

# WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA FROM ITS EARLIEST NOTICEABLE BEGINNING TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES

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**Abstract:** In Hindu religious scriptures, a woman is described as the epithet of Shakti which means a source of power. From time immemorial, Indian women have played a very crucial role in every walk of life. As per Vedic literature, Indian women had performed as Rishies and scholars. Maitreyi was well versed in Vedas; Gargi, the Vedic prophetess and other ladies are well known in Indian history and culture. Whether it is the case of Razia Sultan and Chand Bibi who were the great rulers of the medieval period, or Rani Laxmibai and other thousands of women who equally took part in Indian freedom movements, the role played by every woman has been praiseworthy. The main objective of this paper is to chart women's contribution and participation to political situations and social reforms movements in pre and Post-Independent India including Chipko Movement, The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA); The Progressive Organization of Women (POW) etc.

**Keywords:** Women's movement, Organization, Globalization, Participation

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## Introduction

“The women's movement has a long history in India much longer than the current 'second wave' movement, or even the 'first wave' of earlier this century. The Shakti cults go back centuries, and the concept of Shakti – the female power principle – was recognized thousands of years ago. In this form the women's movement represents, not merely an oppositional force fuelled by anger, a rather negative reaction to oppression, but the development of a distinctive female culture, a positive creative force inspiring men and women alike” (Liddle et al. 1986: 5).

In this paper, a discussion is initiated on wide range of protests in which Indian women have participated. No doubt, there have been and still are several hues and colours to what we very broadly refer to as the 'women's movement'. Today, it comprises of both organizations that are working to conserve women's position and those aspiring to change women's position. Therefore, in tracing the development of the women's movement in India, one would undoubtedly have to highlight the shifting concerns and strategies that have been an outcome of the plurality of perspectives that exist within the movement. The primary concern of this paper is to focus on the work of those working towards change, those organizations that acknowledge women's specific oppression in relation to men in both personal and public life and do not allow this to be subsumed within all other unequal relationships that exist in society. The paper does not celebrate dominant historical narrative nor is it a homogenization of 'woman' as a single category rather a step into the dialogue to bring empowerment and discuss the process of change.

Historical studies and the scriptures indicate that Indian woman enjoyed a comparatively high status during the early Vedic period (2000 B.C to 1000 B.C.), surpassing contemporary civilizations in ancient Rome and Greece. The Rig Veda provides ample evidence to prove the concept of equality of women with men as regards access and capacity to acquire the highest knowledge. A wife in ancient India was also known as “Sahadharmini” as she was held to be one with her husband not only physically but also spiritually. Yajunvalykyia had imparted divine knowledge of the most difficult nature to Maitreyi and that she had not only been able to comprehend the high philosophy but had also actually attained divine knowledge. During the Vedic period, women enjoyed all

the religious rights and privileges which men possessed. Her presence and co-operation were regarded as necessary in performance of religious rites and ceremonies. The Rig Veda refers to Ghosha and Lopamudra as well-versed in the Vedic mantras. A man could not become a spiritual whole unless he was accompanied by his wife. Thus, in the age of the Vedas and Smritis, the religious status of women was as high as of men.

Though the ancient women participated in each family ceremony with men, they only played a role of silent observer, not an active participant. As per Manu, men always enjoy unchallenged authority over their wives. Child marriages, Polygamy and Sati were prevalent at that time. Still in spite of these things women at that time were respected by the society. However, changes in the status of the woman were introduced in the fifteenth century. Saints and supporters of Bhakti movement were expounded and spoken about equality of women with men.

As we have studied the position of women in the Pre-Rig Vedic period was very high. In later Vedic period, the position enjoyed by women in the early Vedic society was not retained. In Vedic era, women could select their husband in an assembly called "Swayamvar" but within certain limitations. Men were allowed to have more than one wife and this was especially quite common among the upper classes of the ancient Indian society. A widow was expected to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and become 'Sati'. Manu assigns to the Woman of Vedic age, a position of dependence, not of subordination. A Hindu Marriage in ancient India was to be indissoluble and supposed to continue even after death. The Rig Veda and Atharva Veda entertained very high ideals about the sanctity of marriage. The Sutra literature condemns the practice of divorce. The Apastamba says that if the marriage vow was transgressed, both husband and wife would certainly go to hell. Yajur Veda says that a woman shall wait for five years for second marriage in the case if her husband left her without any reason and went to any undisclosed place or got lost. The position of widows has changed considerably from the time of the Rig Veda, confusion over the remarriage of widow prevailed during the period as the scriptures are silent about widow remarriage and a wife's rights over husband's property; however, the practice of Nagoya remained popular, with the choice of husband for remarriage. But marriage by the widow from outside of her late husband's home remained debarred.

