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# UNIT 1 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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## Learning Objectives



After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- be aware about the position Indian women as mentioned in the scriptures; and
- learn about the position of women in the colonial and post colonial periods through movements.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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The beginning of women's movements can be observed first from a social reform movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the colonial period women's movements in India were born out of the same historical circumstances and social milieu as earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movements, which provoked a new thinking about various social institutions, practices and social reform legislations. The women's movements ideological and social content changed from time to time and continued into our times. The movement in its entirety can be divided into three distinct phases.

Phase I Social reform movement, national movement and social reform legislation in the colonial period.

Phase II Women's movements in the post colonial period.

Phase III Women's movements in India since the 1970s.

Patriarchy, caste system and several other social and religious ideas and practices which have originated in the ancient Indian social milieu continue to dominate our anthropological thinking about the social status and position of Indian women and are still relevant issues and therefore when one discusses them a historical overview is a necessity.

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## **1.2 POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA**

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Society has been patriarchal for most part of recorded history. It is difficult to talk about the position and status of women, with all women being categorised as uniform. There has been infinite variation on the status of women depending on the culture, class, caste, family structure and property rights. Even while women have right to kinship systems, the entire mechanisms of marriage, descent, residence and inheritance are rarely organised in such a way as to guarantee women access to resources or to allow them to secure access for other women. In fact under patriarchal order kinship, conjugal and familial systems tend to construct women in such a way that they hardly live as independent beings and they are seen only in relation to men, thus depriving women of their selfhood and agency (Pande, 2010, 131). Hence for a proper understanding of the social reform movements for the development of women in India it is necessary to examine the historical background that necessitated and brought about social reforms. In Indian history, we see major shifts in the position of women in different periods and some of these changes are reflected in the texts that prescribe codes of behaviour and therefore capture the dominant worldview of the period.

### **1.2.1 Position of Women in the Vedic Period**

The role and status of women throughout ancient and medieval period has been far from static ranging from one of authority to freedom to one of subservience. Most of the historical sources by and large refer to the elite sections of society concentrating on the court and the aristocracy and hence when they talk of women they generally refer to women of this class because women from other classes and tribal backgrounds had different norms. Tribal women and women from the labouring castes and classes are rarely visible as they represent those groups which did not have a literary culture and therefore did not leave behind much evidence. However, there are references to them in literature and historians also use archaeological evidence to try and reconstruct the lives of the pre-literate societies.

It is generally accepted that one of the basis of the stratification in society is the economic surplus that is appropriated by a ruling class and in the context of the hunter gatherers we see that such a surplus is not there and there the question of private property does not assume much significance as these societies were relatively egalitarian. It is with the rise of sedentary settlements that we see the emergence of stratification as the existence of a class of non-food producers who lived on the labour of others is seen. In the Indian context a large number of Neolithic settlements are noticed. In the north-western parts of India, the rise of the Indus Valley Civilisation based on urban settlements and long distance trade was excavated a century ago. However, in the absence of any written record and the un-deciphered nature of the Indus seals we are unable to proceed any further and therefore unable to reconstruct the position of women.

Though it has often been stated that the position of women was much better in the Vedic period and things started deteriorating with the coming of Muslims, and the often quoted examples are given of Gargi and Maitrey who participated in the Sabha and Samitis it cannot be denied that ancient societies were patriarchal on the simple count that the predominant structure and values of society were oriented to giving men a superordinate status, a fact that was reinforced by sacred literature. In fact one can see continuity in modern times which is one of the reasons that the social reformers and freedom fighters took up the agenda of women's movement in the post Independent period as one of the unfinished businesses of Indian social reform.

Many accounts were written about women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the European travelers. The Orientalists reconstructed the glory of Indian civilisation in the past. The past was presented as a homogeneous whole without any aberrations. The effort was to make the natives understand their laws and appreciate the efforts made by their rulers. The colonial restructuring of gender and the circular institutionalisation of literature both worked to undermine the authority of Indian literature and the societies that gave rise to them. Though they retrieved and put into circulation many Sanskrit and Persian texts, it was a highly restructured version of the past that emerged in the Orientalist framework (Tharu et al (ed), 1991). All these texts showed that women had a very high status in the Vedic period which was a golden age and then the status of the women declined with the coming of Muslim rule and now it was for the British to improve the status of women. One also sees a change in ancient India during the transition from the early to the later Vedic period when the pastoral and semi-nomadic society of the early Vedic period with its relative equality gets settled during the later Vedic period and the territorial units are established during this period. Another perceptible change is seen during the Upanishadic period and later during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C with a proliferation of urban settlements. The emergence of the *gṛhya* and the *srauta* sutras offers us a glimpse of the position of the women during this period. Agriculture was established along with craft specialisation in the urban centers and the 'grahapati' or the householder seen as the ideal. He was the one who exercised control over the household. We get a clear indication of the growing control of the householder over the women of the household and their dependence on the men.

Many of these scholars depended for their sources on textual materials which are Brahmanical in origin. These texts are heavily preoccupied with religious and legal questions. Women are viewed mainly in the context of the family, the relationship between husband and wife being the main backdrop. The first millennium BC, can be called the era of the founding of Brahmanic patriarchy, and the 19th century colonial period saw the reconstruction of Brahmanic patriarchy, as part of a larger scale 'construction of Hinduism' (Chakravarty, 1998).

Buddhist texts are at a considerable distance from this ideal along with the Jaina and other heterodox religious traditions. Though the Buddha and Mahavira spoke for equality of women, we also notice some resistance from members of the Sangha.

