



Role of women and women's organisation

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Abstract

The course of the Indian national Movement is marked by multi faceted and complex stages. The question of social reform remained alive in the nationalist debates in the public sphere from late 19th century till 1947. Women's consciousness around social and the national questions grew simultaneously. Both Indian men and women were leading the social reform movements from the 1880's. In various women autobiographies and writings from all over India, particularly Maharashtra and Bengal, the slogan that 'Personal is Political' was being raised.

The paper is based on secondary data. The data has been taken from status of women in India. The paper will attempt to analyze Demographic profile of women in India, women's movement and organizations. The paper will also discuss the role and achievements of women's organization, women in the nationalist movement and so on.

Keywords: national women, personal is political, demographic, organizations

Introduction

Status of Women in India

Ironically, in the Indian situation where women goddesses are worshipped, women are denied an independent identity and status. This is strongly ingrained in the social fabric, the culture, the economy and the polity. Through various cultural processes in the family and society the selfhood of women is denied from childhood. Freedom, individual hood and identity for women are limited and stifled which have various implications. Though there are certain positive changes taking place in terms of women's education, employment, participation in panchayat, etc. there is still a long way to go. They focus on the status of women in India was drawn by the submission of the report titled 'Towards Equality' by the

Committee on the Status of Women in India. This Committee, which was set up by the Government of India at the request of the United Nations, looked into various indicators to evaluate the status of women in India. The report had made shocking revelations of the regressive changes that women are faced with as against the progressive changes that took place in various sectors of the country. The findings of the report and research studies thereafter, demonstrated the contradictions in the Constitutional guarantees of equality for women and the reality. Various issues like rape, dowry deaths, domestic violence, sati, desertion, female etc., were/are taken up for campaigning and seeking gender justice by women's organisations and human rights groups. The resurgence of the second wave of the women's movement during this century.

Table 1

Constitutional Provisions for Women in our constitution	
Article 14	Men and women to have equal rights and opportunities in the political, economic and social spheres.
Article 15(1)	Prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex etc.
Article 15(3)	Special provision enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women.
Article 16	Equality of opportunities in matter of public appointments for all citizens.
Article 23	Bans trafficking in human and forced labor
Article 39(a)	The State shall direct its policy towards securing all citizens men and women, equally, the right to means of livelihood.
Article 39(d)	Equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
Article 42	The state to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
Article 51(A) (e)	To renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.
Article 300 (A)	Right of property to women.
73rd & 74th Amendment Act 1992	Reservation of 1/3rd of seats in local bodies of panchayats and municipalities for women.

Demographic Profile of Women in India

As per World Economic Forum survey, India's Global Gender Gap Index 2011 ranking is 113 out of 134 countries with neighbors like Bangladesh at 69 & China at 60.

- **Sex Ratio:** Sex ratio is used to describe the number of females per 1000 of males. As per census 2011 sex ratio for India is 940 females per 1000 of males, i.e. females form a meager 47% of the total population. The state of

Haryana has the lowest sex ratio in India and the figure shows a number of 877 of females to that of 1000 males while Kerala has the highest of 1084 females per 1000 males.

- **Health:** Studies on hospital admissions and records have shown that males get more medical care compared to girls. 2% of the female population is absolute anemic. 12% of the female population of the country suffers from repeated pregnancy (80% of their productive life is spent in pregnancy) & lack of nutrition.
- **Literacy:** The female literacy levels according to the Literacy Rate 2011 census are 65.46% where the male literacy rate is over 80%. While Kerala has the highest female literacy rate of 100%, Bihar is at the lowest with only 46.40%.
- **Employment:** Of the total female population 21.9% are a part of Indian workforce. Majority of women are employed in the rural areas and in agriculture. Amongst rural women workers 87% are employed in agriculture as laborers, cultivators, self employed like hawkers etc i.e., in the unorganized sector which almost always remains invisible. Despite the Equal Remuneration Act 1976, women are paid lower wages, occupy lower skilled jobs, have less access to skill training and promotion.
- **Political Status:** Though India had a women Prime Minister Late Ms. Indira Gandhi, women are not fairly represented in the Parliament & other State & Local bodies. With only around 9 per cent women in Upper House and around 11 per cent in the Lower House of parliament, India ranks 99th in the world in terms of female representation among MPs. However 73rd and 74rd for women. amendments to the constitution have ensured the participation of women in PRIs with a reservation of 1/3rd for women. Today more than 30 million women are actively participating in the political decision making process at the grass root.

