

**GENDER AWARENESS, MOBILIZATION AND MASS CAMPAIGNS IN INDIA AFTER INDEPENDENCE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

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**Abstract:** Social violations of human rights in India are seriously widespread and oppressive. The subjugated position of women is characteristic of Indian society. Women in India are the most victims of any kind social aggression. This paper presents a brief account of movements for security and persistence of Women's Human Rights in independent India.

**Key words:** movements, discrimination, feminist, empowerment etc.

After independence, AIWC (All India Women Council) emerged as the foremost a national level organization representing Indian women's improvement efforts on their status in society and the demand for legal rights. But this organization did not last long succeeded in creating an independent social space for Indian women rather it emphasized women's traditional roles as a good wife and mother, instead of questioning them. There was much criticism within the organization for not doing so addressing real issues and problems related to women (Neera Desai 1988,4). The growing dissatisfaction with the activities of AIWC was need for an institution to ensure the equality and dignity of women through replacing old feudal concepts. For this purpose, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) was founded in June 1954, which rejected its radical feminist stand considering the relationship between men and women only the oppressor and oppressed. Instead, NFIW and its members watched the relationship between men and women is one of friendship and tried to involve men in it feminism. The major issue raised by this organisation was against the rising prices, giving rising to 'Anti Price Rise movement' for fair and equitable distribution of food grains and other essential commodities. The issue has been raised that it is a matter of ordinary citizens, it emphasized not only mobilization urban but also rural women. The main feature of this movement was that the housebound women came out of their walls to show their solidarity with the movement and thus, made it a mass movement. Women's activism in this new phase after independence was also encouraged by the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) submitted to the Government of India (GOI) in 1974. The report observed that there had been a significant change in the status of women, particularly in urban areas, due to the development programs initiated by the Government of India, as well as the 'general process of rapid social change that has taken place since independence' but unfortunately in rural areas this change was insignificant and the target group of women in this country was not affected by the rights granted to them by the Constitution (Govt. of India 1974, p.xii). Another important development in this phase was the emergence of a new type of women's activist groups, which engaged with women's issues from a very different angle. Educated, conscious women have come together in different parts of the country to raise an issue that results in oppression of women at the social level and denial of their basic human rights, has formed its own 'Autonomous Groups', without any support of the any political party. The issues raised by them were mainly related to domestic violence, dowry, sexual discrimination etc.

These groups did not confine their activities to slight strategies of passing resolutions etc., but also occupied themselves with some aggressive activities to assert the rights of women and emphasised on giving voice to the oppressions which have been saved non-resonant due to the fact that a long time. This was the stage of women's activism in the early 1970s which is regarded as the beginning of the contemporary women's movement in India (Raka Roy 2000, Leslie Caiman 1992, Nadita Shah 1991,Gail Omvedt 1993). Autonomous women's groups remain independent from the influence of any political party and question the patriarchal interests of the state. In fact, many of these independent women's organizations "believe that state support of the women's cause is one of the major problems facing the women's movement in India" and further argues that "although the state has responded to some of the demands of women's movements, each new law has given the state, not

women more power."(Raka Roy 2000, 13-14). This contradiction over the role of the State in autonomous women's organizations was a very important issue within the women's movement. The declaration of National Emergency by the Indira Gandhi government affected women's groups as much as other civil rights groups in India. During the Emergency, almost all fundamental rights, and especially the rights of expression and association, were suspended. The irony of the whole situation for the women's movement was that a woman Prime Minister headed the state, leading to this violation of fundamental rights. Women's organizations, particularly autonomous groups and those associated with 'opposition parties', faced the brunt of the undemocratic nature of emergency rule." However, the Indian State, while celebrating Indian Women's Year (1975), sponsored and gave patronage to many activities like- holding meetings of different committees established to discuss women's status, Seminars, Research and publicising the women's issues in the media so that people are made sensible of women's problem. During this period of Emergency some laws were also passed regarding equal rights of women. The issue of women's rights and atrocities against them was also raised and debated as a civil question. The mass media also played a contributing role in creating awareness by publicizing the incidents of gang rape of women belonging to the weaker sections of the Indian society (Neera Desai 1988, 4). A number of women rights related groups came into existence in the post emergency period in different parts of the country.

The major challenge arose among the women's groups was the manner in which women associated with different ideological groups, castes and class should be brought on the same platform without quashing their particular interests. But within the feminist movement this diversity was also seen as a positive aspect of the movement and was appreciated by those who believed in pluralism by giving voice to different opinions rather than rejecting them. Despite such controversies within the movement, awareness of women's issues was spreading not only among urban but also rural people. The early seventies saw the campaigns against gender issues. These campaigns were mainly carried out by autonomous women's groups against violence against women, especially dowry and rape. These campaigns were in the nature of direct protests and mass demonstrations. During the 1980s the women's movement became more diverse by including different issues such as education, legal aid and counselling, health care and many other gender-sensitive issues, which were faced by each group according to the circumstances. To provide such services, feminist groups established their own centers. Instead of focusing themselves on certain issues, these support centers were trying to provide comprehensive services on all issues that were considered essential for the realization of women's rights (Radha Kumar, 1993,106)

