

## **Women's Movements in India: Pre-Independence Women's Movements!**

The women's movement in India began as a social reform movement in the nineteenth century. The Western ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity were being imbibed by the educated elite through the study of English. Western liberalism was to extend to the women's question and translate into awareness on the status of women.

In India, the tradition of women's struggles and movements against patriarchal institutions of gender injustice, have been weak when compared to the women's movements in the Western and European societies. In fact, women's fight against the oppression of patriarchy has been rather slow in emerging.

Most of the women's writings of the eighteenth century reveal disenchantment with the prevalence of patriarchy and gender injustices rather than any kind of active resistance or revolt against them. Women did try to go against the male-dominated world (for example, by joining the Bhakti Movement).

The nineteenth century women found themselves totally suppressed and subjugated by the male patriarchal ideologies and attitudes of those times, though there was a feminist identity consciousness and awareness of their plight. However, this awareness did not get translated into an open and organized struggle for selfhood and survival.

Though there were feelings of deprivation and anger against the injustices women were facing, these remained mostly latent, and at the most, sometimes mildly open. In today's world, feminist movements have gained expression due to similar factors.

The women's movement in India can be seen as forming three "waves". The first wave can be seen during the national movement, when there was mass mobilization of women for participation in the nationalist movement.

Thereafter, for over a decade, there was a lull in political activities by women. The late 1960s saw resurgence in women's political activity and can be called the second wave. In the late 1970s, the third wave of the women's movement emerged, which focused on women's empowerment.

### **Pre-independence Women's Movements in India (The First Wave of Women's Movement):**

Readings of texts, religious, political, cultural, social—oral stories, mythology, folklore, fables, songs, jokes, proverbs, and sayings reveal that women's subordination has existed in different forms since time immemorial. Of course, there have been acts of resistance at different times throughout the Indian history, though these have been sporadic.

There are numerous stories of how women questioned and went against the establishment, personified in the deeds of Razia Sultana, Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, Ahilyabai Holkar, Muktabai, and so on.

Women throughout history made efforts to break free from the bonds of oppression they had to face by virtue of their birth.

Many women belonging to the various castes joined the Bhakti Movement. The saints stood up for equal rights of men and women. It resulted in some amount of social freedom for women. Women joined in Kathas and Kirtans organized by various saints of the Bhakti Movement. This helped in freeing women from the drudgery and restrictions of domestic life.

The Bhakti Movement was an egalitarian movement that cut across gender and caste discriminations. Some women such as Mira Bai, Akkamahadevi, and Janaki became leading poetesses. The saints of the Bhakti Movement produced considerable literature in the vernacular language, or the language of the people.

Indian culture became accessible to women also: Saints also encouraged the worship of the feminine counterparts of male Gods (Narayan-Lakshmi, Krishna-Radha, Vishnu-Lakshmi), which indirectly helped to elevate the status of women.

### **Women's Movements in India after Independence!**

There is a distinction between pre-independence and post-Independence women's movements in India. The pre-independence movements were essentially about social reforms and initiated by men. In comparison, the post-independence movement demanded

gender equality, questioned gender-based division of labor and highlighted the oppressive nature of the existing patriarchal structure.

In the euphoria of post-independence, it was believed that women's status would dramatically improve along with other marginalized groups because they were now the masters of their destiny.

However, when this was not achieved there was an upsurge of various movements which raised a number of issues around diverse subjects such as land rights, wages, security of employment, equality, etc. Some of the issues on which women got together were work, population policies, atrocities on women, including rape and liquor.

After India gained independence from British rule in 1947, it was the Congress party that came to power and formed the Government. The government made certain attempts to fulfill the promises it had made to women during the pre-independence period, and also in the initial period after independence.

While framing the Constitution of India, it included the very important aspect of equality of men and women in all spheres of life. Article 14 of the Constitution of India states that, "The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India".

Article 15 states that "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them." Article 15(3) states that "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children".

Article 16 states that “There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State”. According to Veena Majumdar, “The Constitution’s radical departure from inherited social values represented to women of that generation its greatest intrinsic quality.

For the women ... with definite memories of pre-independence society and of the freedom struggle, the acceptance of gender equality in the constitution was the fulfillment of a dream of women’s entitlement to an independent identity.” A number of administrative bodies were set up for the creation of opportunities for women. A number of women were inducted into the government.