Women's movement and organizations

- The roots of the Indian women's movement go back to the nineteenth century when male social reformers took up issues concerning women and started women's organizations. Later, women started forming their own organization from the end of the nineteenth century first at the local and then at the national level. In the years 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. In post independence India, large number of women's autonomous groups have sprung up challenging patriarchy and taking up a variety of issues such a violence against women, greater share for women in political decision making, etc. both at the activist and academic level. India has a rich and vibrant women's movement but it has still a long way to go to achieve gender equality and gender justice.

Socio-Religious Reform Movements

- The roots of the Indian women's movement go back to the early nineteenth century when social reformers like Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

began to focus on issues concerning women like Sati, widow remarriage, kulin polygamy and spoke in favour of women's property rights. Following them, improving the condition of women became the first tenet of the Indian social reform movement. Women's inferior status, enforced seclusion, early marriage, condition of widows and lack of education were facts documented by reformers throughout the country.

Women's Organizations Started by men

- Men who belonged to the socio religious reform associations began the first organization for women. In Bengal, Keshub Chandra Sen, a prominent Brahma Samaj leader, started a woman's journal, held prayer meetings for women and developed educational programmes for women. Members of the Brahma Samaj formed associations for women of their own families and faith. The Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and Gujarat did similar work.
- The male-inspired and male-guided organizations for women did valuable work i educating women and giving them their first experience with public work. While the men wanted their women to be educated and take part in public activities, they regarded the home as the primary focus for women.

Women's organizations Started by women

- By the end of nineteenth century, a few women emerged from within the reformed families who formed organizations of their own. One of the first to do do was Swarnakumari Devi, daughter of Devendranath Tagore, a Brahma leader, and sister of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, who formed the Ladies Society in Calcutta in 1882 for educating and imparting skills to widows and other poor women to make them economically self reliant. She edited a women journal, Bharati, thus earning herself the distinction of being the first Indian woman editor.
- In the same year, Ramabai Saraswati formed the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune and a few years later started the Sharda Sadan in Bombay. The early women's organizations had been confined to a locality or city. In 1910, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, daughter of Swarnakumari Devi formed the Bharat Stree Mandal (Great circle of India Women) with the object of bringing together "women of all castes, creeds, classes and parties... on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the women of India.
- The Parsis, the Muslims and the Sikhs all formed their own women's organizations. They were useful in bringing women out of their homes, giving them an opportunity to meet other women, do philanthropic work, encouraging them to take an interest in public affairs and thus broadening their horizon. It also gave them the experience of managing an organization.

Role and Achievements of Women's Organizations

Votes for Women

- In the inter war years, between 1917 and 1945, there were two main issues that the women's movement took up-

political rights for women and reform of personal laws.

- The demand for voting rights was first initiated with the foundation of the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in 1917 by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa. Travancore-Cochin, a princely state, was the first to give voting rights to women in 1920, followed by Madras and Bombay in 1921. Franchise was of course extremely limited. Women could vote only if they possessed qualifications of wifehood, property and education.
- The Government of India Act of 1935 increased the number of enfranchised women and removed some of the previous qualifications. All women over 21 could vote provided they fulfilled the qualification of property and education. Women had to wait till after independence to get universal adult franchise.

Reform of Personal Laws

- The All India Women's Conference was established in 1927 which took up issues like purdah, child marriage, and other social customs. It waged a vigorous campaign for raising the age of marriage which led to the passing of the Sarda Act in 1929. The women's movement carried on a sustained campaign for these reforms that were finally obtained with the passing of the Hindu Code Bills in the 1950s.

