

## Women's Movement in India: An Outline

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**Abstract:** Women in India have always been a matter of concern. Society considers women as second class citizens. We praise and chant them as goddess, we also abuse her for child marriage, dowry, female infanticide, sexual harassment, acid attack, rape, trafficking and so on. In India, the position of women was not always the same. The status of women in India has remained low since centuries. Even a few years ago, women could not enjoy equal status and rights as men. At present the status of women is much better than before. The women's movement has helped a lot in this regard. This movement can be divided into the pre-independence and post-independence periods. While the women's movement has many successes, it also has some limitations. Yet, the importance of the movement cannot be denied.

**Key Words:** Women, India, Society, Movement, Limitations, Importance.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

To be a patriarchal society, women in India live under men. Here the role of men is predominant and the role of women is not given importance. Women are influenced and managed by men. The status of women in Indian society and family has always been low. Although the condition of women has improved in modern India, patriarchy has not been eradicated. For this, women have to make more women's movements. The women's movement for women's liberation began in the nineteenth century. The awakening of women started with the help of male social reformers. But the real development of this movement started in the 80s of the twentieth century. At this time, women's organizations became very active on the basis of feminist programs.

### 2. WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA: THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD :

The condition of women in India was quite satisfactory during the early Vedic period. Since then, the system of keeping women under men has continued. At the root of the inferiority of women in this country was the pre-British socio-economic structure. Buddhism has taken positive steps to alleviate the plight of women. But over the centuries, women have been the victims of many socio-economic injustices. In fact, during British rule, a large positive movement for women's liberation was organized. New economic and legal systems were introduced in British India. In this case, the women of this country came in contact with the concept of Western democratic meditation. During British rule a new political system was introduced and a new economic situation was created. During this time a modern western education system was introduced among the people of this country and new ideas were developed and spread. In such a context, the liberation movement was organized against the centuries-old social degradation and medieval injustice of Indian women.

There is a lot of controversy about the beginning of the women's movement in India. According to some, the women's movement in India started in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to another group of thinkers, the sense of liberation in the life of Indian women started in the seventies of the last century. According to the first, the beginning of the women's movement in India was through the social reform movements that took place in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although these movements were led by men, later their wives, daughters and others tried to improve the plight of women. Some of the upper class women in the society join hands with men in the work of social reform. The name of Pandita Ramabai is especially significant in this regard. Ramabai emphasizes the need for women's education, the status of widows and their freedom, women's consent to marriage etc. The movements for the promotion of women's education and the establishment of women's social and legal rights in the nineteenth century played a significant role in promoting women's emancipation.

Under British rule, Democratic thinking consciousness arose among the masses. During this time various social reform movements began to be organized. Initiatives were taken to put an end to the long-standing injustice, inequality, oppression, etc. against women. Raja Rammohon Roy organized a social reform movement to end the practice of

sati. Lord Bentinck finally put an end to this inhuman practice. In 1864, a law against child marriage was enacted on the initiative of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The widow's marriage was legally recognized on the basis of a law enacted in 1856. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 was enacted in 1929.

In pre-British India, women were mostly deprived of access to education. After the establishment of British rule in India, the long-standing traditional social system became weak. A new relatively liberal social system emerged. As a result, new perspectives were transmitted among the people of India. The former authoritarian mentality gradually weakens. During British rule, women's equality in education and culture was fairly universally recognized. During this time education spread widely among women. Girls' education has become as essential as boys. Various religious reform organizations and missionary societies have played a leading role in women's education in British India. Examples are the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and the British, Danish, American and German missionaries. In the wake of the Partition of Bengal movement in 1905, a considerable number of women participated in the movements that were formed at that time. The participation of women in the Swadeshi and Boycott movement was eye-catching. At that time sister Nivedita, Sarala Devi, Bikaji Raptam and other notable women came forward for women's liberation. The movement for suffrage in India started in 1917 and in the same year a delegation led by Sarojini Naidu went to the Montague-Chelmsford Mission to demand women's health, education, maternity benefits, suffrage, etc.

They have joined the nationalist mass movement of the National Congress as much as possible. At this time, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the Congress called upon the women to join the national effort. During this time Indian women have been actively involved in various nationalist movements. They have participated in discussions and given opinions on various political programs. They have attended meetings, processions, picketing, faced police torture, and been imprisoned. It has been proved that they are responsible citizens of the country. Some of the contemporary Indian women have gained international recognition for their wise leadership roles. Examples in this case are Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Nalini Dutta and others. Many women have become members of the provincial legislature, ministers in the provincial government.

