long history of ingeniously accepting multiple levels of sovereignty, the renegotiation of the terms for division of power at the time of independence led to the partition of the subcontinent along superficially religious lines. In this Unit, therefore, we would focus on the problem of relation with religious minorities especially Muslim religious minority with the mainstream national movement represented by the Indian National Congress.

31.2 THE MAJOR HISTORIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONS

A straightforward approach to the study of nationalism traces the development of nationalism from the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and culminating in the winning of independence from the British. The 'two-nation'

theory or British strategies of divide and rule is seen as the main reason behind subsequent failure of the process of nation-in-the-making and the ultimate partition. Some goes to the extent of supporting the thesis of Hindu-Muslim difference as incapable of assimilation. This view conflates religiously informed cultural identities with the notion of a coherent Muslim politics. However, like all the other communities of religion in colonial India, Muslims were split on doctrinal issues and divided by class, region as well as language. The opposing viewpoint subscribed to by Indian nationalist historians is equally untenable. They charge British colonialism of creating the historical and cultural divisions of the subcontinent and propose that cultural difference or, worse still, the religious 'communalism' was the pejorative 'other' of Indian nationalism fostered by British policies of separate electorates and selective patronage of the 'Muslim community'. C.A. Bayly, the prominent Cambridge historian locates the pre-history of communalism in the merchant corporations and the declining service gentry of urban north India during the transition to colonialism. Scholars of 'Subaltern' school emphasise the resilience of age old communal consciousness in attempting to explain failure of nationalism to unify the various classes and communities and concerned themselves with the colonial construction of communalism. However, we see that there were complexities, inconsistencies and contradictions in the relationship between the nationalist movement and the minorities whether Muslim, Sikh or Depressed Castes.

The colonial state's stated policy of neutrality based on indifference towards religion was a product of expediency, not belief. In their search for collaborators and the organisation of social control, religion also served a useful political purpose. British perceptions of Indian society as an aggregation of religious communities created a belief in the distinctiveness of various religious communities in idioms emphasising differences, not commonalities between Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Christian and Parsi. Yet British social engineering on its own cannot explain the strength of the process marking Indian attempts to deploy the categories of the colonial state to their own social and political advantage. With the limited introduction of the electoral principle in the late nineteenth century, members of the educated, propertied and privileged sections belonging to all religious denominations had an interest in promoting the politicisation of communitarian identities. Taking advantage of a rapidly growing press and publications market, those claiming to represent 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' interests projected their specifically class and regional concerns in terms of religious community interests. Such political discourses, however, were internally divided and vague and ambiguous.

31.3 CONGRESS AND MUSLIM MINORITY RELATIONSHIP FROM 1885 TO 1914

A large section of Indian Muslims from the *ashraf*, literally respectable, classes opted to stay away from the Congress which was founded in 1885. However, political boundaries were very fluid and economic class interests, regional identity and different notions of community all played a crucial role at the historical moment when the idea of an Indian nation was itself in the process of being forged, negotiated and contested. Sayyid Ahmed Khan, the most important spokesperson of the north Indian Urdu-speaking *ashraf* classes in the late nineteenth century, spearheaded a reform movement within Indian Islam. In 1875

with British support he set up the Aligarh Anglo-Muhammadian Oriental College which attracted the sons of Muslim landlords of northern India. While firmly opposing Muslim involvement in the Indian National Congress, Sayyid Ahmed spent the better part of his energies exhorting his co-religionists against cultural exclusiveness and the pest of religious narrow-mindedness. His criticisms of the Congress had less to do with the threats it posed to the religious identity of Muslims than with the cultural pretensions and different claims of the north Indian *ashraf* class. Just a year before the formation of the Congress, he had expressed his contempt for those who identified religion or community with the nation: terms like Hindu and Muslim had a religious significance, and all those living in India constituted one 'nation'. Yet sometimes he is depicted as a person who began the process of 'Muslim separatism'.

