

## **Women Rights and Movements in India**

The beginning of the women's movement in India can be traced back to the nineteenth-century social change development. Unlike the Western feminist movement, India's feminist movement, according to Maitrayee Chaudhuri, was started by males and later joined by women. Feminism as a women-led movement began independently in Maharashtra a few years later, with pioneering advocates for women's rights and education such as Savitribai Phule, who founded India's first girls' school.

During the nineteenth century, a majority of women's difficulties were brought to light, and changes were implemented. Men were in charge of a lot of the early changes for Indian women. By the late nineteenth century, however, their spouses, sisters, daughters, proteges, and other persons directly touched by campaigns such as those for women's education had joined them in their efforts. Women acquired increased autonomy in the late twentieth century as a result of the emergence of autonomous women's own organisations. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, a new narrative about "women's activism" had emerged.

The period following India's independence is known as the post-pioneer period. Following independence, India had to deal with a slew of issues. Long stretches of provincial mastery had annihilated our indigenous arts and depleted our natural resources. Industrialization, evolving advancements, ignorance, and a lack of portability all contributed to women's failure to adapt to the new demand. During this time, social reformists attempted to channel Indian culture by presenting sacred and legal arrangements, shielding the general public and ladies from separation, and providing fairness to all residents regardless of position, doctrine, religion, gender, or race.

### **History**

The Indian women's movement began in 1975, working toward intersectionality and catapulting gender violence into national discourse. While a barebones women's movement was being carried out in India since the 1920s, it only served as a complement to the political revolution taking India by storm.

In 1920, even Mahatma Gandhi, who touted himself as a champion of women's rights, urged "women to stop fighting for voting rights and concentrate their efforts instead on 'helping their men against the common foe,'".

In the next decade, the movement witnessed the proliferation of thousands of NGOs, political party-affiliated women's organisations and other grassroots efforts as a result of greater media attention toward gender violence. This, in turn, spurred more mobilization and legal reform.

For example, in 1983, Section 498A was adopted into the Indian Penal Code, which made "cruelty" toward wives a criminal offence that could be punished with up to five years in jail. The law, which soon fell flat when cases under its purview were put under the jurisdiction of family courts to resolve marital disputes instead of punishing perpetrators, was still the first major legal victory since women started mobilizing at a large scale for change.

The beginning of women's movements can be observed first from a social reform movement in the 19th century. During the colonial period women's movements in India were born out of the same historical circumstances and social milieu as earlier 19th 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.

#### POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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.

#### Social Reform Movements

The women's movements began as a social reform movement in the 19th 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.

#### Nationalist Movements

As a result of the social reform movement of the 19th 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 19th 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.

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.

#### Conclusion

In India, feminism refers to a group of movements focused on defining, creating, and protecting equal political, economic, and social rights and opportunities for women. Within Indian society, it is the pursuit of women's rights. Feminists in India, like feminists throughout the world, want equal pay for equal labour, equal health and education access, and equal political rights.

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