



WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Dr. Anju Aggarwal, Associate Professor
Maharaja Agrasen College
University Of Delhi

The recognition of gender as an issue forms a basis of India's women's movement. The position of women has been affected by progressive or reactionary trend, which prevailed in the society when the former had ascendancy. Women's position improved, her status elevated, her subjugation diminished and her rights extended. The position of Indian women increasingly deteriorated during the pre British period. During this phase women sometimes is considered a goddess and other times a slave but never a human being with a personality.

In the Vedic society within the framework of patriarchal society the position of women was high. However the status of women deteriorated when the injunctions of Manu, stopped the practice of upnayana for daughters thereby reducing their status to that of shudras. He propounded the theory of the perpetual tutelage of women.¹ The position of women became more and more servile in the Pauranic Hindu society. Polygamy, Child marriage, parda System, Sati pratha increasingly became prevalent. Though women like Chand Bibi, Rasiya Begam, Rani Jhansi, Mira Bai marked Indian history but they came from elite section of society and were therefore free from social subjection, which Indian women, in mass, lived. Women was considered a slave having no identity of her own. Thus on the eve of British Rule she had not only lost her independence but also her personality.² The Bhakti voiced the first protest against the prevailing inequalities and injustices.³ The Bhakti movement did advance, even for a brief duration, the position of the oppressed lower caste and women. But the impact was not lasting. During the mughal period, despite many social disabilities women were happy and contented. In the opinion of Akbar they were 'flaming torches of love and fellowship'.⁴ With the coming of the British Rule in the later half of 18th Century women occupied a subjugated and inferior position in society. The legal position was also not satisfactory.⁵ They were considered as parasites. The subject of Indian women in the pre British period was routed in the socio economic structure of society of the period.⁶ The position of Indian women had reached its lowest at the advent of British rule from the point of view of literacy, individuality, health, social status, freedom of movement and economic independence.⁷

The genesis and the growth of the movement for the emancipation of Indian women was the result of the impact of advanced democratic civilization on the medieval India. It recognized women as a personality. Between 1820's and 1850's the social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwarchand Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, Ranade played a pivotal role in addressing the issues like Sati, Child Marriage, Widow Remarriage, women's education, they struggled to end economic social, political, and other disabilities from which she suffered and launched a vigorous campaign against social evils subjugating women.⁸ Organizations like Brahma Samaj, Prathma Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the theosophical society were formed to uplift the position of women. Widows were legally permitted to remarry by the Act of 1856. Earlier only men raised their voice for the emancipation of women, subsequently women also came forward like Pandita Ramabai raised her voice against patriarchy and castism.⁹ By the end of 19th century women started organizing themselves in strong unity and began to demand their rightful place in society. Organizations like Puna Sadan, Servants of India Society, and Home Rule League were formed and these active women later participated in freedom struggle. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and Begum Ammam Bibi were deeply significant in the new era in Indian social and political history.¹⁰

With the advent of 20th century the scope of women's movement in India began to enlarge rapidly. In the beginning they stressed in being politically active. Sarla Debi Chaudharani participated actively in political and social reform movements. In 1880 Justice Ranade founded 'Bharat Mahila Parishad', in 1882 Pandita Ramabai established 'Arya Mahila Samaj' and in 1910 Sarla Debi founded 'Bharat Stree Mahamandal' in Allahabad. In Punjab Amir-Un-Nisan founded Anjuman-a-khawateen-a-Islam. All these organizations performed the role of training the women. The 1920's and 30's, witnessed the peak of so called first feminist movement. This was the period when women began to organize and mobilize on issues of social reform, civil and political rights. Demand for equal status and political rights found general expression through various women organizations that were supported by the congress party.¹¹ The trend towards feminism found powerful response from parasitic position to socially and economically important. In 1917, Women's Indian Association, in 1925 National Council of Indian Women, in 1927 All India Women's Conference were formed. They were successful in offering national representation of women. Hindu Child Marriage Bill 1927 came through its efforts. Under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu some elite women fighting for the cause of women equality also joined hands with the nationalist Movement. Thus women from all sectors, cities and masses, participated in the freedom movement that increased their self-confidence and self-reliance. Further nationalist movement gave momentum to the feminist movement though some women were already engaged in different political activities. Women participated in the meetings of Indian national congress though symbolic only. Lot of women participated in Bengal Swadhi Movement Gandhi took the women's movement ahead, his unique contribution was the awakening of the immense untapped power in the Indian womanhood.¹² It was due to Gandhi's efforts that thousands of women participated in Indian National Movement, Basanti Debi, Suniti Debi and