Within his own community, Sayyid Ahmed was attacked for his rational approach to Islamic religious studies and commandments by *ulema* in religious seminaries at Deoband and Farangi Mahal in Lucknow. His passionate backing of western knowledge and culture as well as allegiance to the raj annoyed many Muslims deeply fond of their community moorings and the ideal of a universal Muslim *ummah*. Disapproval of the Aligarh school received a boost from the great cleric of Islamic universalism, Jamaluddin al-Afghani, who lived in the subcontinent between 1879 and 1882. In India, Afghani tempered his loyalty to the political principles of universalism by calling for Hindu-Muslim unity against British imperialism. Sayyid Ahmad may have been the most well-known spokesman of regionally based North Indian Muslim powerful social groups, but his leadership was disputed by the very Muslim *ashraf* classes on whose behalf he made his loudest appeals. By the late 1880s Britain's imperial policies in India and new colonial conquests in the Islamic world were leading more and more Muslims to avoid the policy of non-participation in the Congress. An increasing number of Muslims from the North West Provinces began attending the annual sessions of the Congress. In 1887, Badruddin Tyabji, a Bombay based lawyer from the Bohra community, became the first Muslim president of the Congress. By 1895 the well known Islamic scholar Maulana Shibli Numani, who had in the beginning associated himself with Sayyid Ahmed Khan, was publicly opposing the policy of Muslim non-participation in the Congress. Secular nationalism was mainly territorial nationalism, based on the reference to India as a nation-state. This concept was introduced into India from Britain and France after the French Revolution and the era of 'Enlightenment' in the 18th and 19th centuries. Contrary to territorial nationalism, or rather in addition to it, the Indian nationalist movement developed nationalist variations in which a sometimes dispersed religious community was taken as a reference basis for nationalist aspirations instead of an ethnic group or a political territory with comparatively fixed boundaries of geographical settlement.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 may have provided the main drive for the orchestration of the Muslim claim to separate political representation and the establishment of the self professedly 'communal' All-India Muslim League in December 1906. But it was the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 which institutionalised what until then had been a main colonial perception of the importance of religious divisions in Indian society by granting Muslims separate electorates in representative bodies at all levels of the electoral system. It was a historic step that gave Muslims the status of an all-India political category but one effectively consigned to being an everlasting minority in any scheme of

constitutional reforms. The structural contradiction between communal electorates and the local based and region based political horizons was to have large consequences for India's regionally differentiated, economically dissimilar and ideologically divided Muslims and, by extension, for Congress's agendas of an inclusionary and secular nationalism. The common idioms of an otherwise wide-ranging discourse created the colonial Muslims as a separate and exclusive 'communal' category.

The Indian Councils Act 1909, commonly known as the Morley-Minto Reforms, was an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom that brought about a limited increase in the involvement of Indians in the governance of British India. John Morley, the Liberal Secretary of State for India, and the Conservative Governor-General of India, The Earl of Minto, believed that cracking down on uprising in Bengal was necessary but not sufficient for restoring stability to the British Raj after Lord Curzon's partitioning of Bengal. They believed that a dramatic step was required to put heart into loyal elements of the Indian upper classes and the growing Westernised section of the population. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 (Morley-Minto reforms) did not go any significant distance toward meeting the Indian National Congress demand for 'the system of government obtaining in Self-Governing British Colonies'.

The Act of 1909 was important for the following reasons. It effectively allowed the election of Indians to the various legislative councils in India for the first time. Previously some Indians had been appointed to legislative councils. The majorities of the councils remained British government appointments. Moreover the electorate was limited to specific classes of Indian nationals. Muslims had expressed serious concern that British type of electoral system would leave them permanently subject to Hindu majority rule. The Act of 1909 stipulated, as demanded by the Muslim leadership:

- i) that Indian Muslims be allotted reserved seats in the Municipal and District Boards, in the Provincial Councils and in the Imperial Legislature;
- ii) that the number of reserved seats be in excess of their relative population (25 percent of the Indian population); and
- iii) that only Muslims should vote for candidates for the Muslim seats ('separate electorates').