As has been pointed out, most of the historical sources of the earlier period generally refer to elite groups, the king, the court and the rich merchants. We

have to infer about other sections of society from indirect references. The women of aristocracy were regarded as gentle creatures, the mothers of future rulers. Marriage was frequently a disguise for a political alliance and for those of lesser standing a means of mobility for the family. The aristocratic woman led a well protected and isolated life. Reference to women from respectable homes moving about veiled goes back to early centuries A.D. and the *purdah* of Islam intensified the seclusion of women (Thapar, 1975, 8). The women of the artisan families and those of the peasants had a less relaxed life. Here the pressure was not so much from social mores as from the needs of economic survival, where leisure was limited and women participated in the professional works of men. Perhaps the most independent among the peasant women were those who had distinct economic roles, where they had individual access to local markets. There are ample references to such women in the Smriti literature like the *Manusmriti*, the Smritis of *Apastamba* and *Gautama*. In addition, the Jataka stories also offer us many glimpses from the lives of these women drawn from royalty, aristocracy, trading, artisanal, hunting, fisher folk and labourers. What clearly emerges from reading these sources and the Sanskrit literature and dramas and inscriptions is a distinction between different classes of women, where royal women needed protection and the subaltern women were more unfettered. This distinction can be seen in the realm of religion also, with *Lakshmi* and *Parvathy* being demure while *Kali* and *Durga* being ferocious.

According to ancient and later Brahmanical law books, for a woman her dharma was *stridharma*, and her notion of dharma was not a self definition but a world view thrust on her with predominantly male interests. Due to their supposedly fickle nature and the inherent pollution in the female body women were seen as being subordinate to the voice of authority in the family and had to engage in frequent acts of ritual purifications. They had to visit temples with great regularity, perform sacred rites with higher faith and submit to religious fasts.

At the same time, we have examples of women who composed many hymns of the *Rigveda*. Apala, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi, Ghosha were few of the women philosophers. There were groups of women who studied throughout their lives and were known as *Brahmavadinis*. Women also attended political assemblies and offered sacrifices along with their husbands.

### 1.2.2 Position of Women in the Medieval Period

Most of the source material that is available for the reconstruction of Medieval India is written within the Indo-Persian tradition and was composed in a court setting. We do not get much information about the women and their activities. The few women who find mention in the records are women like Razia, Nurjehan, Rudramma Devi, who were exceptions and hence cannot be generalised. We have no information on the domestic life of ordinary women of medieval times. India witnessed significant socio-economic changes during the medieval period giving rise to new social groups which could not fit into traditional hierarchy. We have a large number of inscriptions of the newly emergent groups who prosper because of the changes in the economy, particularly agrarian expansion and crop diversification. The polities that appear throughout the subcontinent during the Middle Ages were not the dispersed fragments of a previous central government, but new formations arising out of the extension of agrarian settlement and the resulting growth of population.

During the medieval period these newly emerging social groups, attempted to redefine their position and status within the given traditional hierarchy and spearheaded a movement articulating their demands for restructuring the existing order. By declaring that God dwells in each individual and one could attain God through faith these saints brought religion to the downtrodden and henceforth marginalised sections of society. This movement is referred to as the Bhakti movement. What is important is that women could also now practice *bhakti* and they were regarded as an equal in the eyes of God. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Lingayat Movement began by Basavanna rejected many of the Hindu beliefs and customs such as Sati, female infanticide etc. which according to its founder brought disaster to Hinduism (Mukherjee 1974). He upheld the individuality of women, their right to choose their husbands, remarriage of widows and right to divorce under certain circumstances.

The advent of Islam did not make conditions better for women in general and a large number of biases and prejudices continued. The invasions of the Arabs and later the Turks and the subsequent setting up of Mughal rule helped to harden the rules and oppressive practices against women. Any woman found without *Purdah* was considered as shameless. The practice of polygamy and easy divorce by men and the law of inheritance went against them. Education was denied to them. Restrictions on their rights and freedom got aggravated.

During the Mughal period, household was an institution in which gender relations were structured, enforced, and, possibly, contested. During this period the harem metamorphosed into a bounded space which could be understood as a family. The record of routine events (like the king's visits to the royal women, preparation of marriages, and distribution of gifts) were a repertoire of the processes involved in the making of 'hierarchical relationships, building alliances and reinforcing kinship solidarities' (Lal, 2004).

The Mughal rulers attempted to put down Sati. Humayun introduced a system of licensing to bring it under some control. Akbar actively pursued the opposition. Jehangir abolished it by law and Aurangzeb pursued the implementation of this law (Baig 1976). But none of them could pursue their reforms vigorously.

### 1.2.3 Position of Women in the British Period

The advent of the Europeans into India did not change the situation of women. Like other Western powers, the primary objective of the British in the earlier days was trade. Later when they were faced with the administration of newly conquered areas, they thought it safe not only to keep the existing social structure intact but also to induct its religious pundits (Brahmins) to interpret its rules when necessary.

The introduction of English education first started to train Indians for jobs under British administration. This created upper class elites who began to doubt the rationale of many of the existing practices in their society. The establishment and expansion of the British rule also encouraged British missionaries to enter their colonies and start schools, orphanages and destitute homes especially for widows. They stood against *sati*, child marriage, *purdah* and polygamy. The new Indian elite exposed to European liberalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through Western education, felt the urgency for reform of their own society. This produced tangible results in the subsequent periods.

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## 1.3 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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The women's movements in the colonial period are mainly of two different concerns: (1) social reform movements and (2) nationalist movements.