**Gender Consciousness, Efforts and Outcomes**

	<b>Efforts</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
<b>Dowry</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First protest in post-independence period were made by the Progressive Organisation of women(POW) in Hyderabad in 1975.</li> <li>• In 1977 momentum when in Delhi demands were raised.</li> <li>• Many efforts by Mahila Daxata Samiti (MDS) and Stree Sangrash of Delhi.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1983) The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, more stringent and introduce the section 498-a to IPC.</li> <li>• Section 198-A CPC.</li> <li>• (2005) Protection of Women from Domestic violence which added an additional layer of protection from dowry harassment.</li> </ul>
<b>Rape</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nationwide anti rape campaign in 1980 demanded reopening of Mathura rape case and amendments in the rape law.</li> <li>• Nationwide campaign after Nirbhaya Gang rape.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1983.</li> <li>• The Criminal Law Amendment Act 2013.</li> </ul>
<b>Uniform Civil Code</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement during Shah Banu Case in 1985 (related to Women's Right).</li> <li>• Shyara Bano Case 2016.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act 2019.</li> </ul>
<b>Sati</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incident of Sati in Rajasthan in 1987.</li> <li>• And women movement against it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 1992 the Indian Government established National Commission for women.</li> </ul>
<b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The organisation like Shakti, Chetna and Shodhini (a network of health activities) made remarkable attempts to revive the traditional Health Care system of Indian society.</li> <li>• These women groups raised awareness about gender sensitive approach towards family, reproductive health, female feticide etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2005 India enacted the National Rural Health Mission (NHRM). It aimed to create universal access to public health service and also balance to the gender ratio.</li> <li>• In 2003 the amendments to the pre natal Diagnostic Techniques (regulation and Prevention of misuse) act 1994.</li> <li>• National Policy for women 2016.</li> </ul>

By the 1980s, the women's movement had achieved significant success in highlighting women's issues and mobilizing women at all levels of society. Now, the women's movement cannot be described as a middle-class movement only. Tribal, rural, Dalit and minority women also became part of it and came forward for their interests. During the 1980s, a wave of fundamentalism that was being reinforced by complex social structures combined with multi-religious and multi-ethnic identities, economic constraints and political opportunism. In this backdrop, the Uniform Civil Code and the issue of sati pose was a serious challenge to women's groups fighting for gender equality. Apart from attacking the discriminatory traditional customs, the women's movement in India has also been alive to some other issues which reflect the low status of women and the denial of their human rights. These issues are mainly related to health and education. In a developing country like India, freeing the economy from regulations, social subsidies and the welfare activities would result in further marginalisation and exploitation in a profit-oriented environment. Thus, "if violence was the rallying issue for women's organisations, the marginalisation and impoverishment of the majority of women within the transforming economy became the entry point for academics into the movement." (Indu Agnihotri and Vina Majumdar 1995,28). In this world of globalisation, media plays a very important role in bringing social change. Women's groups in India are also alive to this fact and thus making efforts to erase the existing gender imbalance and exploitation of women through media. Mass Media make a strong contribution, with the implementation of media campaigns, to the dissemination of the concept of gender equality. If people see in the media the overcome of the differences between men and women will bring him back into everyday life. The Mass Media have always unconsciously affected and influenced the thinking and behavior of society. As an important agent of socialization shaping of gender roles, its mechanisms for checks and balances with respect to gender need to be strengthened. The media should enable projection of women in a decent and dignified way and promote respect and dignity to women avoiding negative portrayal of women. New innovative decent presentation of women, based on Indian culture and society through media must be introduced. A strong legislative effort coupled with a wide spread social awareness with morality and ethics is needed to fight this menace so that women are not perceived as a commodity but as individual with right and dignity

### **SUMMING UP**

The Indian women's movement has been quite successful in making women come out of their social confines and assert their rights and status. In a traditional and complex society of India, women's issues are also multifaceted. Various new issues and problems also keep emerging due to the impact of global forces, in the wake of liberalisation and globalisation, posing new challenges to the movement. In the multicultural Indian society, the issue of addressing the question of women's multiple identities belonging to society, caste, religion, caste, tribe or any other ethnic group has gained ground and even inspired serious speculation within the movement. Efforts are being made by the feminists to understand the diversities of India and correlate them with gender issues without fractionalising the movement. In its early years, the Indian women's movement was elite based with

majority of membership belonging to educated middle class. Today, the mass base of the movement has grown to a considerable extent. The rural and tribal women have also come out of their cocoons and have begun to assert themselves. A significant and momentous achievement by the Indian women is the outset of the process of political empowerment at grassroots by the implementation of 73rd and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The road is also being built to achieve the same at the national level. Another remarkable development was the coming together of various women's organisations and groups on one platform and show consensus on crucial issues of concern for Indian women. The initiative for this was taken by national women's organisations in order to prepare an alternative report in response to the Indian government's Country Report at the Fourth Women's World Conference at Beijing in 1995. Nevertheless, the challenges, from within as well as outside, to the movement are immense. The ideological differences, the question of prioritising the issues, understanding different women identities and their peculiar concerns along with increasing poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, rising communalism and fundamentalism are the issues women's movement has to address in the complex and heterogeneous Indian setup. "While the movement is aware of these challenges the strength of its grassroots support base provides a ray of hope." (Indu Agnihotri and Vina Majumdar 1995,10).

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