These concessions were a constant source of strife during 1909-47. British statesmen generally considered reserved seats as regrettable in that they encouraged communal extremism as Muslim candidates did not have to appeal for Hindu votes and vice versa. As further power was shifted from the British to Indian politicians in 1919, 1935 and after, Muslims were ever more determined to hold on to, and if possible expand, reserved seats and their weightage. However, The Congress repeatedly tried to eliminate reserved seats as it considered them to be undemocratic and to hinder the development of a shared Hindu-Muslim Indian national feeling. Under the system, Muslim voters (and later Sikh and Christians) were put in separate constituencies from which candidates of that particular community could stand as candidates or vote. It heightened community based mobilisation and conflicts. Since the voters were exclusively from a single religious community, the candidates could easily appeal to sectarian interests.

The Muslim political elite was opposed to revocation of the Partition of Bengal and Muslim League was moving in a more militant direction. Alienated by Britain's refusal to help Turkey in her Italian and Balkan Wars (1911-12), Hardinge's rejection of proposals for a Muslim University at Aligarh in August 1912 and the August 1913 riot in Kanpur over demolition of a platform adjoining a mosque. There was some sort of an accommodation with 'nationalist' Hindus and growing impact of pan-Islamism on the young leaders. Its leaders now included Wazir Hassan, T.A.K. Sherwani, and more radical Ali brothers (Muhammad and Shaukat) and Hasrat Mohini in U.P. and Fazlul Haq in Bengal. Papers like Muhammad Ali's Comrade (Kolkata), Abul Kalam Asad's Al-Hilal (Kolkata) and Safar Ali Khan's Samindar (Lahore) propagated pan-Islamist and anti-British ideas. The Muslim League passed a resolution in March 1913 favouring colonial self-government through constitutional means, a stated objective of the Congress Party. The stage was, thus set for a broader Hindu-Muslim political accommodation and co-operation.

31.4 UNITY AT LUCKNOW

In 1915, already there was re-entry of the 'extremist' faction into Congress and both the Congress and Muslim League, meeting simultaneously at Bombay, set up committees to draft a programme of minimum constitutional demands through mutual consultations. At Lucknow in December 1916, a common demand was raised by both parties for elected majorities in the Councils, while Hindu-Muslim differences were sought to be removed through the famous Lucknow Pact by which Congress accepted the separate electorates and an understanding was reached for distribution of seats. The Muslim League accepted under-representation in Muslim-majority areas (40% of seats in Bengal, for example), in return for over-representation in other Hindu-majority provinces like Bombay or United Provinces, where about 30% seats were assigned to them. The Pact, thus paved the way for accommodation of United Province's faction of Muslim League but there was also some resentment against the pact in Bengal despite the support of Fazlul Haq. Both Tilak and Annie Besant played important role in these negotiations. However, leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya felt that too much have been given to the Muslim League. But Tilak felt that this concession was necessary in view of common interests of different shades of political opinions within the country against the third party of the British colonial rulers. It was a controversial decision but the Congress leaders thought that it was indispensable to allay minority fears about majority domination.

31.5 CONGRESS AND THE MINORITIES DURING KHILAFAT AND NON-COOPERATION

The Khilafat issue was a significant anxiety of the Indian Muslims in the wake of the British pressure on Turkey and the resulting reduction in size as well as importance of Ottoman Empire after the First World War. The religious sentiments of Muslims in India were also intensified due to the fact that India was a colony of the British. The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements created a very strong emotional and political appeal against the British. Gandhi used these sentiments to create a united front of Hindus and Muslims and demanded steps towards self-government in India and also protection for the religious and political institution of Khalifa. The Khilafat movement emerged among Indian Muslims