In the Post-Vedic period, woman started being discriminated on the ground of education and other rights. Her socio-economic and political rights were badly negated by the established social customs and political establishments of the time. The birth of a daughter was regarded as a source of misery and that of a son as an object of desire. Manu says it is against the norms and values of society to give economic benefits to a daughter. Although he was against dowry and holds that the evil practice of dowry is an economic transition, which converts woman into a commodity. According to Manu, a woman must be honoured and respected by her father, brothers, husband and brothers-in-law. Thus, Manu lays emphasis on the worshipping of women. At the same time, Manu was not in favor of women's independence. In his words- Women deserve no independence. As a girl, young woman or even as an aged woman (as a mother), nothing shall be done by her independently. In childhood, she is subjected to her father, in youth to her husband and when her husband is dead, to her sons, women must never be independent. Manu viewed that women were ornaments of the house that were to be kept safe and looked after with utmost care and vigilance.

Unlike ancient India, the position and status of woman in the Mughal period was not quite high. Purdah and child marriage had become common. Except those of the lower classes, women in Mughal period did not move out of their houses. The Muslim women observed Purdah much more strictly than the Hindus. Generally, women in Mughal Period were not allowed to remarry. Polygamy was common among rich society. Divorce was not common among the Hindus, while it was permitted both for Muslim men and woman. In spite of all these religious restrictions, woman at that time actively participated in socio-political educational and religious field like Raziya Sultan who was first lady Monarch of Delhi, Chand Bibi who has defeated Akbar etc. In the medieval period, Bhakti movement had played a very important role for improvement of the status of woman.

The best example, who preached the equality of men and woman at that time, was Guru Nanak. He advocates equality of women in each sector that is religious, political, educational and cultural.

During the medieval period education was a distant dream both for the Hindu and the Muslim women. But the women from the royal families were allowed to have literary activities in their harems and tutors were allowed to give tuitions in the harems of the rich Nobles. In the Mughal harem, the first lady who engaged herself actively in literary pursuits was Gulbadan Begum, the daughter of Babar. She wrote *Humayun Nama* on the request of Akbar and has given an account of socio-political activities of the time. The second daughter of Babar, Gulrukh Begum, also had a taste for poetry and wrote a number of verses. Jahanara Begum, the eldest daughter of Shahjahan, wrote many Risalas (Pamphlets). She wrote "*Munis-ul-Arwah*" a biography of Muslim saint Muinuddin Chishti and his descendants. Hence, there were a number of female scholars during the period who made their contribution to scholarly writing. Yet, it is to be noted that the education was limited to the women of Muslims royalty and the women from other common Muslim and Hindu families were deprived of the right.

The history of modern India starts with the advent of the Europeans, particularly the Britishers. The arrival of the Britishers is also marked as the beginning of the new era in Indian thinking as the connection with the Britishers provided them an exposure to the outside world and to rational and scientific education. The debate over the place and role of a woman in Indian society has been initiated with demand for change of the old social norms and conservatism by the new educated elite class of India along with the efforts of the British Bureaucracy and Christian missionaries. The rights of women became a matter of great concern for the social reformers of India and the very dawn of India's renaissance started with the advocacy of women education and liberation from the 18th century onwards. Thus, one may follow the stages of development in the status of women in India in different periods.

The pre-Independence period may be taken as extending from the latter half of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century. During this period many movements had taken place in every part of India and women as part of Indian society could not remain untouched. These movements were basically concerned with aspirations of liberation of a woman as a human being and liberation of the nation. The root to the participation of women in politics can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements. The early 19th century social reforms and educational programmes initiated by various social reformers dealt with the social evils prevalent in the Indian society.

