

MAPPING THE INDIAN WOMEN MOVEMENT FROM COLONIAL TO POST COLONIAL PERIOD: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The women's movement in India has been traced back from the colonial days where the western educated Indian men led reforms for women who were rigidly bounded by the cultural and religious practices based on traditional norms that was oppressive and discriminatory towards women in response to the charges of backwardness of the country based on the position and status of women by the British. Indian women soon began to participate along with their men responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi with the symbolic expression of women as being the mother of the nation. With the independence from the foreign domination the quietude in the women's movement was observed however very soon with the published report on the critical findings of the 'Towards Equality Report' in 1974, it became a watershed moment for the Indian women post independence to assert their identity through the revival of autonomous women's movement across the socio-economic and political divides against the varied forms of exploitation towards women and the search for redressal through prompt responses and policy formulations for the ensuring equality and justice both in the theory and practice led to the efforts for the women's development.

KEYWORDS: Women Empowerment, Colonial Period, Patriarchy, Equality

COLONIAL PERIOD AND THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In the context of colonial India, the position of women was based on the religious and cultural principles based on tradition that has been harmful to women in the form of sati, child marriage, female infanticide, dowry, etc. All these rampant discriminatory practices contributed towards the poor treatment of women and hence degraded the position of women in Indian society. This led to the need for reforms in the Indian society and usher in transformative changes to alleviate the condition and the position of women in society. Social reformers, more specifically the prominent male reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen and Swami Dayanand Saraswati paved the way by vocalising the issues of women that rigidly banded and oppressed them all in the name of practising religion and culture and tried to close the gap that exist between the two genders. The reformers influenced by the western liberal ideals and through their engagements with the colonial rule pressed for the promotion of the education of girl child, widow remarriages and the opposition of polygamy. In the initial phase, the champions for the women's cause were not women themselves but instead it was the Indian western-educated men who sought to make necessary changes that would upgrade the position of their counterparts. 'Religious and social organisations like the

Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Ram Khrishna Mission fought for the cause of women. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of ideas and changes. However, they shared a common concern for rooting out social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. (Bhat.,&Wani, 2022) The position of women in India was viewed by Indian and British reformers as one of the indices by which to measure the extent of modernisation or traditionalism of a nation. and 'the oppressed situation of Hindu women was regarded by the British as an example of the backwardness of all the Indians. (Agnew,1979) This critical views upheld by the Britishers against the Indian society had it's impact and was responsible for the building of a tolerated social spaces for men and women to co-exist together. As opposed to the west where women were leading independently for their own cause, in colonial India, it was the western-educated Indian men who took the lead in improving the status of Indian women.

In colonial India, with men paving the way several consciousnesses on the question of women began to emerge with a desire to make amends. Women's movements and their organisations began to crop up with nationalistic feelings to participate alongside their men in the national struggle, hoping that once India is liberated from the shackles of the British hold, they will live equally in the new India. Among the many that

transpired in colonial India, the most that stand out of women's movement are the three organisations in the form of Women India Association(WIA), the National Council of Women in India(NCWI) and the All India Women Congress(AIWC).

The Women India Association (WIA): With the intention to further the interests of Indian women, the Women India Association, operating on a national scale, was formed in 1917. The establishment of Women's India Association was the first in attempting to organise women on an all India basis(Agnew,1979) and was formed by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinaraj Adasa. This new rise of Indian women was a result of the wave that has been created by the women who were resisting against the system that limited the role and participation of women in social and public life. Influenced from the west more specifically from the Great Britain, the Indian women rose 'for securing the voting rights for women' (Somashekhar,2014) While the Women's India Association was interested in promoting the cause of women, as an organisation formed at a time when the entire India was struggling against foreign domination, it was also very nationalistic in its aspirations. The Women India Association's objectives were not just limited to women alone, but were inclusive and it included the need for political representation of women, creating a thriving environment for men and women in the public spaces and to secure the education for the boy and girl child and prevent early child marriages.

