



Subaltern Movements in India

Issues, Perspectives and Challenges



Edited by
Dr. Pradeep Waghmare

Published by



AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE

Publisher, Distributor, Exporter having an Online Bookstore

Head Office : L-9A, First Floor, Street No. 42,
Sadatpur Extension, Delhi-110094 (INDIA)
Phone No.: 9968628081, 9555149955 & 9013387535
E-mail : akhandpublishinghouse@gmail.com,
akhandpublishing@yahoo.com
Website : www.akhandbooks.com

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© Editor

1st Edition 2021

ISBN 978-93-90870-37-0

*Dedicated
To
Mahatma Jotirao Phule
and
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*

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Printed in India

Published by Jhapsu Yadav for Akhand Publishing House. Cover
Designed and Laser Typesetting at VM Graphic and Printed at Aarna
Enterprises, Delhi.

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Women's Movement in India : Post Independence Period

Dr. Deepak B. Bansod

Throughout the pre-independence period, the main issues of the women's movement were to provide social egalitarianism to women by freeing them from sinful social customs and traditions. But, after independence, matters transformed and all the ladies' movements stay for the financial uplift of women through the abolition of poverty, education, formation of awareness, and generating jobs for women. Thereafter, the women questions took a new turn by setting importance upon the empowerment of women through contribution in decision making organisations.

The Paper focuses on the Women's Movement in India: Post Independence period. The main issues of the women's movement during the pre-Independence period were to provide social equality to women by emancipating them from evil social customs and traditions. But, after independence, the issues changed and all the women's movements spoke for the economic uplift of women through eradication of poverty, education, creation of awareness, and creating jobs for women. Thereafter, the women issues took a new turn by emphasizing the empowerment of women through participation in decision making bodies. The movement started with the major issues of marriage, adoption, abolition of Sati and property

rights of women. To their credit, it may be said that the national leaders including women leaders highlighted the socio-economic phenomena which put the bottlenecks on the progress of Indian women. The next phase saw the demand for equality of sexes, etc.

The objective of the paper is to study the Women's movement in general, to explore the role played by reformers in the women's movement, to create awareness about challenges faced by women in society, to show the social, economic and political emancipation and empowerment of women and to highlight their sufferings and sacrifices of women towards social progress.

For writing this paper, the data has mainly concentrated on the textual approach. Books written by eminent scholars and articles, papers written in various National and International Journals have been considered to do the framework of this paper. Mostly secondary data has been used to write this paper.

Women's Movement

The women crusaded for social guidelines in the fields of education, health, economy and social equality for women. The movement started with the most important issues of matrimony, adoption, abolition of Sati and property rights of women. In the subsequent phase, the women's movement in India necessitated the egalitarianism of genders. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, taking stock of the 50th independence celebrations, comments that in "all these discourses, disciplines and sites of action, gender began to figure as an 'issue' as well as a category of analysis" (Rajan 1999: 3).

In post-independence, it was understood that women's status would theatrically improve. However, when this was not attained there was an expansion of various activities which raised several matters around miscellaneous issues such as land rights, wages, security of employment, equality, etc. Some of the matters on which women got together were work, population guidelines, violence on women, including rape and alcohol. Women mobilized to protest violence, legal discrimination, and rising prices and agitated for better living conditions through higher wages, the prohibition of liquor, and the provision of drinking water (Rajan 1999: 3).

This paper addresses the serious problems faced by them. It seeks, through historical examination, to understand the cleavages in the women's movement by examining the pre and post Independence movements for their empowerment. While women often describe and recognize themselves through variation and conflict rather than through resemblance, this paper uses the word *women's movement*. This approach is justified because analytical categories often must indulge in abstraction from the perceptions and definitions of social actors, so the term can be used to indicate a variety of campaigns around issues important to women (Kumar 1995: 56).