Social reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadeva Govinda Ranade, Behramji Malabari raised their voices against the prevailing practices and social customs of subjugating women. Their efforts rallied around issues affecting women's life adversely such as the practice of sati, female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy etc. Rajaram Mohan Roy championed the ban on the practice of Sati. The campaign resulted in the governmental resolution of 1829, banning the practice of Sati. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar took up the cause of widows and started a movement for widow remarriage in 1850's. It resulted in Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. But this act denied them the right to their husband's and family's property. It met with strong opposition from Bengali orthodoxy. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought against polygamy and encouraged women's education. Pandita Ramabai, Manorama Majumdar, Sarala Devi Goshal started Bharath Shree Mahamandal fought for the education of women. SwarnaKumari Devi started women's organization called Sakthi Samiti in 1886 for widows. Behramje Malabari started campaign against child marriage and nationwide debate over Age of Consent Bill.

Pandita Ramabai whose intellectual upbringing matched that of most nineteenth century reformers remains distinct in her status as a solitary woman leader of the women's cause. A high caste Hindu, steeped in both Sanskrit and Western learning, she challenged patriarchy, both through her personal life and the causes she adopted for self-reliance of women, motivating women for self-improvement and women's participation in

public including political life. In all these respects, she was far ahead of the rest of the nineteenth century reformers. Her book *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1886) is a critique of women's oppression, religion and colonialism. Pandita Ramabai was one of the ten women delegates to the Indian National Congress in 1889 and she was instrumental in the setting up of several women's organizations, schools for girls, and homes for widows, apart from other contributions to society.

Moreover, there are records of 'exceptional' women, women who challenged the norms of that time in different ways such as Rassundari Devi, a housewife in Bengal, when she wrote her autobiography in Bengali in 1876 called *Amar Jibon (My Life)* (Tharu and Niranjana 1994). Having never attended formal school, Rassundari was self-taught. Her book is a passionate description of the deplorable condition of women at the time as well as a secret plea to women to stand up from their subservience space only to be critical of their own lives including the prevalent social customs and practices. Swarnakumari Devi another woman who started 'The Ladies Theosophical Society' (a multi-religion association of women) way back in 1882 and later became a member of the Indian National Congress. The Theosophical Society was later associated with Annie Besant, a British woman supporter of the Indian nationalist movement. Swarnakumari's daughter Sarala Devi also started training women in the use of the sword and lathi in 1903, as she was actively involved in nationalism of a militant kind (Kumar 1993).

In British India, reformers from the elite families led the way in the mid-nineteenth century by establishing girl's schools in the face of stiff opposition. Later, the Prarthana Samaj, founded in the late nineteenth century, organised the Arya Mahila Samaj, Pandita Ramabai set up a series of women's associations, girls' schools, orphanages, and widows' homes. Ramabai Ranade, another eminent social worker of the period, did much work for women and the poor and established the Seva Sadan. In Bengal, Swarnakumari Devi's Sakhi Samiti (1886), a women's association, was concerned with traditional women's handicrafts.

Education opened up and widened women's intellectual capacity by exposing new ideas and other processes of modernisation, altering their view of the world and themselves. Despite limitations on girls' access to equal education, access per se was emancipatory in the long run, contributing to the formation of consciousness and its articulation, and had far-reaching implications for women. While most reformers and British officials propagated a separate education for women, the newly-educated women's aspirations were developing on very different lines. Organised representations by women graduates of Calcutta to the Calcutta University Commission (1917) emphatically demanded the same curriculum for women as for men, a demand maintained by women's groups through the twentieth century, until its clear acceptance in the national education policy in 1986.