to protect the institution of Khalifa in Turkey, which was considered to be the religious and political successor of the Prophet Muhammad and hence the protector of all Muslim holy places. Turkey fought against the British and its allies during the First World War. After the War, The British removed the Khalifa from power in Turkey. The pan-Islamic feelings became intense among the Indian Muslims. However, the pan-Islamic symbols may have been used to establish a pan-Indian religious and political identity for Muslims and to bridge the communal boundaries between the nationalist leadership and Muslims. The Khilafat movement was also anti-imperialist in its nature and scope. There were several other political and economic factors that fuelled the political mobilisation in this period. Gandhi's techniques and ideas made possible the convergence of a purely secular and territorial notion of nationhood with religious issues of Muslim minority. The Khilafat leaders and Muslim elites also realised the need to garner the support of Hindus and especially Congress organisation for furthering their cause. This campaign brought about an unprecedented Hindu-Muslim unity. Both Hindus and Muslims demonstrated together at various places. The Khilafat leaders urged the Muslims not to kill cows for Bakr-Id festivities; Swami Sharddhanand was asked to give a speech from the pulpit of Jama Masjid in Delhi, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew was given the keys of Golden Temple in Amritsar. There were hundreds of such acts of communal harmony throughout the country. The idioms and symbols used by the Khilafat leaders were entirely community-oriented and they were simply trying to get the support of the Hindus against the set of non-Muslim, i.e., the British. Even though the movement was anti-imperialist, the political language was basically Islamic and some Congress leaders were apprehensive that it would be dangerous for the Congress to use such issues for nationalist mobilisation. However, Gandhi and his group went ahead with Khilafat leaders and tried to forge Hindu-Muslim unity and mobilise people of both communities in Non-Cooperation agitation. Gandhi and Shaukat Ali toured the entire country for this joint mobilisation. However, When Gandhi withdrew the Non-Cooperation after the famous Chauri-Chaura incidents in February 1922, Ali Brothers reacted angrily to the decision of withdrawal of the movement.

31.6 CONGRESS AND MINORITIES AFTER NON-COOPERATION PERIOD

Congress considered the Indian national movement indivisible which meant that its stake to power was also indivisible. This prevented Congress leaders from coming to terms with the Muslim League in 1937 and thereafter, until it was too late for an amicable settlement. Things were made even more complicated because leaders like Nehru and Gandhi, no matter how sensibly and carefully they behaved in most cases, or how hard they tried to unite all Indians and all religions on a common platform against colonialism, could not shed the religious cloth of their nationalist aspirations entirely. Gandhi, on a unitarian note, incorporated Hinduist values like non-violence and the reverence of the *chakra* (wheel) into the nationalist movement which helped it spread out among the masses, but which also gave political leaders of religious movements a pretext for confrontation. Gandhi argued that the practice of religious pilgrimage which involved the visiting of sacred centres in various parts of India, linked people from many regions into a cultural unity: "We were one nation before [the British] came to India." Indian civilisation, culture and nationhood all predated the British arrival. He argued that "India . . . has nothing to learn from anybody else. India did not cease to be

one nation because different religious groups or foreigners lived in it". He maintained that India "must have a faculty for assimilation." He supported the introduction of Hindi in either Persian or *Devanagari* characters as a compulsory medium of instruction with optional English courses all over India.

The gulf between Congress and the minorities especially the Muslims widened more after the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation movement. Older communally-minded organisations were revived after the movement and some new ones came into existence. *Tanzeem* and *Tabligh* movements gained ground among the Muslims in the same way as the *Sangathan* and *Shuddhi* had grown among the Hindus. It was period when leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai, Madan Mohan Malaviya and N. C. Kelkar joined the Hindu Mahasabha and argued for Hindu unity and solidarity. Khilafat leaders Mohammed Ali and Shaukat Ali accused the Congress of trying to establish a Hindu Government and Hindu domination in the polity. There were communal riots too in many parts of the country during 1923-24. Congress tried to deal with this situation by attempt to unify two communities through unity of top leaders. This 'unity from above' approach meant that negotiations with 'communal' leaders and organisations were used as tools to arrive at a compromise with minorities on the question of 'protecting' and 'safeguarding' their interests in terms of reservation of seats in the legislatures and in government jobs. In order to meet the challenge posed by the Simon Commission, Indian leaders organised several all-India Conferences to settle these issues and to draw up a blue print of an agreed constitution for India. A large number of Muslim leaders met at Delhi in 1927 and came up with four basic demands which came to be known as Delhi Proposals. These Proposals were as follows:

- 1) Sind should be made a separate province;
- 2) The North-West Frontier Province should be treated constitutionally on the same footing as the other provinces;
- 3) Muslims should get one-third representation in the Central Legislature; and
- 4) In Punjab and Bengal, Muslims should get representation in proportion of their population, thus guaranteeing a Muslim majority in the legislatures and in other provinces, where Muslims were in minority, the existing reservation of seats for Muslims should continue.