Background

When James Mill wrote in his *History of India* in 1817 that the condition of women in society is an index of that society's place in civilization, he wrote women into the project of modernity and modern history-writing in India. In one fell swoop, "women," "modernity," and "nation" became essential and inseparable elements in a connected discourse of civilization (Chakrabarty 1994: 112).

For colonial rulers, the cruel practices against Indian women became an affirmation of the colonial ruler's modernity and the ethical ground on which their "humanizing" work could be started. As outsiders they could claim the role of protector of Indian women, interceding on their behalf against brutal patriarchal practices (Sinha 1995: 74). When colonial education began the new urban select few, came mostly from the upper castes, followed the ideology of individualism and humanism. They professed evil customary practices against women as a civilization lapse and as recognizable social evils (Chatterjee 1992: 149). In this background emerged the social reform movement. It was an attempt on behalf of the new privileged class to rectify the most awful type of system practised. For reformers, women's emancipation was a prerequisite to national regeneration and an index of national achievement in the connected discourse of civilization, progress, modernity, and nationalism (Sen 1993: 43).

Many reformers set up organizations like the Brahma Samaj in eastern India, the Prarthana Samaj in western India, the Arya Samaj in northern India, and the Theosophical Society in southern India between the 1820s and 1850s. They preferred legislative interventions by the government and a larger program of female liberation. Privileged urban men led these actions and protested against many of the ritual and social restrictions on upper-caste women. They extended many benefits to their women groups. These women were drawn into the public spheres of formal education and eventually into employment, political participation, and leadership (Joshi 1975; Borthwick 1984; Engels 1996).

Kadambini Basu and Chandramukhi Basu in 1883 received graduation degree in B.A. from the University of Calcutta. They became the first female graduates under British colonial rule. Kadambini went on to train in medicine and practised as a doctor in Calcutta in the 1880s (Kartekar 1991: 91). Women's education started growing in cities like Bombay and Madras. Noteworthy women like Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai, Anandibai Joshi, etc., of them some belonged to advantage group and some not, challenged age-old restrictions, at least in their own lives, and some went on to participate in the emerging nationalist movement (Forbes 1994; Chakravarti 1998: 82).

During the early twentieth century, Indian feminists focused on attaining equality through two chief channels i.e., by forming associations and joining politics actively. Saraladevi Chaudhurani was full of life contributor to both the social reform and independence movements. She argued that women's issues could not be addressed sufficiently as an attachment of the National Social Conference (set up by the Indian National Congress in 1887) or by men who publicize themselves as champions of the weaker sex, equal opportunities for women, female education and female emancipation... their favourite subjects of public speaking at the annual show" (Saraladevi 1911: 345) but being truly living in the "shadow of Manu," averse to allow women independent action (Bagal 1964: 24). Saraladevi thus in 1910 established the Bharat Stree Mahamandal¹ (Great Group of Indian Women) in Allahabad.

The All-India Women's Conference was much more successful in offering a national representation of women. Women's organizations actively organized in support of the Sarda Bill because from the beginning they had identified child marriage as a major impediment to women's progress that "crushed women's individuality and denied them opportunities for education and development of mind and body" (Akilabai, quoted in Forbes 1996: 87). From the 1920s the Indian National Congress began to build linkages with peasant, worker, and women's organizations to reveal mass support. Women's political participation started increasing due to awareness campaigns. The Partition of Bengal (1905) and the Swadeshi movement attracted much larger numbers, including uneducated rural women (Ray 1995: 29).

Mahatma Gandhi attracted numbers of women as never before in his satyagraha movement. Many Bengali women joined the non-cooperation protests of 1921. Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi, and Suniti Devi joined picketing position, gave arrest, and precipitated an enlargement of the movement. They were: joined by many lady volunteers, particularly Sikh ladies. Students from Calcutta came out in large numbers and marched out with khaddarⁱⁱ [handloom cloth] on, looking for imprisonment. (*Indian Annual Register* 2, 1922: 320) Gandhi's expression was successful because it drew on traditional gender ideology, which not only appealed to women but also reassured men (Forbes 1996: 62). In 1931 Saraladevi, had to forcefully address women's demands for equal rights for all religious women. But her initiative was frittered away (*Stridharma* 1931: 506).