### 1.3.1 Social Reform Movements

The women's movements began as a social reform movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The British conquest and its rule over India brought about transformation in Indian economy as well as in society. The new land revenue settlements, commercial agriculture and infrastructural facilities like roads, railways, postal and telegraph services etc. ushered in by the British led to a significant change in the Indian village economy. The new economic system and administrative machinery required a new type of educated personal which resulted in the establishment of Western educational institutions imparting modern education. The Indians who were the beneficiaries of the new economic system were attracted towards this and as a result a new class of intelligentsia evolved in the Indian society. The articulate intelligentsia became the pioneers of all progressive democratic movements: social, political, economic and cultural. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that was to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. This was a period of the hegemonic control and influence of colonial ideology. This was a time of transition, one of the emerging bourgeois society and values of new modes of thought.

The colonial intervention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century intruded into the areas of our culture and society and this affected transformation in our social fabric. This potential threat was sensed by the Indian intellectual reformers, exposed to western ideas and values. At this juncture, the Indian intellectual reformer sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to Western ideas of rationalism and liberalism sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to what K. N. Panniker (Presidential address, Indian History Congress, 1975) refers to as cultural defense.

This cultural defense resulted in a paradoxical situation. Spurred by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new society, modern yet rooted in Indian tradition. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an attempt to create a new ethos devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, *sati*, child marriage, illiteracy etc. all of which they believed were impediments to progress of women. All the social reformers shared a belief common to many parts of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that no society could progress if its women were backward. To the reformers, the position of Indian women, as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was abysmally low and hence their efforts were directed at an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and propagation, of education. This was mainly spurred by the first wave feminism of the west and concentrated on basic rights for women.

The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only

those issues which the British were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women's institutions and organisations that sprang up during this period do not reveal the development of an independent view. As a result even when women were speaking for themselves they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameters.

Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by Western educated elite men. There was thus an attempt to reform women rather than reform the social conditions which opposed them. There were no attempts to alter the power structure and the men-women relation in the society. This was but natural since the change in the status of women was being sought only within questioning patriarchy itself. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and tutored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives (Pande and Kameshwari, 1987).

Women also joined in the struggle against colonialism, but while they were encouraged to participate by leaders like Gandhi, their work in the struggles was just an extension of their domestic work. Very few women were allowed to join the front ranks with men, and the ones that did, spoke of the isolation they felt at times (Kumar, 1993). As a form of backlash to these new ideas that colonialism brought to India, women's roles were being pushed to a more traditional way of life.

In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women's education and provided a space for women in the public realm. The reformers took up issues, such as, *sati*, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, *purdah*, absence of education among women etc. There were two groups of social reformers, 1) Liberal Reformers and 2) The Revivalists. Both the groups undoubtedly recognised the oppressive social institutions' customs of India. But the former group on the basis of liberal philosophy put forth their work for the cause of women whereas the latter group's work was based on a programme of the revival at the Vedic society in modern India. While arguing in favour of equal rights for women appealed to logic, reason, history, the principal of individual freedom and the requirements of social programme, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Iswarachandra Vidya Sagar, Kandukuri Veeresalingam Panthulu, M. G. Ranade, Karve, Swami Vivekanantia, Swami Dayanand Saraswathi and others provided leadership to the women's movement by frankly acknowledging the degraded position of Indian women. The social reformers concentrated their attention on important aspects of women like *sati*, age of marriage the sad plight of widows and their right to remarry. The social reformers established a number of societies like Bramho Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and others for the cause of Indian women. The best exponent of liberalism was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the first Indian to initiate a social reform movement and campaign for the cause of women. He advocated equality between the two sexes and declared that women were not inferior to men morally and intellectually.

Roy's attention was drawn towards the inhuman practice of *sati*, after female infanticide. From 1818 onwards he began his active propaganda through speeches

and writings against *sati*. Largely because of his effort and persuasion, the East India Company declared the *sati* practice illegal and a punishable offence in 1829.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy also opposed other evils like early marriage, polygamy etc. He supported female education and widow and inter-caste marriage. He wanted that women should have the right of inheritance and property. Roy's Brahmo Samaj played a significant role in the reform activities concerning women.

The Brahmo Samaj, soon after its inception became a vigorous social reform movement first in Bengal which then quickly spread to other parts of the country and added to the volume and strength of similarly aimed local reformist movements. The members of the Brahmo Samaj opposed the caste system and they concentrated greatly on improving the low conditions of women and played a very important role in the introduction of several beneficial measures.

Like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwara Chandra Vidya Sagar also helped women. He did so by propagating widow remarriage. The child marriage evil resulted in large numbers of young girls ending up as widows whose lives were miserable due to the severe restrictions imposed on them. He argued in favour of widow remarriage and published his work on "Widow Remarriage" in 1853.

Arya Samaj was established by Dayanand Saraswathi in 1875. Dayanand Saraswathi emphasised compulsory education of both boys and girls. A series of schools for women- Arya Kanya Patasalas - were the first concerted effort of the Samaj to promote women's education in a systematic way. Prarthana Samaj founded by some Maharashtra Brahmins in 1867 had leaders like M. G. Ranade, N. G. Chandrasarkar and R. G. Bhandarkar. It concentrated more on sponsoring education for women. Both Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj made forceful efforts to prove that Hindu religious tradition were not the source of legitimacy for the sorrowful condition of women in society. Under the influence of the liberal thought of the west the two Samajes strove to restore to women their dignified status.