Urmila Debi participated in the movements of 1921 and offered themselves for arrest.¹³ Both rural and urban women came to the forefront. Thus participation of women gave legitimacy to the politics of Gandhi as well as to the Indian National Congress reflecting the Indian unity. According to Veena Majumdar Gandhi adopted a revolutionary approach in improving women 's status.¹⁴ His call for women participation in mass movements like Swadeshi, Non-Cooperation, Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience widened the interest of women and opened new vistas before them.¹⁵ In 1920 Sarojini Naidu joined the non-cooperation movement of Gandhi and also became the women campaigner of Satyagraha movement. Subahsh Chandra Bose also formed Mahila Rashtra Sangh to participate in freedom movement. According to Govind Kelkar, women were involved in freedom struggle because they were suited for non-violent struggle.¹⁶ The political movement gave great impetus to the growth of women's movement. It created a situation in which number of social restrictions and taboos easily dropped off. The communist women also part of freedom movement. Among the major revolutionary women were Usha Mehta, Aruna Asaf Ali; Bina Das etc. however they did not abandoned the struggle for civil rights. Women contributed greatly in Quit India Movement and other such movements Under the leftist leadership the rural and the labor women actively participated in the Tibhaga Movement of Bengal and Talangana movement in Andhra, which were fought for the equitable distribution of land. These two led to the passing of Zamindari Abolition Act in the early 1950's. 'Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti' was formed under the leadership of the left front.

While the Child Marriage legislation in the 1930's unified the women's movement and later in 80's the marriage law reforms, with the proposal of Uniform Code Bill entered the divisions in the movement (Hindu Muslim controversy). The Ideological conflict however continued on the issue of women's role in society. Nevertheless the scope of women's activities began broadening. Women's organizations like Sharda Sadan by Pandita Ramabai (1889), Seva Sadan by R. Ranade (1909), Women Council of India (1920) and the most outstanding All India Women's Conference (1927) was set up by Margret Cousins.¹⁷ All these organizations fought against social inequalities and campaigned against early marriage, polygamy, purda, dowry etc. preparing the ground for the enactment of social legislations demanding complete economic equality and franchise for women.

Having been closely linked to the nationalist movement, women's movement stagnated in the period after independence. Under Gandhi it became nonviolent marginalized militant movement.

The 1950's-1960's saw no new growth in the movement it was only in the 1970's that we began to see the development of mass movements in which women participated in large numbers and there was a renewed interest in issues related to enhancement of women's status.. Constitutional guarantees of justice, liberty, equality and dignity for the individuals were given. Art 14,Art15,Art15(3),Art16 of the Indian Constitution talks of gender equality. Art.38, 39,42and 44 also made special provisions for women. Art.

51 talks of safeguarding the self-respect of women.^{73rd} an^{74th} constitutional amendment reserve one-third seats for women in panchayats.

According to Veena Majumdar, acceptance to gender equality in the constitution was the fulfillment of a dream of women's entitlement to an independent identity.¹⁸ It was a step to empowerment. But would these only provisions in the constitution bring gender equality? The document 'Towards Equality' brought out in 1974, by the committee on status of women, revealed that since 1911, the condition of Indian women had worsened in a variety of conventional measures of well being. Gender disparities had widened in employment, health, education and political participation¹⁹. The contemporary women's movement took up various issues ranging from rape and sexual harassment, domestic violence to impact of health policies, hazardous contraceptives technologies, impact of structural adjustment policies, rise of right wing politics etc. In the post independence period political divisions emerged in the women's movement more significantly thus making it more fragmented than before.

While in the 50's and 60's women's movement was quite inactive, various scattered movements came up in the 1970's. Different regions gave different priority to different issues concerning women. While Bombay gave more importance to issues of violence, in Kolkatta issues of poverty, literacy, unemployment got priority.²⁰ In 1972, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union of women in the unorganized sector was created under the leadership of Ela Bhatt, helped women to meet their needs for social security, childcare, health care and insurance and made women aware of their rights. It reflected the Gandhian ideals.²¹ In 1973 under the leadership of Mrinal Gore, United Women's Anti Price Rise Front came up and raised the issue of inflation and it turned into a mass movement for consumer protection. Nav Nirman (1974) in Gujrat²² and JP movement in Bihar both were led by middle class women.²³ It was initially a student protest against rising prices and political disorder but became a mass movemet. The Shahda movement in the Dhulia district of Maharashtra initiated by Bhil (tribal's) landless laborers, played an active role in mobilizing the masses, mass line was the guiding principle of action.²⁴ However these organizations were local and close knit with focused agenda. In 1973-74 Maoist group of women formed Progressive Organization of Women (POW)²⁵

