

# Women's Movement and Social Change in India

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## Abstract

The women's movement in India started in 19<sup>th</sup> century with social reform movement. It was a collective effort to change the status and condition of Indian women. The Patriarchal Indian System made them second class citizen and often called them second gender putting them in inferior position. The present paper focuses on the need of the women's movement, its phases and its impact on the society as well as adoption of women oriented laws to protect them. It has been found that the women's movements has played a positive role among women, society and Government towards women's issues like gender inequality, crime against women, their social, economic, political and legal rights. The women's movement has brought social change in Indian society by drawing everybody's attention towards women's issues and changing the present status of Indian women.

**Keywords:** Women's Movement, Gender Inequality, Women's Organizations, Indian Government, Social Change.

## Introduction

The women's movement began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movement which instigated a set of thinking about the society, its social institutions, social practices and social reform legislations. It is mass attempt towards freedom from patriarchy and the oppression it perpetuates. The women's movement was an initiative by women's groups, women's organizations, ideologies, awareness raising efforts supported by feminist. There are three trends in feminist ideology – Liberal, Leftist and Radical. Liberal Feminists emphasized on the legal reforms for the betterment of women. The Leftist Feminists believed in the structural changes in the society to remove gender inequality while The Radical Feminists aims at changing the existing power relations between men and women.

## Objectives of the Study

The present paper aims to study:-

1. The need of women's movement in India
2. The roles of women's organizations, groups and Indian Government in bringing the changes in women's condition
3. The real changes occurred- The present scenario

## Theoretical Framework

In the context of the present study, the broad framework needs to relate gender with social change (transformation). The theoretical framework has to be derived from a concept of social system organized around the structural principle of gender itself. The socialization process which encourages stereotyping

of sex- roles, determines the structure and the relationship of genders which further defines the status and role of both the genders within the family, workplace and larger society.

The institutionalization of inequality between the sexes and their organization into a social system of gender relationships, encircles the major condition where the DEO ( discrimination, exploitation and oppression) of one sex by the other is facilitated. By virtue of this, the exploitation of the weaker sex is expedited (less importance of woman's work as housewives, lesser pay in comparison to men for similar work, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, etc.). To sustain and maintain this institutionalized asymmetry, there exist the normatively sanctioned institutions of oppression in the form of traditional customs and practices. Therefore, social change needs be interpreted in terms of qualitative and quantitative changes happening within the structure of gender relationships. While formal – legal interventions have been made to 'correct' this asymmetry, the actual transformation of these relationships is a long drawn continuing process (Sahoo and Sahoo: 2022).

The role of women's movement cannot be ignored in the process of correcting the asymmetry to bring equality among gender relations.

### **Research Methodology of the Study**

The present study is descriptive in nature and is based on secondary data gathered from a variety of sources such as Encyclopedia, books, journals, scholarly articles, Government documents, and printed and online reference materials.

### **The Women's Movement in India: Its Phases and Aims**

The women's movement in India has gone through three phases

1. The First Phase (1850-1915)
2. The Second Phase (1915-1947)
3. The Third Phase (1947- present)

#### **1. The First Phase (1850-1915)**

With the contact of Indian educated elites to the West and the influence of its idea of liberty, equality and fraternity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian society not only saw the rise of social reform movement but also affected the areas of Indian society and culture - social evils, women's question, market and polity, etc.

During this period of time, the European ideology based on rationality and progress led the Indian Social Reformers to create a new Indian society with old traditions. There was a global realization that no society can progress if its women are having secondary and unequal position in the society. The India Reformers' overall efforts were directed towards upliftment of women's status through legislation, political action and spread of education (Pande: 2015).

This is understandable that social reform movement did not radically changed the Indian Patriarchal structure and questioned the gender equation since only female members of reformers families were involved in the process and that was oriented mainly by the men. So the challenge was to train and educate the 'New Indian Women' who can be made self- reliant, independent and emancipated but to be good housewives. The beginning of Women's education now was to visualized to create suitable wives for the men of the newly emerging westernized elites (Mazumdar: 1972). Further, their entry into freedom struggle on the call of Mahatma Gandhi was just an extension of their domestic responsibilities.

## **2. The Second Phase (1915-1947) :**

The Social Reform Movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swamy Dayanand Saraswati and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar gave way to a secular space for women in culturally bound social milieu. After World War I, three women's organizations namely Women's India Association (WIA), National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and All India Women's conference (AIWC) were created by women between 1917 to 1927. During this phase the struggle against colonial rule was intensified with the call by Mahatma Gandhi who gave a broad meaning to the concept of Swaraj. A large number of women took active part in Freedom Movement. Along with women leaders like Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamal Devi Chattopadhyay, Durga Bai Deshmukh, the India women participated in Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement and Dandi March. The battle against patriarchy at home was still continuing.