Women following the Leftist ideologyⁱⁱⁱ were the least satisfied with constitutional guarantees and promises of prosperity given by the constitution. Under the leadership of women from the Communist Party, in 1954 they formed the National Federation of Indian Women (Munshi 1997: 65).^{iv} The government made certain efforts to accomplish the assurances it had made to women during the pre-independence period, and also in the early period after freedom. Although drawing the Constitution of India, it encompassed the very important feature of parity of men and

women in all domains of life through Article 14, 15, 16 of the Constitution of India. Some organisational bodies were set up for the construction of chances for women. Many women were welcomed into the administration.

In the two decades that shadowed, the 1950's and 1960's, there was a quiet in the happenings of radicals and the women's movements in India. Women, however, started understanding that the legal assurance of equality did not by itself resolve the fairness questions, particularly in a country as diverse as India, which encompasses different faiths and philosophies.

Women's movements in 1970's broke out the limited viewpoint of law and education as the core demands and started to take up the matters which worried females holistically. The subjects raised were cut back of women in industries especially textiles, lack of motherhood benefit to women workers, salary discrimination, insufficient training and discrimination at place of work. Since the women protesters who were working with political parties, trade unions, peasants and workers movements did not take up the above matters relating to women, this period saw the beginning of women's associations in various parts of the country. These organizations made a severe attempt to organise poor women for a change. In the 1970s the New Women's Movement attempted to renew the Uniform Civil Code.^v The continuance of various personal laws which accept discrimination between men and women violates fundamental rights. (Committee on the Status of Women 1974: 142; emphasis added)

The 1980s saw a period of growing calamity in India in form of the Shah Bano case.^{vi} Feminists at first responded to the Shah Bano case and the Muslim Women (Protection of Right in Divorce) Act as women's rights issues. Others started arguing that the way to save the programme for women's rights is to focus on gender equality, rather than personal laws as such (Indira Jaysingh, *The Lawyer*, 1986). Many activists believed that the dispute has been degenerate in a "vortex of patriarchal and communal formulations of the issue" (Mukhopadhyay 1998: 11). It resulted in the breaking of secular accord and resulted in communal conflicts, with both

majority and minority fundamentalism on the rise (Upadhyay 1992: 132).

The advent of new organizations

The anti-price rise program of 1973-74 was a combined effort of various women's establishments belonging to various political parties. The mounting economic hardships and the let-down of most important agrarian and industrial worker's movements led to the beginning of new establishments like Self-Employment Women's Association in Gujarat (SEWA), Working Women's Forum in Tamil Nadu, Sramik Mahila Sangathan in Maharashtra, etc. These organizations took up matters relating to wages, working conditions, exploitation, health hazards among others.

The establishment of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was perhaps the first attempt made to form a Trade Union attached to the Textile Labour Union in Ahmedabad. It was designed in 1972 at the creativity of Ela Bhatt and was an association of women who were involved in different trades, but shared several collective features and work experiences low earnings, extremely poor working conditions (some worked at home, and others laboured on streets as sellers or hawkers), harassment from those in authority (contractors, police, and so on), and absence of acknowledgement of their efforts as socially useful work. SEWA intended at improving the working situations of women through a procedure of training, technical aid, legal literacy, cooperative bargaining, and to teach values of trustworthiness, dignity and straightforwardness, the Gandhian goals to which SEWA pledges.

The year 1975 witnessed the progress of several feminist activities in various parts of the country, particularly in Maharashtra. This is seen as an unforeseen result of the United Nations declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year. An increase of interest in women's concerns and problems had been taking place in Maharashtra from the early 1970s.