On 8th March International Women's Day was celebrated. The International Decade for women (1975-85) increased the awareness on women's issues. Women's organizations all over the country came together to fight women's oppression. With the declaration of state of internal emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, women's movement got fragmented. Many radical women went underground. When the emergency was lifted in 1977, some of the earlier movements were revived and many new were formed focusing on gender issues. With Chipko movement²⁶, Bodhgaya movement, with a radical demand for women's land rights, JP influenced Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (CYSV) in Bodhgaya, Bihar, raising a demand to have land registered in one's own name,²⁷ women's issues were voiced. "Mahila Dakshata Samiti 'was formed in 1977 by socialist women to investigate the cases of

accidental deaths of young brides. 'Stree Sangharsh' was formed in 1979, which campaigned against the death of Tarvinder Kaur by her in-laws. The 'Progressive Organization of Women' in Hyderabad organized protest against dowry in 1975. In Rameez Bee police rape case, thousands of women demonstrated outside Police station in Hyderabad in 1978.²⁸ Others organizations like Samta Munch, Stree Mukti Sanghathan, Feminist networks Collective, Stree Shakti Sanghathan etc. also stressed on struggle against social injustice.

With the advent of 80's, the movement adopted approaches that were more holistic shedding the focus on social justice and taking up feminist agendas like health care, family planning, and child welfare openly. In the later half of 80's, the government made policies to integrate women into development. Women centers were opened to provide aid and counseling. Women's study also took off. However women could get little benefit out of it as due to bureaucratic corruption funds could not reach them. During this phase the liberal stream of the movement focused on demanding reforms. Leftist demanded social change for revolutionary transformation of society and the radical feminist concentrated on reclaiming traditional source of women's strength and defining feminism etc. Thus in the 70's there was lack of ideological homogeneity.

80's were the phase of self-conscious commitment to feminist policies. Since 1980 Indian women's movement was seen as an instrument of protection against violence. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 was amended in 1984-1986. Personal law was introduced in 1985 with the Shahbano case which dealt with the divorce and maintenance of Muslim women, the Mathura Rape Case of 1980²⁹ resulted in the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1983, The case of Roop Kanwar Sati forced the government to pass Sati Prevention Act 1987. In 1987 Indecent Representation of Women (prohibition) act was passed. In 1990 many cases of sexual harassment came into limelight. In 1997 Supreme Court in its historic judgment in Vishakha's case tried to prevent sexual harassment at workplace. Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act was passed in 2005 to protect women against domestic violence. Hindu women after getting equal right in their ancestral property have now got equal share in Hindu Undivided Family (HUF). In 2005 Hindu Succession Act (Amendment) was also passed and Live-in – relationship also got recognition. The most significant development that dominated the women's movement in the late 90's was the introduction of 33% reservation for women in local, village level elections.

The contemporary Indian movement is a complex, rich and vibrant movement. The Indian Womens movement was divided into various small movements having varied opinions about equality. With new movements like movements on sustainable development, Regional and peace movements, sex workers movement and environmental movements etc., the struggle strengthened. Though women's movement was spread all over India nonetheless it remained a strong and plural force. The contemporary women's movement in India took to legislation instead of agitation to bring social change. While some women

activists concentrated on improving legislation others focused on empowering women at the grass roots but not contradictory.

Indian women's movement is now in transition. Indian women's reaction to the patriarchal forces is complex. While some organizations aim at moving the state to action, to provide with women, equal rights and economic opportunity, others strive to improve their condition, pursue the goals of economic cooperation and development, greater autonomy in the family and participation in decision making. Though the legal change of 80's have been a success for it, some trends are set backs to it. Many laws were made in hurry. Some laws on the other hand punish the women only like gender test, prostitution, sati etc. Some of these were weak laws and some were not implemented properly. The Fundamentalist and communal forces also seriously challenge the achievements of socio economic justice and equal status to women. To some it has become directionless, it has become more of an idea than a movement³⁰ In order to be successful, women's movement in India has to fight against broader issues like communalism, to fight for distributive justice. For this they have to actively participate in party politics, in decision making both domestic as well as at government level. According to 2001 census there are 927 females over 1000 males in India. Female literacy is also 54.2% as compared to 75.9% of males according to 2001 census. Unemployment is also more among females. Rural women are still engaged in agriculture. Even being half the population, working two third, only one third of their work gets registered. Though the government has tried to raise the position of women in each five year plans, for example the eighth plan talked about their illiteracy, economic dependency, exploitation, the ninth and the tenth talked of women empowerment, even then the proposed agenda on their education and employment in five year plans limit them in their family role. It is useless to talk of women development and women's rights unless they are given basic rights. Not only men but also women themselves have to change their attitude. To be meaningful it should co-relate with the diversity of India and also other social and political movement in India.