The efforts of Vidya Sagar, Keshub Chandra Sen and D. K. Karve resulted in the enactment of widow remarriage act of 1856. In the South Kandukuri Veeresalingam led the widow remarriage movement. In 1874 he performed 63 widow remarriages throughout the Madras presidency and financially supported men who married widows by providing them houses and other benefits.

Another aspect that the reformers worked on was the age of girls at marriage. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the average age of marriage for girls was 8 or 9. The extensive propaganda by Vidya Sagar and other reformers in this regard led the British government to legislate in order to improve the condition of minor girls and the age of consent bill was passed in 1860 which made sexual intercourse with a girl of less than 10 years of age as rape. Further social reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade, Behramji Malabari and Tej Bahadur Sapru in their attempts to raise the age of marriage cited several cases of consummation at the age of 10 or 11 which led to serious physical and psychological disturbances. Behramji, a Parsi journalist published his notes on infant marriage and enforced widowhood in 1884 suggesting certain reforms to be adopted in the educational institutions to



discourage child marriage and also suggested some corrective measures to the Government. It was between 1884 and 1889 that enormous pressure was brought to bear on the government to enact law to further raise the age at marriage of the girl. At last due to the collective efforts of the reformers in 1891, the Bill known as the Age of Consent was passed, which rose the marriageable age for girls to 12 years.

The social reformers felt that through female education the social evils that were linked to the issue of preserving and strengthening basic family structure could be eliminated and good wives and mothers could emerge from the same. Starting from Raja Ram Mohan Roy including the liberal as well as orthodox reformers supported female education. This resulted in the establishment of schools for girls and homes for widows. Between 1855 and 1858 while he was inspector of schools, Vidya Sagar established 48 girls' schools. M. G. Ranado along with his wife propagated female education and started a girls' high school in 1884. The limited enforcement and practicability of legislations like widow remarriage act of 1856 and others in a tradition bound society was recognised by D. K. Karve, who, therefore, concentrated his efforts on promoting education among widows. In 1896 Karve along with 15 of his colleagues founded the Ananth Balikashram for the education of widows, where the courses were drawn up with an idea to make the widows self reliant. He also started Mahila Vidyalaya in 1907 and S. N. D. T. Women's University in 1916 a separate educational institution for women so as to lessen the resistance of orthodox section with regard to women's education. The social reform movement in its later phases resulted in producing women social reformers who worked for their own cause. Pandita Ramabai started Sharda Sadan in Bombay in 1889 to provide an ashram to destitute high caste widows. In 1912-1913 a widow's home was established by sister Subbulakshmi, another widow in Madras.

Another important aspect of the social reform movement phase of women in India was that of property rights for Hindu women (Mukharjee 1975a). The existing practice was particularly harsh on the Hindu widow who had no claim on her husband's property except the right at maintenance as a result of which she was at the mercy of her husbands relatives. Raja Ram Mohan Roy suggested that the government should enact and enforce laws to remove these disabilities and bring economic freedom and self reliance. As a result of such efforts, special marriage act of 1872 with its provision for divorce and succession to property to women was passed. The married women's property act of 1874 widened the scope of stridhan (women's property) and expanded the right to own and acquire property by women. It also gave a widow a life interest in her husband's share of the property and a share equal to that of a son.

Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Annie Besant were the prominent reformers of the revivalist group who also worked for the cause of Indian women. This group believed in the revival of the Vedic society in modern India. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj was against child marriage. He encouraged widow remarriages and also set up several rescue homes and orphanages. Annie Besant leader of the theosophical movement was also against child marriage and supported remarriage of child widows. She laid emphasis on the importance of female education, thus adding strength to the social reform movement.

Muslim women in India made little progress in their position both in the pre-British period or later British period. Western education, the major vehicle of progress during the British period did not reach them, partly because of the existence of Purdah and seclusion of women from external environment and partly, because education was considered inessential for them. Educated Muslims formed only a small segment of the population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were confined to urban areas in the country. Consequently, efforts in education and association formation among Muslim women did not begin until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one notable exception being the Tyabji family of Bombay. Badruddin Tyabji who graduated from Elphinstone College founded a Muslim self-help association in 1876. His female relatives were later active in starting a Muslim girls school (Amina Binte Badruddin Tyabji) and running a girls' orphanage (Begum Nawale Misra) and starting nursing centres (Shareefa Hamid Ali).

Thus the social reformers laid the foundation of the women's movement in India. Social reform movement was the first attempt to remove the obstacles in the life of women. It created awareness among the people that women must be liberated and be made equal of men.

### **1.3.2 Nationalist Movements**

As a result of the social reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the social evils were eliminated and opportunities were provided to women for their education. The expansion of women's education and their admission to educational institutions had produced a sizable number of English educated middle class women by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century- and they made their presence felt in political activities. The characteristics of the second phase of women's movement i.e. the national movement are: for the first time many women belonging to the middle class, started taking part in the political activities. Till 1919, the national movement was limited to the urban upper class and it was later with Gandhi's entrance into the national movement, participation of the masses began to take place. In this phase, political developments and women's participation in the National movement went hand in hand.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 resulted in the launching of Swadeshi movement by the nationalists. Though there was the absence of mass awakening amongst the women, but meetings were arranged and khadi spinings were taken up by women. Women contributed their bangles, nose rings and bracelets to the national fund. In villages, women started putting away a handful of grain daily for such purpose. The women of Bengal and Punjab took active part in the Swadeshi movement. The women workers of the Arya Samaj were also responsible for arousing national spirit among the people. Swarna Kumari, sister of Rabindranath Tagore and her daughter Sarala Devi were strong supporters of the Swadeshi movement. Important women who participated in the revolutionary activities were Mrs. Shyamji Krishna Varma, Ms. P. Nauroji, Ms. M. Chettopadhyaya, and Madam Bhikaji Rustum, K. R. Kame, a regular among the Indian revolutionaries based in Europe, coordinated to the activities of the revolutionaries. She also raised issues of women's equality at international socialist circles reflecting the Indian reality.