Enthused by the formation of the Progressive Organization of Women (P.O.W) in Hyderabad, Maoist women fashioned the Purogami Stree Sangathan (Progressive Women's Organization)

in Pune and the Stree Mukti Sangathan (Women's Liberation Organization) in Mumbai. On 08th March 1975, International Women's day was celebrated for the first time by both party-based and self-governing organizations in Maharashtra. From around 1978, city-based women's groups were founded, some of which had strong roots in leftist politics. These autonomous organizations focused on raising consciousness about gender issues (Patel 1985: 47).

New Leftist movements and ideas arose in the 1970s. A few feminist movements also came up, like the Shahaça movement. It became rebellious with the involvement of the Left party.^{xii} It has been said that women were more dynamic in the movement; they call for straight action on subjects precise to them as women, like physical and mental violence and mistreatment as a consequence of drunkenness. Sets of women would go from village to village, enter liquor earths and destroy liquor pots and vessels. If any woman reported physical abuse by her husband, all other women would surround him, beat him up and force him to make an apology to his wife in the community.

The anti-price rise protests in Maharashtra were the straight result of the drought and famine circumstances that affected rural Maharashtra in the early 1970s. These resulted in a sharp price rise in urban Maharashtra. In 1973, the United Women's Anti-Price Rise Front was made to rally women against price rises. There were also localized struggles such as the Chipko movement^{xiii} (seen as the precursor of eco-feminism). Chipko movement prepared many women in the Himalayan area to save trees and check contractors from chopping them. Vanishing of forests creates economic adversities to women as along with forests fuel, fodder, fruits, herbs for medicine and other forest products which give them occupation and income also evaporates. There were also localized struggles like the Bodhgaya movement (with a radical demand for women's land rights; (Shiva 1986 and Manimala 1983: 87).

In no time, all the events resulted in a mass women's movement for consumer protection and the demand was for the administration to fix minimum prices and to allocate essential commodities. A

large number of women in hundreds of numbers would conduct protests in front of government offices, outside legislatures and their representatives. A student movement against price rises in Gujarat developed along the same lines to form Nav Nirman (1974), led by middle-class women (Jain 1980; Omvedt 1980; Patel 1985: 36). Women started participating in growing numbers in the Naxalbari movement^{xiv} in West Bengal and the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh. The Shramik Mahila Sangathan etc were several of the establishments that arose during this era.

The countrywide protests (led by women) on a case of custodial rape^x, the Mathura rape case.^{xi} Also of substantial significance in the early days were dowry deaths,^{xii} cases where wives were murdered by their husbands or their relatives for not meeting demands to transfer more cash, goods, or assets from their natal to their conjugal family.^{xiii} Numerous women's organizations opposed reviewing the rape laws as they were not effective in punishing the offenders. These protests led to the passage of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act in 1983.

Continuous crusades were sprung through protest, demonstrations, posters, street plays against dowry deaths. For this purpose, several women's organizations cooperatively formed a joint front called "Dahej Virodhi Chetnamanch". Lastly, the government passed the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1984 after making essential changes to the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act of 1961. Though, they only limited the amount to be given as dowry and did not bar dowry. The exercise of Sati was abolished through law during British rule. A widow named Roop Kanwar was made Sati in 1988.^{xiv} This caused strong demonstrations from women's establishments. The government passed the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Bill.

Political Representation of Women

While numerous women leaders became governors, chief ministers, cabinet ministers, women remain to be understated at various levels of political leadership. In this background, the women organisations in the 1950s and 1960s lacked the efforts

to reach the common people and were powerless to organize ordinary women and problems that disturbed them. This remains one of the weaknesses in the political policies adopted by women's establishments. The 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution tried to address the low representation of women in local authority by reserving 33.33% for women at the Panchayat level.

Reserving Seats for Women in Legislative Bodies

The United Front government in September 1996 introduced the Eighty First Constitution Amendment Bill, which wanted to reserve for women one-third of the seats in Lok Sabha and state assemblies. The bill was later referred to a joint select committee under the chairpersonship of Gita Mukherjee. The resubmitted bill was hotly debated in the House in 1997 and 1998. Since then the bill has been stalled. The debate continues on it.

