CHAPTER - IX.

CONCLUSION.

The preceding Chapters have shown how women were brought out of their seclusion and involved in public life, especially from the Civil Disobedience movement onwards when their participation reached its peak. This was facilitated by the non-violent nature of the struggle. Participation in the struggle did not require any ability to handle weapons. But it required moral courage, a capacity to suffer and the spirit of sacrifice. The non-violent nature of the struggle, apart from facilitating greater women's participation in the movement, also made their role equally significant to that of men.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur observed:

"Of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India none has been so patent as the field of non-violent action which Gandhiji offered to women in his war against British domination of India. It brought the out of sheltered homes to stand in the furnace of fiery trial without flinching. It proved to the hilt that woman was as much able as man to resist evil or aggression. It gave women a definite place as far as the salvation of India was concerned."

Similarly, Sucheta Kripalani says that Indian women were fortunate in having a leader who believed that man and woman were equal partners in life and gave powerful support to their cause. He had an almost instinctive understanding of
women and their problems and had a deep abiding sympathy for them.¹

Hansa Mehta says that women came out as Gandhi made them feel that they could contribute something to a movement where women alone could be real soldiers. He listened to the woes of women and gave the impression that he was their friend.² Shakuntala Goel of Meerut also says that she was inspired to participate in the movement after attending a public meeting addressed by Gandhi.³ Ichabehn Kamalbhavi Desai was encouraged by her mother Tapibehn Desai, who believed that Gandhi was an incarnation of Lord Rama.⁴

Participation in the non-violent freedom struggle brought women into the main stream of the Indian political process. At an all India level, the first stage was the social reform movement of 19th century, when a connection was seen between the degenerated condition of Indian society and the pitiable condition of women, and, accordingly amelioration of the condition of women was seen as an essential pre-condition for the regeneration of society. During the period between the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the launching of the first political satyagraha by Gandhi against the Rowlatt Act in 1919, women participated in the movement on a very limited scale. Participation was mainly confined to urban and upper-class women. During the swadasi movement in Bengal, a glimpse of mass participation by women was seen.

Gandhiji’s emergence on the Indian political scene was
the second stage. Apart from emphasising the need to improve the position of women he also laid great stress on their role in the creation of a new social order based on truth and non-violence. The chief significance of Gandhi's views on women lay in the fact that instead of asking the non-folk to encourage women to participate in politics he made a direct appeal to the latter.

During the first Non-Cooperation movement in 1920-22 the sphere of women's participating in the movement was outside the home, she was supposed to give up her foreign clothing and wear Khadi instead. Apart from that she was to give up wearing ornaments till swaraj was won. A nation in bondage was a nation in a state of mourning and naturally the wearing of ornaments was uncalled for. Great emphasis was laid on spinning, an activity which could be carried on in the home. They were to give donations in the form of ornaments and cash for the Tilak Swaraj and Khilafat funds. The donation of ornaments by women was one of the conditions laid by Gandhi, which had to be met if swaraj was to be attained within the stipulated one-year period.

Apart from that she was to use her influence within the household to further the nationalist cause. She was to see that her children did not attend schools run by the government.

Within the framework of the role prescribed by Gandhiji for women, the level of participation could be said to be reasonably high in most parts of the country barring South-India and Bihar.

The interregnum period between the suspension of the
Non-Cooperation movement constituted the fourth stage. During this period in the context of the public life of the country women’s issues came to acquire a great deal of prominence.

By 1929 most of the Provincial Legislatures had extended franchise to women. In 1926 women were given the right to stand as candidates and sit in the Provincial Legislatures.

In 1925 sections of the Indian Penal Code which made traffic in minors a criminal offence was extended to the Devadasis. In 1929 the Sarda Act was passed declaring such marriages invalid when either party were below the prescribed age, 16 for girls and 18 for boys.

Some progress was made in the sphere of women’s education. A number of institutions imparting education exclusively to women came into existence. Apart from that the number of female pupils also increased. A number of women’s associations came up all over India during this period.