This Swadeshi period marked the formation of several women's organisations. Sarala Devi took steps to organise the women's movement and its nucleus in the

form of Bharat Stri Maha Mandal in Lahore in 1910. Branches of this organisation were established at Allahabad and Calcutta. The objective of this society was to bring together women of all castes and creed on the basis of their economic interest for the moral and material progress of Indian women. Parvati Devi, the headmistress of a Hindu girls' school at Kanchi a small town in the Madras presidency started Kanchi Mahila Parishad to equip women of Kanchi with knowledge to create public opinion over burning issues of the nation.

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. The setting up of Home Rule League and organisation of the Home Rule agitation raised the tempo of the movement. 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).

Pandita Rama Bai's Sharda Sadan (1892) in Poona, Shri Mahipatram Rupram Anathashram in Ahmedabad (1892), Shri Zoroastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903), Maternity and Child Welfare League in Baroda (1914), Bhagini Samaj in Poona (1916) all were established and worked with the particular objective of improving women's lives. These regional organisations were followed by national organisations like Women's Indian Association (1917) and The National Council of Women in India (1920). All India Women's Conference (1926) went on to organise 12 women's conferences till 1937 and Federation of University Women in India (1920) stimulated the interests of women in civic and public life and concentrated on the removal of disabilities of women and promoted social, civil, moral and educational welfare of women and children.

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 for women and establishment of equality of rights between men and women. This association played an important role in articulating the women's movement till its merger with the All India Women's conference.

From the beginning, the Indian women's movement approached the suffrage campaign as a measure to achieve social reform. The leaders believed that enfranchisement of women would mean additional support for reform legislation.

The entry of Mahatma Gandhi with his experience altered the national politics dramatically. He realised the importance of mass base to Indian nationalism, and subsequently an ideology which suited the same was introduced. Gandhian style of mass mobilisation had implications for the Indian women's movement in as much as increasing number of women were sought to be mobilised for participation in the independent movement. Even though Gandhi recognised the existence of a set of problems unique to women, he saw no conflict between a women's movement and a national movement. During the Gandhian era of national movement, women continued their movement for political rights and social reform activities by forming organisations.

Gandhi launched an all India Satyagraha in 1919 against the provocative enactment of the Rowlat Act. Women took out processions, propagated the use of Khadi and even courted jail. Though a few number of women were arrested, yet a beginning was made. Though the non-cooperation movement ended in failure, it awakened the women of all sections and imparted first lessons in Satyagraha.

After the struggle for franchise, for the first time, Indian women exercised their vote in the elections of 1926. The franchise granted to women was very restricted. The first woman to stand for election was Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya. Madras was the first state which nominated a woman member, Dr. Muttu Lakshmi Reddy to the legislative Council. She saw to the enactment of the abolition of Devadasi system and laws to close brothels and protect the minor girls. She brought amendments to the children's act and worked for the creation of health schools.

A large number of women including Sarojini Naidu, actively took part in the Dandi March. Women participated by breaking salt laws, forest laws taking out processions, picketing schools, colleges, legislative councils and clubs. In 1931 Sarojini Naidu attended the Second Round Table Conference as an official representative of the women of India.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya addressed meetings and picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops. She was in-charge of the women's wing of the Hindustan Seva Dal. The inauguration of provincial autonomy under the India Act of 1935 gave women an opportunity to be elected to the state legislatures and also become administrators. In the elections of 1937, 8 women were elected from the general constituencies, 42 from the reserved constituencies and 5 were nominated to the Upper House when the ministries were formed, 10 women took office one as minister and others as deputy speakers and parliamentary secretaries.

The Quit India Movement which was the last in the series of the nationalist agitation was launched by Gandhi in 1942 with a significant slogan "Do or Die". Men leaders were arrested in the first round up and in their absence women carried on the movement and bore the burnt of the British wrath, The women not only led processions and held demonstrations but also organised camps in which they were given training in civil duties and first aid and were educated on democracy. Women organised political prisoners' relief fund while some women went underground and directed the movement secretly. In the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose, Rani Jhansi Regiment was created for women. Women were trained in nursing, social service and to use weapons. Thus women took part in various activities of the national movement. The specific feature of this phase of women's movement is the establishment of several women's organisations led by women themselves on an all India basis to enhance their social, economic, cultural and political scene.

The male leadership during the freedom struggle did not encourage a second line of leadership and women could assume leadership only when the men were in prison. However, in such times, there was an upsurge of women, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, of the upper or middle class leading sheltered lives in their homes, peasant women, working women pouring out in tens and thousands in defiance

of government order and police atrocities. It was not only their display of courage and daring but what was even more surprising was the organisational power, they showed.

It was primarily due to the efforts of women and their role in the freedom struggle that women got the right to vote and complete equality in the constitution of India. However a great gap arose between the theoretical status of women and their rights and what existed in reality.

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## **1.4 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN THE POST COLONIAL PERIOD**

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The period after India's independence is called post-colonial period. Immediately after independence, India had to deal with a variety of problems. Years of colonial domination had destroyed our indigenous crafts and depleted our natural resources. Industrialisation, changing technologies illiteracy, lack of mobility all resulted in the inability of women to cope with the new order.