Mediating structures between the separate female world and the world of public affairs extended the female space. Many women became leaders in both the women's and the national movements. Pandita Ramabai was a delegate to the Indian National Congress in 1889 along with nine other eminent women. Sarojini Naidu believed that the fate of women was linked with the fate of the nation. She wielded tremendous influence on contemporary women and saw no conflict between tradition and women's participation in public affairs, in the world outside the home, as the world was an extension of the home. She appealed to women not to ignore their responsibility. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani became an accepted mobiliser of youth in the nationalist cause and was noted by official intelligence reports as 'more dangerous' to the Raj than her husband, a well-known revolutionary. The partition of Bengal in 1905 galvanized and transformed women's participation in the national movement. The mobilisation of women was attempted through the publication of pamphlets, public meetings held exclusively for women and new nationalist associations (in contrast to the elite associations) which emerged during the Swadeshi period. Some British women who made Indian nationalism their own cause played important roles as 'catalysts'. Among them were Annie Besant and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, both Theosophists, Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist, and Sister Nivedita, the disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

In 1901 Sarala Devi Chaudhurani formed the Bharat Stri Mahamandal after serious differences with the male leadership of the National Social Conference. After 1910, women believed in organising and working with local women's associations, and convinced that women should take the lead role into their own hands, started provincial and national women's associations. In 1875 The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) established in Calcutta, was the earliest of these bodies. It became a national body in 1896. Though its membership was confined to Christians, its objectives were broad in scope.

Indian women did not lose any chance to demand their rights to vote and political participation. The first initiative for the political rights and right to franchise for the Indian women was taken by Women's Indian Association (WIA). It was in 1917 when the first delegation of Indian women led by WIA met the Montagu-Chelmsford Committee on Constitutional Reforms. Montagu-Chelmsford Committee suggested increasing the representation of Indians in the legislative councils and widening the electorate, however, it did not make any reference to the women franchise in India. But with a good deal of efforts made by Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Mrs. Herabai Tata, and Mithan Tata, led the way and granted women the right to vote in Madras and Bombay. Thereby Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first women legislator was appointed to Madras legislative council in 1927, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Mrs. Hannen Angela contested the election for the council.

According to Geraldine Forbes (1982: 525), the 'first wave' of feminism in India was the period between the years 1880–1940. At this time several organizations formed women's wings which not only took up the cause of women but gave women space and opportunity to secure the desired changes. In 1904, a women's wing was started in the National Social Conference, which was later called the Indian Women's Conference. At this time, the issues concerning women's social emancipation that were prime on the agenda of social reformers were issues such as Sati, the plight of widows, polygamy, child marriage and women's education. In 1887, M.G. Ranade established the National Social Conference, which did have women's emancipation on its agenda, as he worked for the introduction of widow remarriage, for the abolishment of child marriage and other issues like education for girls. While the National Social Conference focused on social issues, the Indian National Congress was concerned with the political administration (Liddle and Joshi 1986). Between 1772 and 1947, the British introduced several laws which aimed to liberate women in India. Some of the laws prohibited practices such as female infanticide, sati and child marriage. The year 1891 saw the institution of the Age of Consent Act which raised the legal age of marriage from 10 years to 12 years for girls.

The new revivalism was formed in powerful organizations such as Dayanand Sararwati's Arya Samaj (1875), Vivekananda's Ramkrishna Mission (1897) and Annie Besant's Madras Hindu Association (1904). The new organizations attacked the reformers but supported some reforms of the Hindu society. They did not incorporate a good deal of the programmes of reformers such as educating women, raising the age of marriage, remarriage of child widows etc, but all this was to be done within the framework of Hinduism.

The Swadeshi Movement in India in 1905 saw the visible entry of women into the independence movement. It also marked the formulation of several women's organizations. The entry of Annie Besant into Indian politics in 1914 accelerated the process of women's associations with the freedom struggle. She was the first woman to be elected as president of the Indian National Congress. Sarojini Naidu too became active in Indian National Movement. But it was M. K Gandhi who drew a large number of women into the freedom struggle. The participation of women in India's historic freedom struggle was a countrywide phenomena, their participation in a large scale was linked closely with the advent of Gandhi on the Indian political scene from 1917 onwards. In response to Gandhi's call, a large number of women plunged into the national movement. His message "when women, we call abala became sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful" reveals the importance he gave for the strength of women. A large number of women participated actively in the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, Swadeshi, And Salt Sathyagraha led by Gandhi. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, women in different parts of India joined processions and propagated the use of khadi (spun cotton) and charkha

(spinning wheel). Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Basanti Devi, Urmila Devi and Kasthurba Gandhi played an important role in the boycott of foreign goods.