The last stage was the Civil Disobedience movement that political participation could be said to have reached its apex. The level of participation in this movement was very high and much more visible than during the Non-Cooperation movement. Instead of merely giving up foreign clothing and wearing of ornaments and use the spinning wheel, women this time were to come out of their homes to picket foreign-cloth and liquor shops.
Women in this movement thus were not only to come out of their seclusion to defy alien rule but also social norms. Gandhi had sufficient confidence in the ability of women to successfully persuade the men-folk who were not their relatives to abstain from liquor and not to buy foreign-cloth. That is why he insisted that this aspect of the movement was to be led by women.

Women's participation was visible in all aspects of the movement. In the picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops, and in the breaking of the salt laws, women's participants were extremely visible. Attending meetings and participating in demonstrations were other forms of participation for women.

During the movement women made their presence felt all over India barring most of the areas in South India, namely, the provinces of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and the regions of Malabar. The main reason for this was that the movement was not able to take off in those areas. However, women participants were active in some areas where the movement was not all that effective, like the Provinces of Assam and Punjab.

In the four districts the stages leading to mass participation of women in the Civil Disobedience were somewhat uneven.

In Ahmedabad and Surat the first stage was the efforts made by social reformers like Master Karunashanker in Ahmedabad and Durgaram Mehta in Surat and the various Christian missionaries in the 19th century to promote
women's education. In Ahmedabad the Widow-Re-Marriage and Anti-Child-Marriage associations were formed. In 1907 a Ladies Club was started. During the next stage two women, namely Sharda Mehta and Vidyagauri Milkanth associated themselves with various public activities, including attending the 1902 session of the Indian National Congress. Similarly Anasuyabehn Sarabhai visited Europe before the first World-War and was inspired by the new ideas of social service. In 1918 she was Gandhi's chief lieutenant in the Ahmedabad Textile Strike. In 1917 a ladies branch of the Home Rule League was started with Sharda Mehta and Anasuya as its secretaries. There was some participation by women in the Non-Cooperation movement. In 1921 the All India Ladies Conference was held in Ahmedabad, which was attended by 6,000 ladies. This could be said to be third-stage. The fourth-stage was the initiation of a number of women into nationalist politics as they went to live in the Sabarmati Ashram.

In Surat, efforts by the social reformers to promote women's education did have some impact, as by 1921, the proportion of literate females was sixty-five per thousand which was considerable in the context of those days. However, women there were not visible in the sphere of political activity. There was some political activity for the first time by women in the satyagraha against the Rowlatt Act and during the Non-Cooperation movement. This constituted the second-stage in Surat. The third-stage was women's participation in the Bardoli satyagraha.
In the Districts of Meerut and Agra the process of the political awakening of women was a much more rapid affair. In Meerut the first-stage was the establishment of branches of the Arya Samaj in 1876 and the subsequent establishment of the two branches of the Arya Sree Samaj in 1903 and 1914 and efforts to promote women's education in Meerut. However, as compared to the districts of Gujarat the impact here was somewhat limited. During the Non-Co-operation movement Gandhi addressed a women's meeting.

However, during the 1920s the social attitudes of the urban-middle class in Meerut seemed to have undergone apparently a somewhat drastic change. During this decade the proportion of literate females increased from six per one thousand to eleven. The proportion in Meerut city stood at 128 per 1,000, a figure which could be favourably compared to that of the cities of Ahmedabad and Surat. During this period some women like Kamla Chaudhary, Prakaswati Sud, Satyawati Snatika and Kusumlata were initiated into nationalist politics.

