**Feminists before Partition**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2020-10-28

SUCH is the weight of colonial and post-colonial erasure that the girls and women living in Pakistan today have very little idea about the very early feminists who have come before them. Current nationalist intoxications wish to divide all things and everything along the lines of a border drawn by the British and incongruous to the actual groupings of the subcontinent`s multitudinous identities. There are persistent efforts, on both the Indian and Pakistani sides, to read current divisions and delusions in the historical past. The consequence has been a history full of holes,large omissions and boisterous erasures where the stories of people should be.

Given that India and Pakistan and Bangladesh are all patriarchal societies, it follows that the histories of these lands that have been resuscitated from the past, and presented to populations that do not have much of an idea of the past, have been male histories. There are many male heroes and leaders, poets and writers, men who gave memorable speeches and men who stood up to the British; the stories of women are harder to find.

Women, however, were present and they were busy. In her essay `Feminist Inheritances and Foremothers: The Beginnings of Feminism in Modern India`, the historian Padma Anagol turns her attention to the women of Maharashtra in India.

It is f ascinating to consider these intrepid women of the late 1800s who refused to bow to the patriarchal societies in which they found themselves. It is notable that their activities for reform took place in the context of severe criticism from their Western rulers, who saw India as backward and uncivilised.

Some of the struggles took place under the larger umbrella of social reform movements in which individuals of all religions participated and engaged. In Anagol`s view, it is these reform societies that were the precursors of contemporary feminisms that exist in the subcontinent today.

In the late 1930s, a woman named Lakshmibai Tilak became one of the first Indian women to write her autobiography. The book, which tells the story of Tilak`s life, includes the story of her grandfather who was hanged in 1857 owing to his participation in the uprising against the British. Born in 1868, shewas married off at an early age to a Marathilanguage poet who was subject to many whims and eccentricities and of ten just got up and lef t, leaving his family behind. It is quite likely that it was owing to these events that Tilak advocated for women`s financial and economic independence. In an effort to do just this, she began training as a nurse, an endeavour she sadly had to abandon owing to family responsibilities.

Similarly spirited was Rakhmabai Raut, a woman who had been married early, but who refused to leave her father`s home to live with her husband.The husband sued in court when Rakhmabai was 19 years old. She still refused to join him, pointing out his lack of education and his dishonest lifestyle. The British judge ruled in favour of Rakhmabai, saying that she did not have to go and live with her husband because the marriage had been arranged when she was a minor and had never been consummated. The decision caused a huge outcry in India, where marriages of minors were of ten arranged and where asking for the consent of the parties was unheard of.

Hindus were particularly incensed by the judge`s application of these concepts of consent and consummation because they imagined marriage as a sacrament for eternity rather than a contract lasting a single life.

The tumult from this case and the continuing agitation by women against abuse, child marriage and other cultural and religious customs that demeaned their existence led to vehement debates in the local press across India. Men and religious figures feltthat women had become very rebellious and had overstepped their boundaries. Women on the other hand felt that these issues had remained in the dark for a long time and it was time there was public debate on them.

In a similar manner to the feminists of today, those very early feminists were accused of being puppets of the British. It was the emergence of the nationalist Quit India movement against the British that ended up uniting reform-minded men and women. Ruttie Jinnah, the wife of Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was also said to have been active in these movements.

British women who were busy advocating for the right to vote in Britain were eager to have Indian women join their fight for suffrage. They were startled when many Indian feminists from the time expressed no interest in getting the right to vote, alleging that they did not wish to be equal to Indian men because both the men and they would still be under the thumb of the British rulers. When we are free, they said, we will have the right to vote in our free nations. This was correct; when India and Pakistan were created in 1947, Indian and Pakistani women had the right to vote alongside the men.

The blurring of boundaries between nationalism and feminist reform has proven to be a burden. In both India and Pakistan, women who should be feminists are instead subsumed into expressions of `patriotism` that are based on intellectual and religious obscurantism. They are eager to wave flags but not hold up banners and to denounce those women who do organise and march as `bad` women. It is an old recipe of divide and rule, of creating useless definitions where a `good` woman is just one who kowtows to the toxic masculinity of the state and domestic violence. One wishes that the sheer unoriginality of the critiques of women who wish to control their own would convince women to discard theme. If women in the 1800s could rebel, then so can the women of 2020.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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