During this period the social reformists tried to channelise 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, race, religion and sex. A few of the prominent movements are:

Telangana Movement;

Chipko Movement;

Anti Arrack Movement.

### **1.4.1 Telangana Movement**

The Telangana Movement began in 1946 and continued till 1951. It is one of the two major post-war insurrectionary peasant struggles in India. The Telangana Movement (1946-51) was a protest of the people who wanted both food and freedom from the oppressive regime of the Nizam, the Patils and the Jagirdars in Hyderabad State. The peasants on the Nizam's personal estate were bonded to the ruler. Under Jagirdari system various illegal taxes and forced labour were extracted from peasants by the landlords. Apart from this there were the Deshmukhs and Deshpandes (principal revenue officers of a district who became land owners overtime) or tax collectors of the Nizam who grabbed thousands of acres of land and made it their own property. Peasants thus became tenants at will.

One common social phenomenon was the Vetti system of forced labour and exactions imposed on all peasant sections in varying degrees. Each family had to send someone to collect wood for fuel, carry post to other villages, carry supplies etc. Foot wear, agricultural implements, pots or cloth had to be supplied free to landlords. Another system that prevailed was keeping of peasant girls as slaves in the landlord's house. When landlord's daughters were married these with were often sent with them to serve as concubines.

When the exactions of the landlords reached the point of evicting peasants from their land, the peasants began to resist. Sporadic struggles were launched in 1946 against the Deshmukhs of Visunur, Suryapet, Babasahebpet and Kalluru.

Large number of women who were desperate because of extreme poverty, slavery and sexual exploitation by the feudal lords fought courageously in this movement. In order to mobilise and develop political acumen among women, the communist party formed a women's organisation which published a woman's Journal *Andhra Vanitha*. Through this they campaigned against child marriage, widow remarriage, increased wages etc.

Crucially affected by the oppression of landlords and money lenders, women who were a large section of the agricultural labour and tobacco leaf pickers became militant in the struggle for land, better wages, fair, rent, reasonable interest on cash and grain loans.

Among the bonded class, rape, becoming concubines to landlords' married daughters etc. were prevalent. The oppression of the upper class women was kept under wraps as the violence they faced was not visible and structural purdah was strictly observed both by high caste Hindu and Muslim women. Child marriage and early widowhood were common. Education for women was unheard of. In Telangana the cultural dominance of Muslim feudal rule kept women out of the mainstream for long. Andhra Maha Sabha, which sprung up to assert the cultural identity of the people, added women's education to their agenda of constitutional reform and civil liberties. Thus many women, who were drawn into the cultural movements, drew closer to the communist party which was working through the Andhra Maha Sabha. When the Andhra Maha Sabha added basic agrarian reforms to its programme of action these women also plunged into the struggle.

Women from all classes participated in the movement with energy and commitment where both the urban middle class as well as the peasant sections of the population, drew their support slowly but surely into the movement. The communist party which seriously took up issues of social reforms for women like widow remarriage, prohibition of child marriage, education for women and opportunities, also began to identify women of ability to make the movement stronger. Some of the women who took active part in the movement were Dubala Sallamma, Ch. Kamalamma, Regulla Achamma, Chityala Ailamma, Pesaru Satamma, Malla Swarajyam, Dayani Kausalya, Pramila Tail, Chakilam Lalithamma, Bullemma, Narasamma, Vajramma, Saidamma, Suganamma, etc.

The Communist party in Andhra served as a rear base for the Telangana struggle, arranging for relief and supplies. The entry of the Indian Army into Hyderabad in September 1948 brought about the surrender of the Nizam and the disbanding of the Razakars. The force of the Army was then turned on the peasants, the communist party was banned and repression increased. The rich peasantry withdrew its support once the Nizam was gone and the squads had to move into the forests. Finally the struggle was withdrawn in 1951.

Some changes took place after the withdrawal. Forced labour was abolished, village became active and people resisted the return of the old Jagirdari system. The demand for division along linguistic zones to facilitate all round political, social and cultural development of the people was also subsequently pushed forward. More important was the fact that it had set a revolutionary tradition among Telugu people.

### 1.4.2 Chipko Movement

Chipko Movement was born in a small hilly village, Advani in Tehri Garhwal district of Uttar Pradesh. The illiterate *adivasi* women led this movement in December 1972. It challenged the old belief that forests mean only timber and emphasised their roles in making soil, water and pure air as the basis of human life. This philosophy popularised the movement in many countries. The women symbolically tied sacred threads around the trees, faced police firing in February 1978 and later courted arrest. This movement continued under the leadership of Sri Sunderlal Bahuguna in various villages. The movement's plan is a slogan to plant five F's- food, fodder, fuel, fiber and fertiliser to make communities self sufficient in all their basic needs.

The Chipko movement is inimical to gender in its theoretical underpinnings as well as the political and economic ones. Women and children gather firewood for domestic consumption. They rely on the forestry for combustible crop residues such as rice straw. This, however, is considered inferior to fuel-wood. Therefore, forestry activities that increase the availability of fuel-wood and development projects that promote improved stoves both release women's labour from fuel collection and permit its use in other productive activities, and improve the agricultural environment by permitting crop residues to be better used for enriching depleted soil. The movement points out the link between women's burden as food providers and gatherers and their militancy in protecting natural resources from violent devastation.