In British India, a number of women's organizations were formed to protect and expand the interests of women. Such women's organizations have emerged and developed at the regional level as well as at the national level. The objectives of women's organizations are to ensure equality between men and women, to ensure that women enjoy all rights as men, and to provide for the overall advancement of women. The Women's Indian Association was formed in 1917 under the leadership of Margaret Quincy. Then in 1926 All India Women's Conference was formed. The first session of the All Indian Women's Conference was held in Pune, where equality of men and women was demanded in various fields. Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrita Kaur, Renuka Roy, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Rameshwari Nehru, Maharani Chimabai Gaekwad, Begum Hamid Ali and others led the conference. From this conference, three women delegates kept in touch with the International Alliance of Women, a notable women's organization in Britain. Since then, the women's movement in India has taken an organized form.

In the 1930s, the political climate in India became heated due to extremist activities on the one hand and civil disobedience movement led by Gandhiji on the other. At that time a number of women's organizations were formed, such as All National Women's Association, Women's State Association, Women's Satyagraha Committee, etc. These organizations fought for political movements as well as for the establishment of legal and social rights. At that time women's movement was also formed among the peasants and working class. The role of women in the Tebhaga movement of undivided Bengal was very strong. It should be remembered that the women's movements that took place in India during the pre-independence era were largely political in nature. Many expressed doubts about the importance of these movements from a feminist point of view. The nationalist movement and other armed struggles of the time did not always raise women's issues. In fact, in the pre-independence period, not much attention was paid to women's issues either by political parties or by women's organizations.

### **3. WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA: THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

After independence, emphasis was placed on the recognition of women's legal and constitutional rights, freedoms and equality. A committee headed by Law Minister Ambedkar of Independent India introduced a bill. The bill proposes to increase the age of marriage, monogamy, women's right to divorce, inheritance and maintenance rights, women's property rights, etc. But the bill was postponed. Instead, four separate laws were enacted on some of the issues covered in the bill. These laws are: The Hindu Marriage Act, The Hindu Succession Act, The Hindu Minority And Guardianship Act, The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act.

The enthusiasm that was seen among Indian women in various fields in the pre-independence era, diminished somewhat in the two decades after independence. During this time women began to concentrate on household chores and their political participation was limited to some social work. The women who got seats in the cabinet are satisfied

with the health, social welfare, information and broadcasting departments. Organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) broke up due to disunity, factionalism and other reasons. In a word, soon after independence, Indian women left the difficult place of politics and returned to the 'service' ideology as before.

Mrs. Vandana Chatterjee in her essay 'Women and Politics in India' blames a kind of belief as the cause of women's apathy in Indian politics for two decades after independence. At that time Indian women and their organizations had immense confidence in the new Indian state system. They thought that this new state would change the existing society based on gender inequality and establish women in full dignity. Needless to say, this belief was not given dignity. Naturally, Indian women became active again in the 1970s and increased their participation in politics. The main objective of the women's movement of this time was to raise awareness of women against the prevailing gender inequality and to minimize the incidence of human rights violations. Some elements have worked behind the Women's Awakening of 1970, such as: (i) the call for democratic movement of Jayaprakash Narayan at this time, (ii) the railway strike of 1974, (iii) interference in women's emancipation in emergency, (iv) the Committee on the Status of Indian Women Committee on the Status of Women in India report reveals disturbing information about the unequal and neglected status of women, (v) 'Mathura rape case' etc. These incidents make the middle class and working class women of India very active. Political parties organize various women's conferences. In Maharashtra, small women's camps' were set up as part of a movement against husbands' excessive drinking and wife abuse.

In the early seventies of the twentieth century, a new political environment and trend was observed in India. During this time some new types of political movements were seen to be organized. Examples in this case are Jayaprakash Narayan's movement, Naxal movement, Chipko movement, etc. None of these movements can be directly identified as women's movement. That's right. But due to the participation of a large number of women, the respective movements gained a distinct dimension and confidence was created among the women and an independent reaction was created. As a result, women were empowered to participate in movements against patriarchal authority and violence against women.