The Laws against Sati, purdah system, widow remarriage came into existence during this phase.

## **3. The Third Phase (1947-Present):**

Soon after Independence, only a few women mainly from elite families remain socially and politically active because major concern before the country was the issue of economic growth. Most of the women were confined to the four walls of their homes. The women's organizations like AIWC had broken up due to factionalism and lack of unity. At this point of time, the significance of women's equality, freedom, their legal and constitutional rights was realized. A Committee headed by Law Minister B R Ambedkar introduced a Bill which proposed the following for women- raise the age of marriage, monogamy, their right to divorce, property inheritance and maintenance rights. The Bill was later aborted and four laws were enacted: The Hindu Marriage Act (1954); The Hindu Succession Act (1956); The Hindu Minority Act and Guardianship Act (1956); and The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961); The Maternity benefit Act (1961); The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance.

The women's movement continued due to the efforts of the leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali and other for the empowerment of women and their rights denied due to patriarchal structure of the family where gender based socialization perpetuate the gender discrimination.

The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974-75) titled as "Towards Equality" paved way for the new foundation of women's movement in Independent India, highlighting the discriminatory sociocultural practices, political and economic processes. The new Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), Kali for women, National Commission of Women, etc. sprang into action for women's equality, rights and empowerment of women in India. The movement focused on the large number of issues such as dowry, women's work, crime against women, price rise, land rights and their political participation.

### **Changes occurred due to the women's movement:**

#### **A) By the Government-**

Besides providing Constitutional Guarantee after Independence, the Government of India has played a major role in bringing the women on equal footing to men by adopting many laws in favour of women to protect them. In recent years schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Women Helpline numbers, scholarships for girls, reservation in politics, opened gates for women's entry in all type of professions have given new wings to Indian women to fly.

**B) Among the women-**

The Indian women are now An Aware section of the society. They are aware of their rights, laws and policies made for them. They are being benefitted by them. They are more confident and self – reliant and financially independent.

**C) In the society-**

Indian society is trying to adopt the changing gender relations within the family, workplace and wider society. Women's equality and rights are being given to them. Women are breaking the shackles of Indian patriarchal society to ask for egalitarian society.

**Some Major Women's Movement which brought social changes in India:****• Anti - Alcohol Movement-**

The tribal women in Shahada tribal area of Dhulia district in Maharashtra started an anti -alcohol movement in 1972. These women observed that alcoholism is the real cause of wife beating and they raided liquor shops too to close them. Such movements have been being organized in many parts of India time to time since then. Poor women in rural areas are actively involved in this protest movement.

**• Chipko Movement-**

Chipko Movement in Uttaranchal in the year 1973 is a great example of women's movement in the history of movements in India to save the environment. When the timber traders started cutting the trees and started deforestation for their own financial benefits, the local women came forward in organized manner to "Cling the Trees" (chipko) to save the trees from being cutting down. The movement was led by Sundar Lal Bahuguna. Rural women saved the forest since environment protection was crucial for their survival

**• Save the Narmadan Movement-**

The Narmada Bachao Andolan was initiated by the women of Gujarat in 1980 to draw attention of the authorities to the poor plight of river Narmada and its surrounding areas. The movement emphasized on the better infrastructure and services around the river and implementation of Sardar Sarovar Project to properly use the Narmada water for irrigation and better water management system.

**• Nirbhaya Movement-**

Nirbhaya case jolted the country in December 2012 when a young girl was gang raped and brutally torture in a moving bus in Delhi. Many cities witnessed the silent as well public protests by the women against the incident. The fast track courts were made to speed up the justice to for rape victims. The number of reporting of case has increased after the movement.

**• Metoo Movement-**

With a tweet in October 2017 by an actress about being victim of sexual harassment, the Metoo Movement spread awareness about sexual harassment in the society mainly at the workplace. The more and more women came out of their silent shell to share their individual stories, to share their harassment ordeal and to expose the harasser.

**Conclusion**

Erupted along with the Social Reform Movement during British Rule, the women's movement in India initially aimed at women's equality and their legal rights. Its aims kept on changing time to time with the changing social situations and requirements of the society. There can be no two opinions that women in contemporary India are fully protected by Law. Their overall status has been upgraded in the family,

workplace and society with their increasing level of education and their socio-economic and political powers and facilities available to them through various Governmental schemes and Constitutional Guarantee. The battle does not end here. With the increasing crime against women due to patriarchal mindset, the women's movement needs to be continued to bring positive changes in the society for the women's issues. Women themselves need to help the women in need of help.

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