REFERENCES

- 1 Manu Smriti VI 148
- 2 As Pandita Ramabai described “ She is forbidden to read the sacred scriptures..... Giving her ornaments giving her dainty food.... are the highest honours to which Hindu woman is entitled .” Pandita Ramabai ‘The High Cast Hindu Women’, Fleming H. Rewell Company, New York, 1887 pp 81-82.
- 3 However many of them often declared that women are the great obstruction in the way of achieving final beatitude. For eg. Eknath said ‘ An aspirant must therefore keep himself aloof from the influence of women.” Belvarkar and Ranade , History of Indian Philosophy: vol II p 242.
- 4 Abul Fazal : Akbarnama III translated by Henry Beveridge ,1904, p 372.
- 5 Though doctrine of Streedhan was legally there women were generally excluded from succession to property. J. D. Mayne ‘Hindu Law and Usage’, London, 1892, pp 601-605
- 6 Margret Cousins; ‘Indian Womanhood Today’, Kitabistan, Allahbad, 1947, p 15
- 7 Desai A. R.; ‘ Social background of Indian Nationalism’, Bombay Prakashan, p 274
- 8 Heimsath, C.H ‘Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform ‘, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1964, pp152-156
- 9 Pandita Ramabai’s marriage was inter -caste as well as inter religious. Pandita Ramabai , op. cit
- 10 M.E. Cousins op.cit. p58
- 11 Everett, Lana Matson: ‘Women and Social Change in India’ Delhi, Heritage, 1979.
- 12 Majumdar Veena; The Social Reform movement in India from Ranade to Nehru ‘ in B.R.Nanda (ed) Indian Movement from Purdah to modernity’ , Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1976.
- 13 Sharma, R.K ‘Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women’, Delhi, 1981, p 61. Suniti Debi had founded Nari Karam Mandir.
- 14 Majumdar, Veena; op.cit

- 15 A decision to boycott British goods was taken in August 1905 and in October Partition Day was observed by the exchange of Rakhis to symbolize brotherhood. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, Delhi, Macmillan and Company, 1983, p80
- 16 Kelkar Govind; ‘Women Movement Studies’ A Critique of the Historiography, 1984
- 17 Margret Cousins; *op.cit.*
- 18 Majumdar, Veena; *op.cit*
- 19 *Towards Equality*; Report of the Committee on the status of women in India, New Delhi, 1974.
- 20 Ray,Raka; ‘Field of Protest: Women’s Movement in India ‘,New Delhi, Kali for Women 1999
- 21 Jain Devika; *The Self Employed Women’s Association*, Ahmadabad, How 3,2 Feb. 1989,p.14
- 22 Gali Omvedt; ‘Women and rural revolt in India’ *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol 3, no.4, 1976 p.22
- 23 Originally a student’s movement later joined by thousands of women. It took three months for the police to crush the movement. Vibhuti Patel, *Reaching for Half the Sky*; Antar Rashtriya Prakashan , Bawada 1985 pp.8-10
- 24 Mies Maria; “The Shahda Movement-----A Peasant Movement in Maharashtra, Its development and its Perspective, *Journal of Peasant Studies* , vol.3, no. 4 ,1976, p. 480
- 25 POW made the connection between feminism and idea of equality. Gali Omvedt; *We will smash the prison*, London, Zed Press1980, Appendix II
- 26 Bahuguna S,L ; ‘Women non violent power in the Chipko movement ‘ *In Search of Answer* edited by Madhu Kishwar and Vanita Nanda, London, Zed Books , 1984
- 27 Manimala; ‘Zamin Kankar. Jot Onkar’ *In Search of Answers*,’*The Story of Women’s participation in the Bodhgaya Movement’*, *Manushi*, 3,2, p.150.
- 28 Reports in *Times of India*, *Statesman*, *Indian Express*, April 2-12, 1978
- 29 A 17 year old girl Mathura, in Maharashtra was taken by local policemen to the police station and was raped there. In June Maya Tyagi in Haryana was stripped, raped and paraded through streets.
- 30 Epstein; ‘What happened to the Women’s Movement’ *Monthly Review*, 53(1) May, 2001