In opposition to these proposals, Congress came up with its own proposals drafted by an all-parties committee. This Report came to be popularly known as Nehru Report and was placed before an All-Party Convention in Calcutta in December 1928. The Nehru Report recommended that India should be a federation of linguistic provinces and there should be some level of provincial autonomy for these provinces. Elections were to be held on the basis of joint electorates but the Report suggested that seats in Central and provincial legislatures should be reserved for religious minorities in proportion to their population. The Report also recommended separation of Sind from Bombay and constitutional reform in North-West Frontier Province. Differences cropped up in the All-Party Convention in Calcutta. A section of Muslim League and Khilafat leaders were willing to accept joint electorates and other proposals provided their amendments moved by M. A Jinnah were accepted. These amendments were same as point number 3 and 4 of Delhi proposals and they also demanded the residuary powers

of legislation should rest with the provinces in the proposed federation. But a larger section of Muslim League led by Mohammed Shafi and Agha Khan refused even to accept these amendments and showed their unwillingness to surrender separate electorates. The Hindu Mahasabha and The Sikh League also raised objections to separation of Sind as well as other provisions suggested for North-West Frontier Province, Punjab and Bengal in the Report. They were also adamant not to accede to Jinnah's amendment. Even Congress was not in a mood to accept amendment regarding the residuary powers to the provinces and favoured a strong centre. Muslim Leaders of all hues now put forward a joint front and Jinnah too joined them and declared that Nehru Report was biased towards Muslims and a tool to create Hindu domination. Muslim leaders came up with fourteen points which were based on Four Delhi Proposals along with the amendments moved by Jinnah to Nehru Report and continuation of separate electorates and reservation of seats for Muslims in government services and all self-governing bodies. The attempt at compromise formula thus ended in a complete failure.

31.7 THE COMMUNAL AWARD OF 1932 AND THE CONGRESS

The British tried to use the religious and other identities for their own political purposes. The Communal Award announced in August 1932 was also such an effort of the British ruling class. The Award allotted to each minority a number of seats in the reconstituted legislatures to be elected on the basis of separate electorates. Muslims, Sikhs and Christians had already been treated as minorities earlier and now the Award declared that the Depressed Classes would also be treated as a minority and hence entitled to separate electorates from the rest of the Hindu community. The Congress has been opposed to the principle of separate electorate for various communities on religious ground, although it has accepted it briefly under Lucknow Pact (1916) as a kind of compromise. Congress thought that such a move to grant separate voting rights under separate electorates would divide Indian people and prevent the growth of national consciousness. Congress took the position that although it was opposed to separate electorates, it will not demand change in the Award without the consent of minorities.

But the effort to treat the Depressed Classes as a minority community was vehemently opposed by the Congress leaders because that would create separate electorate for them from the rest of the Hindus and make them separate political entities. Gandhiji, particularly, in Yervada prison at that time, took a strong exception to this move and saw it as an attack on Indian nationhood and felt it would endanger his social reform agenda of abolition of untouchability. Gandhiji demanded that the representatives of the Depressed Classes should be elected by a general electorate under a common franchise. He however favoured a larger number of reserved seats in legislatures for the Depressed Classes. He went on a fast unto death on 20 September, 1932 to put into effect his demands. There was an emotional reaction to the news of Gandhiji fast and leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya, M. C. Rajah and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar held discussions and negotiations. The end result of this was the famous Poona Pact, according to which the idea of separate electorate for the Depressed Classes was dropped but the seats reserved for them in provincial legislatures were increased from 71 to 147 and in the Central Legislature to 18% of the total seats.