The Chipko women believed that the trees were alive and could breathe like them. Thus trees should be respected. Besides supporting agriculture and animal husbandary, the forests grew medicinal herbs used for healing powers. The hill women used fruit, vegetables or roots from it in times of scarcity. This dependency on forest resources was institutionalised through some social and cultural mechanisms, like religion, folklore and oral tradition. Many wooded areas bore marks of the hill folk's instinct for the plantation and preservation of the forest.

The Chipko movement against tree felling is a phenomenon no less. On April 1974, these women whose annual per capita income was Rs.129 rose against tree -felling. It is nationally and internationally discussed as the peoples' ecological movement for the protection of the natural environment. Men migrated to the plains and women were left to cope with an impoverished existence and to provide for the old and the children. Women repeatedly challenged administrators and politicians stating, planning without fodder, fuel and water is one eyed planning. In the course of this movement, Garhwal women successfully undertook leadership roles and questioned the right of the men to decide the fate of the forests or to enter into contracts without consulting them, who were the worst affected. The forests were these women's home, and hence they would not let it be cut down. The police force used all repressive and terrorising methods to retreat the non-violent strength of the women.

One of the women, Gaura Devi led 27 village women to prevent the contractors and forest department personnel, about 60 men in all, from entering the Reni forest to cut 2,415 trees. While the women blocked the narrow passage leading to the forest, the men used all sorts of threats and also misbehaved with the women. But the women bravely refused to budge. In the course of this movement,

Garhwal women successfully understood leadership roles and questioned the right of the men to decide the fate of the forests or to enter into the contracts without consulting them.

### 1.4.3 Anti Arrack Movement

The anti-arrack movement of women in Andhra Pradesh was one of most historic and significant movements of the 1990s. The historic bangle waged by the women of Andhra Pradesh against the social evil of alcohol drinking is a magnum war in Indian social history. Women have played a historic role in bringing about a ban on consumption and sale of distilled liquor in Andhra Pradesh. The movement indeed was not just for elimination of liquor but for the protection and survival of their lives and culture. The rural women in the villages raised their voices against the degeneration of the progress of their families through the damage caused by their men to their children and themselves.

The movement was started in a small village, Dubagunta, in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh. The main reason for the movement was said to be the successful literacy mission that has been going in Nellore district. The National literacy Mission (NLM) was officially launched in Nellore District from 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1990 and was implemented from January 1991. This program was implemented in a very innovative way with recognition of development as an instrument of change and empowerment of women. Hence a campaign approach was adopted to spread the message of literacy. Primers were written, popular performances used and a center for people's awareness created. Besides this, cultural committees were organised to convey the meaning and need for literacy in the forms of songs, dance-dramas and street plays. (Pande, 2002)

Sharing of problems through such mediums helped women to create a close bonding. They decided to fight the vice of drinking. The women reasoned that if the arrack shops were closed the men would not get liquor and hence would not drink. These women then marched together the next day and were able to get the arrack shop closed in their village.

The Dubagunta episode was soon quoted in another literacy primer, under the title, *Adavallu Ekamaithe*, (*If Women Unite*). The lesson had an electrifying impact on women in other villages who felt that they could do the same. In many villages women's committees were formed. Their fight turned into a larger issue involving contractors, the excise department and the state itself. The women wanted to know why their village did not have drinking water, schools for children or proper wages but plenty of arrack shops (ibid).

Anti-arrack movement though started as a spontaneous outburst of lower class and lower caste women it soon became a rage through classes and castes against local arrack shops, excise officials, liquor contractors and all the machineries of state involved in the trade.

Apart from these, the women resisted pressure tactics and attacks from those whom they were fighting. The inspirational guidance extended by the veteran freedom fighter Mr. Vavilala Gopala Krishnaiah, added momentum to the movement organised and spread to all villages in the district. Soon all the arrack supply sources were blocked. There were spontaneous and simultaneous demonstrations in all the areas against the evils of arrack consumption.



The women's struggle against the sale of arrack in Andhra Pradesh had 20 non-political organisations that fought for the scraping of auctions and bring about a complete ban on its manufacture. Through this movement, women have definitely emerged out winners because they are well aware of their strengths and ability to bring about change in society. Most importantly, the anti arrack agitation is a very good example of the articulation of a family violence in public. It showed a feminist way of looking at issues, especially a private issue like family violence and aligning it to a larger issue of state and society. It questioned the notion about domestic violence being private and women not being able to do anything about it.

This movement gave tremendous self-confidence and sense of power to women, who realised their strength and used it to their benefit. Women emerged out winners because they are well aware of their strengths and ability to bring about change in society.

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## 1.5 WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN INDIA SINCE THE 1970s

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In the post Independence period 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 equity and poverty alleviation. Gender issues were subsumed in poverty related concerns and there were no specific programs which aimed at women. Women during this period were involved in such movements like the law and famine relief movement but did not start to pick up issues involving their oppression until the 1970s. NGOs and other such organisations from the 70s started emphasising on women's development and provided women avenues of collectively voicing their concerns. These grass root organisations have questioned the welfare approach to women and incorporated an empowerment participatory approach. While questions about the success of these organisations are often raised, it is often seen that women exposed to some amount of mobilisation show great potentialities, receptiveness and defining capacities (Banerjee, 1992).

The myth of equality for women was shattered by the path breaking, **Towards Equality Report of 1974**. It focused attention on the fact that despite many progressive social legislations and constitutional guarantees, women's status had indeed not improved much. Women continued to have an inferior status in many areas like political, economic and social. The report pointed out to a sad fact that society had not yet succeeded in framing the required norms and institutions to enable women to fulfill their multiple roles. The increasing incidence of practice like dowry indicated a further lowering of the status of women. The report also pointed out that the concern for women and their problems which received an impetus during the freedom movement had suffered a decline in the last two decades.