Dandi March is a saga of women heroic participation in the freedom of India from the Britishers. When the male satyagrahis and their leaders were arrested and succumbed to the might of British forces, the women folk were out in the streets to answer the wrongs of British Empire, to complete the work of their menfolk which was left due to their arrests by the British forces. Sarojini Naidu, Muthuben Patel, Mridula Sarabai, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Avanthikabai Gokhale were some of the prominent women associated with the Salt Satyagraha. The protest led by Smt. Swaroop Rani against the salt law in Allahabad can be considered as a historic one as the women did not bow against the most hideous act of lathi charge and other atrocities.

Women's organizations such as Desh Sevika Sangh, Nari Satyagraha Samiti, Mahila Rashtriya Sangh, Ladies Picketing Board, Swayam Sevika Sangh, and Stri Swarajya Sangh began mushrooming at this time to organise the mass boycott of foreign cloth and liquor. The strategy of non-violence at this time became the standard protest tactic as the government continued with lathi charges and mass arrests. When women were jailed, feelings of solidarity developed between women satyagrahis of different classes, linguistic and caste backgrounds. Suchetha Kripalani was the first one to be jailed who had been in charge of the Women's Department of the All India Congress Committee, since 1939.

Women were active both in the moderate and extremist factions. In the Quit India Movement of 1942, women took part in processions holding meetings, demonstrations and organizing strikes. Kanakalatha Barua, a young girl of Assam led a procession and was killed in the police firing. In Bombay, Usha Mehta operated an underground radio station. Aruna Asaf Ali was one of the most important figures of 1942 movement, for years she remained underground avoiding arrest. She published bulletins and edited the newsletter 'The Inquilab' along with Ram Manohar Lohia. Few women who did not believe in non-violence adopted the revolutionary path. Young college girls joined secret societies. Kalpana Joshi and Preeti Waddadar were associated with Chittagong armory raid. The Chchatri Sangh started in Calcutta in 1928 was an important training and recruiting ground for future revolutionaries. In Delhi, Roopvati Jain at the age of 17 was in charge of a bomb factory under Chandrashekhar Azad.

Though, the number of women who acquired positions of power or membership in the representative bodies was less compared to men. In the 1937 election, eight women were elected from the general constituencies and 42 from the reserved constituencies and became ministers when the provisional cabinet was formed. Vijayalaxmi Pandit became minister for local self-government in Uttar Pradesh and later Ansuyabai Kale and J.T Sipahimalchi were appointed Deputy Speakers in Madhya Pradesh and Punjab, respectively. Hansa Mehta and Begum Shah Nawoy took office as Parliamentary Secretary in Bombay and Panjab respectively. In the Constituent Assembly which met in December 1946, there were 14 women members.

It is definitely after Independence that the Indian women gained considerable importance in social and political spheres. At Independence, the majority of women still remained ignorant but they did not allow the fire that burnt in their hearts to die. They took many progressive decisions such as organizing themselves to fight for a new set of goals. The goals were getting equality based on gender, job opportunities, reforming the existing laws which gave women only partial justice, and creating a society which did not oppress women intellectually, physically and emotionally.

From 1947 the Indian women's movement took a different path. It began to fight for complete freedom of women from the age-old shackles. Many women connected with the national movement became conscious of getting legal sanction for their rights and securing equality based on gender. The activities of the modern women activists caused a rift between them and the existing conservatives in the Indian society. The modernists claimed equal opportunities for women in all spheres of activity. Their efforts culminated in the founding of the All India Women's Conference. Thus the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) which had been established in 1924

had grown to become the single largest national voice of the divergent groups and political tendencies infusing all its old and new demands with an equal-rights perspective.

Through the relentless pursuit of these enlightened modernists, education was extended to women and so was secured the right to husband's income, the right to abortion and pension for widows. Securing the right to abortion shocked the conservatives but it actually provided an opportunity for women to take a decision to safeguard their health and to uphold their right of choice. It also jolted their stereotyped role as child-bearing machines and ensured them at least a limited amount of freedom.

Many women's organizations like National Federation of Indian Women (1954) and the Samajwadi Mahila Sabha (1959) were formed to work for championing the cause of Indian women. Since the country was facing a socio-political crisis after the British rule many demands of the women activists were not supported by the Government. But during this period from 1945, the Indian women got an opportunity to participate in confrontational politics.