Conclusion

Women's movements are deliberate efforts made by women's associations to bring about fairness and sovereignty for women. The prestige of women has been the foremost apprehension of many reform movements in both the pre and post-independence period. It is well known that Indian society is a diverse society with caste, religion, ethnicity and gender as some of the important proportions influencing politics and the progress of the society. It is debated by many scholars that gender has been a crucial issue in the history of the nation since the start of British colonial rule over India. Gender and the term "women" has been used to both front and challenge issues of equal opportunity in society. The colonial rulers used gender, and they considered as malicious and cruel patriarchal practices towards women, as an explanation for the rule forced on India. After independence, a spirited although uneven women's movement has taken form in India. Women from varied castes, classes and communities have played a part in the movement along with protestors drawn from a range of political trends, parties and groups belonging to various viewpoints making the movement extremely varied. It is studied that the Women's movement in India particularly before and after Independence

shaped a new type of inspiring movement of social problems and the fight for social parity.

Notes

- i Bharat Stree Mahamandal was a women's organisation in India founded by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani in Allahabad in 1910. One of the primary goals of the organisation was to promote female education, which at that time was not well developed.
- ii khaddar (in India) a cloth that is hand-woven and is made from a kind of cotton or silk thread made on a spinning wheel.
- iii Left-wing politics typically involves a concern for those in society whom its adherents perceive as disadvantaged relative to others as well as a belief that there are unjustified inequalities that need to be reduced or abolished.
- iv Vidya Munshi was a founding member of the National Federation of Indian Women and today is a member of the National Council of the Communist Party of India.
- v Article 44 of the Indian Constitution states that "the State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code (UCC) throughout the territory of India." The desirability of a uniform civil code is consistent with human rights and the principles of equality, fairness and justice.
- vi Mohd. Ahmed Khan v. Shah Bano Begum [1985 SCALE 767 = 1985 SCR 844 = 1985 SCC 556 = AIR 1985 SC 945], commonly referred to as the Shah Bano case, was a controversial maintenance lawsuit in India, in which the Supreme Court delivered a judgment favouring maintenance given to an aggrieved divorced Muslim woman.
- vii It was a Bhil tribal landless labourer's movement against the non-tribal landowners.
- viii The Chipko movement or Chipko Andolan was a forest conservation movement in India. It began in 1973 in Uttarakhnad, then a part of Uttar Pradesh (at the foothills of Himalayas) and went on to become a rallying point for many future environmental movements all over the world.
- ix Naxalbari uprising was an armed peasant revolt in 1967 in the Naxalbari block of the Siliguri subdivision in Darjeeling district, West Bengal, India.

- x Rape perpetrated by agents of the state on women in official custody, such as police lock-up.
- xi The incidence of rape can be culled from figures published by the Bureau of Police every year. The statistics from Delhi and Calcutta (1995-96) show that the largest number of rapes occurred inside the home and are committed by persons known to the victim, often relatives. However, both the women's movement and the media tend to focus on rapes committed in police custody or public spaces.
- xii In 1979 in Delhi, of 358 such deaths, fewer than 50 were suicides, 23 were classified as dowry burnings, and the others were recorded as accidental. The number of accidental burnings increased to 466 in 1981 and 537 in 1982.
- xiii A dowry includes the money and other consumables, as well as assets like shares or real estate, given by the bride's family to the groom's family at the time of marriage. Traditionally an upper-caste Hindu custom, the practice has widened to all classes and castes since the beginning of the century. In recent years it has also become common among non-Hindus.
- xiv Roopkuvarba Kanwar (c. 1969 - 4 September 1987) was a Rajput woman who was made Sati (burned alive) at Deorala village of Sikar district in Rajasthan, India. At the time, she was 18 years old and had been married for eight months to Maal Singh Shekhawat, who had died a day earlier at age 24 and had no children.
- xv She was a veteran member of Parliament from the Communist Party of India.

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