

Indian Women's Movement

The roots of Indian women's movement go back to the nineteenth century male social reformers who took up the issues concerning women and started women's organization. Women started forming their own organization from the end of the 19th Century, first at local and then at the national level. In the year before independence the two main issues they took up were political rights and reform of personal laws. Women's participation in the freedom struggle broadened the base of the women's movement.

The Social Reform Movement

The history of women in India can be traced back to the social reform movement in the early 19th century that attempted to ameliorate the condition and the status of women, particularly from higher castes. Social reformers were the first to challenge the traditional subordination of Hindu women. They, however, fought for giving women some dignity and status within the framework of Hindu revivalism. They continued to emphasize the patriarchal ideals of Hindu women, the self-sacrificing, selfless and submissive wives and mothers.

The basic premise of the social reform movement was that women were oppressed because of social customs and tradition, such as child marriage, the oppression of women, sati, purdah and lack of education. Only a few progressive thinkers, such as Jyotiba Phule and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, perceived oppression of women in Indian society as a traditional instrument for maintaining social inequality and the dominance of high castes in Indian society. The first Mahila Mandals, organized by Hindu revivalist and reformist organizations Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj, created space for women for socialising and education.

Gradually in course of time the social reform movement became instrumental in the growth of women's organisation mostly in urban areas. The focus of women's movement during this period was, however on improving the status of women within the ideological framework of Hindu revivals and the emerging class of Western Educated intelligentsia.

The Nationalist movements

The merging of social reform movement with the nationalist movement for independence brought a marked shift in the perspective on women's issue. Democratic ideology of the nationalist movement and the need to broaden the political base of Nationalist struggle contributed to the acceptance of the principles of equality of rights, status, and opportunities for participation in the process of National Development. It was freedom struggle from the 1920's onwards that called for fundamental redefinition of gender roles.

The period from 1911-18 is of great significance in the history of Indian national movement because for the first time a woman Annie Besant led the national movement as president of Indian National Congress. It was due to women like Annie Besant that organised movement for the emancipation of women took place and the demand for political rights for women came to be firmly established on the political agenda. The important achievement of the women's movement in India during the second phase was the founding of Women's Indian Association (WIA)

The Women's Indian Association was mainly concerned with influencing the government policy on women's suffrage. Educational and Social reform issues. Its main objectives were spread of women's education, elimination of child marriage and other social evils, franchise

of for and establishment of equality of rights between men and women. This association played an important role in articulating women's movement.

M.k.Gandhi the leader of India's Non violent Freedom. Struggle played an important role in channelizing the energies of emerging women's movement into the Nationalist movement. Gandhi's view on women synthesized the Hindu ideology on women with liberal western ideology on equality in the public sphere. Like social reformer, Gandhi perceived women as the oppressed group and opposed social customs that subordinated them However he envisaged a significant role for women in Indian society and advocated gender equality in legal,educational,social and political spheres. One point to be noted here is that although Gandhi favoured female education for all sections of society, he too advocated women's education to improve their traditional role as wives and mother in .the patriarchal family.

The partition. Of Bengali in 1905 resulted in the launching of Swadeshi movement by the nationalists. Though there was the absence of mass awakening among the women but meetings were arranged and khadi spinning's were taken up by women. The swadeshi period marked the formation of Several women's organisation. Sarala Devi took steps to organise the women's movement. The objective of this society was to bring together women of all castes and creed on the basis of their economic interest.

Women's Movement in the Post Colonial period

The period after India's independence is called post colonial period. Immediately after independence India had to deal with a variety of problems. During this period the social reformists tried to channelize the Indian society by introducing constitutional and legal provisions and protecting the society and the women from discrimination and by

providing equality to all the citizens irrespective of caste, creed, religion. A few of the prominent movements are

Telenga Movement

Chipko movement

Women's movement in India since the 1970's

In the post independence during the first few decades. The major concern was for overall economic growth. This was immediately followed by another decade which witnessed an increased concern for equality and poverty alleviations

Women during this period were involved in such movements like the law and famine relief Towards Equal remuneration act. Dowry removal. In fact at that time there were three major issues Girl child, Gender Violence and Globalisation.

(Make a vivid discussion)

The important characteristics of the 3rd phase of Women's movement i.e. from post independence era to 1985 are as follows till the 1970's a kind of passivity influenced the women's movement. The economic crisis of 1960's created an atmosphere in which issues connecting women are more and in which women started taking place (1975-1985- International Women's year) saw the emergence of autonomous women's movement in which autonomous women's groups and organisation started fighting for liberation.

The emergence of independent India as a welfare state also affected the contours of Indian women's movement. The period from the late 1960's has been marked by an economic crisis and stagnation with rising prices, increasing landlessness and generalised discontent both in the rural and urban areas. The left parties took interest in the economic crisis and started organising movements. Though exactly women's issues were not taken up, women were mobilised in large numbers and they participated in the general struggle of the rural poor, tribals and working class. This resulted in the establishment of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). The economic hardship of the rural masses also drew the attention of some political parties. Issues like wife beating, alcoholism, dowry and sexual harassment from the upper caste were also given attention. Thus in the early 1970's while elite women organisations were conducting cultural activities and beauty shows, the poor women were getting entrenched into serious movements.

The year 1975 saw the emergence of autonomous women's movements. The government appointed the Committee on the Status of Indian Women (CSIW) in 1971 to examine the rights and status of Indian women and to suggest certain measures to enable women to play their proper role in the building up of the nation, and gradually in this way since the 1970's the issue of empowerment of grassroots women has come to the forefront of the contemporary women's movement in India.