As part of its mission, the first franchise delegation of Indian women, which met the Montague-Chelmsford Committee on constitutional reform in 1917 was organised by the Women's India Association and included several women's organisations. The women's delegation demanded that they be included under the expanded Franchise in the new Constitution, which, instead of discriminating on account of sex should ensure equal opportunities to women' (Maitrayee,2005). The suffragette movement in India was a fight against orthodoxy, ignorance and reaction and not against the other sex. The Indian women desired to vote not from a sense of self-aggrandisement but from a desire to fulfill their duties and responsibilities in public life.(Agnew,1979)

The National Council of Women in India: The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was formed in 1926 as part of the International Council of Women's national branch in India. While the activities of the National Council of Women in India rested on the matters of social concerns, it also expanded its horizons to include crucial matters such as 'The Hindu Women's Right to Property, Bill to validate marriages between different castes of Hindus, Bill to amend the Child Marriages Restraint Act, Birth Control, etc.' (Chaudhari,2015)

All India Women's Conference (AIWC): The umbrella organization of the pre-independence period is the All India Women Conference, the most influential organization, which originally met to discuss on women's education.(Subramaniam,2004) This women organisation emerged with the necessity to mobilize the women around the idea of imparting education as it felt that 'education itself was initially perceived as a kind of panacea for solving problems of women, family and society.'(Chaudhari,2015) All India Women Conference tried to steer clear of politics at its initial beginning but realised the need for women to engage with politics as 'social changes cannot be brought about without political change.'(Chaudhari,2005) And hence amendment was proposed among the members to partake in the affairs of politics for the greater cause and larger achievement of the women's body, which was readily accepted by its members. In 1931 when the Franchise Committee of the Round Table Conference met to discuss franchise, the All India Women's Conference opposed separate and communal electorates opposed the reservation of women, and the privilege of women with property or the status of wifehood as a prerequisite for voting and instead urged for equal electoral rights for both men and women.

The All India Women's Conference (AIWC), the Women India Association (WIA) and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) have from the very beginning spoken with one accord and agreed not only in principle but also in detail regarding demands put forward. (Chaudhari, 2005) Despite their united stand, the white paper on the Indian Constitution proposed to divide women into communal constituencies. The three women's organisations met in Bombay and sent a telegram to the Prime Minister, deplored the separate electorate. (Lateef, 1977) Before independence, the women's organisation alongside men, participated in large numbers in the national movement in the struggle for independence.. The Indian women with much political enthusiasm responding to the call of Mahatma Gandhi, participated in large numbers in the 'Civil Disobedience Movement led by Gandhi towards Salt Satyagraha.' (Khullar,2005) The mass participation of women in the nationalist movement was significantly influenced by Gandhi's commitment to improving the status and role of women in Indian politics. (Agnew,1979) With Mahatma Gandhi invoking the spirit of nationalism in the minds of all the Indian women to come and join forces using symbolic expressions of women as being the mother of the nation and its people who need to be rescued from the hands of the oppressive dominant forces, which here refers to the British government. The women's movement hoped that once India gained its freedom and independence, women who constitute half the population, would also remain free and equal therefore, their resistance was not directed at men within the society, but rather it was the external forces whose

intervention they disliked and disapproved of. Their enemy was therefore not the institution of patriarchy but the foreign institution that controlled India.

POST COLONIAL INDIA AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Post independent India, the women's movement underwent a period of silence for a while but starting from the 1970s onwards, several autonomous women organisations came into being. 'It is from this time that the history of the movement is said to come to a new phase, a resurgence of activity after what is seen as a period of quietude.' (Butalia,2005) The modern women's movement has its genesis in the freedom struggle. The resurgence of the movement in the 1970s was both a response and a reaction to the deepening crisis within society and the state. The declaration of national emergency in 1975 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the struggle for democratic rights and civil liberties altered the political climate. (Subramaniam,2004) Women felt that post independence, she would live in a place where there is equality and justice to all but the reality was different for women and this time around she had to struggle against gender discrimination, violence and oppression and against all such backdrop, several autonomous women's organization came up for the wellbeing and rights of all Indian women economically, socially and politically. Therefore, 'the contemporary women's movement sought a redefinition of the tradition of gender, in revealing and challenging the violence and oppression that women have experienced in their lives.' (Ratna,2003)

With the recommendation from the United Nations, the Committee on the Status of Women in India was set up to review the issues of women and determine the redressal mechanisms in relation to the position of women specially in the field of education and employment. This report came to be popularly known as the 'Towards Equality Report' with its published findings in 1974. The comprehensive report portrayed a critical analysis in terms of gross gender inequality and discrimination in varied themes like the socio-economic and political, and thus the disadvantaged position that women face in all aspects necessitated the need for reforms beginning from the policy advocates to the revival of women's movements. Since then the civil liberties have become more popularised and it provided leverage for the women's movement to gain momentum. 'The emphasis on autonomy in the 1970s and 1980s imparted much-needed legitimacy to women's groups that came to be seen as independent political formations in their own right, as distinct from mainstream political parties and their women's wings.' (Roy,2015)