Another hallmark of the age was that it created a political and social consciousness among women. In 1975, the Lal Nishan Party organized a joint women's conference which was attended by women in Pune in Maharashtra. The well-known women's organisations which were formed during this time are the Stree Mukhti Sangkatana, the Stree Sangharsh and Mahila Dakshata in Delhi, Vimochana in Chennai, Baijja in Maharashtra. *The Feminist Network* in English and *Manushi* in Hindi were some of the first women's newsletter and magazines to appear. The issues that they raise are wife-battering, rape, divorce, maintenance and child custody along with legislative reforms. This progressive outlook is indeed a by-product of the changing economic, social and political climate in the country. The rumblings of changes, intermittent and sporadic at the beginning, began to be heard rather loudly from the middle of the 20th century.

Shetkari Sanghatana, one of the most powerful farmers' organizations in Maharashtra, organized in November 1986, one of the largest gatherings of peasant women. The leader of this movement was none other than Sharad Joshi who wanted to incorporate into Indian women's movement, the rural women. In a way it was to squash the elitism of the educated middle class women in the movement, thus making it more effective. Joshi played an initial role in making his party egalitarian, even though the main objective was political. It stressed, in many ways the prerogatives of rural women in India. Thus the Shetkari Mahila Sanghatana and the Stree Mukhti Sangharsh had many objectives as part of their agenda, like fighting goondaism, procuring sanitation and drinking water facilities. Another important aim of the organisation was to make the village Panchayat self-sufficient. Joshi was also able to procure the support of women in his fight against religious fundamentalism. In the south E.V. Ramaswamy Naikkar of Tamilnadu and V.T. Bhattathirippad of Kerala spearheaded movements for uplifting women from the unenviable situation marked by social discriminations during the 1930's and 1940's.

### **Women's movements in the Post-Independence India**

The foundation of political participation of women was laid down during the national movement. The transfer of power from British to Indian hand gave women opportunity to participate in democratic process. Large number of legal, socio-economic measures has been taken up by the Independent government to raise the status of women in India. Women too have become politically active, as they have started participating in national and state politics.

However, from the mid-1960s onwards, we see the birth of new socio-political movements as poverty and unemployment were widespread and people grew disillusioned with government development policies, the prevalent economic rights, land rights and the price rise. India saw a series of struggles and peasant movements in the early 1970s such as the anti-price-rise agitation in Bombay and Gujarat between 1972 and 1975 and the Chipko Movement which began in 1973. Of particular importance to the women's movement were the

agitations such as the Shahada agitation and the subsequent formation of the Shramik Sangatana in the 1970s of the Bhil (tribal) landless labourers against the exploitative landlords which were triggered off after the rape of two Bhil women. Radha Kumar (1993: 100) describes the militant role played by women in this agitation in detail. The problem of family violence, wife beating and alcoholism became issues of grave concern around this time and the strategy of retaliation was adopted.

Chipko Movement (a Hindi word meaning “hugging”) is used to describe the women movement because local village women literally “hugged” trees, interposing their bodies between the trees and the loggers to prevent their being cut down. The Chipko Movement is an ecological movement, concerned with the preservation of forests and thereby giving message of maintaining a positive relationship of human being with their environment.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) movement in Ahmedabad led by Ela Bhatt, which was a sort of pioneering women's trade union movement that began in 1972, was another such landmark in the history of the contemporary women's movement. Women involved in various trades in the informal sector were brought together by their shared experiences such as low earnings, harassment at home, harassment by contractors and by police, poor work conditions, and non-recognition of their labour to list just a few. Apart from collective bargaining, the movement strove to improve working conditions through training.

The Nav Nirman movement of 1974, which began as a student movement in Gujarat, chiefly against corruption, was another such turning point in the history of agitations for ‘rights’ and ‘Lokniti’ (people's rule of law). Influenced by concepts of ‘revolution’, the movement critiqued the caste system and religious rituals. Besides involvement in political and economic issues, it was also concerned with those that were considered private such as domestic roles, family violence and challenged patriarchal stereotypes. The Progressive Organization of Women (POW), developed in Hyderabad in the year 1974, worked towards organizing women against gender oppressive structures in society. The organization promoted the ideology of ‘equality’ and opposed the economic dependence of women on men.