In the two decades that followed, 1950s and 1960s, there was a lull in the activities of feminists and in the women’s movements in India. Women, however, started realizing that the constitutional promise of equality did not by itself resolve the equality questions, especially in a country as diverse as India, which comprises different religions and cultures.

The challenge of addressing inequality within women remains till this day. The women’s movement has not been able to “decommunalise” the issue. Women’s organizations and feminists did not know how to deal with the problems of women belonging to different religious groups. By the time the feminist movement stepped into the 1970s, minority identities had begun to harden. This divisive environment affected Muslim women.

Religious fundamentalists tried to place the onus of preserving religious-cultural identity on women. This identity syndrome, with women in the center, diverted attention away from Muslim women's grim realities and the deviations from the actual Islamic position.

Having been a secular movement, the women's movement found itself facing a difficult challenge that it did not know how to handle. On the conceptual level, Indian feminists were in a dilemma: how to assimilate Muslim women's issues into broader feminist issues and, at the same time, safeguard their religious and cultural identity. This has been most obvious in the case of Muslim Personal Law.

Placing Muslim women's issues within the confines of religion has further marginalized them, and created hesitancy among the secular feminists in addressing their problems for fear of hurting religious sentiments.

The 1970s also witnessed the split of the Indian Left Front. This led to a number of doubts regarding their earlier analysis of revolution. New Leftist movements and ideas emerged. A few streams of feminist movements also developed, such as the Shahada movement, which was a Bhil tribal landless laborer's movement against the exploitation of the tribal landless laborers by non-tribal landowners. It began as a folk protest, and became militant with the involvement of the New Left party.

It has been said that women were more active in the movement, and as their militancy increased, they demanded direct action on issues specific to them as women, such as physical violence and abuse as a result of alcoholism.

Groups of women would go from village to village, enter liquor dens and destroy liquor pots and containers. If any woman reported physical abuse by her husband, all other women would surround him, beat him up and force him to apologize to his wife in public.

The formation of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was probably the first attempt made to form a Trade Union attached to the Textile Labor Union in Ahmedabad. It was formed in 1972 at the initiative of Ela Bhatt, and was an organization of women who were involved in different trades, but shared a number of common features and work experiences—low earnings, extremely poor working conditions (some worked at home, and others toiled on streets as vendors or hawkers), harassment from those in authority (contractors, police, and so on), and lack of recognition of their efforts as socially useful work.

SEWA aimed at improving the working conditions of women through a process of training, technical aid, legal literacy, collective bargaining, and to teach values of honesty, dignity and simplicity, the Gandhian goals to which SEWA subscribes.

The anti-price rise agitations in Maharashtra were the direct result of the drought and famine conditions that affected rural Maharashtra in

the early 1970s. These led to a sharp price rise in urban Maharashtra. In 1973, the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front was formed to mobilize women against inflation.

Within no time, it fire balled into a mass women's movement for consumer protection and the demand was for the government to fix minimum prices and to distribute essential commodities. Huge groups of women, between 10,000 and 20,000, would hold demonstrations at government offices, houses of Members of Parliament and merchants, and those who could not get out of their homes would express their support by beating thalis (metal plates) with lathis or belans (rolling pins).

This movement spread to Gujarat, where it was called the Nav Nirman movement. In Gujarat, the movement started as a student's movement against spiraling costs, corruption and black marketeering. Soon, it became a massive middle- class movement and thousands of women joined it. The methods included mock courts where judgments were passed on corrupt state officials and politicians, mock funeral processions, and processions to greet the dawn of a new era.

Women started participating in increasing numbers in the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal and the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, the Navnirman youth movement in Gujarat, and the Chipko Movement. The Shramik Mahila Sangathan (Working Women's Organization), the Progressive Organization of Women, and the Mahila Samata Sainik Dal (League of Women Soldiers for Equality) were some of the organizations that emerged during this period.



## **Contemporary Women's Movements in India**

There are different strands of thought and activism that have come together to create the contemporary women's movement in India. These movements were initiated by the Declaration of the UN Year of Women in 1975. This year also witnessed the release of the Status of Women Committee Report. The report was a voluminous one of compiled data on the various indices indicating the status of women in India.

This report directly attacked the myth that women in post-Independence India were "progressing". It revealed that a majority of Indian women suffered from poverty, illiteracy and ill-health, as well as discrimination in both the domestic and public spheres. This resulted in agitations and campaigns against the worst manifestations of sexism and patriarchy by middle-class women.