Amongst the many women's organisations that emerged, some of the prominent movements on the themes of economic

liberation for women are the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) established in the year 1972, led by Ela Bhatt, for the viable economic working conditions of women. The role of the Self Employed Women's Association was in 'advocating for better working condition and wages for self employed women and it utilized the collective strength of it's members as leverage against exploitative people and policies' (Danell,2003) The movement was broad based with several membership and organizations working under the flagship of Self Employed Women Association for the economic empowerment of women ensuring a fair and dignified treatment from the exploitative nature of the commercial relationships. Another movement is the Anti-Price Rise Movement (APRM) emerged in Maharashtra with the mission to protest against the rising cost of necessities like oil, grains, wheat and kerosene and the challenge of the poorer working class to afford the bare minimum. It demanded that the government lower the cost and improve the efficient distribution of essential public goods. 'The momentum of the Anti Price Rise Movement was maintained by interspersing marches with the representations, debates in the legislature and direct pressurising actions like the gherao. Undoubtedly, the Anti Price Rise Campaign mobilised the largest number of women in India. The Anti Price Rise Movement was unique in bringing middle and working class women together to support each other' (Nandita,1990) and this movement was dubbed as, 'the new women's movement.' (Nandita,1996) When the price rises and the economy fluctuates, cutting across the caste and party divides, it is the women at the bottom of the economy who often gets the brunt of it considering her primary role at home as caregiver and nurturer that very often her needs falls short while prioritizing her family and she becomes the worst sufferer due to her lack of resource.

On the aspects of violence against women was the Progressive Organisation of Women (POW). The practice of dowry and its aftermath has been one of the contributing factors towards the female infanticide or the unwanted girl child in India, more specifically by the Hindus, whose religion and culture perpetuate it. 'Protest against dowry was first organised by the Progressive Organisation for Women in 1975, the violence inflicted against women for dowries, especially against murder and abetment to suicide.' (Kumar,1999) Continuing with the social issues, particularly in response to violence against women, the Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), an organisation that emerged as a reaction to the Mathura Rape case, where a teenager was raped by a local policeman but the case was acquitted. The total lack of sincerity and seriousness on the issue of women and crime anguished women across the country. The Forum Against Oppression of Women decided to reopen the case and seek for legal charges. The Forum, which originally began as an anti-rape campaign in 1979, raised

awareness regarding dowry-related violence in later years. It specifically demanded new laws and the effective implementation of existing laws to protect women's rights. (Subramaniam, Khrishana & Bunka, 2015) The Mathura rape case was a watershed moment for women in India to rise above and get the government serious about the safety and security of its women.

On the aspect of environment was the prominent women's resistance movement in the history of India, the Chipko Movement. 'Beginning in the mid 1970s, Chipko (Literally, cling to) was a movement to prevent forest destruction by timber contractors and was carried forward by women, who were traditionally responsible for fuel, food, and water in the family' (Nivedita, 1999) 'The Chipko based its campaign for women's mobilization on the latter's supposed special responsibilities for nurture related activities and generalized that women had a special concern for the preservation of life and ecological systems and hence this movement achieved high levels of women participation.' (Sen, 2003) 'The women of Chipko have added to the world's consciousness of environmental issues. Most afforestation programmes have been launched as a result of the movement. The purpose of the Chipko movement was not only to save the forest but to establish a caring and mutually supportive relationship between human beings and nature.' (Bahaguna, 1990)

The contemporary women's movement had been emerging, vocal on the questions of violence against women at home and in workplaces on account of physical and sexual violence victimizing the vulnerable and the marginalized. Indian women are also taking a stand against perpetrators for justice to prevail. Despite the many constitutional provisions ensuring safety and protection towards women there is a widening gap that exists between papers and real life experiences and the women's movement must recalibrate their strategy to keep in tandem with the changing circumstances to stay relevant and push for closing the existing gaps for an approachable and bias free environment.

CONCLUSION

The Indian women's movement has evolved over the years from proactive participation alongside men against the foreign dominion in the colonial days to the contouring of the limited space post independence to advocate their cause due to the fact that the issues of women are very often overlooked despite the enormous socio, political and economic underrepresentation coupled with the violence towards women that deters the agency of the women in India. It is only through the vocalizing of the issues with concerted mobilisation of women across the region, state and country utilizing the available tactics even without uniformity of standards applied across the country focused on the varied themes that women's movement continue to thrive

and push forward the agenda for the realization of a just and peaceful order for all.

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