### **Towards Equality' Report, An Eye Opener**

Conceding to the representations made by the international women's movements, the United Nations declared 1975–1985 as the International Decade of the Woman and organized the World Conference on ‘Equality of Sexes’ in Mexico (1975). In India, the National Committee on the Status of Women had been set up to examine the status of women in the country and to investigate into the extent to which the constitutional and legal provisions had impacted on women's status including their employment and education. The Committee was the first major attempt to review and evaluate data on various aspects of women's status.

The Committee came out with its findings in the form of a report, popularly known as the Towards Equality Report (1974), which became a major landmark for the women's movement. The report revealed the shocking deplorable condition of women in India evident from demographic data, an analysis of the socio-cultural conditions prevalent, the legal provisions and safeguards, economic role played by women in all sectors, women's access to education, political participation, the policies and programmes for welfare and development, the impact of mass media, etc. The report also made several recommendations which included stressing the important role of the State and the community in the achievement of ‘gender equality’. It highlighted the need for a concerted effort to eradicate oppressive practices such as dowry, polygamy, child marriage, ostentatious expenditure on weddings, and it emphasised the need for a campaign on legal awareness, the provisions of crèches, better working conditions for women including equal remuneration for equal work, the compulsory registration of marriages, law reform on aspects concerning divorce, maintenance, inheritance, adoption, guardianship maternity benefits, the universalisation of education, etc. The report reiterated the constitutional goal of a Uniform Civil Code for the country.

Following the 'Towards Equality' report, a few numbers of micro-studies were conducted all over the country which paved the way for the emergence of the new area, 'Women's Studies', in the Indian university system began in 1975. The rationale behind this new area of study was to make university education more relevant to social realities prevalent in society with a clear commitment to gender equality and secular values. Subsequently, the first National Conference on Women's Studies was held in 1981 and it stressed the need for establishment of Women's Studies at universities. At this time there were only a few Women's Studies Centres in universities like the Research Centre for Women's Studies at the SNDT Women's University, Mumbai and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, also in Mumbai. Due primarily to the struggles of the women's movement in the mid-1970s, the Women's Studies Centres or programmes within institutions of higher education and research expanded.

Women's Studies has largely been acknowledged as the 'academic arm' of the women's movement with a clear political commitment to establish gender equality in society. It is this 'commitment' which is the foundation of the area which sets it apart from most other disciplines as well as defines its engagement with 'change' and, its critical perspective of mainstream scholarship. Women's Studies scholarship strives to validate women's everyday experiences and voices which have for long remained unheard. Further, the 1990s saw the evolution of Women's Studies publications with the establishment of a number of feminist publication houses and the establishment of a separate section on gender by mainstream publishing houses. Unfortunately, for many of the centres, their activities consisted of setting up of documentation centres, publishing newsletters or journals and doing some gender training which replaced real grass-root mobilization and 'extension'.

Much hope has been pinned on law and legal reform by feminists in India in the early period of their struggle for gender equality, particularly those influenced by the liberal ideology. They have looked towards the law as protective machinery for women's rights as well as an agent of change through which conventional roles and practices in society can be questioned and transformed. According to Vina Mazumdar (2000), the women's movement's engagement with the law can be divided into two wings, namely, the 'Rights Wing' and the 'Empowerment Wing'. The former refers to those who have targeted their demands on the state and seek legislative mandates for women's advancement, while the latter refers to those who place more emphasis on empowering women from 'within' themselves. However, the women's movement in India does hold legal rights and safeguards as important tools for the achievement of gender equality and failure of the law to achieve its purpose has been ascribed to either lack of awareness of the provisions of the law, poor access to the law (including economic restrictions), faulty implementation mechanisms, etc. The law prohibiting Pre-Natal Diagnostic Tests and the Domestic Violence Act of 2005 are examples of laws that have come into existence due to pressure from the women's movement but which are yet to be implemented in the spirit and letter under which they were drafted.