In 1973-75, communist and socialist women organized a protest movement against the price hike in the urban areas of Maharashtra. Thousands of housewives joined the public procession. Those who could not leave the house to join the procession, they supported by playing thala. This movement soon spread to Gujarat. In Gujarat, this movement became part of the NavNirman movement, influenced by Jayaprakash Narayan's 'Total - Revolution'. In fact, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) formed in 1972 as a Gandhian organization. SEWA focused upon the exploitation and low wages paid to women in the informal sector. These women faced harassment by civic authorities and their work was not recognized as socially useful. This women's organization organizes women employed in unorganized fields and builds unions. The organization provides training and loans to unorganized women. Over time, this movement of SEWA spread to cities like Delhi, Lucknow, Bhopal, Indore etc. This movement of women was quite successful.

In 1972, an anti-alcohol movement was started by tribal women in the Shahada tribal area of Dhulia district in Maharashtra. The movement was initially led by Gandhian Sarvodaya activists and later by participants in the Maoist movement. The women of the Vil-Tribe were at the forefront of this movement. Tribal women identify alcoholism as the main cause of wife-beating and raid liquor dens. Immediately, the perpetrators were publicly punished for beating their wives. Such movements are organized by women in different places. It is mainly the poor women in the rural areas who are involved in this protest movement.

The Chipko movement in Uttarakhand in 1973 is another great example of a women's movement. In the area, timber traders indiscriminately cut down trees and started deforestation. Women come forward in an organized manner for the conservation of forests. They organized a protest movement to protect the trees. The Chipko movement gained prominence as the first major movement to protect the environment. For this movement, the idea was established that women have a special tendency and a favorable role in the care of nature. For rural women, saving the environment is crucial to their economic survival. As primary food, fuel, and water gatherers, women have strong interests in reversing deforestation, desertification, and water pollution.

The independent role of women in the Indian women's movement began in the 1980s. At this time, the political activities and organizational activities of Indian women increased tremendously. Numerous women's organizations have sprung up in different parts of the country, whose mission is to continue the movement against violence against women, demanding equality in employment, wages and social status. Women's organizations, mainstream political parties and grassroots movements in contemporary India focused on issues of interest to women. The movement was formed against domestic violence, dowry deaths, rape, wife-beating and alcoholism. At this time three trends of the feminist movement in India can be noticed: liberal, leftist and radical. Liberals emphasize legal reform. Liberal feminists place special emphasis on making all necessary legal reforms for the betterment of the female nation in order to free women from the second-class position in society. Leftist feminists emphasize radical change in the structure of society.

to end gender inequality. And radical feminists focus on changing the existing power relations between men and women. At this time, a number of events related to the feminist movement in the world had a profound effect on the feminist movements in India, such as the international women's movement and the United Nations (UNO) organized women's conferences in Mexico, Nairobi, Beijing, Copenhagen, etc. These conferences strongly illuminated the Indian women's movement.

#### **4. LIMITATIONS:**

- Before independence, there was not much activism among Indian women on the issue of women alone. Thousands of women have come out of their homes and fought hard for the freedom of the motherland. But they did not take any effective initiative to change the patriarchal society.
- In the immediate aftermath of independence, women's movements in India have gradually come to a standstill. Indian women at that time relied heavily on political leaders (where the number of women was negligible) to solve women's issues.
- Although feminist movements have been propagated in India since the 80s of the twentieth century, due to ideological and methodological disputes, women's movements in India have not become very influential.
- One of the major weaknesses of the Indian women's movement is that it has been largely confined to the educated and upper class women of the city. The Sati incident in Deorala, Rajasthan in 1987 pointed to the weakness of the Indian women's movement. So, it is said that the appeal of the feminist movement in India has not reached every woman in India.
- Caste, communalism, evil practices, lack of scientific thinking, etc. have also weakened the feminist movement in India. When the then government of India gave importance to Sharia law in the narrow political interest beyond the verdict of the historic Shahbano case of 1985, it was thought that Indian women would at least oppose this law with all their might. But it turned out that non-Muslim women avoided this as a matter for Muslim women. And Muslim women succumbed to the pressure of fundamentalists and remained inactive.
- Most of the feminist organizations in India have either acted as branches of one political party or have worked under the auspices of one or the other party. As a result, those Indian feminist organizations have really failed to play an independent role in the women's movement.

#### **5. CONCLUSION:**

Women need to be fully aware of their rights. Women need to abandon the old values of Indian society and embrace modern values. We have to try to solve the problems related to the oppression of women in Indian society. There is no doubt that Indian women have made unprecedented progress in the last one hundred years under the influence of the women's movement. Now the dignity of women is much better than before. But, as a percentage, Indian women still lag far behind men in the workplace, education, health and safety. India has enacted many laws and progressive plans to improve the status of women. But there is still no end to violence against women. Therefore, women should continue their women's movement for the development of women.

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