The report of the Committee on the status of women proved to be a turning point in the path of contemporary women's movements in India.

### **The report made the following recommendations:**

1. Equality not merely for justice but for development;
2. Focus should be on economic empowerment of women;
- . Child bearing should be shared as a social responsibility;

4. Recognition of household work as national productivity;
5. Marriage and motherhood should not be a disability;
6. Emancipation of women should be linked to social emancipation;  
and
7. Special temporary measures for de facto equality.

The year 1975 saw the development of a number of feminist activities in various parts of the country, especially in Maharashtra. This is seen as an indirect result of the United Nations declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year. An intensifying of interest in women's issues and problems had been taking place in Maharashtra from the early 1970s.

Inspired by the formation of the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) in Hyderabad, Maoist women formed the Purogami Stree Sangathana (Progressive Women's Organization) in Pune, and the Stree Mukti Sangathana (Women's Liberation Organization) in Bombay. On 8 March 1975, the International Women's day was celebrated for the first time by both party-based and autonomous organizations in Maharashtra.

In September, a conference of Devadasis was organized. In October, a United Women's Liberation Struggle conference was held in Pune. A connection was established between the anti-caste Dalit movement and feminism. The Dalits were classified as untouchables because of

the activities they undertook, such as curing leather or clearing excreta.

The Dalits had been agitating for social acceptance, and for women's rights to education, widow remarriage and against Purdah. Women from the Dalit movement formed the Mahila Sarnta Sainik Dalam (League of Women Soldiers for Equality). It stressed on equality, and highlighted women's oppression, especially the oppressive character of religion and the caste system.

In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of Emergency throughout the country. This interrupted the development of the women's movement. Many political organizations were forced to go underground. Many activists were persecuted and arrested.

During this period, the focus of the activists shifted to civil rights such as freedom of speech and association, the rights of political prisoners, the right to freedom and liberty and so on. In 1977, Emergency was lifted. This led to the revival of some of the women's movement that had been brought to a standstill by the declaration of Emergency. Women's groups were formed in most parts of the country. The 1980s witnessed a transformation of the women's movement. Organizations increased their focus from one or two issues to deal with holistic issues.

**There were three different streams of feminist orientations:**

i. The Liberal Stream focuses on demanding reforms in those aspects of the polity which specifically affect women.

ii. The Leftist Stream situates oppression of women within a holistic analysis of the general structure of oppression and calls for a coming together of specific movements for social change in order to effect the revolutionary transformation of society.

iii. The Radical Feminists concentrate on defining the development of feminity and masculinity in society as fundamental polarities, and experimented with reclaiming traditional sources of women's strength, creativity, and so on.

Since the pre-independence time, freedom struggle and thereafter, women's organizations were linked to political parties. What have come to be known as "autonomous" groups or organizations have emerged in the 1980s, which were not linked to political parties. The new women's groups that were formed in the late 1970s had a number of members who believed in the Leftist ideology.

They declared themselves to be autonomous, even though they had affiliations with various political parties. They rapidly built networks among themselves despite ideological differences. The fact that most of the members of these groups had leftist affiliations and belonged to the urban educated middle class influenced the feminist movement of the late 1970s and the 1980s.

The groups of the 1970s were loosely organized and without formal structure or funds. Many groups opted for autonomy and wanted to be separate, women-only groups without any party affiliations or links, as these were hierarchical, competitive and wallowed in self-interest.

Feminists criticized party politics, but recognized their importance. They felt that parties could help in the enactment of reforms and in fulfilling feminist aims.

Even though many of the feminist movements and campaigns of the late 1970s and the early 1980s were city-based movements and dominated by urban groups, feminist consciousness was entering rural movements too.

In Andhra Pradesh, the 1950s sharecropper's movement in Telangana was renewed in the late 1970s. In Karimnagar District of Telangana, women had been very active in the movement of the landless laborers from the 1960s onwards.

The kidnapping of a woman, Devamma and the murder of her husband by a local landlord sparked a new wave of agitation. The Stri Shakti Sanghatana was formed in Hyderabad in the late 1970s, because of a demand for an independent women's organization from the women themselves. In Bihar, the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (Young Students' Struggle Organization) was formed, and women of the organization raised feminist issues.

This organization was involved in an agricultural laborers' movement for land reclamation from the temple priest who owned most of the land. Women were actively involved in this movement, and it was decided that there would be a demand to register reclaimed plots of land in the names of men and women.