The 73rd and the 74th Amendments to the Constitution, however, are examples of legislations that have transformed the lives of women for a more egalitarian society in future. With the provision of 33 per cent reservation of seats in Panchayat and Nagarpalika bodies, women at the so called 'grass roots' of Indian society have been given the opportunity to be in the formal decision making and governance. Though, the Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve one-third seats for women in Parliament, is yet to see an enactment. With these amendments and laws, the status of women in India has been changing and they are now emerging from the past traditions into a new era of freedom and rights.

Globalization and liberalization have played a crucial role in making women more empowered and stronger in every walk of life. On the one hand, it has created new opportunities for women to be forerunners in economic and social progress. With the advent of global communication networks and cross-cultural exchange, the status of women has been changed to a large extent. The emergence of a global market with its associated policies of privatization, 'stabilization', and liberalization, women in the urban settings have become more independent and self-sufficient. The lower middle class is experiencing a shift in the way family relations worked as they are

setting out of their private spaces to earn a living. Globalization has helped women share ideas and network in the international markets (UNIFEM). Globalization has given women a stronger voice. Women are more vocal. Women's liberalization started in the 70s and is beginning to grow and is on an upward spring. There has been a noticeable change in what women can do and what their opportunities are. The government has done more advertising (TV and radio commercials) portraying women in leadership roles.

Different non-profit organizations have been brought to India from around the globe. These organizations have provided women the skills they need to advance, such as literacy and vocational skills. An organization called India Corps has brought in a range of programs to help women help themselves. The women in rural settings have been influenced by globalization through media and through numerous investing programs like non-profit organizations- that are constantly investing in women's issues in big way. These NGOs are creating awareness and proposing ways of change. The women are increasingly empowered and stronger than before. This transformation is not universal and does not happen in any particular pattern. Hence, we can observe pockets of changes due to efforts of a few. We need more such interventions and investments so that this work can continue. Media can be viewed as a positive aspect of globalization. Media has the opportunity to reach people, and to convey a message to people all over the world. A magazine called *Femina* shows the accomplishments of different Indian women from all over and provides inspiration to the women who read it.

Since traditional Indian culture hinders women's access to jobs in factories, stores and the public sector, the informal sector is particularly important for women where they plough fields and harvest crops while working on farms, women weave and make handicrafts. However, cultural restrictions are changing and women are freer to participate in the formal economy, though the shortage of jobs throughout the country contributes to low female employment. But in the recent years, conditions of working women in India have improved considerably. More and more women find themselves in positions of respect and prestige; more and more workplaces are now populated with women who work on equal terms as men. Working is no longer an adjustment, a mere necessity; but a means to self-worth and growth. In the 21st century, the business women in the form of women entrepreneurs are highest rising entrepreneurial populations in India. In this present era, the well-read women do not want to bind their lives in the four walls of the houses. A woman is full of life as she plays many roles in her life. A woman is a pilot of a family and in turn of the nation.

Finally, I argue that the future of women (of all sections) in India is gradually changing for better. From the time of Vedas and Upanishadas to the present time, Indian women have played a very crucial role in every field of life. Especially, in the last three decades, Indian women have made a great stride in the world of corporate, business, sports, cinema, research, science, politics, defence and administration and have been participating in the country's affairs steadily. Listing few of them: Saina Nehwal, P.V Shindhu and Sania Mirza and many others in the field of sports: Dr. Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw (Chairman & Managing Director of Biocon Ltd.), Indra Nooyi (CFO, Pepsico), Chanda Kochar (MD & CEO-ICICI Bank), Ekta Kapoor (JMD & Creative Director, Balaji Telefilms), Ritu Kumar (Fashion Designer) etc. in the corporate world. The role of women is also emphasized after the POSCO and Nirbhaya case. Many striking incidents made the Government to take important legal steps in the direction of women rights and safety like Vishakha Guidelines, laws related to dowry, property rights etc. The easy adaptation of Indian women to new ways of life is the story of considerable achievements. Increasingly venturing into new avenues of public and private employment, they fill their roles with confidence and a mature sense of responsibility. There are women governors, ministers, ambassadors; women in administrative, judicial, educational and professional services. Although there are many challenges that still exist (rape, sexual violence, and homophobia) and that women cannot be homogenous in a single category (multiples: dalits, tribal women, lesbians etc.) yet women of all segments of the society are getting visible gradually. All this shows that the future of Indian women is definitely bright and will definitely reach new heights.

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