In the Punjab the Unionist leaders Fazl-i-Husain and Sikander Hayat Khan, and in Bengal the Krishak Praja leader Fazlul Haq, had made sure that by 1937 the provincial interests had prevailed over a specifically Muslim communal line within the domain of representative Muslim politics. The All-India Muslim League's dismal performance in the 1937 elections revealed the complete bankruptcy of any notion of an all-India Muslim 'interests'. The Muslim League, won only 109 out of 482 seats allotted to Muslims under separate electorates, securing only 4.8 per cent of the total Muslim votes despite attempts to project popular programmes. Congress was relatively more successful and formed ministries in a few provinces under provincial autonomy. It was the perceived threat from the singular and uncompromising 'nationalism' of the Congress to provincial autonomy and class interests which gave the discourse and politics of the Indian Muslims a fresh lease of life. The famous resolution passed at the Muslim League's Lahore session marked the transition of the Indian Muslims from a minority to a 'nation'. Jinnah made the demand that all future constitutional arrangements be reconsidered afresh since Indian Muslims were a 'nation' entitled to equal treatment with the Hindu 'nation'. But in attempting to give territorial expression to the Muslim claim to nationhood, Jinnah and a mainly minority province based All-India Muslim League had to make large concessions to the autonomy and sovereignty of the majority provinces. For Jinnah, religion was a political weapon to wrench his share of power. On the basis of the concept of 'Muslim nationalism' he argued that India was not homogeneous, but consisted of two nations, Hindus and Muslims. Muslim nationalism was operating on the same level as 'monolithic nationalism': beyond the religious Hindu-Muslim polarisation it did not recognise any further divisions. Congress had refused a coalition government with The Muslim League in U.P. in 1937 and in subsequent negotiations with the League Congress was not willing to accept itself as a Hindu political body or Muslim League as the sole representative of the Muslims. The demands put forward in 1940s by league regarding a separate 'homeland' for the Muslims was not acceptable to secular Congress leaders.

31.8 CONGRESS AND THE SIKH MINORITY

The formation of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee provided a focal point for the movement for the reformation of the Sikh religious places and creation of Sikh religious identity. Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee began controlling Gurdwaras one by one, but the trouble arose where the *mahants* were stubborn as they were shielded by law. Starting in late 1920, large number of reformers both in urban and rural Punjab had joined to form separate and independent groups called *jatha*, for gaining control over their local Gurdwaras. Leader of a *jatha* was called *jathedar* under whose command a *jatha* would occupy a shrine and try to gain transfer of management in its favour from its current incumbents. Sometimes the transfer went peacefully especially in the case of smaller Gurdwaras with less income resources, and sometimes with the threat of force. It enlisted the active support and sympathy of some of the important nationalist papers in the country like *The Independent* (English), *Swaraj* (Hindi), *The Tribune*, *Liberal*, *Kesari* (Punjabi), *Milap* (Urdu), *Samindar* (Urdu) and *Bande Mataram* (Hindi). Two of the vernacular dailies *Akali* (Punjabi.) and the *Akali-te-Pardesi* (Urdu) also played an important role. It brought the necessary

awakening among the Sikh masses and prepared them to undertake the struggle for reform. Master Tara Singh remained the editor of these two papers. With the direct and indirect support of the Central Sikh League, the Indian National Congress and the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the Shiromani Akali Dal started a non-violent struggle against the government for the control of the Gurdwaras. In the agitation at Nankana Sahib Gurdwara, many agitators were killed and nationalist leaders including Gandhi visited the scene of the tragedy and expressed sympathy for the Akalis. Similarly Congress leaders also supported other Sikh agitation like Nabha agitation, the immediate cause for which was the deposition of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha. It was believed by the British that he was in sympathy with the Akali movement and was also considered to be too independent to suit their political needs. The Sikh leaders Master Tara Chand and Kharak Singh supported Non-Cooperation movement.

However, the political relations were not stable between Congress and Akalis. About the communal aspect of the report relating to Punjab, the Nehru Report had stated, "As regards the special claim of the Muslims and Sikhs for greater representation than their population would justify – it is enough to say that in the view we have expressed above, no such claim is admissible on the part of any community, however, important it may consider itself to be". The report accepted claims by the Muslims in the provinces where they were in minority while dismissed the Sikh claims on the basis that the Punjab problem is a peculiar one where there is the presence of the strong Hindu minority side by side with the Muslim majority and the Sikh minority. The report further said that "endless complications will arise if we recommend reservations for all minorities. The communal question is essentially a Hindu-Muslim question and must be settled on that basis". The Nehru Report deeply affected the politics of Punjab as it did not only cause disappointment to the Sikh community but was also responsible for the division among them especially over the communal clauses of it which provided for universal adult franchise in Punjab with no reservation of seats for the minorities, as was done in other states excepting Bengal, where the Muslims were in minority.