Agra had a large number of schools for girls as early as 1905 and the level of female literacy, when the Civil Disobedience movement was launched was one of the highest in the province. But the practice of 'purdah' was widely prevalent and was the greatest hindrance to political participation by women. An impetus to break this tradition came from outside in the form of Mata Parvat Devi, who came from the Punjab in 1926 to settle down in Agra. With the help of the wives of some of the nationalist leaders of Agra she launched a campaign to politically mobilize
women. Women like Shiva Devi Dikshit, Sukhdevi Fallwal, Vidyawati Rathore and Chandravati were some of the women to get initiated into nationalist politics. Thus in Agra the process of women's participation in nationalist politics passed through a single-stage. The prominent women participants during the Civil-Disobedience movement in Agra were wives of the local nationalist leaders, who viewed the movement as an instrument to emancipate their women-folk.

The fact that the women participated in such large numbers in areas having a different socio-cultural environments is a fair indication of the popular appeal which the nationalist movement had come to acquire under Gandhian leadership. The movement could be said to be symbolized by his personality and a religious sanctity seem to be acquired by his decree.

In the period which followed the abandonment of the Civil-Disobedience movement some women who had gained prominence because of their participation in the movement emerged as leaders, which was something new in these districts, with the exception of Ahmedabad. All the districts had women who were politically active before launching of the Civil-Disobedience movement but none of them perhaps with the exception of Sharda Mehta and Anasuyabai Sarasvai could be referred to as leaders.

During this period the Jyoti Sangh was formed in Ahmedabad by the women who had been active in the Civil-Disobedience movement. In the context of those days it was an association with a very comprehensive programme. The association made efforts to make women economically
independent. The association represented an effort to put to constructive use the enthusiasm shown by the women for the nationalist cause.

Women's participation in the Quit-India movement could not acquire the heroic proportions of the Civil Disobedience days mainly because the movement had taken a violent turn.

More than any other factor, participation in the national movement contributed greatly to the emancipation of women. The fact that the Indian constitution does not discriminate on the basis of sex is one of its results. The Constitution gives women equal right to work and to get employment in State agencies. The Hindu succession Act of 1956 made the daughter as equal co-heir with the son. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 permitted the dissolution of marriage on permitted dissolution of marriage on specific grounds. Monogamy has also been mandatory on men as well as women. The Directive Principles of the Constitution lay down the principle of equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

Despite the principle of sexual equality being one of the salient features of the Constitution difficulties remain in implementing the principle. The problem of dowry, despite its being declared illegal, continues to remain rampant. Though Child-Marriage has been declared illegal, the custom still is prevalent in the rural areas. The level of female illiteracy continues to remain fairly high. A proper environment for the solution of these problems is yet to be created.
One reason for this is that after the enactment of various provisions of the Hindu Code Bill, women's issues were relegated into the background. In independent India a political movement centering on women's issues did not emerge till fairly recently.

The case studies that were conducted in the four districts give a very clear indication that the freedom movement had a significant impact on the personal lives of the women, who participated in it. A number of women carved out prominent places in public life after 1947. They became legislators and ministers. Some women in Ahmedabad and Surat districts did not marry, as they decided to devote themselves to public service. The relatively less important women developed some sort of a client-patron relationship with the more prominent women for the solution of their personal problems. Some women, who had a poor educational background educated not only themselves but insisted on educating their daughters. Others, who had themselves been married at a young age, as they belonged to conservative families provided a liberal upbringing for their daughters and got them married at a mature age. Some widows found an avenue for a more fruitful life making a clean break from the oppressed existence to which society normally chained them.

We have some idea as to what impact the national movement had on the personal lives of a few women. It is, however, very difficult to assess the impact of such participation on women in general. It is not possible to
attribute all social progress in respect of women to the participation of some women in the national movement as a variety of social forces were at work. It is, however, significant to note that the participation of women in the freedom movement was not only accepted but applauded. The women who participated were looked upon as model examples of what the women could do. This factor by itself was a liberating influence. Participation in the national movement might not have broken all the walls of fear, discrimination and exploitation but it certainly weakened their foundations.

3. Interview with Shakuntala Goel, Meerut, 27.3.1987.