In the post independence period, the women's movement has concerned itself with a large number of issues such as dowry, women's work, price rise, land rights, political participation of women, Dalit marginalised women's right, growing fundamentalism, women's representation in the media etc. It has also been able to draw a large number of women around three major issues: girl child, gender violence and globalisation.

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

Ideals of equal status and important provisions for the welfare of women were incorporated into the Indian constitution, while the pre-independent legislative acts continued to be in force. The constitution guaranteed equal rights to both the sexes. Article 15 and Article 16 (2) of the constitution forbids discrimination and accepts all as equal in the eyes of the law (Article 14). In the early 1950s a series of legislations such as the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, Dowry Prohibition Act and Equal Remuneration Act were passed.

The emergence of independent India as a welfare state also affected the contours of Indian women's movement. The government Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) promotes welfare and development services for women, children and under privileged sections of the society. It has a nation wide programme for grants-in-aid for welfare activities with a special emphasis on women's welfare.

The period from the late 1960s has been marked by an economic crisis and stagnation, 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. Through women's issues were not taken up, women were mobilised in large number and they participated in the general struggle of the rural poor, tribals and industrial working class. Women's organisations such as Shramik Mahila Sangathana (the working women's organisation) took up the issue of rising prices of essential goods, adulteration etc. This saw its culmination in the anti price movement of 1973 as a united front organisation of women belonging to political parties such as CPI (M), Socialist Party, Congress and even non-political women. The political parties mobilised women to achieve their own political gains. This resulted in the establishment of National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) by the Communist Party of India. The economic hardships of the rural masses also drew the attention of some political parties. While pressing for better working conditions for peasant women, issues like wife beating, alcoholism, dowry and sexual harassment from the upper castes were also given attention. Thus in the early 1970s while elite women's organisations were conducting cultural activities and beauty shows, the poor women were getting entrenched into serious movements.

The decade from 1975 to 1985 saw the emergence of autonomous women's movement. The year 1975 was declared as the International Women's Year (IWY) which was later extended to a decade. 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.

Paying unequal wages to women for equal work is a part of the general discrimination against women in the work place especially in the agriculture,

plantations, mines and other unorganised industries. Working women's hostels, legal facilities and trade union rights are not available to women. Mortality rate among women is higher than that of men due to malnutrition. Violence against women appears in the form of dowry deaths, wife battering, mass rape during caste and communal riots, gang rape, sexual harassment of women and stereotyped representation of women in media. Along with these, poverty and deprivation affect the conditions of dalit and tribal women, many of whom are forced to prostitution.

Autonomous women's movements emerged during the international women's decade which provided an opportunity towards attention on women's issues. In 1975, March 8<sup>th</sup> was celebrated as international women's day for the first time. Important features of the women's autonomous movement are that women organised themselves and led the movements and fought against oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination.

The women's organisations that emerged during the autonomous movement period could be divided into six categories:

- i) Autonomous groups whose main propaganda is agitation and to raise consciousness.
- ii) Grass root or mass based organisations like trade unions, agricultural labourers' organisations, democratic groups, tribal organisations etc. in which women's issues like wife beating, sexual harassment by the landlords, alcoholism of men have been taken up.
- iii) Groups that concentrate on providing services, shelter homes etc. to needy women.
- iv) Professional women's organisations such as doctors, lawyers etc. that seek to agitate against discrimination and more often create alternate channels for professional activity.
- v) Women's wings or fronts of the political parties.
- vi) Groups involved in research and documentation on women's issues.

The above mentioned groups and organisations take up women's problems and its members are mostly women and they are run by women. Saheli, Manushi, Stri Shakti, Stri Mukti Sangathana, Pennurimai Iyyakam etc. are some known women's organisations. All these groups have taken up various issues like atrocities against women. They issue pamphlets, collect signatures to support demands, organise protest rallies, make demonstrations to mobilise public opinion etc. They also organise street corner meetings, street plays, skits and songs and poster exhibitions. They also bring out feminist magazines to raise awareness among women.

The autonomous movements besides creating general consciousness among women, exposed the conversation of the judiciary as in the Mathura Rape case, by removing the bill boards and stopping shows where women have been shown or used as sex symbols. These autonomous movements have also given rise to special interest groups involved in the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns. More research is being carried out on subjects related to women. In the academic field, women's studies became an upcoming field to be taken more seriously during

the 1970s (Patel 1975). As a result of the pressure created by the women's movements, amendments in the laws regarding rape, dowry, marriage etc. were made.

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## 1.6 SUMMARY

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Unlike the women's movements in America and Britain, in India, the concern for women's freedom was first espoused by enlightened males during the British era who had imbibed liberal ideas. Upto the 1920s the struggle was carried on by men. It was only after Mahatma Gandhi's entry into politics, that the nationalist movement under his leadership was transformed from a middle class movement into a mass movement where women for the first time raised their voices against the disabilities that they suffered. It is the women's movement in India that has been the force behind the long struggle of women's advancement from subordination to gender equality and finally to women's empowerment. Though a lot needs to be achieved and there are various impediments in making this reality available to a large section of women, the women's movement has brought women's issues centre stage and made them more visible.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) Discuss the position of women in Vedic society?
- 2) How did the status of women start declining during the Medieval period?
- 3) Critically analyse the women's movement in post independent era.
- 4) "Social reform movements' contribution towards the emancipation of women" Discuss.