



Women's Struggles & Women's Movement in India: a Review

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Abstract

Three phases of Women's Movements: 19th Century Social Reform Movement, 20th Century Freedom Movement and Women's Rights Movement in post 1975 period have brought to fore wide range of women's concerns. There have been various ideological shades in the women's movement. Old women's organisations have an elitist bias. They do not believe in transcending the existing social order. In their personal lives, they abide by the rules of caste system and generally believe in maintaining the status-quo. During last 3 decades, women from marginalized sections-Dalit & tribal, workers and agricultural labourers, poor women in urban and rural areas have mobilised against violence against women in the community and in the family, witch-hunting of female headed households, mass rape of tribal and dalit women, dowry murders and alcoholism.

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Introduction

In the 19th century, the male social reformers with the blessing of the British administrators, influenced by western liberal democratic values initiated the process of fight against female infanticide, widow-burning, segregation of women from the public life, prostitution and begging by the destitute women. They also organised public functions for widow-remarriages. As a result, their relatives, neighbours, community leaders and the organised religion boycotted them. In a way, it was a blessing in disguise because their isolation from petty politics gave them ample time and resources to interact with the power-structures to bring about legal reforms and establish educational institutions, shelter homes, training centers for women from where the first generation of teachers, nurses, skilled workers came out.

Enormous amount of literature of that time, produced by the Indian social reformers in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Tamil, Bengali bears witness to their path-breaking efforts. The first generation of English educated empowered women became pioneers of the women's movement in the pre-independence period. Most of them channelized their energies in building pioneer women's organisations such as All India Women's



Conference (AIWC), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and Anjuman-e-Islam. The political agenda of AIWC was to fight against child marriage, mobilise public opinion in favour of voting rights for women, impart basic skills (such as tailoring, embroidery, cookery, hair-style, childcare, folk and classical music and dance, letter-writing etc) to women to become efficient home-makers. Cultural ambiance of AIWC suited the needs and aspirations of the high caste Hindu women. For all practical purpose, YWCA was multireligious in terms of its areas of activities and beneficiaries, though its decision-makers happened to be the Christian wives of politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and managerial cadre who were in the close proximity of the British rulers. YWCA provided vocational training courses to groom nurses, typists, secretaries and teachers, classes in bakery products, flower arrangements, Western and Indian classical dance and music classes. Anjuman Trust was committed to the cause of women's education and skill formation, which would enable them to be home-based workers. They had to work within the matrix of purdah. YWCA women had to face outside world with nominal male protection. AIWC women had their male family members as facilitators. Women leaders from Anjuman Trust interacted only with the Muslim community. Differences in eating habits, dress-code and language barriers prevented them from collaborative ventures though their leadership was from the economically better-off section.

Women's Liberation Movement of the Seventies

Genesis of the new women's liberation movement lay in the radicalization of Indian politics in the late sixties. Rebellious mood of the youth, poor peasants, marginal farmers, educated dalit and tribal men and women, industrial working classes found its expression in the formation of innumerable special interest groups addressing themselves to the needs and demands of the local masses. Macro political processes were also finding major shifts in their rhetorics as the protest movements of the subaltern masses had taken militant paths guided by different political ideologies. The official communist parties faced major political challenge in the form of the Naxalbari movement in Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Punjab. Middle class mass upheaval in Gujarat (popularly known as Navnirman movement) against corruption, price rise, unemployment, speculation, hoarding and black-marketing in 1974 was replicated in Bihar in the name of Sampurna Kranti Movement under the leadership of a Gandhi an



leader, Jay Prakash Narayan. Unprecedented strike of the railway workers gave a proof of the political power of collective strength of the working class. Tribal people's struggles against destructive development which served the interests of the kulaks, moneylenders, contractors, bootlegger and indigenous industrialists thriving on the barbaric means of surplus extraction developed in Chhatisgarh, Singhbhum, Bhojpuri, Srikatulam, Chandrapur, Dhulia and in the pockets of the North Eastern states.

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Proliferation of the Autonomous Women's groups

Nationwide anti-rape campaign in 1980 resulted into emergence and proliferation of the autonomous women's organisations in several cities and towns of India. These groups such as Forum Against Oppression of Women (Mumbai), Saheli (Delhi), Stree Shakti Sangathan (Hyderabad), Vimochana (Bangalore) managed to get tremendous publicity in the print as well as the audio-visual media because at that time 'violence against women' was the most sensational and the newest issue. Family members, especially fathers and brothers of the women victims of violence flooded the women's groups. Later on, the women victims started approaching these groups on their own. While doing agitational and propaganda work against series of rape cases in custodial situation, domestic violence and dowry harassment, these groups realised that to work on a sustained basis



and to take care of these facilitative aspects of violence against women, it was important to evolve institutional structures for support to the women victims of violence based on feminist principles of solidarity (mutual counselling) and sisterhood.

Conclusion

Most of the women who took an initiative in the formation of the new women's groups were extremely averse to authoritarian structures within the family, educational and religious institutions and society at large as all of them did not allow women critical thinking and a space to grow as independent, cerebral and politically conscious human beings. Hence, they were very clear in their approach that they would encourage each and every member of the group to articulate thoughts and establish intimate working relationships based on the collective decision-making processes. Initially this method proved very effective in creating a new cadre of women who were intellectually enlightened, politically articulate, well informed and supportive to each other within their small groups.

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