Women in the National Movement

- They had attended sessions of the Indian National Congress and taken part in the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, 1905-11 and in the Home Rule Movement. But the involvement of really large number of women in the national movement began when Gandhi launched the first Non Co-operation Movement and gave a special role to women. Peasant women played an important role in the rural satyagrahas of Borsad and Bardoli. Women participated in the Salt satyagraha, in the Civil Disobedience Movement, in the Quit India Movement and in all the Gandhian satyagrahas. They held meetings, organized processions, picketed shops selling foreign cloth and liquor and went to jail.
- Apart from these, women freedom fighters like Bhikaiji Cama, Saraladevi Choudhurani (Bengal), Kalpana Dutt and Kamala Dasgupta (Calcutta), Lakshmi Sahgal (who was in charge of the Rani Jhansi Women's regiment, Part of the Indian National Army formed by Subhas Chandra Bose) were involved in revolutionary activities.
- Women's participation in the freedom movement did not lead to a separate autonomous women's movement since it was part of the anti-colonial movement. While women who picketed shops, marched in processions or went to jail or threw bombs did not question male leadership or patriarchal values, it did generate in them a sense of self-confidence and a realization of their own strength.

Constitutional Provisions and Social Legislations

- The Constitution of independent India followed the basic principle of women's equality as accepted in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Karachi Congress.

The provision of Article 15(3), which empowered the state to make special provisions for women and children, suggests that there was a realization of women's disadvantaged position and the need for the state to enact special measures to bring them at par with men. The legal reforms in the 1950's sought to provide greater rights to Hindu women in marriage, inheritance and guardianship.

First Phase of Women's Movement: An Assessment

- Nineteenth century social reformers were primarily concerned with issues that affected urban, upper caste, middle class women such as purdah, sati, education, age of marriage and widow remarriage. They argued that uplift of women was necessary because women are the mothers of future generations. While women were urged to come out and work for the nation, there was no questioning of the traditional role of mother and wife. In fact it was stressed that if they were educated they would become better wives and mothers. The women's movement in pre-independent India has been often called the first wave feminism. In this phase, women blamed tradition and religion for their suffering and sought redress in education and legal change. They were feminists in the sense that they recognized women as oppressed because of their sex.

Women Organization's in Post Independence period

- The women's organisation became passive in the fifties and lost the vigour shown during the pre-Independence period. Most of these organisations were urban based and the leadership came from the educated middle and upper class women. In the post-Independence period, two important organisations for rural women were set up, i.e. Kasturba Memorial Trust and Bharatiya Grameen Mahila Sangh (Indian Rural Women's Organisation). Their main objective was to assist the rural women in developing leadership potential. One of the weaknesses in the political strategies of women's organisations in the 1950's and 1960's was their inability to mobilise ordinary women and issues that concerned them. The lack of efforts to reach the masses and expand the base of women's movement limited its effectiveness and agenda for action. The position of peasant and working class women deteriorated and only a small minority of women benefited. The 73rd and 74th amendments in the Constitution have, however, brought reservation of 33.33 percent for women in local governance at the Panchayat level.

Resurgence of Women's Movement in 70s-The Second Phase

The late 1970's and 1980's was marked by a resurgence of women's struggle and emergence of new women's groups and organisations. The growing economic hardships of poor rural and urban women (fifty percent of the households were below poverty level at the end of the Sixth Five Year Plan) and failure to take up women's issues by the general agrarian and industrial workers movements resulted in women labourers organising separately.

Organizations

- Such new organisations as Self-Employment Women's Association (Gujarat), Working Women's Forum (Tamil Nadu), Sramik Mahila Sangathan (Maharashtra) concerned themselves with the plight of women workers in the unorganised sector. Organising women labour and taking up the issues of their wages, working conditions, exploitation and health hazards became an important task for these women's organisations. Research on women in the unorganized sector helped in developing new strategies for dealing with the problems of poor rural and urban workers.
- In Ahmedabad first attempt at a women's trade union was made with the formation of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) at the initiative of Ela Bhat in 1972. Its aim was to improve the condition of poor women who worked in the unorganized sector by providing training, technical aids and collective bargaining. based on Gandhian ideals, SEWA has been a remarkable success.

Limitations of Women Movement

- The women in India could never come together en masse as they were divided along the various lines of caste, class, religion, ethnicity, awareness etc.
- The issues confronting them varied in the urban and rural contexts.

Women Empowerment

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. However, there still exists a wide gap between the accepted goals and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India, on the other. The access for women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections of society to education, health and productive resources is inadequate. They remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded. But a number of programmes are being implemented and various kinds of efforts have been made to empower women.

- **Economic Empowerment**
- **Political Empowerment**

Basic legislations for Women

- Marriage
- Dowry
- Sati
- Rape and Indecent Representation of Women
- The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act.
- Workplace
- Vishakha Guidelines

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