The Report became the root cause of acute differences between Master Tara Singh and Sardar Mangal Singh on one hand and Baba Kharak Singh and the Congress on the other hand. Master Tara Singh was the first Sikh leader to react sharply to the communal clauses and provisions of this report. He immediately expressed his resentment by sending a telegram to Moti Lal Nehru. Sardar Mangal Singh came in for severe criticism for having signed the report ignoring the Sikh interests. Mahatma Gandhi later tried to mollify the feelings of the Central Sikh League leadership. On December 30, 1928 while addressing the All Parties Conference he stated that personally he believed that the Nehru Report had not done justice to the Sikhs. Congress leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Moti Lal Nehru, and M. A. Ansari met Baba Kharak Singh, Master Tara Singh and other Sikhs leaders before the start of the Congress session of Lahore (1929). They assured them that in the open session of the Congress; a resolution would be passed assuring the minorities, especially the Muslims and the Sikhs, that no such constitution would be promulgated in the country that would not satisfy the minorities. Such a resolution was passed in the Lahore Session of the Congress.

The Simon Commission favoured the separate electorate and reservation of seats and recommended only 19 per cent representation to the Sikhs in Punjab. The dispatch was strongly criticised by the Shiromani Akali Dal. As the Congress and the Sikh rejected the Simon report, the Viceroy called the Round Table Conferences from 1930 to 1932 to decide the future of India with the involvement of Indians. The first Round table Conference was boycotted by both the Congress and the Sikhs. After the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 5, 1931 Gandhi went to attend the second Round Table Conference on behalf of the Congress. Before going to London he met leaders of all communities, princes and leaders of important organisations. A Sikh deputation under the leadership of Master Tara Singh placed the Sikh point of view before him and stressed that the Sikhs being an important minority, required adequate safeguards in any future constitution. Important among them were the re-demarcation of Punjab territories by transferring overwhelming Muslim majority areas to the North West Frontier, joint electorate without reservation of seats and one third share for the Sikhs in the Punjab Cabinet and the Public Service Commission. In the absence of any acceptable solution for the communal problem, the British Government on August 16, 1932, gave its own verdict in the form of Communal Award. The Award made the position of Muslims in Punjab and Bengal strong. According to the Award the system of separate electorate was retained and the Award represented the three communities in Punjab as such that the Muslims got the statutory majority of seven seats in Punjab while the Hindus and the Sikhs gained nothing. The Sikhs were very agitated over the issue, there was a lot of anger against the Loyalist Sikhs, but on this issue even the loyalists gave strong statements in the press, which further encouraged the Sikhs. Previously, on July 24, 1932, a Sikh conference representing the Akali Dal and the Central Sikh League was called at Lahore, which rejected the proportion of seats allocated to the Sikh as unacceptable. It voiced its grim determination not to allow the successful working of any constitution, which does not provide full protection to the Sikhs by guaranteeing an effective balance of power to each of the three principal communities in the Punjab. During the entire period till Independence and Partition, Congress and Sikhs minority relation was turbulent. At the time of Independence, however, the Congress Party assured Tara Singh, Baldev Singh and other Sikh leaders that India would belong to all its religious communities, and the Constitution would be secular and tried to win them over.

31.9 SUMMARY

We find that the relationship between various minorities and national movement was never an easy one. It passed through various phases and it was full of inconsistencies and contradictions. Sometimes Congress tried to win them over with political concessions. But the belief that British were fostering these divisions and a simplistic way to paper over internal contradictions in the name of a singular national identity proved that there were various possibilities. The formation of a national identity involved negotiations and contestations. These were manifested especially in the relationship between Congress as the representative of national consciousness and various political formations claiming to represent and articulate the interests of various religious and social minorities.

31.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Evaluate the relationship between Congress and Muslim minority from the formation of Congress in 1885 to 1914.
- 2) Discuss the orientation of Muslim politics and its relationship with the Congress since the Lucknow Pact till the partition.
- 2) Describe the progress in the relation between Congress and the Sikhs represented by the Akali leadership.



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